

The thinking man's teen movie

Robert Cuffley turns genre convention on its head with *Turning Paige*

FILM PREVIEW

TURNING PAIGE

Starring Katherine Isabelle, Philip DeWilde and Nicholas Campbell
Directed by Robert Cuffley
Friday, September 28
Globe Cinema

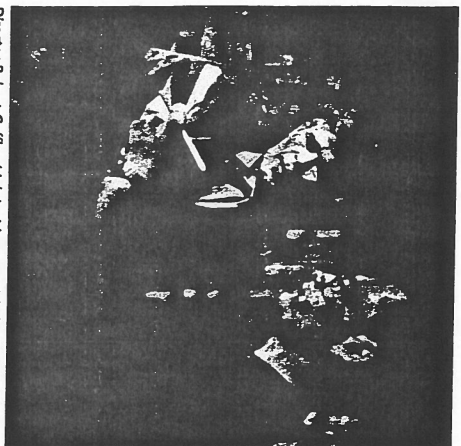
MARK HAMILTON

In Robert Cuffley's *Turning Paige* there's a moment when the title character responds to her teacher's off-camera car horn, her request for extra writing assistance whittled down to "one book for you, two books for no." Her response, much like the rest of the film, is subtle and nearly imperceptible — a masterful treatment of one of life's minor details that can carry the weight of the world.

Cuffley is already familiar to the local film scene thanks to the formation of his production company, Chase, several award-winning short films and upwards of 85 music videos, but *Turning Paige* marks his first foray into the world of feature film, telling the story of Paige Fleming (played with aplomb by Cuffley's niece and honesty by *Clinger Snaps* Katharine Isabelle), and the gradual unravelling her life undergoes with the re-appearance of her long-absent brother, Trevor (the spooky and no-nonsense Philip DeWilde). *Turning Paige* approaches the coming-of-age genre through fresh eyes.

Deftly playing with the audience's perspective of character through clever shifts of point-of-view, the script (co-written by Cuffley and Jason Long) takes pains to examine the ways in which dysfunctional families fall prey to emotional history and how easily these card houses topple at the first jolting truth. By revealing small kernels of truth one piece at a time, *Turning Paige* puts off the difficult feat of revealing an audience's perspective of an entire situation's peak in banking we know every thing, yet soon realize that nothing is quite as it seems.

"I wanted to keep things on the subtle side, and really embraced the idea of less is more," says Cuffley, fresh from a screening at the Montreal International Film Festival. "While in independent production that's often a restriction, I chose instead to embrace



Director Robert Cuffley (right) with actor Nicholas Campbell on the set of Cuffley's first feature, the family melodrama *Turning Paige*

role opposite Al Pacino and Robin Williams in the upcoming *Ammonia*. "Katherine is the queen of subtlety, and her talent is paying off. By next year, she'll be major."

Hiding herself behind a stately cold stare and short-tempered temper, Isabelle's Paige is a mystery that's almost unknown by even her best friend, Danielle (Nikki Barnett), and boyfriend, Jeff (Brandon Frazier). Nearly as important as the film's characters is the snow-filled backdrop of Montreal, New Brunswick ("The home of the highest per capita of Tim Hortons in Canada," says Cuffley), where *Turning Paige* was also during one of the worst winters in memory. Obscuring the stereotypes and winnows much as the Fleming family covers their past, the heavy blankets of snow played perfectly into Cuffley's and Long's wish to make an "anti-seen movie" — no cheerleader rhyms, graduation proms or spring break sexual escapades. So far their unassuming text has paid off, particularly with those over the age of 40 — or rather those with teenage children of their own.

"It's nice to see that it's sophisticated enough to hold the attention of someone not thinking about site, emotions and Britney Spears all of the time," says Cuffley.

While there's certainly a large number of those over 40 who care

that. That approach is really quite conducive to Canadian budgets because even if you want more, you can't get it."

Used as a mantra while shooting, the sentiment of "less is more" is primarily evident in the film's sparse, lingering photography and deliberately paced editing, evoking Cuffley's primary sources of inspiration during shooting — *sex, lies, and videotape*, *They Still a My Bodyguard*, and the open-ended films of Hal Hartley. Cuffley's most proud of *Turning Paige*'s ability to slowly pull an audience in by maintaining a tight coil of deceit and revelation.

"By about the 36-minute mark, they can't leave even if they want to," he says.

Sick of the flashy "boom-boom-boom" MTV style of quick edits, Cuffley holds faith that audiences are still willing to allow a film to unravel its secrets slowly. While cut running time of close to three hours, *Turning Paige* is well condensed too long in some quarters.

"As if there's some invisible quantity or minutes after which the average North American viewer will just turn off, and that's something I just don't buy. I've seen movies 75 minutes long that feel like they've stolen four days of my life, and three-hour films that just fly."

Heading up the cast as Paige,

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