

CBC drama about people not just the disease

Gabriel: Books and movies about people with terminal diseases are usually about how they get the most out of life.

Ryan: This is my journal, not Terry Fox's.

TV movies about people with cancer are usually about how saintly and brave they are.

But this is *Princes In Exile*, not *Brian's Song*.

The 1971 ratings smash was the original disease-of-the-week TV movie — and, for many years, the genre was like a malignant tumor in the brains of U.S. network programmers.

Canadians didn't make any. There was already a plague of them infecting the airwaves.

That hasn't changed but tonight at 8 on Channels 3, 5 and 12, we're getting our own cancer movie — about a summer camp for kids with the disease.

Princes In Exile is one of the most affecting Canadian movies ever made in English — and calling it a "cancer movie" really isn't fair.

It's not about dying, it's about living.

"I can understand viewers' trepidation, I had some of my own," director Giles Walker (*90 Days*) told me.

"But once they start watching, they'll see they're in good hands."

Good hands — and sensitive hands. Walker lost his first wife to leukemia. The experience made it very difficult for him just to open Mark Shreiber's novel, *Princes In Exile*, let alone make a movie based on it.

But, then, Walker spent some time at a real cancer camp, Paul Newman's Hole-In-The-Wall in Connecticut, and came away with a new attitude.

"They were so inspiring. They were living with this (hanging) over their heads and there I was, worried about doing a movie."

The kids in the movie's fictional Camp Hawkins are a happy gang, too — except protagonist Ryan Rafferty (Zachary Ansley), who not only brims with self pity, but feels superior to the others.

Superior not only because his prognosis is worse — he has incurable brain cancer — but also because he is so bright, with so much promise.

"It's like I could have been a king in this world — all of us could have been," Ryan says.

"So, like, (we're) princes in exile."

Ansley, the 18-year-old Vancouver actor who is brilliant as Ryan, is as brooding and intense as his character. Recently in Toronto, he folded his lanky frame on a sofa, and pushed his (now) shoulder-length hair off his face.

"A lot of the character was within me," he said.

"I didn't think of it as turning it on and off. I just got on and off."

"Zachary's just miserable all the



HEROES: Zachary Ansley and Stacie Mistysyn play teenagers suffering from cancer in the TV movie *Princes In Exile*.

Television

Antonia Zerbisias



time," joked *Degrassi High's* Stacie Mistysyn, who co-stars as Holly.

She's the optimistic girl who, after losing a leg to bone cancer, tries to coax Ryan out of his funk — and into a romance.

It's a challenge. He's much too involved with himself to get involved with anyone else.

For the Gemini Award-winning Mistysyn, working on *Princes In Exile* was a big change from the grind of a weekly series.

"Degrassi is very systemized while, with *Princes*, every day was different. I loved it — and learned a lot from it."

The script, which has already won best screenplay award at Montreal's film festival for writer Joé Wiesenfeld (*Anne Of Green Gables*), is both moving and funny.

Although some of the characters are somewhat clichéd — Ryan's bunkmates can easily be labelled as the artist, the

goof, the jock, the philosopher — the cast that makes those characters live is sensational.

Two standouts are Gordon Woolvett who, as funny guy Lewis, deserves to be remembered at the 1991 Geminis, and heartbreaker Nicholas Shields as Robert, whose daredevil antics win his campmates adulation and the nickname "Stuntman".

They're surrounded by dozens of non-professionals who sacrificed their summer and, in some cases, their hair, to make *Princes In Exile* happen.

The National Film Board-Cinepix-CBC co-production is 100 per cent Canadian — and it looks it.

Not because Gillian Chandler's make-up design isn't sadly realistic, nor because Normand Corbeil's music doesn't catch in your throat as well as your ears, and not because Savas Kalogeras doesn't take beautiful pictures.

The reason it looks Canadian is because it's honest in how it approaches cancer, kids and even camp.

"If it were American," says Walker, "Ryan and Holly would have jumped in the creek and made love in the water."

And Holly would have had two legs and Ryan his hair. And we would have had just another forgettable disease-of-the-week movie.

Princes In Exile is anything but.