

Rootless Whispers new Can-Am scam

Back in the rosy dawn of tax-shelter cinema, "Canadian" movies like *Whispers* seemed to roll off the assembly line like so many deformed hockey pucks.

Here, finally, was a branch-plant plan that played to our grim patriotic condition — our need to emulate American formulas, our eagerness to please others and make a few lousy bucks in the process.

The hallmarks of the genre — street signs altered to imply a U.S. location, a transplanted American "star" working alongside a bevy of hungry domestic actors in supporting roles, shoddy production values — would become abiding symbols of our national inferiority complex.

To answer Northrop Frye's famous cultural inquiry, "Where is here?", here was where some of the worst shlock committed to celluloid died aborning.

With the more recent entrenchment of a valid and purposeful Canadian movie industry and a burgeoning star system in which even directors have public profiles (Denys Arcand, Patricia Rozema, Atom Egoyan), those slipshod products of the 1970s now seem little more than a lurid dream sequence, barely remembered and best forgotten.

But maybe *Whispers*, a Canadian-made actioner based on American author Dean R. Koontz's best-selling pulp novel, is onto something. Maybe it's time — as this movie seems to scream out with every inept gesture, every stilted "star-turn" — to kowtow to the Americans again.

Mindful of the Mulroney government's slavish desire to tunnel itself into the seductive vortex of Manifest Destiny, the makers of *Whispers* have fashioned an old-fashioned, acultural fraud. A movie that pretends to be what it isn't, a movie that disguises its origins but can't disguise its ineptitude.

Whispers opens with one of those panoramic tracking shots of a nighttime cityscape. The skyline — dotted with notable landmarks such as the Toronto-Dominion Bank — belongs to Montreal.

But as the camera descends to street level, we're assaulted by oddly unfamiliar (yet all too familiar) fixtures: a U.S. Mail box; cars bearing Massachusetts licence plates, well, except for those cars bearing Quebec plates (hey, you can't catch every detail, right?); and the usual assortment of this-is-America paraphernalia.

Upstairs in her spacious apartment, novelist Hilary Thomas (British actress Victoria Tennant) is attacked by a handsome automaton, Bruno Clavel (Quebec actor Jean LeClerc), who is easily repelled but returns to terrorize his victim only hours after the original attack.

Well, one assumes it is hours later. Like the film's narrative continuity, the clocks in this

Movies

Craig
MacInnis



Whispers

Starring Victoria Tennant, Jean LeClerc and Chris Sarandon, screenplay by Anita Doochen from the novel by Dean Koontz, directed by Doug Jackson. At the Uptown (Yonge St. south of Bloor, 922-3113). R

apartment don't work very well. In one shot, Tennant is seen placing a paring knife on a bedside digital clock which reads 11.05. In the next shot, it's 11.07, in the next shot it's 11.05 again, and in the next shot it's 11.06.

When the maniacal Bruno attacks for the second time, he is thwarted by — wait for it! — a burning croissant, which sets off a fire alarm and allows Tennant to plunge her paring knife into the assailant's chest.

LeClerc is less a vicious killer than a walking disaster area, a dour goofball whose homicidal efforts are almost laughable. In one scene destined for some future Pierre Berton book on dumb-movies-made-in-Canada, Tennant escapes from her attacker by throwing her bathrobe over his head while he stands in her bathtub, leaving LeClerc to wriggle around like a moose caught in a purse seine net.

Typical of this sort of movie, it is left to an American star-in-the-descendancy (Dog Day Afternoon's Chris Sarandon in his worst role since *Lipstick*) to assume the role of clean-up hitter; a guy who can get to the bottom of the mystery (such as it is) and who can fall in love with the beautiful, threatened novelist.

Like most romantic encounters of this sort, their first session of lovemaking is performed up against the living room wall, and on the dining room table.

Sarandon, as the hard-bitten but tender cop, will likely earn another Pierre Berton footnote for the scene in which he is fatally stabbed by Bruno, and for the following scene, in which he staves off rigor mortis just in time to lurch back to his feet and save Tennant from a sure date with doom.

Whispers will also be of interest to Pierre Berton for its cameo appearance by distinguished Canadian actress Jackie Burroughs as the retired madam of a bordello in Quebec's Eastern Townships (subbing, natch, for smalltown New England).

Burroughs, a wily survivor of these Can-American fiascos, at least has the good sense to avoid personal embarrassment by offering a convincing impersonation of Ruth Gordon.

Ruth Gordon, of course, is dead. But in a movie like *Whispers*, that hardly counts as a quibble.



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8275 Mayrand, Montréal Québec, Canada (H4P 2C8) Tel.: (514) 342-2340 Telex: 055-60547 Fax: (514) 342-1922

December 19, 1990

Mr. Sid Adelman
Entertainment Editor
The Toronto Star
1 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ont. M5E 1E6

Fax no.: 416-869-4416

Dear Sid,

To quote a famous line from that film classic "NETWORK": "I'm madder than hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

Specifically, I'm referring to what purports to be a review of a film I produced called "WHISPERS", which was headlined with "Rootless Whispers New Can-Am Scam" and from there on, became a vitriolic diatribe about our Canadian production kow-towing to the Americans by having produced an old-fashioned cultural fraud.

It must be a real kick for a budding film critic to be able to scream "scam" and "fraud" with impunity and hide behind the protective shield of what purports to be a critical evaluation of a film. (I use the term "budding" as I was told that the Toronto Star has no real film critic outside of yourself and that Mr. MacInnis came over from the music department.)

I have no idea where Mr. MacInnis gets his information from but if he wants to shoot from the hip, he should at least be aware of some facts.

Fact (1) There was no Canadian government funding in this production.

Fact (2) A U.S. company was acquiring the cost, so why wouldn't they want an American look?

Fact (3) When we make a film with Canadian money, we keep a Canadian look.

Fact (4) The book's location was in the U.S. so why not place it there?

Fact (5) Many European co-productions with Canada are shot here and Canadian locations have served to represent Russia, France, England, Czechoslovakia, etc., and nobody leaps to the ramparts screaming fraud.

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Sid, you and I have been in the business a long time and at least when you gave it to us on one of our films, you had style. You never used an elephant gun to shoot a mouse. In all my years of filmmaking and all the criticism I've received from you, never did I write a letter of complaint. What really upsets me in this article (I don't consider it a criticism) is how insulting it is to the people who made the film -- the crew. These people are fine craftsmen and rank with the best in the world and I defy anyone to imply shoddy production values or say that they are inept.

A music critic never compares a symphony with a rock concert. A dance critic never compares a ballet with a popular dance. Would a literary critic compare John Updyke's writing to that of Jackie Collins? Why can't a film be criticized for the genre of film it is. In our case, it was a low-budget thriller destined to satisfy both a distributor's and the public's demand for films like this. ("WHISPERS", by the way, was sold in every major territory in the world.) It was never meant to compete with films made by such auteurs as Denys Arcand, Patricia Rozema and Atom Egoyan.

Experienced critics of the cinema recognize this fact and are able to critique a film by comparing it with other films of the same type. Maybe some day Mr. MacInnis will recognize this fact and while honing his own literary skills, be able to say what he wants to say with more style.

As for his keen observation of continuity, I can only say that for a film that was shot in 28 days, to find fault with a clock that is a minute off isn't that bad. You can find those same old continuity film bugbears, clocks, cigarettes, 1/2 filled glasses, etc. in even big budget films that have taken months to shoot.

In closing, I would like to add that it is very rewarding to be judged by an experienced critic who knows our side of the business. I refer to a Variety review that quotes: "Whispers is a superior thriller...in a field glutted with predictable would-be chillers, Canadian-made pic delivers a truly novel storyline and a very satisfying pay-off...explanation of what is going on is off-beat and ingenious...Jackie Burroughs is terrific in a single scene...Tennant is an ideal lady in distress while Leclerc has the rugged good looks to personify the nemesis." Thank God for our trade magazines!

There's an old quote that states: "Criticism comes easier than craftsmanship". Sid, we've both learned ours. Let's hope you can teach MacInnis his.

Yours truly,



John Dunning

JD/ha
