



Ultimately Sumptuous

by Chris Wodskou

Henry And June
directed by Philip Kaufman

"An erotic masterpiece," proclaim the ads. "The most intellectually sexy film since *Last Tango In Paris*," or words to that effect.

At the outset, *Henry and June* would appear to be some sort of hybrid of *9 1/2 Weeks* and *The Moderns*: an ultra-stylish pastiche of intellectualized, highbrow eroticism where any sort of theme, message, or structuring principle takes a back seat to the film as a gorgeous work of art.

In other words, *Henry And June* is director Philip Kaufman's follow up to *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*. It reveals Kaufman's continuing obsession over the intellectualization, apotheosis and artistic representation of sex.

At any rate, this is not the story of Henry Miller and his temptuous marriage to June. Despite the title, this is Anais Nin's (played wonderfully by Mary de Medeiros) film, based on her diaries chronicling her feelings about her marriage to the good-hearted and indulgent, but conventional banker, Hugo (Richard Grant), her affair with Miller (Fred Ward), who had expatriated himself to France, and her fascination with and attraction to June (Uma Thurman).

And that's just about all the plot you need to know, as Kaufman weaves a tapestry of timelessness and spacelessness through which the characters float languidly and distractedly. As in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kaufman keeps the pacing ponderous and pensive with just enough witticisms and pithy maxims to sustain



Henry & June

interest. And when the film is less than gripping, it never fails to be beautiful to watch, the camera studiously paying homage to de Medeiros and Thurman in a manner similar to the cinematographer's love of Isabelle Adjani in *Camille Claudel*.

Vision and representation are central to the whole film—perhaps

paradoxical in a film ostensibly about writers—with Kaufman frequently returning to the mirror motif so prevalent in *Unbearable*. The effect gets to be grating by about the fifth sex scene taking place in and out of mirrors. It is symptomatic of a film that is ultimately sumptuous and alarmingly content-free.

The sex-as-liberation ethic espoused by Miller is parroted throughout, but by turning sex into a contemplative objet d'art, Kaufman fetishizes it and becomes a slave to a highly self-conscious form of erotic art. There's not a whole lot of spontaneity in sex scenes so carefully

composed and orchestrated that you can almost hear the director's instructions in the background.

One would think there is an implicit equation between sex and artistic expression at work, but we don't even get a sense of Miller and Nin as being writers, let alone great writers. They flirt; they fight; they read each other's work and say, "This is great"; and they go at it like pigs in heat. At least *Unbearable* had a strong sense of purpose that transcended merely looking nice.

Henry And June is ultimately redeemed by the strength of the performances, particularly those of de Medeiros, whose presence is never less than arresting and fascinating, and Thurman, whose credibility as an actress should not be doubted after this performance.

Although the notoriety of the film is largely due to a steamy scene between her and de Medeiros, she is convincing and poignant as June becomes increasingly unhinged. Fred Ward (*Tremors*, *Miami Blues*) makes the transition from campy B-movies and black comedies to art house film with ease. His portrayal of Miller is appealing in its unforced, natural earthiness.

The only real disappointment is Richard Grant—brilliant in *Within* and *How To Get Ahead In Advertising*—who is clearly uncomfortable with playing the straight man in an erotic drama.

All of which leaves us with the eternal "art for art's sake" dilemma: *Henry And June* looks great, feels better than a kick in the pants, and I can't say it left a bad aftertaste.

Can't say it left an aftertaste at all.

From the Brandt photo estate

La belle province Love Rectangle

by Mark Dillon

An Imaginary Tale
directed by Andre Forcier
produced by The Telescene Film Group

The more I think about *An Imaginary Tale*, the more Spike Lee comes to mind.

Just let that sit with you while I tell you about this film (it's original French title: *Une Histoire Inventee*), which is likely to be the most talked about Canadian film of the year.

Similar to last year's successful *Jesus of Montreal*, *An Imaginary Tale* comes, not surprisingly, from "la belle province."

It is always a happy occasion to see a Canadian film (if Forcier would be so kind as to let me call his film Canadian) that has the kind of production values

and generous doses of laughter that can make it a box office hit, while still being heartfelt and inventive. *Imaginary Tale* is just such a film.

What's it about? That's actually a tough question; this film rides a roller-coaster of modes from melodrama to tragedy to all out zaniness. But, it's basically the story of a love "rectangle" in the Montreal world of jazz and theatre.

The beautiful Louise Marleau plays a woman who is so enchanting that her past lovers, there must be 40 of them, follow her wherever she goes. She can have any man she wants.

Any, that is, except Gaston (Jean Lapointe), the aging "Don Juan of the trumpet world." It is Marleau's daughter (Charlotte Laurier), who is an actress playing Desdemona in a production of Shakespeare's *Othello*, who catches Gaston's eye. (Unfortunately, the daughter is on the rebound from her leading man, whom

she caught pants down with a makeup girl.)

This complex love story has a classical French romantic quality to it. You might want to call the film a cross between *Les Enfants du Paradis* and *Mo' Better Blues*.

Which brings me back to my original point.

To those who have seen the film, some resemblances to Spike Lee's latest are obvious. In one scene at the Black Butter, the bar where Gaston blows his horn, Marleau's husband (jealous of the attention she gives the musician) smacks him in the face with a beer bottle, splitting his lip in two and ruining his musical career. Just like what happened to Denzel in *Mo' Better Blues*.

Aside from this coincidence in plot, I think both films share flaws that prevent them from achieving greatness. Both contain baffling changes of mood that are, in the end, exhausting.

A comic funeral after the tragic deaths of two of the characters doesn't ring true. It's like Spike's film: after Denzel's career is washed up, we get a happy montage of his salvation in family life (although we are never told what he does for dough).

It's as if the filmmakers think that audiences today only want light stuff. Tragic scenes must be followed with comic, heatwarming ones so that we can leave the theatre smiling. Wasn't there a time when people went to the movies to cry?

Also, just as Spike was justifiably accused of racism for a couple of scenes in his film, Forcier's movie will probably be considered offensive by the Italian community, because of some cheap jokes that use ethnic stereotypes.

Despite these flaws, *An Imaginary Tale* remains an important, vastly entertaining Canadian film that deserves to be seen.

Funking York sounds need the write stuff

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