

Independence as convenience

Trendy film misses tragic, brutal point



Dianne Wiest: dignity against all odds

W. HURST
The plot of *Independence Day* is so timely it's trendy: Young, talented Mary Ann wants a career in photography, which means attending an exclusive, expensive school in Los Angeles. She must prepare to leave behind Parker, her loving man; Carla, her dying mother; and Mercury, her stagnant home town. However under this superficial narrative churns a real, more significant drama: Nancy, Parker's sister, is married to a wife-beater. Nancy's trauma and tragic predicament are less attractive than the Mary Ann plot but they are more important.

Mary Ann, played by Kathleen Quinlan, is pre-occupied with 'photography as art', and endlessly clicks the people and places of Mercury.

Because her personality does not develop during the course of the film, Mary Ann fails to gain the audience's sympathy. She knows what she wants - a career and an apartment with a pool in L.A.

Accepted to the school Mary Ann also wins a scholarship, which is hand-delivered by her professional idol, who just happens to be in the neighbourhood. Parker, her lover, wants her to remain in Mercury, and this is dealt with in an efficient, brisk fight.

Her dying mother, Carla, represents a larger, emotional hindrance but this obstacle is easily overcome. Carla refuses to accept filial guilt as proof of love. She wants Mary Ann to leave. Carla has always kept 'run-away' money. She never felt trapped, knowing she could leave when she wanted. She is a woman who has faced issues, decided, and lived with her choices. However, these choices never constricted her.

Tragically, Nancy, played by Dianne Wiest, is never given the opportunity to choose. When the film focuses on Nancy, *Independence Day* stops being trendy and becomes vital and troubling, due mostly to the power of Wiest's performance.

Nancy accepts the abuse, until she

is driven to a suicide attempt. Recovering in a psychiatric ward, she gets drugs and Parker's sympathy. She cries out to be saved, not to be forced home but there she is sent, to the beatings.

At this crucial point, the film's portrayal of independence falters. Chivalrous Parker tries to protect Nancy in the only way he knows. He threatens Nancy's husband with violence in kind, but this accomplishes nothing. Nancy's parents refuse to see, let alone do, anything. Worse still, Mary Ann also fails her. When she sees Nancy beaten, she does not batter on the door. She does not call police. Independent, resolute Mary Ann runs to Parker and then disappears from Nancy's life. Mary Ann betrays Nancy to her by saying, "There's nothing anyone can do for her." The film never questions Mary Ann's abandonment.

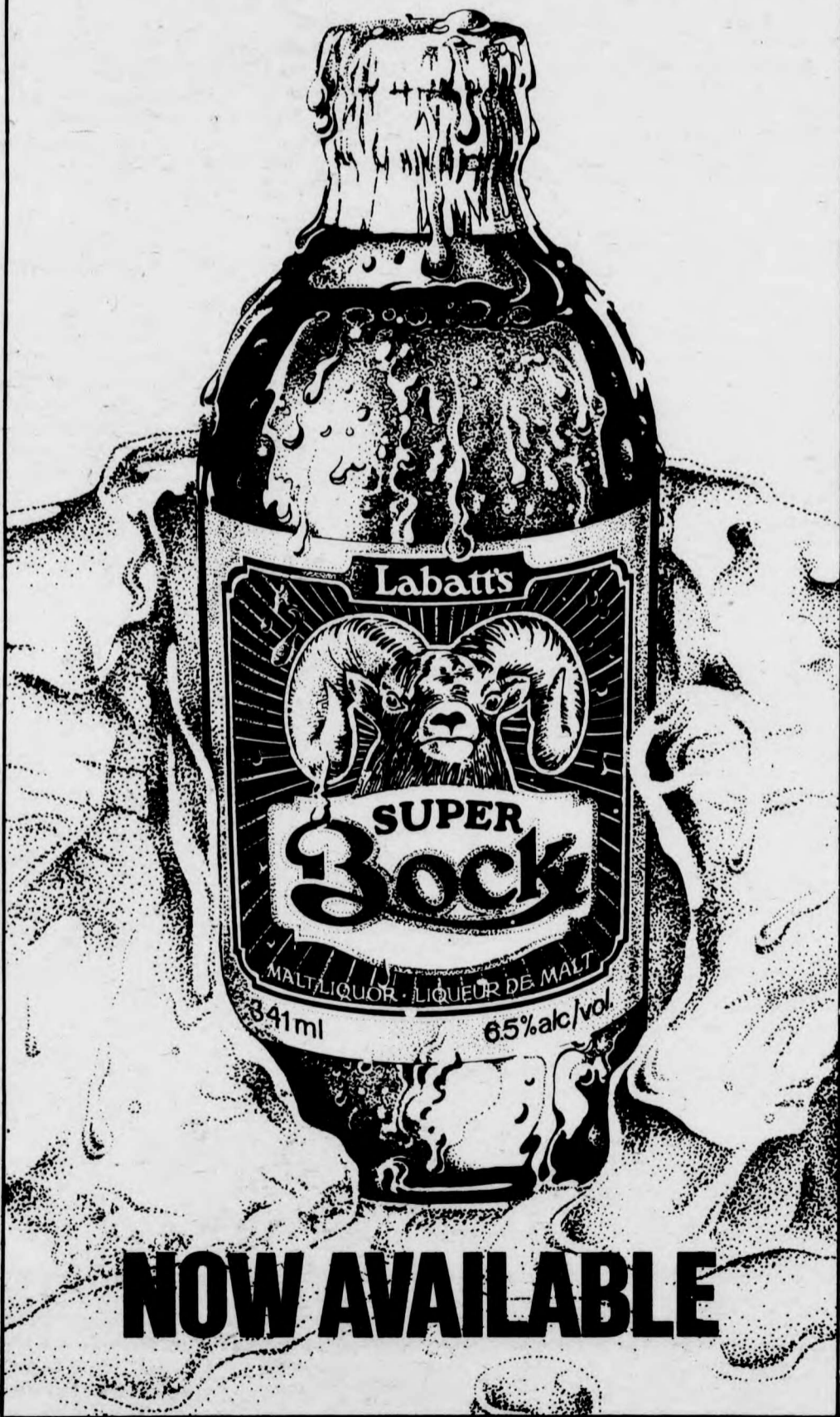
As Nancy, Dianne Wiest accomplishes more than she might have set out to do. With a flutter of hands and split-second grimaces, she shows her brutality-induced madness. Her gasps for air become gasps for control. And against all odds, Wiest gives Nancy an exquisite dignity.

After her scenes are over, Wiest's face remains in the mind's eye, displaying the horrid tragedy of Nancy's plight.

When the film ends Mary Ann has everything she wanted, without struggle, without conscience. *Independence Day* is an attempt to tap the 'Liberated Woman' market independence according to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Helen Gurley Brown would love it.

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