

## Eric Till's **Gentle Sinners**

One is not especially predisposed to like this film: another adolescent coming of age that takes place in another small community in the Canadian bush. And yet, as soon as we get past the bible-thumping ignominy of the caricatural parents (played in living two-dimension by Jackie Burroughs and Kenneth Pogue, not their fault one suspects), the film quite unabashedly seduces. The opening scene has Eric (known as Bobby by his parents, and played beautifully by Christopher Earle) scammed out of his money and every stitch of clothing off his untanned vulnerable hide. The shot of a youngster trying to literally find his trousers while thumbing rides on the open road as the sun is coming up is both moving and hilarious, and sets the tone for this quite delightful production.

Eric's classic search for the father culminates in his finding the wonderful Uncle Sigfus, his Icelandic bachelor uncle, who shares the duties of avuncular confident with his friend Sam. Ed McNamara as the former and George Clutesi as Sam give the most heart-wrenching and understated performances, beautiful and totally believable, so clear and elegant one simply envies the seamless quality of the acting.

The plot plots its way through finding venue to support the errant nephew, as he has forfeited his work in lumber by alienating the town grotesques, the evil Tree brothers. Sigfus and Sam take Eric trawling for fish and director of photography Kenneth Gregg gets some extraordinary moments out of the lake

scenes, while our hero, who cannot swim, is almost drowned.

Eric meets the ingenue, Melissa (Charlene Senuik) while she is collecting money for the evil Tree brothers. Director Eric Till gets the most out of these young actors, evoking with the shimmer of an impressionist painting the evanescent quality of adolescent summers of first love.

The climax of the film has all the magic, passion and dread of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Dire threats arise for boy, man, and nature, plus our hero gets to rescue his "maiden fair." And in case we missed the allusion, the writer does throw Huck, in book form, at us more than once.

*Gentle Sinners* is such a work of art, a story worthy of telling and a Canadian film which transcends in many important ways the simple genre piece it could have succumbed to being; the cinematography is frame-for-frame most exquisitely executed, and the direction is almost flawless. And yet... again there are these nits which should not be overlooked, if only because they were not necessary. The women in this tale, most likely based on "true" or "real" ones, are, without exception, whores, witches and wimps. Ed Thomason is a writer of such apparent and rich talent, that surely he could have avoided the obvious, the cheap thrill of creating another brazen buxom lass, smothering mother, helpless housekeeper, or golly-gee ingenue who must be booked and bedded before the finale. There is so much humour and compassion and sincerity in this story, based on the Valgardson novel, that one is stunned by such lapses.

Jackie Burroughs plays without a hitch the fundamentalist mama, so why must we have her go quite over the edge as a complete witch? The slut in the team of hitchhikers is not particularly offensive - in fact she is beautiful realized - only this sluttishness is a theme amplified by

the ingenue's mother, who, as housekeeper of the evil Tree brothers, is mistress to both, and rendered helpless to protect her nubile, and presumably virginal, daughter from their lecherous advances.

Okay, enough, the heroine did have to be in some terrible danger or the hero's efforts to save her would not have been so grand or passionate. Still, she did have her own strategy for escape, and might have succeeded had she not fallen for Eric. So we come back to the bothersome wimpification of the female principal.

For all that, there shouldn't be a dry eye in front of the set when this film is screened on CBC Jan. 6. Despite its flaws, it is truly worth viewing.

Anna Fuerstenberg ●

**GENTLE SINNERS** d. Eric Till **exec. p./p.** Peter Kelly **assoc. p.** Flora Macdonald **a.d.** Tony Thatcher **2nd a.d.** Mike Williams **sc.** Ed Thomason, based on the novel by W.D. Valgardson **p. asst.** Roman Stoyko **unit man. (Tor.)** Gail Einarson-McCleery **unit man (Wpg.)** Alix Washchshyn **cont.** Kathryn Buck **p. sec.** Deborah Osborne **des. coord.** Bob Powers **d.o.p.** Kenneth Gregg **cam. op.** Michael Storey **cam. asst.** John Maxwell **lighting** Erik Kristensen **light. assts.** Len Watier, Keith Jenkins, John Wilson **sd.** Erik Hope **boom** Chris Davies **art d.** Milt Parcher **des. (Wpg.)** Stan Langtry **des. asst. (Tor.)** Catherine Baseraba **des. d. (Wpg.)** Robert Lowe **grafix** John Simons **set dec.** Peter Razmofofsky, Michael Happy, Bill Chody **cost.** Betty Dowson, Michael Harris, Ruth Secord **cost. (Wpg.)** Gloria Tallman, Ted Patterson **make-up** Mario Cacioppo **make-up asst.** Barb Zaporzan **hair** Phil Benson **staging** Ralph MacDonald, Robert Wytka, Derek Loomes, T.B.A. (Wpg.) **painter** Randy Chodak **sp. efx.** Doug Wardle **des. sked. (Wpg.)** Welland Jennings **carpenters** Dave Mackling, Gerry Filby **cast.** Dorothy Gardner, Michelle Metivier **post. p.** Toni Wrate **film ed.** Ralph Brunjes **lab (Wpg.)** Mid Can Labs **p. coord.** Laurie Cook **unit pub.** Sally Swank **coffee** Kim Forrest **lp.** Christopher Earle, Charlene Senuik, Ed McNamara, Todd Stewart, Jackie Burroughs, Kenneth Pogue, Neil Bennett, John Curtis, Frank Adamson, George Clutesi, Benjamin Darvill, Jessica Steen, Jeff Hirschfield, Cathi Allen, Joanne Allen, Don Emms, Ralph Almond, Clarence Franklin, Joe Tenhaft, Gudmunder Peterson **p.c.** Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

## Don Carmody's **The Surrogate**

In spite of its terminally rotten script and direction, *The Surrogate* has something rare and valuable to offer the discerning moviegoer: dramatically functional, integrated and central-to-the-storyline sex.

Now, in the unabashed stroke movies - *Candy*, *The Story of O* - the sex is certainly necessary, there'd be no movie without it, but it's not what you'd call "dramatically functional," not when the drama is either perfunctory or totally absent, the young-woman's-sexual-odyssey storyline being a narrative rather than dramatic construction. In the ordinary dramatic movie - *Coming Home*, *Body Heat* - it is not sex that functions, but desire (with or without fulfillment) and its consequences. The sex scenes have value only as statements of fact: they did it and the earth moved, or they did it and it shows their marriage is boring. Apart from rape scenes (and without going into the question of whether they do, or do not, constitute sex scenes), sex which delineates and develops character, furthers the plot and is, itself, dramatic (that is, filled with conflict, crisis and resolution) is a rarity. In Canadian film, only James Woods' scenes with Debby Harry in *Videodrome* come readily to mind. Entire movies built on and worked out in terms of explicit sexual conflict (again excluding rape) are almost unknown. Currently, we have Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion*, before that *The Stud* (with Joan Collins, from her sister's novel) and possibly *Lolita*, and the films of Russ Meyer. Then the idea starts getting diluted - *Shivers* might be included, but there are those parasites.

There is, of course, a perfectly good reason for the scarcity of good (or even bad) sexual drama, apart from the impositions of self, public- and governmental censorship, and that is that sex requires consent and co-operation, but drama requires conflict.

The premise for *The Surrogate* provides a fine arena for sex-with-conflict: Frank Waite (Art Hindle), an upper middle-class car-dealer, has an impotence problem and so much rage that he has blackouts from time to time, both of which he blames on his wife's frigidity - they haven't made love in a year. The wife, Lee (Shannon Tweed), does seem cold and hostile, but that could just be her response to life with Frank. We do know that she likes to masturbate in the bath and that she says she's willing to make it any time he can get it up, so we think she can't be all that frigid. Our sympathies, not high for either one, are balanced between them.

The drama starts when Frank's psychiatrist suggests the couple hire sex surrogate Anouk Ven Derlin (Carole Laure). She'll get you fucking again, through deeds not words, says the shrink, but warns that her treatments can be monumentally weird. Waiting for Anouk's first visit, Frank and Lee, who has been dragged into this against her better judgement, are clawing the walls. When she arrives, the tension escalates: they seem to be just making nervous small talk, but it's plain she's probing for an opening, a way to get



● Ed McNamara and Christopher Earle in *Gentle Sinners*: seamless acting