

Arts cont'd

tales of ritualized sex

by J.A. Stephan

The Handmaid's Tale
directed by Volker Schlöndorff
Nova Entertainment

The *Handmaid's Tale* is science fiction with a feminist slant. Based on Margaret Atwood's award winning bestseller, this screen adaptation remains faithful to the original. As opposed to the muddle of flashbacks that existed in the novel, the film unravels the story in sequence.

The plot revolves around one woman's experience in a radically altered society which is visually similar to our own.

The setting is Gilead, a hypothetical America taken over by right-wing fundamentalists in the twilight of the 20th century. Pollution, nuclear accidents and genetic experimentation have caused a "plague of barrenness" among the women. The new government, acting to preserve the species, subjects all women to servitude under the State.

Fertile females are ordered to serve God and their country by serving as handmaids. Each is assigned to a Commander, a member of the ruling elite, to be impregnated in a ritualized ceremony. The infertile women fulfil roles including wives, handmaid instructors/disciplinarians, domestic servants and prostitutes. The remainder are sent away to clean up toxic wastes.

The movie begins as Kate (Natasha Richardson) and her family make a failed attempt to escape Gilead. Now in military hands, Kate is tested for fertility and sent to a handmaid training centre. Instructors clutching cattle prods indoctrinate Kate to the philosophy of the State and pass her onto a Commander (Robert Duvall) and his wife Serena Joy (Faye Dunaway), a former television evangelist.

Enscenced in their house, Kate must, during her monthly peak of fertility, submit to a sexual ritual. Taken from the story of Rachel and her handmaid recounted in the Book of Genesis, Kate lies on her back between Serena Joy's



Robert Duvall (l) and Natasha Richardson (r) in the film version of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

outspread legs and submits to the passionless thrusts of the Commander. If successful, the baby belongs to Serena Joy to raise as her own.

Screenwriter Harold Pinter and German director Volker Schlöndorff present the morality of Gilead's social structure in a biased tone. An explanatory note opens the film, "Once upon a time a country went wrong, that country was Gilead." Judging the story by contemporary standards belittles the potential fear we might experience and lessens the impact of Atwood's Orwellian vision.

Because Gilead looks much like present day America, it is difficult to accept the premise put forth. One expects societies of the future to exist in visually altered environments, like the ones in *Bladerunner* or *1984*. The only suggestions of technology are desktop computers and bar code I.D. bracelets.

State coordinated costumes, which serve to repress individual-

ity, are served up as brilliant blue for wives, scarlet for handmaids and grey for domestic servants. The absence of fashion is striking.

Although the dialogue is sparse, performances are impressive. Richardson captures Kate's frustration and strength in an aggressive manner that is not evident in the book. Portraying the wife's anguish with terrific subtlety, Dunaway is an all too beautiful Serena Joy. Duvall confidently displays the military discipline of the Commander in opposition to his potent desires. As Kate's love interest, Aidan Quinn possesses a seductive quality, and Elizabeth McGovern infuses humour into her performance as a rebellious handmaid.

Atwood said that the atrocities of *The Handmaid's Tale* are based on real events, but director Schlöndorff is never able to infuse believability into his screen version. It remains an intriguing story, absent of emotional intensity.

artscalendar

compiled by Kristy Gordon

The Time Has Come To Change Our Minds — Trash (the age of consent) is a new play by **Deanna Wilkins** and **R. Kelly Clipperton** dealing with the sexual pressures of the 1980s. The play runs from March 15-17 at the Burton Theatre at 8pm. Tickets are \$4 in the Fine Arts Lobby. This play comes with an intriguing warning, it contains sexually explicit material and may offend (thus guaranteeing a full house).

The IDA Gallery (first floor fine arts building) presents **Sandra Gregson's** MFA thesis exhibition featuring sculpture and drawing. The display runs from March 19-30 and is open weekdays from 10am-5pm.

Have you made plans to see the **Scott Liddle Band** and **Big Ska Country** March 16 at the Glendon College Cafeteria. Phone 487-6703 for more info. "Spring Dance '90" features

York dancers who are on the brink of their professional careers. The performance will showcase original choreography by faculty members **Donna Krasnow**, **Holly Small**, **Jean-Louis Morin** and guest artist **Phillip Drube** March 16-17 at the Betty Oliphant Theatre (404 Jarvis). Call 736-5137 for more info.

The music dept presents visiting artist **Larry Polansky**, who will lead a workshop on electronic music and the use of computers in composition. The workshop will take place in 204 McLaughlin from 9am-12pm and 1-4pm on March 16. Phone 736-5186.

The **Percussion Ensemble** will perform under the direction of **John Brownell** March 16 at noon in DACARY Hall.

La Maison de la Culture presents **Puzant Apkarian's** photographic exhibition *28 Men*. This display runs until March 26 in Glendon Hall. The gallery is open from 11am-4pm. Call 487-

6730 for more info.

James Coleman presents *Box (Ahhareturnabout)* in the AGYU (RN145) until March 30. The display features the use of sound and visuals which take the audience from the past to the present and into the future. The gallery is open Tues-Fri 10am-4pm and Wed 10am-8pm.

Set aside time for **Lillian Allen and the Revolutionary Tea Party and Fujactive** March 24 at the Apocalypse Club (750 College Street), performing a benefit for El Salvador's Radio Farabundo Marti, the voice of the Salvadorean People in Struggle. Tickets are \$17 at the door. This event is sponsored by CKLN, CIUT and the York Women's Centre. For more info call 531-8497.

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