

Richard Pearce's

Threshold

"This is like Lourdes. People given up for dead come here expecting miracles and you give it to them," says an admirer to eminent heart surgeon Thomas Vrain at the outset of *Threshold*. Curiously enough, the lines could easily have been directed to those of us crammed into the Elgin theatre and to the hundreds who were turned away from the Festival of Festivals' premiere of this much-awaited picture. Many indeed came seeking a miracle, having endured a dismal year of Canadian cinema. Would this be the film to lift the industry out of its juvenile delinquency?

Threshold opens flawlessly, stimulating our hearts to beat a little faster. Our prayers just may have been met. A fictional account of the world's first artificial heart transplant, its story breathes universal appeal. We are front-row witnesses to modern-day magic. A team of doctors and nurses, appropriately pentecostal in their robes, remove a man's dying heart and replace it with another. He had smoked a pack too many, driven his body to its threshold. We shudder at our own indulgences. By all rights the man should be dead, and he most certainly would be, if it were not for the delicate and deft hands of Dr. Vrain (played delicately and deftly by Donald Sutherland, the undisputed Messiah of Canadian acting). We are in awe.

Director Richard Pearce and writer James Salter treat their subject matter with such complete reverence that the effect is, in the early going, very seductive. Gone is the need to demythicize doctors and their profession as was the case with the quackery in Chayevsky's *Hospital* and the shenanigans in Altman's *M.A.S.H.*

We are asked to discard our skepticism and distrust of modern medicine

and do so willingly. Or is it unwittingly? Vrain and his disciples are so reassuring around the operating table that we find ourselves staring innocently wide-eyed at opened chest cavities. Our sudden internship in the operating room is made possible due mainly to Sutherland's etherized performance. He quickly consecrates a trust with the viewer. Vrain is no barber or butcher. He's the guardian angel of intensive care. His stride is airy; his entrances and exits, winged.

Unfortunately, *Threshold's* reverential tone gradually begins to wear thin. Pearce and Salter pass out the halos too liberally and force us to accept a view of hospitals which runs somewhat contrary to experience. No amount of symphonic background can convince us that isolation wards aren't cold and impersonal. Sutherland wisely senses this and tries to keep his character under control. Vrain is not one to mollycoddle a patient. He lets his eyes telegraph reassurance. He'll be with the patient when the supreme moment arrives: when there's a single breath separating life from death. However, after the umpteenth closeup of his weary and ponderous face, Vrain's apotheosis shows symptoms of disease. The elements which seemed inspirational in the beginning of *Threshold* threaten to resemble the follies of a 'born again' sermon. Endless exaltation turns into a bore.

Salter tries to keep Vrain down to earth with hints of family trouble and an affectionate affair with a nurse. His obvious intentions were to portray Vrain as a real person, not as a Superdoctor constantly floating on Cloud Nine. However, these ideas are only outlined; there's never a chance to flesh them out. Similarly, the central theme of the film, the ethical and emotional issues surrounding the use of an artificial heart, is given only a cursory run-through. Pearce seems content to wow us with technology, showcasing the plastic and stainless steel device as if it were the Hope diamond.

Technically speaking, *Threshold* will receive praise for its sparkling produc-

tion values. But it is plagued by several structural problems common to a great number of Canadian film, not the least of which is the lack of a good story. Pearce devotes so much screen time to surgical window dressing that by the time Vrain meets Aldo Gehring, the resolute young researcher with whom he builds the artificial organ, the coffin has been nailed shut on our golly-gee-whiz enthusiasm. By this time, we've been asked to be in awe just once too often.

There is so little development of relationships in *Threshold*, so little insight into the characters that the film ceases to work on a human level. The story becomes as inanimate as the artificial heart itself. Pearce tries to inject some life by strumming up some contrived moments of controversy about Vrain's research but he forgets that the good doctor has already been made infallible. At this point, the audience is way ahead of what little story line there is.

Even the introduction of Carol, the sweet-faced young patient who eventually becomes the first recipient of Vrain's artificial heart, can't revive *Threshold*. While Marc Willingham manages to make Carol empathetically vulnerable in a short period of time, her effect is painfully negated by Pearce's tendency to turn sentimental moments into saccharine. We never really find out how Carol feels about having the device fuel her life. Pearce, once again, resorts to trying to wow us with the saintly aura of Vrain's visage. It no longer works.

Only Jeff Goldblum as Gehring brings much-needed ambiguity to the film. Before his fall from grace by succumbing to the spoils of fame, we were beginning to suspect that everyone in *Threshold* floated on air, propelled by ankle wings. But Goldblum's character is too minor to affect the crawling plot. By the supposed climax of the film, Carol's operation, we are experiencing anemia. *Threshold's* lifeblood has been spent some time back.

We had crowded into the Elgin seeking a miracle. And for a time it seemed

entirely possible. But, alas, Toronto is not Lourdes. Miracles don't happen too frequently here. This is not to say that those associated with this film should feel discouraged in any way. *Threshold* deserves a lot of praise. After all, a near-miracle is a lot better than nothing.

Stephen Zoller •

THRESHOLD d. Richard Pearce p. Jon Slan and Michael Burns sc. James Salter p. man. Barbara Laffey exec. in charge of p. Robert Sax p. des. Anne Pritchard editorial consult. Bill Yahraus d.o.p. Michel Brault ed. Susan Martin mus. Micky Erbe and Maribeth Solomon mus. consult. Charles Gross a.d. Jim Kaufman (1st), Pedro Gandol (2nd), Jerome McCann (3rd) asst. p. man. Judy Watt loc. man. Peter Davis, Michael Mueller, Phyllis Wilson unit man. Maureen Fitzgerald sc. superv. Gillian Richardson asst. cam. René Daigle (1st), Sylvain Brault (2nd) cam. trainee Rita Johnson steadicam op. Louis De Ermed video cons. Paul Quigley stills John Williamson 2nd cam. Vic Sarin, Paul Mitchnick (asst.) gaffers Jacques Paquet, Roger Bate best boy Richard Allen elec. Bill Brown, Ira Cohen, Thomas Fennessey gen. op. Ken Smale key grip Louis Graydon grip Jim Craig (2nd), Lee Wright (3rd) loc. rec. Bryan Day boom Victor Gamble cableman Michael LaCroix re-rec. Paul Coombe, Jack Heeren mus. rec. Andrew Hermant asst. ed. Elaine Foreman (1st), David Troster (1st), Richard Kelly (2nd) ed. trainee Allison Leslie Gold, Allan Lee superv. sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik dialogue ed. Sharon Lackie, Tony Currie mus. ed. Ion Webster Foley ed. Andy Malcolm asst. sd. ed. Michele Moses, Catherine Hunt, James Bredin art dept. co-ord. Jackie Field asst. art. d. Lindsey Goddard art dept. sec. Karen Boulton set dec. Anthony Deco asst. set dec. Susan Kyle, Gordon Sim, Claire Smerdon, J. Gallaro props Don Miloyevich, Laird McMurray (asst.) sp. efx. Gordon J. Smith, Daniel Bezaire sp. efx. asst. Peter McBurnie, Gynts, Skudra, Rosa Skudra, Lee Wildgen, Hilary Shearman animation Dennis Pike ward. des. Sharon Purdy ward. Brittney Burr (mistress), Lorraine Carson (asst.), Anna Nikolajevich (trainee) make-up Shonagh Jabour, Suzanne Benoit (asst.), Christine Hart (asst.) Mr. Sutherland's make-up Wally Schneiderman hair Judy Cooper-Sealy, Jenny Arbour (asst.) const. man. Brian James head carp. Dave Isham scenic art. Reet Puhm cast Gail Carr extra cast. Film Extra Services pub. Glenda Roy p. acct. Dorothy Precious p. book-keeper Mar Morgan p. sec. Shalhevet Goldhar, Julie Coulter asst. to p. Luanna R. Bayer p. asst. Mark Achbar driver capt. John Pace craftservice Rebecca McKenzie title Dan Perri McNichol Associate Maurice Dunster asst. to Mr. Sutherland Robert Watts l.p. Donald Sutherland, John Marley, Sharon Acker, Mare Winningham, Jeff Goldblum, Allan Nicholls, Paul Hecht, Stuart Gillard, Mavor Moore, Lally Cadeau, James B. Douglas, Barbara Gordon, Michael Lerner p.c. Paragon Motion Pictures Inc. (1980) running time 97 min.

• "By all rights, the man should be dead." Allan Nicholls, Donald Sutherland

