

Starts well, fails to follow through

Punch

FILM REVIEW

Punch

BY JEET HEER

Featuring topless female boxers and a dysfunctional family torn apart by incestuous desire, *Punch* starts off promisingly as a Canadian drama with enough tawdry pleasure to double as an episode of *Jerry Springer*. Alas, as with daytime television, a little sleazy fun ends up leaving you feeling cheap and soiled in the end.

The film focuses on the troubled relationship Dr. Sam Frizzell (Michael Riley) has with his teenage daughter Ariel (Sonja Bennett). Although pushing 18, Ariel shows no sign of becoming an adult, because she has bonded too tightly with her father. Sam's wife committed suicide when Ariel was young, so the father and daughter have leaned on each other to an unhealthy degree. When Sam brings home a girlfriend named Mary (Marcia Laskowski), Ariel lashes out and knocks the poor woman to the ground.

The next day, Sam tries to patch things up with his erstwhile girlfriend. "Mary, we were doing very well until my daughter assaulted you," he says. Mary is understandably not convinced by this, and blames herself for being so vain as to want to date a doctor. "I did something slightly ... shallow, impure and I ended up with a black eye. There is some poetry in that," Mary notes, in a typically bizarre bit of dialogue.

After such a fiasco of a date and attempted reconciliation, Sam

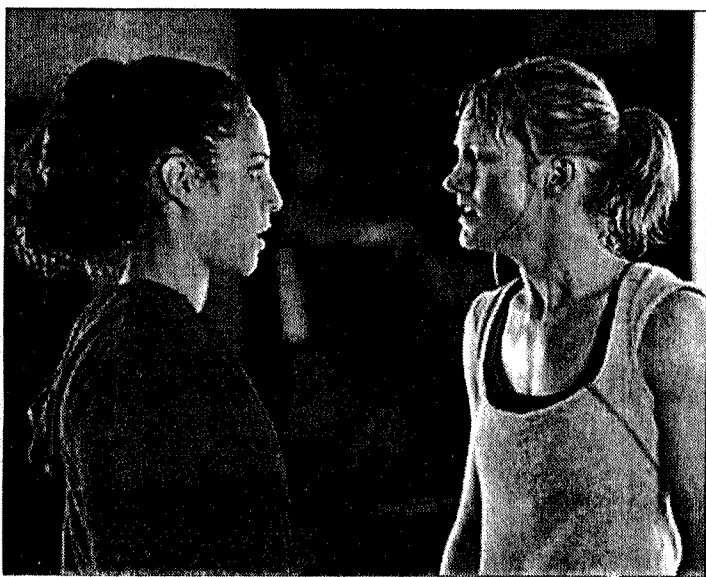
and Mary both want to go their separate ways. However, Mary's pugnacious sister Julie (Meredith McGeachie), a topless boxer whose winning streak is fuelled by her anger, doesn't like the way her sibling has been treated. Julie forces herself into the dispute and creates a situation where Mary, Sam and Ariel all have to come to terms with what has happened.

As the first feature of writer/director Guy Bennett, *Punch* is hardly an auspicious beginning. While Bennett knows how to keep the story moving and certainly possesses an interesting and odd sensibility, he displays very little talent for writing dialogue, a crucial skill if you want to craft an effective drama.

Time after time, Bennett's characters simply blurt out their problems in annoyingly explicit ways. All it takes is one or two minutes of probing from a stranger and they start spouting off about the traumas that have shaped them. This sort of psychobabble happens often on daytime television, but it thankfully remains rare in real life.

The actors are good enough to endow their characters with a complexity that transcends the weak writing. As Sam, Riley etches a plausible portrait of a man torn between his love for his daughter and a desire to move on in life. Bennett and McGeachie also come to life in odd moments when they aren't hobbled by the lines they have to spout. One can only hope these actors will soon find themselves in other movies with better scripts. ★

National Post



THINKFILM

McGeachie (left) and Bennett come to life in odd moments.

Film | Daddy's little girl now director's leading lady

When Vancouver director Guy Bennett wrote a script about a single father and his teenage daughter, he gave it to his own 18-year-old daughter, Sonja, to read. Although Sonja was an aspiring actress, Guy told her: "If this gets made, I really want Sarah Polley—maybe I can get you in as an extra."

But time was on Sonja's side. The film, *Punch*, about an unhealthily close and bordering-on-creepy father-daughter relationship, took years to make. All the while, Sonja was taking theatre gigs in Vancouver. "By the time we were ready to cast," says Guy, "I was a fan of her work." Sonja, now 23, is electrifying in *Punch* as the violent and manipulative, yet ultimately sympathetic, daughter.

Her performance drew the attention of executives at Fox Broadcasting Co., who are currently auditioning her for TV pilots.

With *Punch* opening in Canada this week, Guy, 43, and Sonja are fielding questions about their relationship. Guy says that until Sonja was 10, she was the only woman in his life and they were too attached. But he considers the film a worst-case scenario—what could have happened had he not recognized he was "using her as an antidote for his loneliness." Sonja insists *Punch* is very much her dad's view and she would have projected something completely different. But since it got her a ticket to Hollywood, she doesn't really mind.

SHANDA DEZIEL

Blow by blow girl saga

Punch

★ ★ ★

Starring Michael Riley, Sonja Bennett, Meredith McGeachie, Marcia Laskowski. Written and directed by Guy Bennett. At the Carlton and Canada Square theatres. AA

GEOFF PEVERE
MOVIE CRITIC

The modest wallops packed by Guy Bennett's first feature, *Punch*, come from rage reversal.

This is a movie where the girls do what boys usually tend to do, and that's sufficient to lift the film to a realm of pulp fascination. Although superficially more a domestic relationship drama than a payback thriller, this is a movie about women who get mad and kick major ass.

Moments after we meet Ariel Frizzell (Sonja Bennett), the teenage daughter of widowed doctor Sam (Michael Riley), in a locker room, she clocks a girl for wondering who the older man is she was massaging in the whirlpool.

A few days after that, Ariel lays another roundhouse on Mary, a woman (Marcia Laskowski) her father — a lachronic but infinitely patient sort with certain unresolved issues concerning both his dead wife and his slap-happy daughter — invites to their large suburban home for an uncomfortable dinner.

The motivation for this particular slugging is provided when the prospective new girlfriend responds to Sam's admission that he's just "examined" his daughter for alleged breast lumps. "That's creepy," she says reasonably.

Although rendered in vanilla-TV style, *Punch* would be beyond the pale even if it only focused on the profoundly sublimated tensions defining the relationship of this bereaved father and daughter: Obviously feeling the full flush of sexual power, Ariel is determined to be both daughter and wife to her dad, whose own confusion runs a parallel course — he wavers between father and baby.

The result is a captivatingly rendered fraught parent-child relationship.

Michael Riley's Sam exists in a fog of benumbed and benign denial, while the steely-eyed Sonja Bennett conveys a coltish post-pubescent unpredictability — gently jibing her father about his wardrobe one minute, lashing out with stinging fury the next.

But there's more to *Punch*. As it develops, Mary has a sister Julie (Meredith McGeachie) who happens to be a lesbian topless boxer. (Yes, that again.) And Mary's just as willing to settle matters over smashed cartilage as Ariel is. Appointing herself her sister's vigilante avenger, she marches over to the Frizzells' house to demand retribution.

Whatever you want to say of this showdown — and the dramatic motivation for introducing the topless boxing subplot to the crypto-incestuous one — there's no denying the power of what you're watching when Ariel and Julie engage in an estrogen showdown over the kitchen table. These are two of the most furiously pissed-off women to face each other since Signourney Weaver squared off against the mother of all aliens.

Punch is a fascinating curiosity, in some ways as confused and unresolved as its characters.

Moreover, as arresting a development as it is, the topless boxing business never quite integrates. (Outside of cable TV, how could it?)

But in other ways, *Punch* is as risky and unblinking as any current Canadian movie out there, and you've at least got to give it credit for sticking its chin (and other anatomical extremities) out as far as it does.

At this point in time, writer-director Bennett would seem a more confident and stylish writer than he is a director — his dialogue has a barbed naturalism to it, and his actors are disarmingly comfortable doing the darndest things — and his first movie at the very least leaves you wondering where the next fist might fly from.

Having made a feel-good family healing drama about implied father-daughter incest deflected by the fortuitous intervention of a lesbian topless boxer, God knows what he'll hit us with next.

