



An honest, upbeat look at living with cancer

BY SHIRLEY KNOTT

BOYS WILL BE BOYS. That's the message at the heart of *Princes in Exile*.

Let a group of teen-aged boys loose at summer camp for three weeks, and they will sky-dive out of trees, plan daredevil stunts on dirt bikes, try to seduce the camp nurse, hold an exorcism and make the first, fumbling gestures of young love. They will do and dream of doing what any 16- or 17-year-old boy would — even if they do have cancer and might not live to see another summer.

First shown in August at the Montreal World Film Festival where it won the award for Best Screenplay, *Princes in Exile* makes its television debut this week (Sunday, CBC at 8 p.m.). It's billed as a "heart-warming story about life's real heroes," and at Camp Hawkins, a summer retreat for children with cancer, heroism means having the courage to face the disease without losing the ordinary hopes, joys and friendships of ordinary kids.

The making of Mark Schreiber's novel into a feature film brought an unlikely alliance between the National Film Board and Cinepix, a film company with several box office hits. John Dunning, co-founder of Cinepix and producer of *Princes*, is best known for the *Meatballs* series of camp comedies celebrating hairy chests, Hawaiian shirts and hormone imbalances. Giles Walker, the director, has made his reputation in NFB films over the past decade with his "testosterone trilogy" of satirical comedies: *The Masculine Mystique*, *90 Days* and *The Last Straw*.

Working together on the movie did not prove to be "the marriage made in hell" that Walker first feared. Nor is the film they finally made a frenetic "*Meatballs with cancer*." With the quiet humor and sensitivity which brought wide acclaim to his script for *Anne of Green Gables*, Joe Wiessenfeld's adaptation of *Princes in Exile* follows the rite of passage of a boy coming to terms with cancer — not by facing death, but by learning to enjoy ordinary experiences of life.

Princes in Exile is the story of Ryan Rafferty (Zachary Ansley), a bright, introspective 17-year-old with a brain tumor. Embittered by the disease which has robbed him of the dreams of what he might have been with a full life ahead of him, he is determined in the three weeks at camp to make at least two of his goals come true. As he writes on the first empty page of his notebook, he is resolutely set to lose his virginity and to write a journal which will be published some day.

THINGS DON'T GO QUITE as Ryan plans, of course. While the comely camp nurse tactfully sidesteps his awkward attempts at seduction, the kids he meets — Robert (Nicholas Shields), the daredevil, Holly (Stacie Mistysyn), a girl who has lost her leg to cancer, and Louis (Gordon Woolvett), a genially quirky camp mate — are less gentle in their rejection of what Ryan calls his realistic attitude toward cancer and what they call his self-pity and despair.

The conflict reaches its climax when Ryan is goaded by the boys in his cabin into reading

Zachary Ansley and Stacie Mistysyn play two young people suffering with cancer.

his journal out loud. As a piece of writing, it is the over-written, over-wrought prose of an adolescent, but it is also a genuine attempt to give expression to the fear, loneliness and despair of facing a terminal illness.

His camp mates don't quite see it that way and their verdict is instant and unanimous. "That's a pile of shit," says one. "It's really kind of a downer," says another. Even the camp doctor concurs: "Hope helps. Despair doesn't."

In the end, Ryan burns his journal. When the camp closes at the end of the three weeks, he departs with neither of his goals fulfilled, and it is a measure of the movie's conviction in the doctrine of hope that he leaves without a sense of loss or failure.

The story of *Princes in Exile* with its tender romance, its unflinching acknowledgment of death and its abiding humor is presumably the story that Ryan should have recorded in his journal. It is uplifting, heart-warming, poignant rather than impassioned, and unwavering in its faith in the power of the human spirit to overcome cancer.

As one of the boys puts it, "Books and movies about people with terminal cancer are usually about how they get the most out of life." It may not be a recipe for art, but it is a prescription for reassurance. *Princes in Exile* delivers that reassurance, and it is a message that society — with no cure for cancer yet in sight — desperately wants to hear.