

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

Four women, members of the 2007 Older Women in Film group, wrote about the film.

Carol : To enjoy the film you have to be prepared to forget action, special effects, fast moving dialogue and glamour. What you will experience is a group of ageing women slowed down by time and the hardship of life, who are, without exception, interesting, each with a story to tell. These women, who find themselves in a beautiful setting, show an inner and outer radiance. They talk about family, marriage, love, work, pain and death. They have all survived one or more blows as they have passed through life. Their lives are real and come across that way as they talk about the ups and downs that life has handed them.

A "down" at present is that their bus has broken down in the middle of nowhere and they find a derelict house for shelter while they plan the next step. For such seasoned travellers through decades it is a temporary disaster, which will soon resolve itself. These women have lived long and survived much.

The setting is beautiful and soothing, with wonderful pastel views and sounds of nature, especially the sounds of birdsongs. The distant forest is the only possible threat and the tranquil immediate surroundings encourage the women to relax and talk together through a series of quiet conversations.

On arriving at the derelict house they pull together to make it as comfortable as possible for their short stay. This pulling together is very reflective of how women work together at any age but it is made even more effective as they call on all the wisdom acquired in their many years of life. We slowly learn a lot about their lives and also begin to consider aspects of our own lives. The women selected for this film are real people, sharing real lives and have been given the scope by the director to talk freely. These women still have periods of hope despite their long lives and ageing bodies. Their actions and their words paint beautiful pictures of these fascinating individuals.

The film is a story of courage and friendship and we see the bonds developing in front of our eyes. We see acceptance and understanding of different ways of life and the conversations illustrate the resilience and fortitude of these women, and of women in general. They are compassionate listeners and respond in a loving way. The women speak of deeply felt pain during their idle chitchat and we get a fuller picture of each of them. This is not a usual way of filming but it is closer to what happens in real life. The women really listen to each other, reaching out to the other women with understanding, acceptance and support.

They are beautiful people despite wrinkles and time. We do glimpse them in younger days as the director intersperses the dialogue with earlier photographs of the characters. It actually seems unnecessary to do this and I feel that it detracts from the women's own stories. The film is funny, moving, heart-warming and enjoyable, illustrating the humanity of the women. It is, I think, a film which older women can more appreciate but also one that younger people can learn from. The wisdom which these women display is an education for

everyone. It is clear to me from this film that older women have a lot to offer and it is disappointing that most films, and indeed society, seem to marginalize older women.

These women, from a diversity of backgrounds, illustrate the beauty within---- the humour, honesty, understanding and compassion which they have developed with time. Their aging process and the physical limitations this brings have allowed them to think further than the stereotypical images of women normally seen on our screens. They have long passed the emphasis on glamour and allurements which many films would have us think women are all about and they give us all, young or old, an insight into the importance of human interaction and mutual support.

DORRIE : I am very bad at recalling the names of films and books, and also the details of plots. It is the overall atmosphere - the feeling of the film or book - that usually stays with me. Odd that when talking about Cynthia Scott's film *The Company of Strangers* I have often given it the similar title of the very dissimilar book *The Comfort of Strangers*.

In this brilliant novel by Ian McEwan, lovers are on holiday in a city they do not know, whose language they do not speak. Out for an evening stroll, they become hopelessly lost and the city's maze of streets and squares, picturesque by day, becomes increasingly threatening as night and darkness fall. A mysterious stranger insists on befriending them and a sinister relationship develops between the three of them and the stranger's wife. The story ends in a nightmare of violence.

There are parallels in *The Company of Strangers*. Eight women are stranded in a Canadian forest. They did not know each other before the bus journey that brought them together and consigned them to a dilapidated house in a forest clearing when the vehicle broke down. To at least one of them, the natural beauty of their environment becomes terrifying at night when strange animal cries suggest hidden threat. The women have no idea how their isolation will be resolved or how they will survive, and each of their companions is an unknown entity.

How different from the menacing tone of McEwan's book is the sense of hope and the suggestion of an innate goodness in the world which imbues Scott's film. As director, she builds her atmosphere skillfully, with breathtaking scenery softly shot; pale, calm colours; slow, slow movements; wordless, contemplative portraits of the women lost in thought; the mirror-like lake; gentle music; and birdsong. For me, it is the sound of the birds that, more than anything, inspires an emotional response to this film. Between the mass of dark trees and across the still lake, their calls are lonely, melancholy, almost aching. Yet they have a strange, unworldly beauty that lifts the heart. They are a reminder that the human lives we are being pulled into contain sorrow, regret and approaching death. At the same time, there is a sort of beauty in the women's acceptance of their lives and the way they give and receive loving support between them.

For me, the two most important features of most films are the characters and the story. (I prefer the traditional word "story" to "plot" with its connotations of contrived action, twists and turns, and unconvincing climax.) I want to believe

in the people I see on the screen, for at least a couple of hours; I want to know where they come from, what has happened to them in the past, and to care what happens to them in the course of the film. Apart from the bus journey and the forest setting, the director of *The Company of Strangers* has chosen to forsake fictional characters for a film about eight real people who did not previously know each other, played by the people themselves, talking about their own lives in their own words. I find this an irresistible format. Perhaps it is true that most women have a propensity to communicate by learning about each other's lives, or maybe I am just plain nosy, but Scott involved me completely in this group of women thrown together and discovering each other as I was discovering them.

Curiosity is aroused from the start. The film opens with a screen blanked out by fog, and out of the mist come voices, then figures. There are clues. The figures become women; they seem to be older women, there are a couple of walking sticks; they are on good terms, chatting and joking; although the misty atmosphere could disguise hidden dangers, they are walking slowly but with determination; they seem to be in good spirits. They find, not the dream house that Constance is seeking, but a broken down, empty shack. "What a dump" comments Winnie in Bette Davis fashion and gradually, each of the eight begins to establish a personality as they work together to make the place somewhere they can sleep more or less comfortably. As they search out useful rubbish - boxes, an old mattress - they laugh, they sing, they encourage each other.

Are we seeing a stereotypical image of women as homemakers? This is more than that. After all, they are not Doris Day creating a comfy, gingham-curtained home for a hunky husband. They are women, doing the best they can for themselves and for the benefit of the group of women. They are working co-operatively and non-competitively. It would be unrealistic to suggest this is always the case when women work together, but I have worked extensively with, and often led, teams that were wholly or mainly female, often in challenging and stressful situations. I know that women can create a working environment that is mutually supportive, committed to a common purpose, free from intrigue and competitiveness, and fun.

There is also the age of the women in Scott's film. Apart from one, the driver of the bus, they are all older if that word is defined as aged sixty or over. Some are considerably older than that. The film was released in 1990. Most of these women did not experience the rat race of the 1980's, the downside of feminism when women had earned the right to compete for "men's jobs" only to find that sexism still existed with a vengeance and competition in the macho workplace meant either being as ruthless as your male colleagues, or giving up. Some of the women describe their work lives as appallingly hard but pulling together was a way of life to them: a necessity for survival.

Age and ageing are a central theme of *The Company of Strangers* and, in taking this on, Cynthia Scott has done something very rare. She has made a film which tackles her subject, not by mourning the passing of years or specifically reflecting the ever-present ageism of wider society, but by featuring older women almost exclusively and celebrating them and their age. Gradually, each of the women reveals herself in the way she responds to her situation and

by her interaction with the group. Most absorbing, and eventually most moving for me, are the scenes in which pairs of women talk, finding each other in details of their past lives. These conversations require the patina of age to achieve their richness and delicacy.

There was some research into gender differences in socialising many years ago. Watched through a two-way mirror, quite young boys and girls were put separately into a room with a partner of the same sex, whom they did not know. The room contained toys and activity games. The camera recorded how the pairs established a relationship with each other. The boys chose a toy or a game and played with it, devoting all their communication to the task demanded and the rules. The girls chatted, asking questions about the other's friends, their favourite colour, and so on. They were much less interested in the toys than in each other. Even today, after a generation of feminist child-rearing, there are still striking differences between the genders. In any playground, boys can be seen scuffling and tumbling over a ball while knots of girls are standing around talking. Simplistic perhaps, but we can all recognise this scenario. Females tend to be good at using language and from a very early age, seem to want to communicate verbally. Add ageing, and there is so much more to learn and appreciate about another woman.

The director obviously chose women for her film who would be good screen performers but also came from a diversity of backgrounds. And what a wonderful group of people she found. Who could fail to be infected with Cissie's laugh, or moved to tears by her fear of losing her only child who she believes to be "only on loan to her"? And Beth: I want her to see that she is not inferior, she does not need to stay so buttoned up and that she is very beautiful even without the wig. Alice, a Mohawk, divorced, a distillery worker in her youth, speaks poignantly about her sadness that she will not live to see her great-grandson grow up. Catherine, a nun, practical, humorous, sings as she tries to fix the bus's engine. There is an aura of "goodness" about her and she reminds me of some girls at my convent school who were destined for the veil, but hopefully not for the narrow, bad-tempered existence of some of our teachers. The aristocratic looks of Constance, the most obviously sad of the women, looking towards death which she sees all around her. She was "born to be happy but became unhappy", dissatisfied with what many would regard as a successful life. Mary has found herself in later life, as an artist and in her confidence to be open about her lesbian lifestyle. She has a well of peace and calm which is a valuable focus in the group. Winnie has hidden depths. Her life has been full and not easy, from a Liverpool childhood to dancing for a living. She is still a graceful dancer, leading the others in a syncopated rhythm. (Incidentally, can it be that the makers of one of my other favourite films, *Belleville Rendezvous*, based the wonderful triplets on Winnie? The resemblance is striking.)

I love this film. I love the look of it and the sound of it. I love the pace of it, the time given to seeing the women just sitting and contemplating their lives. I love the conversations between the women, finding points at which they touch each other and understand. I love the gentle humour and the fun the women have together, even reverting to child-like play. I love the tear-releasing honesty of women talking about their youth, falling in love, their children and

grandchildren, and the hopes and dreams they still allow themselves. I love the camaraderie of the older women's pill-taking rituals, and the comparing of ailments. I even love the acknowledgement of the fears and sadness about death that inevitably lurk in every older person's consciousness.

There are two truths that are clearly and compellingly illustrated in *The Company of Strangers*. One is that older women are often treated as invisible in our society and this is no better illustrated than in the cinema where there is a comprehensive neglect of older women characters. This is not only insulting to an increasing proportion of the population, but also deprives us of some potentially fine films of which *The Company of Strangers* is one. Anxious to be rescued, the women in the forest stand together shouting at the sky "Is anyone there? We're alive!" Yes, indeed we are.

The second truth is for me the overwhelming theme of the film: that one of life's most precious experiences is to reach out and connect with fellow human beings, to learn about them, to try and understand them, to love them. As I am writing this, a member of our older women's film group has just died. I knew her only from our meetings and the lively lunches we share after watching a film, but I liked and respected her a great deal. I am sad that she died, admiring of the way she met the end of her life, but also very regretful that I shall not now have the chance to get to know her better. This is one of the worst aspects of getting older: family and friends are snatched away from us with increasing frequency and then we realise we never really got to know them properly. There was never enough time.

The women in *The Company of Strangers* have the chance to connect in a few intense days removed from the concerns of everyday life. Perhaps the film's message is that such chances are precious, and when they happen, they are necessarily fleeting. As the film ends, the group is leaving the broken down house to return to normality, this time with their arms around each others' shoulders. But there is no talk of staying together or seeing each other again; it is clear that this is "goodbye".

Dorrie Bancroft March 2007

ELIZABETH : Thoughts on '*The Company of Strangers*'

This film is simply beautiful to look at- the morning and evening mist, the silence of dawn and sunset, the vastness of the landscape- the surrounding wood land, the lake, hills, the sense of being away from the landscape and pressures of daily living. Is it frightening for the viewer? Or is it a relief, a release from the closeness of daily city life?

I think of the films that aim to shock, alarm, frighten, make us afraid of the worlds we inhabit every day, with scant hope of finding such an earthly paradise (depending on how one imagines paradise). Is this what we would wish, when we go on holiday, to 'get away'? As the world becomes more heavily populated, will such a landscape disappear, be available only as a rare privilege?

For me it is a comforting world to inhabit, taking me back to the Minnesota lakes and woodlands of my childhood (the remembered simple cottage now surrounded by a church conference ground on the small, clear lake we loved),

the familiar yellow school bus, the songs where I know all the words). A walk in pine woods anywhere (as I have found in New England, Scotland, Finland, Sweden) is full of the scents and sounds that take me back. A train journey through the lakes and woods between Gothenburg and Stockholm delights my eyes and soothes my longing for the days that are gone.

The film brings to life the pleasure of company in the presence of people who are able to engage with those around them without pretence, competitiveness, a need to dominate. The unfolding sight of the range of recovered memories and skills when confronted with a need to survive is heartening and makes me realise how rarely we are confronted with such a reality in our developed society. What makes it difficult to be ourselves with strangers? How long could this particular group be who they are and where they are without relationships becoming tense?

Reading about the making of the film removed some of the sense of it being spontaneous, even though I'm aware that editing is the key to keeping the story line moving. But it did not explain how the actors were chosen, except in the glimpse of Mary's first meeting with the director and writer. So each woman represented a stage in life? a way of life? the immigrant and the native born? The city dweller and those more accustomed to a life close to nature? The shy and the extrovert? The doer and the observer? The young and the old?

Today I came across a quote about growing older- those who fear growing old are living in a present which does not satisfy their hopes/wishes, and so reflects a rejection of the present. Only Constance appeared to be preoccupied with life nearing its end (and in fact the actor said she would never throw away her pills, as her character does in the film!), and she was the slowest to demonstrate a feeling of confidence in the company of the group (when playing a game of cards she knew well and could enjoy the banter).

I was most fascinated by watching how each woman's personality emerged as the film progressed, through behaviour, song, conversation- as when Michelle changed from feeling the pain of her injury, the frustration of the bus breakdown, and her initial scorn when she realised where they had come, to her quiet and thoughtful exchange with Catherine about her chosen vocation and her gentle persuading to encourage Beth to be herself (take off her wig, enter into the company) and to see Beth's face soften in response. Alice's long remembered survival skills were employed in teaching others to harvest long grass to make pillows and create a net to catch fish from tights and twigs, all the while sharing her native language with Mary. Catherine emerged as the doer, singing a Bach chorale while lying on her back working at the bus engine and finally deciding to go on foot for help. Constance was a container of memory, feeling guilt that she had brought the group to see a part of her early life, yet moved by the place and her surviving memories of birdsong and shining lake, and finally entering fully into the lively card game. Beth had survived a difficult and painful life, yet found that her city-dwelling image of self could survive the fearful wilderness and relax in a totally different environment. Mary, like Catherine used to a life with women, was the observer who possessed the skills of writing and painting and a love of birds, quietly offering her knowledge and humour while recording their experience. Cissy, a cheerful survivor whose life experience had lately included loss and illness, saw

herself as ordinary yet she had an infectious humour and readiness to question and appreciate everyone and every experience. Yet, her simple question on their last night together, 'When were you most frightened?' and the talk turned briefly to the Second War, was a reminder of reality. Winnie remembered her youthful times in Liverpool, down to her dancing feet and ready songs, bringing the group to a lively dancing and singing last night before Catherine set off to bring rescue.

There was a timelessness about the film which enveloped me from start to finish. What started for the women as a day outing became something of a survival test, during which they discovered the richness of their own and others' lives, a confirmation of the natural wisdom women can achieve through living. However, on a second viewing, it sometimes seemed contrived. Would a mattress be in an open barn and still be dry, uninfested? Where did the pillowcases, blankets, a tool for cutting the grass come from? I was disappointed to read that they hadn't really eaten the frog legs! Is the story a metaphor for the longing we experience when daily life closes in on us, or the promised holiday fails to live up to expectations (too many other people, a spoiled environment, awful weather), or we look back on our lives and acknowledge our regrets and shortcomings? Or, from another point of view, is it a reminder that possessions do not satisfy us as much as kindness, generosity of spirit, understanding and patience, the safe place in which to be ourselves without pretence and to be valued for who we are, rather than what titles we hold or positions we have achieved?

The film reminds me that, for all the exhortation to make the most of our appearance as that is what tells the world who we are, I am likely to find a kindred spirit in many guises if I remain open to new experiences and relationships and seize the moment to enjoy a sunny day, the smell of fresh rain on grass, the little kindnesses that happen in daily life....a seat offered on the train, a door held open, a smile exchanged with the news agent, the eccentric frail man who always shouts hello from across the road, the young woman who wants to tell me about the flower just bloomed in her garden, a favourite piece of music played by a busker...the unexpected phone call from a friend or letter from family, making new friends at a time least expected and most welcomed. .

SHEILA: The Company of Strangers Watching this film for the first time left a feeling like meditation - so peaceful and utterly relaxing - due partly to the gentleness of the pace and partly the lack of 'action'. Virtually nothing happens. There is no real storyline, just a situation the women arrive in at the beginning and leave at the end. Only the element of potential danger provides a plot, with the question 'will they survive or won't they?' creating an underlying tension which holds your attention throughout. I loved this simplicity, so uncontrived and lacking in artifice. Nothing was predictable. It could have turned out either way, in the usual arbitrary fashion of life where so much is a question of luck or chance. What is depicted is ordinary life shown through a prism for the viewer to ponder over. The prism metaphor is particularly apt because of the film's extraordinary use of colour. At first its colours simply seem beautiful: pale pastels of blue, pink, apricot and smokey

grey, interspersed with sudden warm, glowing, contrasting jewels. But the more you watch, the more the colours effect their symbolic role, the pastels used to portray the older women fading softly towards the end of their lives and the brightness interspersing for moments the force of life before it becomes shadowed by death. The women's clothes are all shades from the same pale palette, with only the driver, Michelle, in glorious strong colours reflecting her youth. At Constance's weakest moment as she talks about dying soon, she becomes almost monochrome, her facial pink only returning during the absorbing social card-game. And the one older woman who wears a stronger colour, the strikingly bright peach scarf, is Winnie, the one most rooted in life as it always was, with her lipstick and smoking, her down-to-earth negativity about their situation and the joyful hilarity of her dancing. As I watched the film I was constantly struck by its visual beauty. Many of the shots were as perfectly composed and balanced as a painting, and I wanted to stop the film to look at them for longer, for instance the picture of Winnie and Cissy beside the huge boulder, or the image of Constance staring out over the reflected lake. In comparison, other films seem very crude in their colouring and composition, functional rather than artistic, like turning from a Vermeer to a newspaper photograph. I could watch most of this film over and over again just to enjoy the loveliness of the colours and pictures. The film is on several levels a meditation on life and death. For me it kept evoking thoughts of humankind on earth. The group of women appear slowly out of nothingness into the emptiness of nature and disappear again slowly into nowhere. The world is there already, existing without them, and it's there at the end when they leave it. What do they do with themselves there? What does one do with one's time on earth? Humankind has made homes to sleep in, found food, evolved social activities, created art. All these things the women have to do in their wilderness. A microcosm of life? Or a microcosm of women's lives? The situation becomes a setting for relationships to develop: telling each other their thoughts, sharing things, offering support and affection, joking and laughing. The basic enjoyments of existence.

Only at the end did it strike me that it was an exclusively female world, not one man appeared in the whole film, not even piloting the plane. Would the presence of men have added a different layer of activity? Do men have a different *modus vivendi*? There is nothing assertively feminist about the film, yet in retrospect one realises that the only women displaying creative talents are the childless ones: the nun Catherine, with her music and motor mechanics, and the lesbian Mary, with her writing and painting. Alice has some knowledge of medicine, but only in the form of a traditional domestic skill passed down from her grandmother who 'doesn't believe in doctor'. Indeed Constance actually highlights this aspect of the older generation's lives when she mentions how she had 'a small talent' once, but gave up the study of art to stay at home looking after her baby, 'busy breeding and mating and breeding'. These are women who have essentially been confined to a domestic setting, and the film's setting reflects this.

A major factor contributing to the sense of peace in this film is its depiction of nature: so beautiful, detached, existing in its own right, not threatening despite the isolation. Repeatedly it has been proved that contact with nature is an essential for spiritual health, but sadly this knowledge is rarely acted on.

Humankind is increasingly assembling itself into huge urban settlements, moving further and further away from its original setting. Nature in this film gradually casts a spell of calmness and acceptance. I felt taken back with Constance to the happiness of her childhood, the sense of security, the willingness to die in such surroundings. As she reaches her dream-house and looks back over the lake, there is a wonderful sense of peace at last. The still water with the birds flying over it during the day or the moon hanging over it at night evokes a mood of tranquillity which cannot be disturbed by the actuality of danger.

The character of Constance provides the pivot for one of the film's key themes: the attitude to death. The oldest in the group and thus the closest to the end of life, it is she who introduces the theme with her comment, 'Death is around us everywhere, eh?' as she looks at Beth's painting of the little dead bird. When first shown sitting in the house, she is on her own, her face utterly miserable, feeling her pulse and reaching for her pills. But once at her 'dream-house', her face becomes transformed with serenity. The reflections in the lake give the impression of her looking back over her life. She feels happy there, she says, 'even if it's only for a very short while', and she throws her pills away into the water, as if she has finally accepted the ageing and dying process and no longer needs to struggle against it. The film seems to draw a parallel between closeness to nature and the ability to accept the cycle of life and death.

The most fascinating aspect of the film, though, must be its unique portrayal of the relationships between the various women. The story begins with them singing along on their coach outing, a song from their youth, rendered nostalgically, playfully, in chorus and individual parts, the element of fun established from the start. They are social creatures enjoying being together. As they plod their way to the house, helping each other along, grumbling and laughing, we sense their acceptance of each other, the warmth which allows them to co-exist so easily, supporting and encouraging one another without intruding on their essential privacy. There is genuine respect and tenderness, which deepens through the course of the film, until at the end they plod away from the house once more wrapping their arms around each other with affection and protectiveness.

There is not even a generation gap between the older women and the younger one, Michelle. She is intrigued but impressed by them all, clearly speculating about what she might be like at their stage of life. In conversation with Catherine, her initial astounded amusement at anyone being a nun quickly turns to genuine interest in the same way as Cissy responding to Mary's lesbianism with, 'That's good'. They each affirm the others' right to be themselves. The only exception to this, who actually proves the rule by changing over the course of the film, is Beth. At first she keeps apart

from the others both physically and emotionally, clinging to her self-conscious construct of refusing to be 'an old lady'. Then in the touching scene with Michelle she opens up, admits how she envies the others' spontaneity and suddenly becomes secure and confident enough to reveal her real self by taking off her wig, accepting herself as the others do, and subsequently joining in the group activities, laughing as she dances, hunts for food and plays cards

and talking frankly about her feelings as an older woman.

Watching these characters had a similar impact on me as viewer; I found it an emotionally fortifying experience. Within the group they are all strong enough to express their most intimate feelings and deepest sadnesses with a simple, unpretentious honesty. And as a group, they face their emergency situation with a complete absence of melodrama, with resourcefulness, persistence, delight in their achievement of getting food and whole-hearted enjoyment of the social activities that fill their time: the dancing, singing, aerobics, the card game. You felt you would enjoy their company, as they enjoy each other's.

I especially liked the way the film was spliced with photographs from the women's early years. For me this insight into the past rooted each of them in their individual backgrounds and created more realistic characters than would otherwise have been possible. The film depicts the transitoriness of human life, and the photos seem to emphasise this by showing how certain memories remain.

A final, deeply emotional aspect of this film is its use of music. I found the women's singing and dancing a sheer delight. It is so spontaneous and joyous, informal, true to life, both personal and increasingly social, constantly recurring, as essential to the humans as the birdsong to the birds. The background music is wonderful at evoking exactly the appropriate mood: the idyllic classical music of Chopin and Schubert calm and reflective, mirroring the effect of nature, inducing reflection and contemplation, whilst the popular tunes, jazz and gospel are bright and lively, interspersing the situation like flash-backs to another, more active existence. The film and its music are so organically interlinked that I cannot imagine one without the other. Particularly magical is the use of Schubert's beautiful 'Notturmo' to mark the women's arrival at the house and their departure from it, as if they are entering a different world through the medium of music. I feel I shall never hear that piece of music again without the image of these women coming into my mind.

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