

THE MONROE DOCTRINE

By PAUL MATWYCHUK

An Albertan boy becomes Marilyn Monroe's lover in Ken Cameron's *My One and Only*

Sometime early in her career, Marilyn Monroe must have read a really enticing Canadian travel brochure—or at least there must have been an executive at 20th-Century Fox who was really determined to see her photographed against all of Canada's greatest natural wonders.

In 1952, she traveled to Niagara Falls to film the watery thriller *Niagara* for Henry Hathaway, and then just a year later she came to Banff with Robert Mitchum, Rory Calhoun and director Otto Preminger to make the Cinemascope Western *River of No Return*. Marilyn still wasn't quite the iconic goddess she would become just a few years later, but *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *How to Marry a Millionaire* had firmly established her "lusciously adorable childwoman" persona in the public mind, and she was definitely the biggest thing to ever hit the sleepy Alberta resort town.

The excitement that surrounded her visit was captured a few years ago in a cover story in *Saturday Night* full of vivid photographs of Marilyn posing against the mountain scenery, as well as various Banff residents' even vivid recollections of their chance encounters with her. Playwright Ken Cameron read that article with particular interest. You see, his screenplay adaptation of Paul Quarrington's novel *Civilization* (about a stuntman's relationship with a D.W. Griffith-like film director) had failed to attract investors, but he still had Hollywood on the brain.

"I'd just liked working on *Civilization* so much," Cameron says. "It was a non-linear story about Hollywood, and I thought I should take some of these ideas and put them into a theatrical context. And when I saw the Marilyn stuff, I said, 'Ah! Here's a story that's ideally suited to being told in a non-linear fashion—a story about a fascination that haunts you through time.' It was the perfect vehicle for a notion I already had." And so hatched the premise for Cameron's bittersweet play ***My One and Only***, which receives its Edmonton premiere this Friday at Workshop West.

Cameron had been especially inspired by an anecdote in the *Saturday Night* piece about Marilyn walking down a mountain road, alone, and meeting three boys riding their bikes. "Supposedly Marilyn said, 'Hey! Hey, you kids!

Can I ride your bike?" Cameron laughs. "Sure," they said. "Sure, Marilyn Monroe—you can ride our bike!" In *My One and*

Only, that incident is transformed into an encounter between Marilyn and one boy, 15-year-old Scout, who soon becomes the unhappy actress' confidant, her liquor supplier... and eventually her lover. "I really tried to look at the question of what happens to you if your first girlfriend is Marilyn Monroe," Cameron says.

And the answers he comes up with are complicated. There's a tricky moral dynamic going on in the play—as skillfully as Marilyn often manipulates Scout into doing her favours and as damaging as their relationship is to Scout's attitude toward sex, you don't get the feeling that she's just cynically taking advantage of him. And despite the difference in the two characters' ages, the power issues aren't the same as they would be in, for instance, a play about Robert Mitchum seducing a teenaged girl by the shores of Lake Louise.

"If it's a sexual relationship between an older male and a teenaged girl," Cameron says, "we feel in our hearts that the girl doesn't want it—or if she does, she's been misled. But if it's a younger man and an older woman... well, what man doesn't want to be introduced to the glories of sex at an early age? Everything shifts. It's a completely different moral framework, and I find that fascinating. You know, there was a case in the papers not long ago where a female teacher was having sex with a teenaged student. Take a poll, and I bet you nine out of 10 people, men and women, would feel the boy got the better end of the deal! But what the play looks toward is that it does do damage, even if we don't think of it that way. We think, 'Wow, lucky kid,' but the play says, 'Lucky, my ass!'"

That's why Cameron argues that *My One and Only* isn't really a play about Marilyn Monroe, but a play about Scout. "Marilyn is just the surface of the play," he says. "Scout is the engine. Half the play doesn't even take place in 1953; the rest takes place 10 years later, and that part of the play focuses on regret and loss and the desperate wish to change the past.... It's a hard part for Chris Fassbender [who plays Scout]. He never leaves the stage, and he's got to react to everything going on around him on three different levels: as a 15-year-old, a 25-year-old, and sometimes even an eight-year-old. In one scene he's three ages at once!"

Man, Robert Mitchum had it easy—all he had to do in *River of No Return* was wrestle around in the bushes a little with Marilyn Monroe.