

In Good Company

There is little plot to speak of in *The Company of Strangers*, a film that focuses on eight women in an abandoned farmhouse after their bus breaks down. There are none of the turning points that often anchor the best screenplays. The pace is Sunday slow. There are no special effects, no heart-stopping surprises. And yet fifteen years after I met the likes of Cissy, Mary and Alice, *The Company of Strangers* lingers in my mind as a film of intense beauty and quiet truths.

Released in 1990, the film was cut from a different cloth all together, one of a handful of alternative dramas produced by the National Film Board. Like *Sitting in Limbo* and *Train of Dreams*, *The Company of Strangers* marries thoughtful structure with unscripted dialogue performed by non-professional actors. Credit for the script goes to Gloria Demers, with a helping hand from director Cynthia Scott, editor David Wilson and associate producer Sally Bochner. Most of the script's structure was shaped by Scott and Demers, who doubled as associate director.

Scott spent the better part of a year interviewing senior citizens in Montreal and was struck by one common experience: they all felt invisible, insignificant. Initially, Scott was open to a cast that included men, but during improvisations she noticed how these women of a different generation became deferential in the company of men. Scott decided to go with a woman-only cast. She knew she had to pluck these women out of the environment where they had been made to feel marginal and plant them in a milieu where their voices would be heard.

And so it is that eight women end up in an isolated, empty house in the Laurentians north of Montreal. The pretext is that one of the women — 88-year old Constance — is looking for the country house she knew and loved as a child. Constance eventually finds the house at the edge of a lake, and rescue comes in the form of a water plane. Over the course of three days and nights, we are introduced to a group of women whose conversations shimmer with honesty and humour and ripple with wordless pain.

The only young cast member and professional actor is Michelle Sweeney, who does duty as a bus driver with a gutsy singing voice. It's up to Catherine Roche, a nun, to vainly tinker with the bus for a day before setting off for help. Joining Constance is Alice Diabo, a straight-talking Mohawk who fashions a fishing net out of pantyhose. A spry Winnie Holden leads the women in an outdoor fitness class and a dance inside the kitchen. Cissy Meddings is an elf-like woman with an irresistible smile and disposition with no hint of the stroke that had left her bed-ridden. Beth Webber is all British reserve, better dressed for high tea than a hike. Mary Meigs came to the production defined both by her lifelong artwork, and a lesbianism that had to be kept closeted and shrouded in shame.

Demers had written about two-thirds of a script before shooting began. Scott has marveled at how Demers was able to inhabit the women's personalities and create dialogue that sounded so natural and particular to each woman. But little of that dialogue made it to the screen. It was there as backup, to be used as a springboard for spontaneous conversations.

Rather, Demers and Scott invested a great deal of thought and care in structuring the story as a series of scenes that would explore issues that were central to the women's lives. The screenplay provided a structure and shelter for these non-actors, which they filled with the shades and hues of achingly honest dialogue.

As designed by Demers and Scott and executed by Cissy and Alice, a berry picking scene becomes a meditation on loneliness. Memories of youthful love are stoked when Alice, Beth and Winnie find themselves parked in a rusted, abandoned car. The night sky becomes a canvas of unanswerable questions as Alice and Cissy wonder if there is life after death.

Scott and Demers spent weekends during the production rewriting the script: scenes would be restructured, added or abandoned, depending on how the story had evolved.

Occasionally, a scripted line would be used to end a scene to great effect. Constance, who wears her sadness like a shawl permanently stitched to her rounded shoulders, tells Alice she knows she will soon die, and would rather die in the country — where she has found a rare moment of happiness — than a hospital or nursing home. "I'm not going to die," declares Alice, after a perfectly timed pause. "I'm going fishing."

Alice heads off to fish, Constance stays back and weeps, and we are left to contemplate the company of some remarkable women, their textured lives revealed through the prism of simple conversations.

Emil Sher
Canadian Screenwriter, Spring 2005