means of getting inside her characters beyond the neorealist intimacy of her debut. She signals these intentions satirically via an early view of a capsule endoscopy camera being swallowed as part of an intake exam—a hyper-literal way to look inside a person in search of what ails them. It's a visual gag that's also an alienation effect, and the rigorous dislocation of the filmmaker's approach—the wilfully off-tempo storytelling and editing rhythms, the alternately halting and run-on dialogue, and Star's repetitive self-sabotage, understood implicitly as a frail state of grace—will inevitably throw some viewers, the same way that Werewolf's hardscrabble cinematography bewildered certain trade-paper critics. (When McKenzie deservedly won a $100,000 prize for Best Canadian Feature from the Toronto Film Critics Association, I thought of the Variety writer who carped that she should invest in a tripod next time.) But focus and concentration are also their own rewards, and, in the same way that Star's unconventional syntax and vocabulary belie depths of humour and emotion, *Queens of the Qing Dynasty* finally seeks to express rather than obfuscate. By communicating a rare, cathartic, and humane commodity, McKenzie has given us a movie worth talking about. ◆
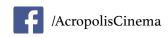
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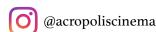
Acropolis Cinema
presents:

Ashley McKenzie's
QUEENS OF THE QING
DYNASTY

July 13, 2023 – 2220 Arts + Archives

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ABOUT THE FILM

In a remote small town, a neurodivergent teen forms an unlikely rapport with an international student from Shanghai volunteering at the hospital where they are a patient. Between the two, a bond forms, cemented by their candid conversations, nightly text messages, and exchange of their deepest secrets. The boundaries of their friendship quickly expand into something special, altering their inner alchemy.

Queens of the Qing Dynasty is a queer story that breaches the absurd and poetic, the platonic and the romantic. Both intimate and intense, it explores the intrinsic beauty and innate flaws of what it is to be human, the profundity of connection, and the vortex of mental illness. The electronic music score blurs between cinema foley and sound design to create a feeling of an alternate plane. *Queens of the Qing Dynasty* is an affectionate ode to women, asexuals, and neurodiverse and genderqueer individuals who exist beyond the norms of society by writer and director Ashley McKenzie, who was previously featured at Acropolis with *Werewolf* (2016).

122 min. | Canada | 2022

Tales from the Unama'ki Hospital
by Adam Nayman

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 90, Spring 2022

Intense duets are at the centre of Ashley McKenzie's cinema. Her 2016 debut Werewolf portrayed a pair of emotionally conjoined drug users, juxtaposing devotion and addiction as two sides of the same coin. In her follow-up, *Queens of the King Dynasty,* which recently premiered in Berlin's Encounters competition, a young psychiatric patient and her volunteer caregiver form a codependent relationship with shifting emotional and power dynamics. Both outsiders of a kind, the two characters each recognize some aspect of themselves in the body and soul of the other.

Checked into a Cape Breton emergency ward after what is evidently the latest in a series of suicide attempts, 18-year-old Star (Sarah Walker) is, as Lawrence Garcia writes in Mubi's Notebook, like a glitch in the system. No matter how educated and well-intentioned her caregivers, she stymies their attempts at communication—and salvation—not out of defiance, but as a function of her own neurodivergent personality. Processing her environment through dilated pupils that suggest a perpetual form of lucid dreaming, Star could be an anime heroine or a somnambulist; the only voice that penetrates her trance state belongs to Chinese transplant An (Ziyin Zheng), who's new to the hospital and trying to pad their case for immigration with community service. An speaks to Star in the soft tones of a longtime friend, even during their first late-shift exchange—a meet-cute in what eventually reveals itself as (without reducing down to) a

kind of romantic comedy in which courtship is indivisible from confession, and time seems to warp and bend to the contours of mutual infatuation.

During its first half, *Queens of the Qing Dynasty* captures the distended nature of hospital time, with its slow-motion 24-hour clock and hallucinatory, day-for-night torpor, at once urgent and soporific, intimate and impersonal. It's in this underlit, liminal space that the two characters size one another up. In Star, An sees a fellow outsider whose visible difference as an immigrant in mostly white Nova Scotia is heightened by their flamboyant, non-binary affect and gestures—a performance that also feels like an extension of something authentic. For An, newly settled in a country potentially more conducive to the possibility of gender transition, Star's deep and perilous vulnerability inspires not simple pity but a form of solidarity, which extends beyond the hospital walls in later sequences that fill in a wider community portrait without sacrificing subjectivity.

McKenzie shot *Queens of the Qing Dynasty* before COVID some time after she'd returned home to Nova Scotia from an extended festival-circuit victory lap with *Werewolf*—back to a community that she says felt at once familiar and stagnant in the wake of her international itinerary. (On a Zoom call in early 2020, she joked that in her neck of the woods the loneliness of lockdown was pretty much indistinguishable from business as usual.) By imagining a chance encounter that deepens into a loving codependency, McKenzie was perhaps addressing—and exorcising—aspects of her own isolation, but the characters in her film are closely based on other real-life sources: Star's biography and behaviour are modelled on a neurodivergent teenager who McKenzie met years ago while auditioning actors for *Werewolf*, while Zheng, who moved to Cape Breton several years ago, is by all accounts playing a thinly veiled version of themselves—a "sassy bitch," as per the production notes. (Zheng is officially credited as a script consultant.)

These characters feel unique to Canadian cinema, contemporary, micro-budget, or otherwise, and the actors inhabit them to the point where they don't really seem to be acting at all. This is not to say that *Queens of the Qing Dynasty* has a remotely documentary aesthetic: if anything, it represents a break from the rigorously finessed naturalism of *Werewolf*, or perhaps an elaboration and expansion of that film's sole, fleeting passage of magic realism, in which a character becomes briefly encircled by CGI swirls. Here, amidst the usual array of extreme close-ups and slightly asymmetrical establishing shots that make up McKenzie's typical visual syntax, there's all kinds of play with digital textures and the iconography of social media. Early on, we get a glimpse of Star's sardonic, melancholy Instagram scroll (screen name: "ratsbackwards"); later, iPhone text messages float across the screen in ghostly isolation. There's also a rapturous passage in a virtual-reality room that recalls the video-game escapism of Kazik Radwanski's *How Heavy This Hammer* (2015), which used similar imagery to delimit the boundaries of its protagonist's fantasy life. The slightly surrealist weave of images is heightened by the tour-de-force soundscaping of Andreas Mandritzki, who interlaces Autechre-ish electronica with *musique concrète* and stylized foley work.

What McKenzie is chasing through these strategies is a profound sense of interiority—a