

## YOUNG TRIFFIE'S BEEN MADE AWAY WITH

BY NOREEN GOLFMAN

*It's a production made in heaven. It's a final product divined from more hellish parts. It's the home-grown feature film *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* and it's fabulous.*

Newfoundland talent Mary Walsh can now add film director to her impressive credentials, *Young Triffie* being her first achievement of this kind. Walsh had the guts and wisdom to purchase the rights for the story from the source author himself, none other than satiric icon Ray Guy, who first wrote the play in the mid-'eighties. Not only does the film version bring these two creative geniuses together but it also draws on the best imaginable production collaboration in this country, namely, the established local production house of Morag Loves Company Productions, helmed by Newfoundlanders Barbara Doran and Lynne Wilson, and Cinémaginaire Inc, run by Oscar-winning Québécois Denise Robert and her partner, Daniel Louis, who have already scored big hits with *Invasion of the Barbarians*, *Mambo Italiano*, and *Maurice Richard*.

With such talent behind the shoot, and with so much of it on screen in the likes of Walsh herself, as well as Andy Jones, Fred Ewanuik, Andrea Martin, Remy Girard, and Colin Mochrie, there would have to have been something toxic in the catering truck for it to have failed.

That said, it takes more than smart people and a good script to make it all fall into place. Typical of



Photo: Justin Hall

Remy Girard and Mary Walsh: dead serious satire

both Guy's and Walsh's sensibilities, the plot pushes well past the boundaries of familiar generic conventions. As you might expect, the screenplay belongs to the far end of the spectrum of comedy, the deep end, where comedy threatens to turn into its twinned opposite, tragedy. Indeed, the drama begins with the white,

multiple-stabbed, washed up body of one Tryphenia Maude Pottle – an eccentric and authentic outport name if there ever was one, but also a signal that we are headed for more than merely wacky shenanigans around the bay. After all, it looks as if Triffie has been made away with.

So it is that we enter the realm of the murder-mystery comedy, but it is fair to say that when you pull away the curtains of that hybrid genre you start to see something much more sinister at work, a dead serious satire aimed at a long list of social and domestic abuses. Consider the main themes of incest, pedophilia, mutilation, trespassing, alcoholism, exhibitionism, and pornography. Why, there is even a moment when Andy Jones's Pastor Wilfred Pottle is nailed, shockingly, comically, to a table. After such an inventory of sins, plain old small town gossip starts to sound pretty benign.

*Young Triffie* is set in the pre-Confederation moment of the late 'forties, in the fictional but

familiar community of Swyer's Harbour. This is a place popularly sentimentalized in song and fiction as offering the kind of quality of life most modern urban dwellers long to return to. Tourist campaigns depend on that mythology of community well-being, and exploit its unhurried appeal, its rural rhythms and innocent charms.

Naturally, the myth of those pine-clad hills relies on a suspicion of the urban and its civilizing ways. But as conceived out of Ray Guy's skeptical, brooding brow and drawn from Mary Walsh's unflinching imagination, outport life is a model of depravity, all dressed up in painted cladding and fluttering lace curtains. Insular, cut off from the main centres of St. John's or the mainland, the rural town shelters

repression and breeds deception. It is significant that such dysfunction should be seen to be thriving on the eve of Confederation, again belying one dominant myth that rural Newfoundland was better off left alone.

Borrowing a popular narrative device, the film introduces a naïve outsider in the form of the Ranger, played broadly for laughs by Fred Ewanuik in the manner of Rowan Atkinson's Mr. Bean. Clearly, the Ranger is a useful cipher, discovering along with the audience the true nature of the community's almost tortuous survival strategies.

Perhaps no characters embody those strategies better than Mary Walsh's postmistress, Millie Bishop, and Andy Jones's Pastor Pottle. In a scene notable for the sheer weight of its brutal intensity, these two characters face off against each other like raving maniacs. The effect is almost shocking, at once comic and fearsome,

like nothing you have seen before on screen. Ray Guy might have helped coax the words into life but Walsh and Jones breathe them into existence with an unrestrained fury. That scene alone could strip all the pretensions and sentimentality out of outport myth.

Other notable actors help sustain the high level of performance. Andrea Martin (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Wag the Dog*), as the horny, gin-sipping

Mrs. Melrose, has rarely been given more scope to flex her considerable comedic power. Cathy Jones as Aunt Ducky Piercy lives up to all our high expectations of her. And young Marthe Bernard makes the loveliest corpse, stab wounds and all, you'd ever want to see.

What you recognize in the subversive and defiant anti-sentimentalism of Mary



Photo: Justin Hall

Walsh and Girard in character: pushing the boundaries

Walsh's *Hatching, Matching and Dispatching* is allowed more subtlety and play in the extended format of the ninety-minute feature. The bite is harder here, the satire more sustained and pointed, and consequently more provocative.

To be fair, the high production values of this wonderful film owe as much to the experienced crew from Québec as they do to local talent. The cinematography is sharp and satisfying, the editing is fast, crisp, and shrewd, and the general sense of this four million dollar production is of first-class professionalism. Long live co-productions like this one.

With original music and lyrics by Alan Doyle, with so much terrific material to chew on, and an almost embarrassingly hot ensemble of actors to play off against each other, Mary Walsh's *Young Triffie* is an unqualified success. That it reminds viewers of Ray Guy's own gloomy genius makes it all just perfect. 