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# UPTOWN



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## cover story

# Anti-Road to Avonlea, indeed

Local filmmaker Danishka Esterhazy got her hands dirty capturing 19th-century Manitoba farm life for her debut feature, *Black Field*

## movie preview

**BLACK FIELD**

May 28 – June 10, Cinematheque

Kenton Smith

Winnipeg filmmaker Danishka Esterhazy would like to see an end to the so-called 'chick flick.'

"Having female characters does not equal that kind of movie," she says with a shake of her head. She simply prefers intelligent, independent female protagonists who aren't 'cardboard types' — that is, characters who are allowed to be human and make both good and bad decisions.

For instance, Esterhazy's feature debut, *Black Field*, concerns two Scottish immigrant sisters trying to survive alone on their rude farm. One day arrives silver-tongued stranger David Latouche (Mathieu Bourguet), who may be more than he seems. Sexual tensions ensue and very possible mortal danger looms.

"As human beings, it's perfectly possible for anyone to identify with what a female character goes through," Esterhazy continues. "A feminist perspective should not be considered limiting."

"I mean, I describe myself as a female filmmaker, but don't see that as a barrier. I mean, do we see Will Smith films as only for black men?"

Inspired by the dark romance of the Brontë sisters — whose novels she calls "early feminist literature" — Esterhazy started writing the screenplay for *Black Field* in early 2008. So striking was her basic scenario that she found a producer with the first draft: local thespian and acting teacher Jeff Skinner.

It wasn't long after that development money was found through both Super Channel and Telefilm Canada. "The film came together quite quickly for a Canadian indie feature; everyone seemed to like the script," Esterhazy says.

That includes Sara Canning, star of TV's *The Vampire Diaries*, who plays older sister Maggie in *Black Field*.

"Danishka's the first female director I've ever worked with," Canning says. "I had good expectations of her just from reading the screenplay — I connected with it more than any other I've ever read."

Yet it's not as if there was no trepidation whatsoever from potential funders. According to Esterhazy, "At first, people said, 'You want to do a 19th-century historical drama for under half a million? Are you insane?'"

"But it turned out to be quite doable for the money."

Indeed, Esterhazy consciously tried to write the script with a small cast and limited locations in mind. But she refused to water down Canadian history.

"Life back then was dirty, difficult and dangerous, and we were striving for authenticity," she says. "We began referring to the film as the



Danishka Esterhazy on set

anti-Road to Avonlea."

It was certainly the most demanding shoot co-producer Ashley Hirt had worked on. "We were out shooting in fields in early spring," she says. "That's hard physical work."

"For that matter, lots of unexpected challenges came up — like figuring out the cost of renting chickens. As a city girl, I'm not usually thinking about those sorts of things."

The chickens proved a challenge after the fact as well, escaping from their coops and holding up production while crew members scrambled to recover them.

"It's going to make for a DVD featurette," Hirt chuckles. "Now I appreciate the great importance of a good animal wrangler."

Then there was the horse that did not get along with a cow, the ticks that stuck to an actress during a photo shoot, and the fluctuating weather — which included a wind tunnel that inspired fear of a major-league storm. (It passed.)

Also, "one horse also went a little crazy on Sara," Esterhazy says. "We're pretty lucky there were no major catastrophes. Really, we were skating close to the edge the whole time. It was a nerve-wracking shoot."

Esterhazy's fierce dedication to the project was evident to her collaborators.

"She was up to her knees in the mud just like everyone else," Canning says. "It was such a passion project for her."

Indeed, Canning says Esterhazy proved herself the most thorough director she had ever worked with — a fact that became clear even before shooting began.

"I only met her for the first time about three days before production started," Canning says. "But she sent me loads of material to help me prepare. She was also there with me for the costume fittings."

"She clearly had a strong vision — she knew what she wanted. But she also encouraged me to play with the character of Maggie a little. She was excited to hear my thoughts on character and story."



From left: Sara Canning, Ferron Guerreiro and Mathieu Bourguet star in Danishka Esterhazy's new movie, *Black Field*.

According to Hirt, Esterhazy "is the kind of woman who takes charge, yet she isn't afraid to seek others' advice to solve problems. She always takes other people's input into consideration — while ultimately keeping her own counsel, of course."

Hirt herself had previously worked with Esterhazy as part of a director's lab.

"It's not like Danishka had never been on set before," she says. "Her experience from her various shorts, like *The Snow Queen* and *Infectious*, enabled her to deal with problems."

"Yet she's also very motivated to better herself. She's always trying to learn more and hone her skills. She's very willing to 'go back to school.'"

Has Esterhazy ever felt a particular challenge as a female director? "It's hard to analyze my own career in terms of barriers," she says, "but I can see others' careers clearly, and how they are faced with difficulties."

"A lot of people don't realize something about women in film: there's better female representation in the U.S. senate than there is among filmmakers. And there's really no good reason why."

Forget what *American Psycho* author Bret Easton Ellis recently said on Movieline.com (i.e., that there's something about the film medium that requires the male gaze).

"A director needs to be a good storyteller, have a strong visual aesthetic and be a good communicator," Esterhazy says. "Women can certainly do all that."

Good directors also tend to leave an impression on people.

"She's become a role model for me as a woman in the film industry," Canning says. "I can't wait to see what she comes up with next."

Read Kenton Smith's review of *Black Field* on page 21.

## movies

# The great unravelling act

Danishka Esterhazy's *Black Field* starts out incredibly strong, but drags its heels in the second half

## movie review

**B**

### BLACK FIELD

May 28 – June 10, Cinematheque

Kenton Smith

An early scene in this film offers the perfect exercise in empathy.

Maggie McGregor (Sara Canning) is the elder of two sisters living alone on a 19th-century Manitoba farm. A handsome stranger arrives, named David Latouche (Mathieu Bourguet). He takes quick — and clearly interested — note that the sisters' nearest neighbour is miles away.

Imagine you were Maggie. Imagine you were any woman her age — say, alone at a remote bus stop. Might your heart pound a little harder at encountering a man who seems pleased there's no one around?

Sexual danger simmers not just in this scene, but throughout *Black Field*, the debut feature from Winnipeg writer/director Danishka Esterhazy. It also illustrates that, for the dramatist, there's rich possibilities in sexual repression.

Indeed, this Prairie Gothic tale is driven as much by passions that good Scottish Presbyterians know is the stuff of wickedness. Yet implications of peril may well be justified: after all, who is Latouche and what does he want — particu-



Mathieu Bourguet as David Latouche (left) and Sara Canning as Maggie McGregor (right)

larly from 14-year-old Rose (Ferron Gurreiro)?

What's best about *Black Field* is its psychological complexity. When Maggie demurs about Latouche staying at the farm, what are her reasons? Fear of the man, or of her own sexual desire?

Or is she jealous he may prefer the younger Rose?

All these, in fact, may not be mutually exclusive, and the script develops the conflict straight through, with character revelations right up to the very end. Esterhazy also demonstrates a

strong grasp of visual storytelling, understanding that a gesture or simple insert can convey all necessary meaning.

Unfortunately, this early tension isn't sustained. Were the whole of *Black Field* as tight as its first half hour, this would be a

near-great film. Instead, it's a good film that proves screenwriting guru Syd Field right: most movies, if they go astray, do so in the second act.

The lynchpin of the film is Canning's performance as Maggie. She's in almost every scene and is fascinating because it's hard to know what she's thinking. Bourguet is equally enigmatic; the weak side of the triangle is Gurreiro, who mostly comes across rather one-dimensionally (not to mention a little too dolled up).

Practically a character unto itself is *Black Field*'s rude setting: the cinematography makes the scraggly wooded prairie cold and foreboding. On the other hand, there are gorgeously photographed horizons that echo the landscapes of John Ford.

For that matter, the minimalist lighting is actually appropriate to the time and place, when crude domiciles had gloomy interiors. It also makes for a fitting mood, and the use of copious shadows puts the dramatic focus on the characters.

Yet the editing is often abrupt, as in the inexplicable termination of a truly arousing sex scene. And several bits with two Mounties not only impede the plot's momentum, they're just awkward. *Black Field*, like its characters, could stand to clean up a little. As the Scots would say, however, it has good bones.

For more info see our movie listings below.

## showtimes

Deadline for listings submissions is Tuesday at 4 pm. Listings are free but placement cannot be guaranteed. Listings are current Friday to Thursday and are subject to change without notice.

### OPENING THURSDAY

SEX AND THE CITY 2 (WIDE)

### OPENING FRIDAY

PRINCE OF PERSIA (WIDE)  
BLACK FIELD (CINEMATHEQUE)

### SHOWTIMES

**CINEMA CITY NORTHGATE** • www.cineplex.ca • 1399 McPhillips St at the Northgate Shopping Mall • 334-6234 • Listings unavailable by press time

**CINEMA CITY MCGILLIVRAY** • www.cineplex.ca • 2190 McGillivray at Kenaston • 269-9981 • Listings unavailable by press time

**CINEMATHEQUE** • www.winnipegfilmgroup.com • 100 Arthur St • 925-3457 ▶ **BLACK FIELD** May 28 7:00 9:00 May 29-30 7:00 June 2-6 7:00 June 9-10 7:00 ▶ **10 YEARS OF SEND & RECEIVE** May 29 9:00 ▶ **ME AND ORSON WELLES** June 2-5 9:00

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empiretheatres.com • 1120 Grant Avenue • 453-4084  
▶ **SEX AND THE CITY 2** (14A) Fri Mon-Thu 3:15 4:00 6:40 7:30 10:00 Sat Sun 12:10 12:50 3:15 4:00 6:40 7:30 10 ▶ **LETTERS TO JULIET** (G) Fri Mon-Thu 4:10 7:15 9:40 Sat Sun 1:10 4:10 7:15 9:40 ▶ **SHREK FOREVER AFTER 3D** (PG) Fri 4:20 7:10 9:30 Sat Sun 12:40 4:20 7:10 9:30 ▶ **THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO** (18A) Fri Mon-Thu 3:20 6:30 Sat Sun 12:15 3:20 6:30 ▶ **MACGRUBER** (14A) Fri-Thu 9:50 ▶ **IRON MAN 2** (PG) Fri Mon-Thu 3:40 6:50 9:45 Sat Sun 12:20 3:40 6:50 9:45 ▶ **ROBIN HOOD** (14A) Fri Mon-Thu 3:30 6:45 10:05 Sat Sun 12:30 3:30 6:45 10:05

**GARDEN CITY** • 2305 McPhillips St • 338-8747 • www.famousplayers.com • Listings unavailable by press time

**GLOBE CINEMA** • 3rd Floor Portage Place 393 Portage Ave • 694-5623 ▶ **SEX AND THE CITY 2** (14A) Eve 6:50 9:45 Sat Sun Mat 1:00 4:00 ▶ **ROBIN HOOD** (14A) Fri-Wed Eve 7:00 9:50 Thurs Eve 9:50 Sat Sun Mat 1:10 4:10 ▶ **MAO'S LAST DANCER** (PG) Eve 7:10 9:40 Sat

Sun Mat 1:20 3:50 ▶ **CARMEN** (STC) opera performed at Opus Arte Royal Opera House (STC) Opera Sat June 12 10:00 AM

**IMAX THEATRE** • www.imaxwinnipeg.com • 3rd Floor Portage Place 393 Portage Ave • 956-4629 • ▶ **ALICE IN WONDERLAND 3D** (G) Fri 5:00 9:30 Sat 3:15 9:30 Sun 3:15 8:30 Mon 8:45 Tue 8:30 Wed-Thu 8:45 ▶ **HUBBLE 3D** (G) Fri 12:10 8:15 Sat 12:00 2:00 6:15 8:15 Sun 12:00 2:00 6:15 Mon 7:30 Tues 10:00am Wed 12:30 7:30 Thu 1:45 7:30 ▶ **WILD OCEAN 3D** (G) Fri 7:15 Sat Sun 1:00 7:15 Mon 11:00am 6:30 Tue 1:10 Wed 10:00am 6:30 Thu 3:00 6:30 ▶ **EGYPT 3D: SECRETS OF THE MUMMIES** (G) Fri 10:00am 1:15 ▶ **GREECE: SECRETS OF THE PAST** (G) Thurs 12:30 ▶ **COSMIC VOYAGE** (G) Wed 2:00 ▶ **THE HUMAN BODY** (G) Tue 12:10 Wed 11:10am ▶ **AMAZON** (G) Fri 11:10am Thu 10:30am ▶ **MAGIC OF FLIGHT** (G) Mon 10:00am ▶ **ALASKA** (G) Mon 12:10 Thu 11:30am ▶ **STORMCHASERS** (G) Tue 11:10am ▶ **DOLPHINS & WHALES 3D** (G) Wed 3:00

**KILDONIAN PLACE** • www.cineplex.com • 1555

Regent Ave W • 663-2166 • Listings unavailable by press time

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**SILVERCITY ST. VITAL** • www.cineplex.com • 110-1225 St Mary's Rd • 256-3901 • Listings unavailable by press time

**TOWNE 8** • www.landmarkcinemas.ca • 301 Notre Dame Ave • 947-3380 ▶ **PRINCE OF PERSIA** (PG) Daily 6:45 9:20 Sat Sun Mat 1:30 4:00 ▶ **SHREK FOREVER AFTER 2D** (PG) Daily 7:00 9:15 Sat Sun Mat 1:45 4:15 ▶ **HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2D** (PG) Sat Sun Mat 1:15 3:45 ▶ **THE RUNAWAYS** (14A) Daily 7:00 9:15 ▶ **LETTERS TO JULIET** (G) Daily 7:15 9:30 Sat Sun Mat 1:45 4:15 ▶ **IRON MAN 2** (PG) Daily 6:45 9:30 Sat Sun Mat 1:15 4:00 ▶ **MACGRUBER** (14A) Daily 7:15 9:30 Sat Sun Mat 1:30 3:45 ▶ **DATE NIGHT** (PG) Daily 7:15 9:20 Sat Sun Mat 1:45 4:15 ▶ **CLASH OF THE TITANS 2D** (14A) Sat Sun Mat 1:30 4:00 ▶ **A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET** (18A) Daily 7:00 9:15



Sex and the City 2 opens Thursday