



March 4, 2004

Sudz Sutherland's sexy romantic comedy is finger-lickin' good

LOVE, SEX & EATING THE BONES

Starring Hill Harper, Marlyne N Afflack. Written and directed by Sudz Sutherland. (18A) 101 min. Opens Mar 5.

**BY JASON ANDERSON
EYE WEEKLY**

It's the movie they're literally paying you to see. Rather than squander their meagre marketing budget on a few TV ads, the makers and distributors of *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* have an unorthodox scheme to boost the fortunes of this sly, raunchy and very funny romantic comedy, which won the Best Canadian First Feature prize at the Toronto International Film Festival last September and two top honours at the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles last month. Anyone with a coupon (available from www.eatingthebones.com) receives \$6 off a ticket to the film. The plan is to fill enthusiastic hometown houses in its first two weeks of release, thereby creating the buzz and early box-office results the movie needs in order to have any chance for success in the rest of Canada and south of the border.

"I'm just trying to get that \$2-Tuesday energy," says co-writer and director Sudz Sutherland, who spoke about the movie last week along with star Hill Harper. "People are very skeptical. It's as if they're saying, 'Why would they be *pushing* a movie?' I'm like, 'Don't fucking question it, just go. I'm giving you \$6!' It's not like we believe the movie is worth less -- this is just something to get the buzz going."

As Harper points out, "Any comedy plays better with a critical mass of people. If you have a full house, you hear roars of laughter at certain points. If you have 20 people in the place, you're not gonna have a roar, even if it's the funniest thing ever."

It would certainly be a crime to waste a phone-sex gag as fine as the one in *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*. Even though cynics may scoff at its creators' ambition, this movie deserves your attention. Harper plays Michael, a likeable young photographer-turned-security-guard who spends his time hanging with his buddies at work and keeping up with the latest releases at Pornocopia. His viewing habits get in the way of a budding romance with Jasmine (Marlyne N. Afflack), a marketing researcher who's so wary of playas, she's declared herself celibate. Nevertheless, she sees Michael's potential and the two of them struggle to make the romance work in spite of many impediments, some more comical than others.

Though the movie sometimes sticks too closely to formula, Sutherland and his writing and producing

partner, Jennifer Holness (they're also married with two kids), know how to subvert the romantic-comedy genre to suit their needs, taking wry digs at the anxieties and expectations of both sexes. And unlike most of its higher-budgeted Hollywood ilk, *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* is both sexy and funny.

Sutherland says his intention was to "make a romantic comedy that was realistic. I was sick and tired of seeing movies like *The Brothers*. I wanted to see a movie that reflected a romance between two young black folks. I wanted to do something that was reflective of my experience and that of my friends, and that anybody could look and see themselves in, no matter what skin colour they were."

"The comedy in the movie doesn't come out of race at all," Harper says. "It really comes out of relationships and everyone can relate to that." He likens *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* to *Chasing Amy* and *Jerry Maguire*, "really well-written romantic comedies about two flawed individuals who loved each other so much, they found a way to have a relationship."

The idea for *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* dates back to when Sutherland was himself a security guard, years before the Scarborough native's filmmaking talent was established with his 1999 short *My Father's Hands*. "During that period of my life, I was surrounded by porn," he says. "Guys at that bottom level of joe jobs, what a lot of them do to pass the time is look at *Hustler* or *Penthouse* and adult videos. If you're lonely, you gotta have some sort of sexuality and that's it."

Meeting some of the more avid aficionados got Sutherland thinking about the ways in which porn can create an alluring, even comforting personal world for many people, so much so that forging connections with living, breathing human beings becomes too risky. Though Michael's porn consumption is an engine for comedy in the film, it ultimately represents something more serious for him and Jasmine.

"Fear is the throughline of all relationships," says Harper. "Whatever the impediment appears to be, whether it's money or this or that, if you break it all down, it's about fear. If she's the rich girl and he's the poor guy, she's afraid that if she dates him, she'll wind up poor. Or he's afraid that he'll lose his best buddies because he'll change. This movie deals with that fear. My character's addiction in the film could be any addiction."

Yet the risqué nature of Michael's addiction didn't make it easy for Sutherland to get the project off the ground. Nor did it help that there weren't any precedents for a Canadian comedy with a largely black cast, even one in which the most prominent white dude is played by a Barenaked Lady (Ed Robertson, Sutherland's pal since high school). The director jokes about meeting with potential financiers who declined to shake his hand once they heard what the script was about. "Other people told me, 'You won't sell a comedy in this country. It's gotta be dark and depressing. It's gotta be about how everybody's a fucking porn addict and it's dirty and nasty.' But that's bullshit. That's not life as I recognize it. The majority of Canadians that I know, they love to be with people and love to make love and have fun and make babies and just live life. That's what we wanted to show in the film."

Sutherland's thrilled that the film has generated great feedback already, especially from couples. "I got an email that said, 'We saw the movie at a screening in January and we had a really good night that night.' That's great because that's what the movie was designed to do."

"But this is where the next step comes," adds Harper. "People have to feel comfortable enough to say, 'I loved the movie, I had great sex after the movie, it's opened up a whole new thing in my relationship... plus you should go see it, too.' We don't want *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones* to be somebody's little secret. We want them to spread the word. This isn't a big studio film that is gonna do fine because it's already paid for because of foreign sales and DVD. If this film is gonna expand -- and if you wanna see more films like it -- you gotta support it."

You heard the man.