

A summer to remember

Princes in Exile isn't just another movie about brave kids battling cancer but an unsentimental look at teenagers enjoying life while facing death

Oh, no! Not another movie about brave kids battling cancer with stiff upper lips and rapid one-liners.

Well no, as a matter of fact, *Princes In Exile* is not another one of those — although it is about kids with cancer at a summer camp.

Maybe because director Giles Walker's first wife died of leukemia or maybe because only one kid in the cast really did have cancer, but this is one kid-and-cancer TV-movie that does a wide end-run around cheap sentiment and ends up scoring big.

His quirky comedies

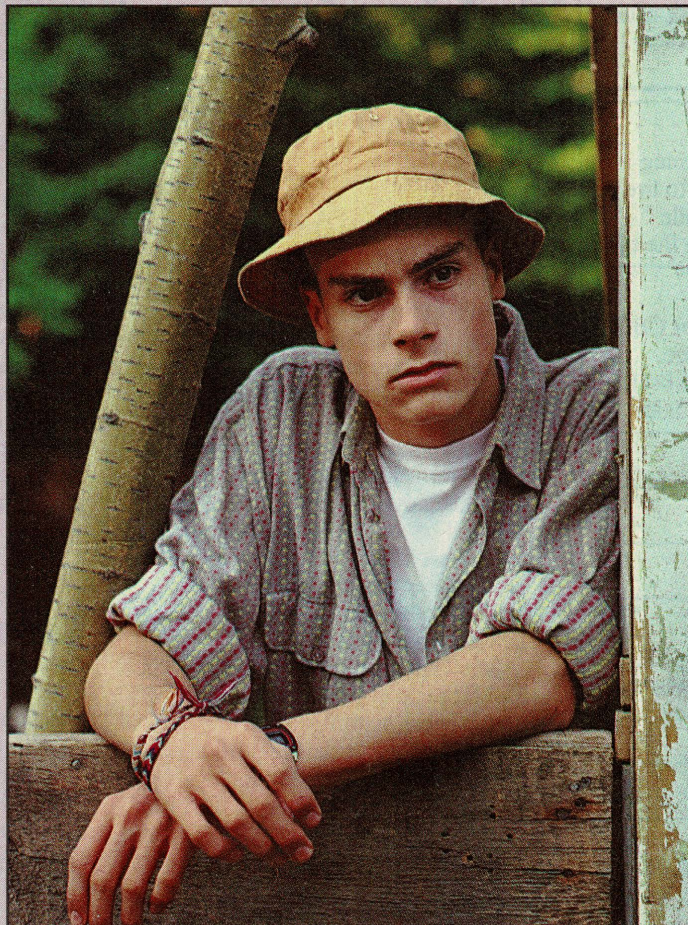
Screened earlier this year at both Montreal's and Toronto's film festivals, it was a huge hit with audiences and critics. And Montreal's festival gave its writer Joe Wiesenfeld (*Anne Of Green Gables*) the nod for best screenplay.

All of which is very satisfying for Walker, the man better known for his quirky comedies *90 Days* and *The Masculine Mystique* and the man who never wanted to make this movie in the first place.

"I approached it with some trepidation," he confesses in a telephone interview from Montreal's National Film Board offices where he works.

But Cinepix producer John Dunning, the man who gave the world *Meatballs*, insisted he read Mark Shreiber's novel. The first word was cancer and Walker, although remarried and with two children, got no further.

Three weeks later when he could bring himself to read it, he recognized its movie potential. An unusual partnership involving the NFB, Cineplex, CBC, Telefilm and \$2.7 million followed. But for Walker there were still barriers.



Zachary Ansley plays a 17-year-old with a brain tumor and an attitude in *Princes In Exile*, Sun., 8 p.m., chs. 3, 5, 12

"I got it going because I felt it was my duty, but part of me was hoping it would fall through," he says. "I did nothing to sabotage it, but at three in the morning I would lie awake wondering how I would get through it."

He was holidaying with his kids in New Brunswick when the call came: If he wanted to visit one of the camps for kids with cancer to see for himself, he had to go then. He flew to Boston, rented a car and drove to Paul Newman's Hole In The Wall Connecticut camp for terminally ill children, dreading it every kilometre of the way.

"When I got there I never looked back. It was inspirational. To spend time with these

kids can be the most cathartic time of your life," he says.

If there was any criticism of *Princes In Exile*, it centred on the campfire scenes with camp director Dr. Merritt (Chuck Shamata) when bald, scarred grinning kids shook the pine trees with their laughter.

"People thought it was too much, but it was nothing compared with what we saw at the real camps. We toned it down a lot," said Walker.

Princes In Exile is the story of 17-year-old Ryan Rafferty (Vancouver's Zachary Ansley) who has a brain tumor and less than a year to live. He goes to Camp Hawkins with two goals: to lose his virginity and to publish his journal.

His journal is brutal, obsessed with death, a downer, the guys in his cabin agree.

"I want people to know the truth about cancer," Ryan snaps back at them. "This isn't Terry Fox's journal."

The only reality he's willing to acknowledge is the ultimate one: "One of these days I'll wake up with a headache again."

Funny cancer skit

But one of the guys in his cabin is Robert (Nicholas Shields) who taunts life with daredevil stunts; one of the girls on the other side of the camp is Holly (*Degrassi High*'s Stacie Mistysyn) who has lost a leg to the disease but still wants Ryan to help her do a funny skit about cancer.

And what is funny about cancer? Parents, for one thing. These kids are merciless in their send-up of their folks' bedside manners.

"Yes, they're mean, but it's accurate," says Walker. "That's what teenagers are like. Parents don't mean to do it, but they suffocate their kids."

The parents of kids with cancer were Walker's toughest audience. "I can't think of anything worse to experience. It's a double blow. Someone you love is dying and so is your immortality."

In some ways he made the movie for them, for the parents. One woman told him after a Washington, D.C. special showing that he had given her a "window" onto her son's life away from her. She saw that when he was at cancer camp, he did have a normal life — if only for three weeks.

"That really touched me," says Walker. "It's like being up on the second floor of your house and watching your kids playing in the yard."

— Catherine Dunphy