

Diane Keaton shines in lead role

Mrs. Soffel is strong on convictions

Mrs. Soffel
Westmount

review by Lisa Trofymow

There's something good about this film, which contradicts all the rumors I've heard about *Mrs. Soffel*. Despite the fact it stars Diane Keaton and heartthrob Mel Gibson, *Mrs. Soffel* is not merely a commercial candy wagon — it is an intriguing, moving (though imperfect) film.

The plot is based on "a true story" (a fact flashed onscreen as the film begins — is "truth" supposedly more poignant than fiction?) about the religious, sexually constricted Kate Soffel, wife of a prison warden. She becomes intensely attracted to a condemned prisoner named Edward (Mel Gibson) — a

man so beautiful that young women wait like groupies outside the prison walls, hoping to give Ed gifts and to plead mercy for him. He and his brother are to be executed for a murder they did not commit. As a turn-of-the-century idol, Mel Gibson is almost typecast, but his emotional range is surprisingly wide.

Russel Boyd's cinematography is excellent. The freely moving camera captures the atmosphere of 1901 and contrasts the theme of imprisonment — Ed is literally imprisoned and Kate is sexually and emotionally trapped. This theme augments the delicious tension between Kate and Ed as they talk, touch, and finally kiss through Ed's cell bars.

As difficult as it is to accept Keaton as a 1901 wife, it is as easy to believe that her Mrs.

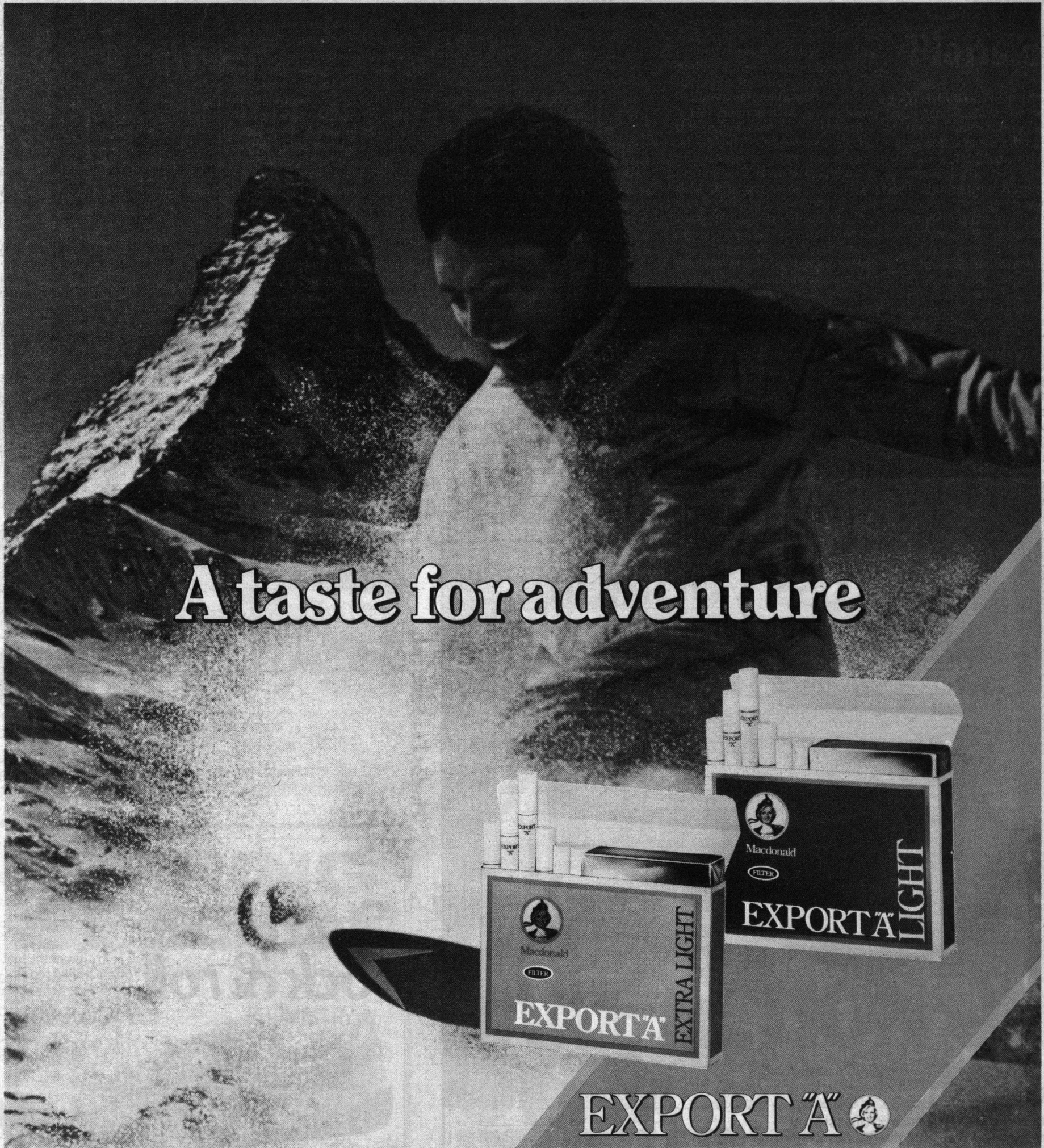
Soffel would forsake reputation, husband, and children for her love of Ed — Keaton shows much emotional depth.

But the tragic story is not just a tale of doomed lovers. It is also a tragedy of society's restrictions, primarily upon women. Mrs. Soffel has three children, is confined to a respectable yet loveless marriage, and is fervently pious. For Kate, to free Ed from prison is to free her passion and to live outside rigid morality, to have adventure. However, she cannot return to society after Ed is killed — her husband must reject her to keep his reputation and Kate is put behind bars. Her imprisonment becomes ironic, no longer metaphorical.

Gillian Armstrong (who also directed *My Brilliant Career*) has made a multi-layered

love story without the goo. The deft cutting of shots allows no sentimentality to spoil the sexual tension between Gibson and Keaton although the single consumption scene is quite clumsy. The film leads one to seriously ponder how a few courageous females can challenge conventional society and morality. Kate exemplified this through her shocking affair, her daughter, and her burgeoning independence (when her father asks her if one should be punished for one's sins she replied "I'm thinking")

Whether for its intelligence, for its visual beauty, or for its emotional intensity, *Mrs. Soffel* is worthwhile cinema. But don't let me — or any other reviewer — influence your independent decision as to what movie to see Friday night.



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