

Quadruple Feature

This fall the CBC has a Sunday night festival of new and recent Canadian movies. Here's what our film critic says about four of them

by MARTIN KNELMAN

IN THE RECENT ITALIAN SATIRE *The Icicle Thief*, TV has a nasty habit of cannibalizing cinema. The hero, a beleaguered director, looks on helplessly as his film is trashed and trivialized by tacky commercials, lethal editing, idiotic studio hosts and restless channel-hopping audiences. The downside is obvious, yet in Canada TV may be a movie director's only hope of reaching an audience.

This fall the showcase 8-to-10-p.m. spot on CBC's Sunday schedule offers an astonishing assortment of films. Some, like Anne Wheeler's *Bye Bye Blues* (the affecting saga of a Second World War grass widow) and *The Last Winter* (a sweet Prairie coming-of-age drama), had theatrical releases but were seen by few people. A handful, including *Getting Married in Buffalo Jump* (a romantic comedy set on a ranch), were produced within the CBC. Most, such as *The Little Kidnappers* (a remake of an old charmer), *Rookies* (about minor-league hockey), *Princes in Exile* (about a camp for kids with cancer) and *Lantern Hill* (filmed by Kevin Sullivan between *Anne of Green Gables* and *Road to Avonlea*) were made for TV by independent producers who have also sold them to broadcasters outside Canada. In the cases of both *Buffalo Jump* and *Princes in Exile*, the CBC showings come just weeks after the world premières.

Of the millions of people who watch the made-for-TV movie *The Little Kidnappers* on The Disney Channel in the United States or on CBC (October 21), how many will recognize the name of director Donald Shebib? In the early

1970s, big hopes for Canadian films rested on his shoulders. *Goin' Down the Road*, his unforgettable account of two Maritime drifters who run amok in cold, cruel Toronto, was regarded as a model he and others could follow.

But things didn't quite work out that way. *Between Friends*, Shebib's 1973 study of bungling criminals, died at the box office, and his own career sometimes seemed as wayward as the drifters portrayed in his movies. *Heartaches*, his 1982 comedy with Margot Kidder and Annie Potts as factory workers, should have been a hit but wasn't. Lately he has worked mainly as a hired hand on episodic TV.

The Little Kidnappers—the story of two young boys who, deprived of a dog, provide a secret home for a missing baby—is the 1990 version of a fondly remembered minor classic from the British cinema of the 1950s. Those were the days when foreign films were rare in North America, and going to witty, understated movies with Alec Guinness or Peter Sellers—instead of the vulgar Hollywood product—was considered a mark of taste and refinement.

The original was produced in black and white and set in Nova Scotia, though filmed in Scotland; the new ver-

sion offers a picture-postcard vision of Nova Scotia circa 1903. After the spectacular success of *Anne of Green Gables*, Disney executives were eager to have other stories set on Canada's East Coast early in the century, and at the time Disney was looking for a film Kevin Sullivan could produce. When Sullivan got busy with *Road to Avonlea*, the *Kidnappers* project went to another small independent production company, and Shebib was signed to direct.

There was something precious about the material even the first time around, and now, in keeping with the craving of Disney and CBC for wholesome family entertainment, it has been made extra heartwarming.

The two orphaned lads—eight-year-old Harry and five-year-old Davy—arrive in Nova Scotia as the film opens, only to run up against a brick wall of repressed family emotions. It is their destiny, of course, to melt-the icicles around them.

Long ago Charlton Heston gritted his teeth through the crossing of the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* and the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. Now here he is lending a "distinguished" older star presence as the dour, repressive grandfather whose unforgiving nature



Topic of cancer: camp kids put on a skit in *Princes in Exile*

creates big trouble. Having lost a son (the father of these lads) in the Boer War, he takes it out on a Dutch neighbor, and such vulnerable members of his family as his dreamy daughter (Leah Pinsent). Needless to say, he has to learn a lesson, which happens when the baby is discovered, and eight-year-old Harry is put on trial.

The bagpipes tug a bit too insistently at the heartstrings, and *The Little Kidnappers* is undeniably corny and sentimental, but it's a beautifully crafted piece of work, and Shebib has managed to draw marvellous performances out of his two child actors, Charles Miller as Davy and Leo Wheatley as Harry. This is hardly the road we expected Shebib to go down, but he has managed to negotiate it with some distinction.

ROOKIES (OCTOBER 28) TELLS THE story of Cory Dyson, a seventeen-year-old hockey hotshot trying to make it professionally with the Oshawa Blades. This Atlantis production, directed and co-written by Paul Shapiro and Jeffrey Cohen, catches the unglamorous side of small-time, small-town sports, and it has several entertaining cameo appearances by, among others, Linda Kash as a ditsy reporter. But *Rookies'* young hero, played by Yannick Bisson, is rather conventional, and I was more interested in a rival teammate, demoted from the NHL, engagingly played by gap-toothed Ian Tracey. This film was conceived as a pilot, and if it goes to series, I hope we get to see a lot more of this surly scrapper.

"HE'S NOT EDUCATED," SPUTTERS THE heroine's mother, with a thick Scottish accent, in *Getting Married in Buffalo Jump* (November 4). "And he's [Ukrainian]....and, well, I'm only thinking of you.... You could be a concert pianist and travel the world!"

But Sophie Ware, played with likable spunk by Wendy Crewson, doesn't want to be a concert pianist and travel the world. She wants to take over the southern Alberta ranch her late father has left to her, especially since her mother (amusingly played by Marion Gilsenan) plans to take her comfort money and move to Vancouver.

That's where Alex comes in. Alexander Bresnyachuk, played by the formidable young Toronto stage actor Paul Gross, is a ranch hand with an interesting past and a lot of nerve. So he propositions Sophie. Why not get married, strictly as a business deal, and run the ranch together?

Sophie has enough self-awareness to know she doesn't want to wear sequined tops and play "New York, New York" or "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" for potential heart-attack victims in cocktail lounges.

She doesn't find Alex unattractive, but feels so affronted by his let's-skip-the-romance-and-get-down-to-business approach that she balks at his offer. Sophie understands the notion that every rancher needs a wife, but is not sure, as she puts it, that every wife needs a rancher. And matters get very complicated with the emergence of Alex's ex-girlfriend, a sharp-tongued native, and the resentful son of their union, not to mention Old Country parents who think marriage terms can be bartered like a herd of cattle.

Veteran director Eric Till may not be exactly right for the material—the pace is too poky, and many scenes look as if they were shot from the far side of the moon—but this piece has the kind of

Getting Married in Buffalo Jump has the kind of edge often lacking in TV drama

edge that's often lacking in TV drama. What gives the material its piquant flavor is the witty script by John Frizzell (adapted from a novel by Susan Haley). Frizzell has a wonderful knack for dialogue that explores the tension and the humor of a situation at the same time.

"THIS IS NOT A CANCER WARD WITH trees," announces Dr. Merritt, the jocular camp director played by Chuck Shamata in *Princes in Exile* (November 11), directed by Giles Walker and based on a novel by Mark Schreiber. "The only thing we're going to shrink is your underwear." But a lot of the teenagers kibitzing in the bunkhouse and leaping off the dock have no hair; they've lost it in chemotherapy. And the story is far from pure invention. Those making the film were inspired by two real-life camps for children with cancer—Oochigeas, located near Parry Sound, Ontario, which has been operating since 1984, and The Hole in the Wall, in the United States, founded and funded by actor Paul Newman.

I approached *Princes in Exile* with trepidation, because a subject like this

can make for a grim evening, and there's a tremendous temptation to make the material excruciatingly exploitive and manipulative. But Joe Wiesenfeld, the screenwriter, was aware of the pitfalls.

"The most inherently tragic and painful stories are those about children facing death," he remarks. "Because these stories are so difficult for an audience to endure, they tend toward sentimentality in the telling. What attracted me to Schreiber's book as a film subject was the possibility of presenting an unsentimental, even light tone."

Despite some heavy passages and a bit too much wisdom-mongering, Wiesenfeld has succeeded. And Giles Walker demonstrates he has a sure touch with material radically different in tone from his sex farces *90 Days* and *The Last Straw*.

The story suggests an outdoor version of *Degrassi High* with a dark shadow lurking over it. Ryan Rafferty (Zachary Ansley), the seventeen-year-old hero, has a terminal brain tumor, so he knows he probably won't live long enough to attend medical school. He records his lugubrious thoughts in a journal (which he hopes to have published), and it's an angry downer. The film's conceit is that over the course of the session—during which he watches a fellow camper die, collaborates on an irreverent skit about cancer victims, and also falls in love—Ryan learns to break out of his depression. Physically he may still be doomed, but in terms of his mental outlook, Ryan has been cured. He's even upbeat enough to crack jokes about his horniness.

Even if that uplifting thesis gives you pause, not to mention its highfalutin title, *Princes in Exile* has enough exuberance, style and insight to win you over. When the kids get back on the camp bus to go home, we can't be sure which of them will live long enough to attend another session. But we do feel sure the film has earned the right to explore this subject.

TAKEN AS A WHOLE, CBC'S SUNDAY movie series provides the closest thing, outside a film festival, to an overview of our (dare we say it?) national cinema. Unfortunately, if you want to see *The Little Kidnappers* and the others without interruptions you'll have to tape them and use the fast-forward button on your VCR. At the moment, the CBC is too desperate for advertising dollars to stop treating Canadian film directors like the hapless hero of *The Icicle Thief*. ■