

christina ricci martin donovan lisa kudrow lyle lovett

**"A SCATHING COMEDY!
LACERATINGLY FUNNY!"**

-Janet Maslin, THE NEW YORK TIMES

**"1998 HAS FINALLY PRODUCED A FUNNY MOVIE!
SO FAST PACED IT VERGES ON SCREWBALL COMEDY!
RICCI AND KUDROW ARE SENSATIONAL!"**

-Kristine McKenna, LOS ANGELES TIMES

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Opposite
of Sex**

a don Roos film

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You'll be offended.

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Visit the Sony Pictures Classics site at <http://www.spe.sony.com/classics>**CINEMA****Sweet country pain**Canadian independent film *The Hanging Garden*
steers clear of Hollywood conventions

BY WILL O'BRYAN

If ever a movie should've spoken to me directly, it would be *The Hanging Garden*. The lead character, Sweet William, shares my name and birth month, June. As a teenager, he's overweight, insecure and closeted; so was I. His mother takes him to a prostitute against his will; my father always promised (or threatened) to take me to a Dutch brothel for my sixteenth birthday. After these details were laid out, my empathy tried to kick in.

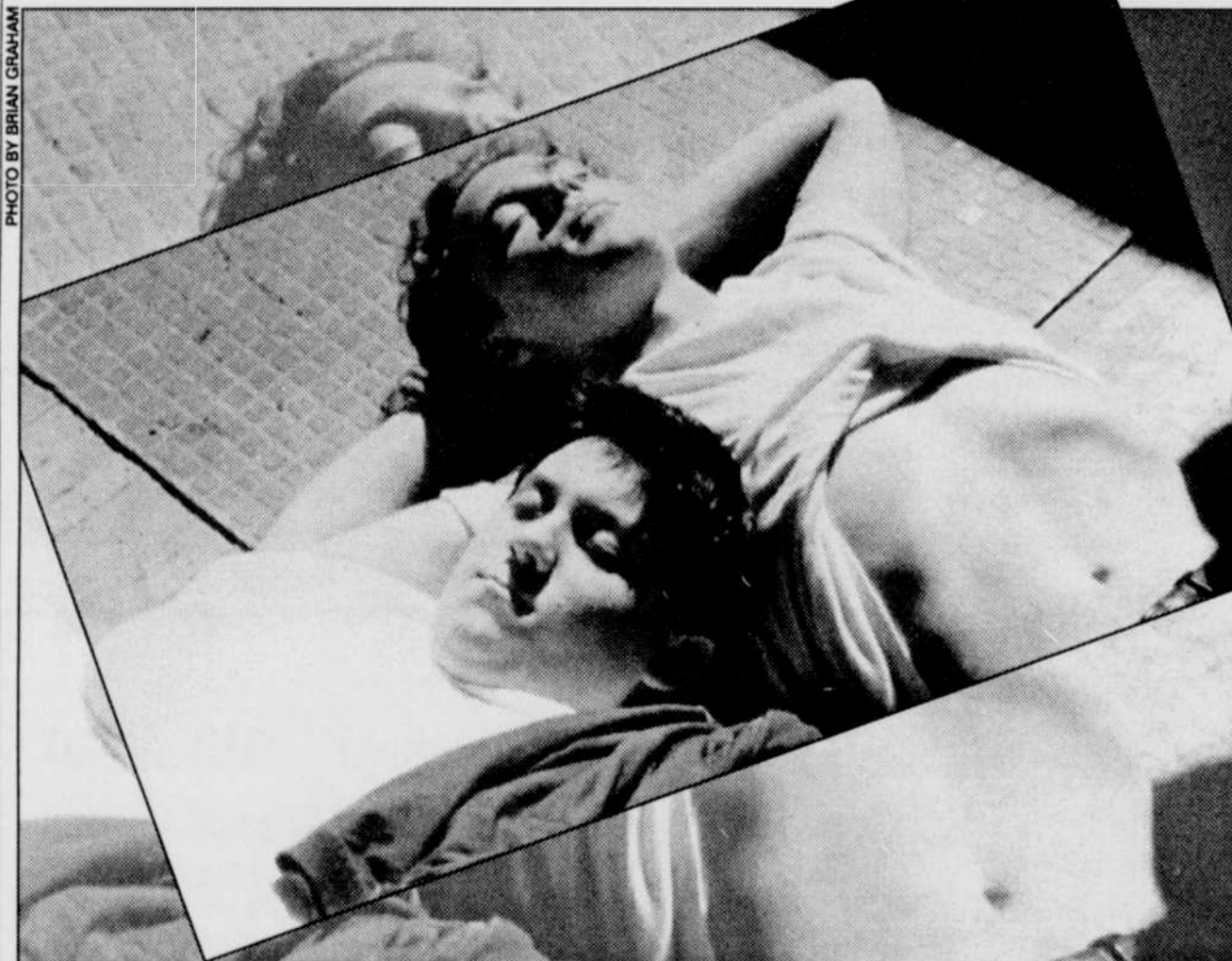
I expected this story to pull me into it, but it didn't. Thom Fitzgerald, who wrote and directed *The Hanging Garden*, really didn't tell a story as much as he illustrated a poem. It's a 12-grain, whole-wheat poem Fitzgerald composed in a root cellar. This is organic cinema.

The poem moves from past to present, from

Mac (Peter MacNeill) and Iris (Seana McKenna) are so tragic. An audience may want a clue as to whose lead to follow, but there isn't one. The film maintains both its comedy and tragedy throughout. It's not that *The Hanging Garden* is both comedy and tragedy, it's neither. It's a shade of gray—which is not to say it's bad. As a matter of fact, Canadian audiences adored it.

One disappointment is that renowned queer fiddler Ashley MacIsaac is credited with playing Basil, but the character is insignificant. He just floats about as the minstrel mime.

So, again, while Fitzgerald's message is difficult to interpret, his prose is lush and his cast entertaining. All



Troy Veinotte (left) as teen-age Sweet William reclines against Fletcher (Joel S. Keller)

the literal to the metaphorical, and combines them all at once in a rainy North Atlantic garden.

Adult Sweet William (Chris Leavins) returns after a 10-year absence to his rural Nova Scotia homestead for his sister's wedding. His departure was triggered by the aforementioned visit to the town prostitute after Grandma caught him exchanging hand jobs in the garden with young Fletcher (Joel S. Keller). Having left as a dangerously obese, somewhat abused, and definitely humble teenager, his return as a thin, out gay man catches the rest of the family off guard.

This might sound like the premise for a laugh riot comedy, or maybe a tender story of personal growth, but even those loose phrases are too constricting for what Fitzgerald presents. It could be a case of U.S. versus Canadian sensibilities, but relative to what I'm used to, Fitzgerald's Canadian picture pulls in many directions simultaneously, never really arriving anywhere. Like a poem, it conveys some emotions. But also like a poem, it's entirely a matter of personal perception. Some scenes are arguably funny and yet very disturbing.

The acting is easier to pin down. Leavins and Kerry Fox, who plays William's sister, Rosemary, have great comic talent (although it seems as if Fitzgerald directed them to downplay the comedy). Conversely, parents Whiskey

manifestations of Sweet William are fascinating, whether it's little Sweet William (Ian Parsons), the child who is taught gardening by rote by his impatient father and who begins to eat as a way to defend himself; as teen-age Sweet William (Troy Veinotte), who lumbers about with a mix of hope and bitterness; or the adult Sweet William, who lives in "the big city" and sings advertising jingles when he isn't waiting tables or fending off advances from his sister's groom, the adult Fletcher.

Of the three Williams, Veinotte's is the most touching. Maybe the story was so close to home that he wasn't acting so much as emoting, but he does a remarkable job—exquisite if you consider it's the first role for the Nova Scotia native.

And Fitzgerald's work is not too shabby either, especially if you consider it's his first film as well. Regardless of what U.S. box office receipts may deliver, Canada has spoken, guaranteeing that we're sure to see more Cinema Fitzgerald. I only hope that in the future he'll color within the lines. I'm guessing there's a substantial contingent, though, who've taken a shine to his poetic license.

■ *THE HANGING GARDEN* opens July 3 at KOIN Cinemas, Southwest Third Avenue and Clay Street. Call 225-5555, ext. 4608, for show times.

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