Swann: *The Movie*

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Swann: Directed by Anna Benson Gyles. Screenplay by Carol Shields and David Young from the novel *Swann: A Mystery* by Carol Shields. Cinematography: Gerald Pacher. Film editor: Robin Sales. Production design: John Dondertman. Music: Richard Rodney Bennett. Produced by Christina Jennings and Ann Scott. A Norstar release (1996). Cast: Brenda Fricker, Miranda Richardson, Michael Ontkean, David Cubitt, Sean McCann, John Neville. Running time: 96 minutes.

THE ART OF ADAPTATION FROM NOVEL TO SCREENPLAY requires, almost more than anything else, the finely tuned instincts of an editor, the ability to select, rearrange, sometimes reinvent and, when necessary, ruthlessly delete. The 1996 adaptation of Carol Shields's novel *Swann* reveals just how difficult and sensitive this process can be, how much it reflects individual taste and a sensibility appropriate to the genre. In accepting the challenge of re-editing *Swann* for the screen, both Toronto screenwriter David Young and British director Anna Benson Gyles have certainly remained faithful to the essence of a novel which foregrounds the seemingly peripheral, the in-between moments, those sidelong nuances which admit us, little by little, to the interior life of the characters. They have also had to make hard choices which involve reshaping the novel's structure. The result is a film of quiet grace overall which reduces the multi-layered voices of the novel into a delicate dance between two very self-contained women, feminist writer and academic Sarah Maloney and small-town librarian Rose Hindmarch.

In recreating *Swann* as a piece of cinema, the first thing both Young and Gyles had to contend with was a murder mystery which resists the conventions of its own genre, deliberately obscuring as much about its own core of truth as it offers. Sarah and Rose are drawn together through their fascination with a local poet and farmwife Mary Swann, now deceased. Sarah has discovered the poems of Mary Swann, a slim volume of verse in which images surface powerfully under the skin of the text. It is an astonishing piece of work, considering that it was written by an uneducated, dirt-poor farmwife in southern Ontario who was murdered by her abusive husband at the age of 50. Why she was murdered is not the issue for novelist or filmmaker, however. It's *how* Mary produced her poems under circumstances of abject poverty, domestic abuse and near illiteracy: this is the mystery that excites and eludes interpretation.

In resolving this question, we might expect a murder mystery writer to set up the plot and advance the action through a series of external dramatic events to which various characters must react, usually under some degree of pressure. Not so Carol Shields. She prefers to pause frequently, and in a leisurely way to lift the veil from her characters' internal musings, not only on the enigma that was Mary Swann, but on their own human condition.

Sarah Maloney tells us: "I've never been able to see the point of emptying one's mind of thought. Our thoughts are all we have. I love my thoughts, even when they take me up and down sour-smelling byways where I'd rather not venture. Whatever flickers on in my head is mine and I want it. . ."

This kind of transparent glimpse inside the mind of a character, particularly a woman who treasures the life of the mind as much as Sarah does, is the established territory of the novel form, but much less accessible for a filmmaker working, in the end, with a series of visual images placed one against the other. How do you show the workings of someone's intellect? What does the terrain of someone's imagination look like to someone else? It's the kind of thing that keeps filmmakers awake at night, stumbling around the terrain of their own imaginations.

Even more challenging is the way each chapter of the book, except the last one, is powerfully committed to the voice and point of view of a different major character. These characters' observations and experiences become intertwined because they frequently allude to and comment upon one another. As such, each of the four characters is given equal substance and import. The chapter titles say it all: "Sarah Maloney," "Morton Jimroy," "Rose Hindmarch," "Frederic Cruzzi." All four have a unique interest in Mary Swann, verging on obsession in some cases, which will eventually unify them as a group. Yet the conventions of dramatic film call strongly for one true protagonist whose vision and values become a filter for the action of the story and, all-importantly, allows the audience to identify, or at least sympathize, with that character.

So whose story is it? The answer to this cinematic conundrum, for both writer and director, is to shift the world of the novel from a multiplicity of viewpoints almost entirely to Sarah Maloney's perspective and then work at capturing the book's precise and emotionally subtle tone in her relationship with Rose Hindmarch, which unfurls slowly, haltingly and with tremendous care. It is now the story of Sarah and Rose on a journey together into the misery and poetry of Mary Swann's life. This is perhaps the most significant editorial revision from novel to film.

Of course, the characters themselves are not immune to change either. Screenwriter David Young and actress Miranda Richardson transform Sarah from the energetic "irrepressible" young woman of the book whose professional success does not alter her tremendous personal charm, to the Sarah of the film, also successful, also attractive, but in a brittle, elusive and mercilessly honest portrayal of an ambitious career woman. In the novel, Sarah is working on a paper to present at the Swann symposium organized by academics excited by this literary oddity. The Sarah of the film, on the other hand, is writing a full biography of Mary Swann, and is doing so in competition with the self-styled "official" biographer Morton Jimroy, also writing the definitive life of Swann.

By raising the stakes of Sarah's ambitions against Morton Jimroy's enormous ego, David Young attempts to heighten and clarify the conflict between these two writers. This tension is handled much more aslant in the novel and allows Jimroy's loneliness and self-parodying stance to emerge, not to mention the fantasy he has been building up about the charming

Sarah whom he's never actually met. In the film, their professional conflict doesn't really play well, largely because Jimroy is reduced to a bundle of stereotypical assumptions about middle-aged academics, an unfortunate caricature, in fact. Less than three-dimensional, he presents no real threat or obstacle to Sarah's search for the truth about Mary Swann. Like most of the minor characters in the film, he remains background texture for the major interchanges in the film between Sarah and Rose Hindmarch.

Rose Hindmarch has also been altered in the transition from book to film. Shields's Rose is timid, naïve, spinsterish in the Victorian sense. Her life is busily defined by committee work, her duties as town librarian and her devotion to the dead Mary Swann. Rose has collected Swann's few paltry belongings and artifacts and created a small museum in her memory, a monument to a minor poet. She lives alone and aches with that knowledge, a small, plain woman in a small, unremarkable town. Actress Brenda Fricker spins this unprepossessing material into a woman of sturdy sensibility and dignity, even in temperament, and for the most part comfortable in her station. The escalating academic interest in her Mary has her teetering, not between fear and excitement as in the novel, but between pride and a watchful possessiveness over the sketchy remains of Mary's history.

As a visitor to the museum, Sarah begins a careful minuet with Rose, an acquaintance between two very private, even solitary women who come to respect one another's hard-won integrity and commitment to Mary Swann's legacy. Their connection is much more finely drawn than the relationships either woman has with the men in their lives. In the film, Sarah is in transition from one lover to another. This is another major digression from the novel in which, early on, she marries a performing artist as much out of a sense of pragmatism (read the desire for a family) as love. Screenwriter David Young eschews the quick marriage in order to make the most of this trusty film convention, the Love Interest. In Young's hands, the performing artist becomes a nice-looking carpenter (Michael Ontkean) who drifts in and out of the film's narrative, handy and quietly supportive—just what every career girl dreams of. He makes a final appearance at the Swann symposium just when Sarah most needs his physical and moral support.

One cannot write about the film adaptation of *Swann* without noting that the last chapter of the novel is not only devoted to describing the events of the Swann symposium but is structured as though it were a screenplay. In the simplified prose of this format, the story plunges into action-driven plot, with all the novel's players gathering at the symposium hoping for answers to the riddle of Mary Swann. Considerable effort is expended to reveal the identity of a person who has throughout the novel been systematically stealing the rare bound editions of Swann's book and other memorabilia of Swann's life. There are lots of farcical bits of business: people bumping into one another, hiding behind curtains, late-night knocks on bedroom doors and so on, the sort of thing one might expect from a British comedy of manners. This sudden shift in form and focus tends to rob the book of its lovely satirical poise and complexity. Certainly the *faux* screenplay doesn't appear to have made things any easier for Young, whose own script at this stage also tends to reduce the story to a

much simpler level of exposition. Both novel and film acquire a strangely arch quality toward the end in their attempt to retread in ironic terms the well-worn clichés of the cinema and the mystery genre itself.

Without doubt, the film version of *Swann* reflects the strengths of the novel most successfully when it mines the rich territory of memory, loss and desire contained within the female triangle of Sarah Maloney, Rose Hindmarch and Mary Swann. It's as though the struggle to define Swann is a natural extension of their own search for identity, the yearning within themselves. Inevitably, the fugitive Swann escapes everyone, as suggested by the blurry, poorly illuminated photograph of Mary which appears at the end of the film. It's an evocative image, and the most accessible visual symbol of Swann's peculiar tendency to recede further and further into obscurity the more people try to hold her up to the light. ❦

Life Goes On: Don McKellar's Last Night

TRICIA WASNEY

Last Night: Written and directed by Don McKellar. Cinematography: Douglas Koch. Film editor: Reginald Harkema. Production design: John Dondertman. Music: Alexina Louie, Alex Pauk. Produced by Niv Fichman, Daniel Iron and Joseph Beccia. A Lion Gate Films release (1998). Cast: Don McKellar, Sandra Oh, Callum Keith Rennie, Geneviève Bujold, Roberta Maxwell, Robin Gammell, Sarah Polley, David Cronenberg, Tracey Wright. Running time: 96 minutes.

THE DAY AFTER THE GENIES (CANADA'S VERSION OF THE OSCARS) were presented in March of last year, the *Globe and Mail*'s coverage of the event began with the headline "Genie Awards turn into the Don McKellar show." And for good reason. The bulk of the awards went to *The Red Violin* which McKellar co-wrote and in which he plays a small part, and to *Last Night*, a film he wrote, starred in and directed. In addition to winning the best actress and best supporting actor awards (for Sandra Oh and Callum Keith Rennie), *Last Night* was honoured with the special Claude Jutra Award for direction of a first feature film. McKellar was also celebrated at Cannes (1998), where he was awarded the Prix de la Jeunesse for his debut feature.

McKellar has been an active force in Canadian film for about the last decade. He has been a screenwriter on such films as Bruce McDonald's *Roadkill, Highway 61, Dance Me Outside,* and *Elimination Dance* and with François Girard on *Thirty-Two Films About Glenn Gould* and *The Red Violin*. As an actor he has had major roles in *Highway 61* and in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica,* for which he won a best supporting actor Genie. He has appeared in numerous other films, including Egoyan's *The Adjuster* as well as in many of his own screenplays and co-productions.