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Cancer story will make you feel good

□ Canadian show tackles difficult issue of dying children

By Bill Anderson
(Canadian Press)

The country is in a recession. The GST is on the horizon. Winter is closing in.

Why not watch a movie about children dying of cancer, just to cheer yourself up?

Improbable as it sounds, *Princes in Exile* not only has the power to lift your mood but — dare we say this about a TV show? — change the way you look at things.

That's a lofty claim to make for any piece of fiction, but this charming Canadian film — set for a two-hour broadcast Sunday night on CBC — tells a story that may resonate in the viewer's mind long after the credits roll.

The credits, in fact, help explain why *Princes in Exile* is so good.

The script — named best screenplay at the recent Montreal World Film Festival — was written by Joe Wiesenfeld, whose work includes the 1983 Academy Award-winning short *Boys and Girls* and the CBC mini-series *Anne of Green Gables*.

The director of *Princes in Exile* is Giles Walker, known for the National Film Board comedy *90 Days*, and the producer is Marrin Canell, another film board alumnus whose work included Gwynne Dyer's *War* series.

The unlikely impetus for the film, however, came from John Dunning, co-founder of the blatantly commercial Cinepix Inc. of Montreal, the firm that produced the Bill Murray comedy *Meatballs*.

Around 1987, Dunning was apparently looking to do something different

when he came across the novel *Princes in Exile*, written in 1981 by 20-year-old American author Mark Schreiber.

Dunning approached Walker, but the director — having lost his first wife to leukemia — wanted no part of a story involving a summer camp full of terminally ill children.

Still, Walker agreed to visit such a facility — The Hole in the Wall Gang Camp in Connecticut, financed by actor Paul Newman — and came away convinced.

"When I walked out of there," Walker has said, "it was like I was wearing a suit of armor that I haven't taken off since."

What could be so inspiring?

Well, as viewers of *Princes in Exile* will see, the children at fictional Camp Hawkins brim with two of life's most precious qualities — courage and humor.

Bravery, at least in disease movies, is usually a given, but it's really the laughter and high spirits of the children that catch the viewer off guard.

For one, the children at the camp are elated at the prospect of being away from their gloomy parents.

"The way my parents carried on, you'd think they were the ones with the tumors," says one kid. "I would've come to this place even if it wasn't any better than a prison camp."

"Yeah," says another camper. "Mine weren't going to let me come at all. I had to threaten to kill myself if they didn't."

As we get used to this strange perspective — yeah, I'm dying, get over it — we follow the focus of the film's action, Ryan Rafferty, a brooding teenager who believes he alone is facing the grim truth about death.

Rafferty, played with persuasive intensity by Zachary Ansley, had wanted to become a doctor before he learned he had cancer.

Now, his diary reveals the two



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PRINCES IN EXILE: Zachary Ansley stars in this CBC movie

things he wants to accomplish before he dies:

1. Lose virginity.
2. Publish journal."

The reasons for pursuing the first goal are obvious enough, but there is never a cheap or false note as Rafferty comes in contact with Andrea Roth, who sparkles as the compassionate young camp nurse, and Stacie

Mistysyn, the fetching actress of *De-grassi* fame, who plays plucky teenager Holly.

As for the journal, it represent the other disease Rafferty has — his hard-boiled outlook on life.

To reveal more might spoil the pleasures of this little movie, which touches the heart and mind in a wonderfully right and human way.