

ON JACKIE BURROUGHS' A WINTER TAN**By Gary Burns**

Curatorial essay by Gary Burns to accompany The Cinema Lounge screening of A Winter Tan at The Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on Friday Jan 20/ 2011

The film is based on the book *Give sorrow words: Maryse Holder's letters from Mexico*. It's the true story of a self-destructive American academic who goes to Mexico to research passion and ends up dead. While in Mexico she wrote letters to a friend back in Toronto. Throughout the film Maryse (Burroughs) speaks directly to the camera the words conveyed in the letters, and as a filmic device it initially feels a touched forced but as you get used to it the feeling of artifice falls away and Jackie Burroughs' performance begins to take command of the film. The letters, however, do serve as a not too subtle reminder that the character's self-destructive behavior is not going to end well. It's the very fact that the story is being told through the letters that we sense the tragic turn to come, and it lends the film its undercurrent of foreboding. On the surface the source material - the novel and the letters - may seem more suited to a one-woman theatre piece, the antithesis of the cinematic, but the crazy combination of verité meets reenactment leaves an incredibly strong cinematic mark.

But it's Jackie Burroughs' bravado performance as Maryse Holder (complete with New York accent) that holds it all together. This is her film. Burroughs was in her late forties when she made *A Winter Tan*, and she is fearless in her no-holds-barred portrayal. Her character says she is, "scratching out a novel from banal sexual encounters" and that it's true that she only wants to fuck; her hunger for affection and acceptance and yes, sex, requires her to go through some serious humiliation and degradation to get what she wants. After being barred entrance to a nightclub where her much younger and much blonder friend is admitted, she leaves humiliated, only to regain her composure and trudge on alone to find what she is looking for. In this scene Burroughs is just plain startling in her ability to go from humiliation to semi-dignified poise in the time it takes to walk out of frame.

Burroughs is astonishing in her ability to present the complex mix of emotions associated with Maryse's need and desire: the vulnerability, the hurt, the sheer determination and humiliation, a fragile poise fronted by a fuck you arrogance, all back and forth in a dizzying display of emotion, and astoundingly at times it is all there at once. While broke and pool-crashing in Acapulco, Maryse dives into the pool only to surface in front of her latest crush flirting with her much younger friend. Her injured, almost girlish horror at seeing them leads her to remark that she's hurt by her friends "absence of need," because need is one of her own defining traits. When her crush comes to her side she sulks and rebuffs him but quickly relents. As much as she tries to pretend that it is only sex that she craves, in fact she wants much more, she wants to be wanted and she wants to be loved.

Burroughs brings a nervous energy to the part that allows for these amazing slights of hand, one minute an injured lover, the next a ravenous attention-seeker looking for her next prospect, seamlessly blending poise and cool with fragility and neediness.

Maryse journey of self-discovery and self-destruction plays out in front of a backdrop of Mexico and its inhabitants, framed by John Walker's superb and often haunting cinematography, from the boys in a fishing village to the peasants on the train or the gruesome reality of the bullfights. On a number of occasions Maryse confuses her tormentors; is it the men or the country that is abusing her? When her suitor Lucio, played with cocky self-awareness by Javier Torres, is a no-show, she takes her anger out on Mexico, calling it an "asshole country." At

times she acts like a jealous schoolgirl in love with men and a country that won't love her back. Even the trees hiss at her, she laments at one point. She's a sexual tourist who confuses the men who hurt her with the country and its cities towns and squares. Sitting in the branches of a tree, having been spurned by Lucio, she says "What am I considered anyway, sitting in this cesspool square, I've never been so exploited by a country in my life, so abused and lied to. Hear me, great judge in the sky, and render justice." Then she laughs, amused by her own literary quip, which she writes down. Her hurt is material for her book. You pity her but she wouldn't care to hear it because she needs and wants no pity, she knows what she is up to and doesn't seek our approval. And again its Burroughs ability to run the scales of emotion at breakneck speed that keeps us transfixed by Maryse's torturous journey of self-discovery and self-destruction.

Maryse's journey is one of contradictions and she repeatedly mocks her own gullibility in believing there might be love found in Mexico. She says she's being punished for desiring men, and the man who really gets his hooks into her, her main tormentor, is Miguel Novaro, played with a calm assured sexuality by Erando Gonzales. He's a serious lover for Maryse; in contrast to her many infatuations. When Miguel calls her Mama Sita, she takes offence, thinking it is something lured or crass. She is falling for him and wants to be treated like a lover, even a girlfriend, not a target of exploitation as she treats many of her own young conquests. There's a superb moment in the film where she is torn between her love for Miguel and the rational knowledge that she'll never have him. Maryse addresses the camera-as-pen pal back in Toronto and she gives an embarrassed wave. We see Miguel over her shoulder; she can't help herself, she has to go to him even though she knows it will lead to further hurt and humiliation. One of her last lines is, "Fuck, I need a vacation." She needs a break from the self-destructive bacchanal that is her current existence in Mexico but we sense her fate would be the same regardless of the country.

The last shot of the film is a haunting close-up of her eye, when she is presumably at death's door looking out at us, still defiant, like she's saying, "See what I've got myself into." It's the final moment of a bravado performance rarely seen in this country or anywhere. Seen twenty-plus years later the film shows that filmic conventions are meant to be broken and that you can make a true masterpiece with five directors, an uncommon approach, and an actress who is a true force of nature.

Gary Burns Background

Canadian film writer and director Gary Burns has made a career out of defying the odds. He has created several innovative, low budget independent films that remain quintessentially Canadian - and indeed, Calgarian. His first feature *The Suburbanators* debuted at the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival where it placed in the Top Ten Canadian films and was also invited to the Sundance Festival. *Waydowntown* was the winner of the CITY TV Award for Best Canadian Feature of 2000. More recently *Radiant City* won Special Jury Prize at the 2006 Vancouver International Film Festival. Burns is currently in post production on his latest feature film *The Future Is Now!* which he is once again collaborating on with co-writer and co-director Jim Brown