

March 5, 2004

## Love, Sex & Eating the Bones

Directed and written by: Sudz Sutherland



Starring: Hill Harper and Marlyne N. Afflack

Classification: 18A

Rating:

BY RICK GROEN  
THE GLOBE & MAIL

Seems there's a budding young talent in our Canadian midst, and his name is as smooth as his talent — Sudz Sutherland. In his first feature, he's actually managed to put a fresh coat of paint on that cracked and peeling edifice known as the romantic comedy.

Everyone who works in this genre struggles with the same problem: Not how to bring the lovers together but how to keep them apart — that is, to invent a credible impediment to romance that will hold up through to the requisite happy ending. Well, Sutherland has devised a doozy in *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones*, but more on that good news later.

First, let's speed through the bad. The picture definitely looks suspect at the start, where we seem to have landed yet again in that dreary, excuse-me region of Canfilm. The opening tableau is manic — two bored security guards, one black and the other white, engaged in a yahoing game of table hockey.

No better is the cut to a parallel set of middle-class women sharing a clichéd bit of girl talk. And matters don't improve in the next minute, when Michael (the black guy) gets off work, rents a "Come-fu" video from the local porn shop, and repairs to his apartment, where he proceeds to abuse himself while Sutherland abuses us with a crude fantasy sequence.

Mercifully, this is all over fast, and then matters do improve — greatly, surprisingly. Watch for the boy-meets-girl sequence that has Michael (Hill Harper) and Jasmine (Marlyne N. Afflack) catching each other's eye at the neighbourhood laundromat.

We discover them as they discover each other. When not security-guarding things, he's an aspiring photographer. When not running ad campaigns, she's a committed celibate, still nursing fresh wounds from her last stale relationship.

Now listen to the dialogue — their tentative banter is nervous and playful and delightfully credible. Instantly, the picture springs to life and, with only a few faltering exceptions, stays there.

Also, although both of the main characters are black, their race is allowed to emerge quietly and organically out of the script. That seldom if ever happens in the equivalent version of an American film, where even black directors tend to cue the audience with loudly broadcasted stereotypes.

Instead, the characterization here is neither colour-saturated nor colour-blind, but just bubbles up with a simple effervescence that seems uniquely Canadian. For example, when angered, Jasmine breaks out in rapid-fire French. Why? Because she's of Haitian background and, despite her urbane veneer, grew up on a dairy farm in Shawinigan, where, presumably, her parents were sent when they first immigrated. A nice, indigenous touch.

Later, watch for a lovely sequence where Michael tries to teach her the “brother's nod” — a subtle gesture of acknowledgment exchanged when black men, otherwise strangers, pass each other on the street. The nod must be understated, and not overly familiar, not flamboyant or potentially gay — just a small act of fraternity, no different in intent than the greeting shared by fellow cyclists, or runners, or bus drivers.

The scene works as good sociology but also, when Jasmine butchers the gesture badly, as good comedy too — not many screenwriters could bring off that double-bill. And not many directors could handle the triple-screen effect that Sutherland uses to dramatize a three-way phone conversation — usually, this sort of flashiness descends quickly into gimmickry; here, it looks right and feels natural.

But what of that clever impediment? Well, Sutherland plants a false lead. Surely, we think, the romance will be blocked by Jasmine's self-protective vow of celibacy. Nope. She likes the man and she's horny besides — after a year of swearing off, who can blame her for wanting to get it on.

So brace yourself, fellas: This time, the impediment to amour is male sexual dysfunction, better known by its non-medical name: “This has never happened to me before.” Apparently, Michael can't get it up for her, because he's gotten it up too often for himself. Yep, the guy is addicted to porn, and the junk has unmanned him. As he wails: “It's the ultimate disconnect. I need my eyes back.”

That's not all he needs back. And (I can hear half of you yelling) this is funny? As it turns out, yes. Sutherland's artful trick is to stick a serious tension — sex objects versus love subjects — into a genre flick without losing his balance, without sacrificing either the comedic levity or the thematic weight. It's not too serious, not too frivolous, just right.

He shows a similar knack for dealing with other stock conventions. Like the inevitable montage sequences — in this case, Jasmine trying on some enticing lingerie, or Michael scouring the street for photo opportunities. Again, not too long, not too short, just right. Even the sub-plots, which are typically just second-act filler, have some zip here.

Hired to sell feminine hygiene products, Jasmine develops an ad campaign based on a what-if-men-had-periods premise — the gag is old, but the telling is a hoot.

Add to all this a first-rate cast — the principals are both engaging while the supporters (Mark Taylor along with Kai Soremekun) make for sharp comic foils — and the result is a whole lot more than a feature debut that shows promise. It's a fulfilled feature, period.

So don't forget a name that's easy to remember: Sudz Sutherland. He's got a flair for dialogue; he's got a feel for the camera; he's got more mistakes to make but, above all, he's got real movies in him — bring on the next one, please.