

CMFH Film Reviews

"The Velvet Devil"

2006, Canada

Drama, Musical, Romance, TV

Review by *Deborah Dearth*



When your mother sings to dead grandmothers it may be hard to convince her that a radio career is just as respectable.

Growing up listening to her mother sing only for the spirit world, Velvet is confounded that she doesn't want to share her talent with a living audience. Mesmerized the first time she hears singers over the radio, her fate is sealed. She leaves her Native American Métis community for the lights and promise of the big city of Toronto, and forever shuts herself off from her family and heritage.

It is the 1930s, and she must pass as white in order to get ahead in her career. From the moment she cuts her braids in order to stay at a boarding house for white women, she becomes a woman without a history. Haunted by her own connection to the spirit world that she does not allow herself to realize, Velvet climbs the ladder of success while removing the rungs of her past.

Andrea Menard owns this production. After all, she wrote the stage play and every song in it. The other actors are merely stage dressing - this is a one-woman show. Much like her character, Velvet, she grabs hold of the performance enthusiastically and takes it as far as it will go, though Velvet limits herself by the heritage she keeps a secret.

The rest of the cast seems so dark and serious behind Menard who glows in her performance. Obviously enthusiastic about the words she has penned, it's hard to deny their appeal. The songs are catchy and sultry, as Velvet evolves from a wannabe radio jingle girl into a nightclub diva. As a musical, the plot is powered almost entirely through song, and the transitions are smooth. The mood is deceptively light, though the underlying longing for a connection with home is revealed in every decision she makes.

Directed by Larry Bauman for Canadian television, the film feels like an intimate play. Backgrounds are often displayed on digital screens, but this does not distract from the production. The focus is on the character, not the surroundings. Her natural intuition prevents her from ever truly being far from home, no matter how long she runs.

Her moments of opportunity and foresight are emphasized with a yellow light that sears like a heat lamp - a simple stage trick that creates a fragility in Velvet we may otherwise not fully realize. Premonitions flash and memories receive a fuzzy glow; the style may not be new, but the story remains fresh.

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Not just another country girl heading to the city, this girl must also shelter a past for which many remain ignorant and prejudiced. She does not even entrust her true love with the secret. The film glosses over any discussion of society's treatment of Native Americans, but it is apparent that the consequences of a public revelation would destroy her. An enchanting one-woman musical, Menard has created a character that will be remembered for both her songs and her heritage.