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Sara Canning, left, and Ferron Guerreiro star in *Black Field*, directed by Danishka Esterhazy, inset above.



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## Gothic girls

Sara Canning and local director Danishka Esterhazy get in touch with the dark side

CANADIAN actress Sara Canning was at work last spring on the rustic set of the film *Black Field* when she got the news that the TV series pilot she had just filmed, *Vampire Diaries*, would be picked up as a TV series.

"As soon as we wrapped on *Black Field*, she had to fly to Atlanta and start shooting a TV series," says Winnipeg director Danishka Esterhazy, 40. "We got her at the perfect time. We were so lucky." The feeling was mutual for the Gander, Nfld.-born Canning, 22, although the combination of the dark romance of *Vampire* combined with the Brontë-esque trappings of *Black Field* put Canning at risk of being pigeonholed as a gothic girl. "I don't feel like Gothic Girl," she says on the phone from Los Angeles. "Although, working on *Black Field*, Danishka influenced me so much. She's a huge history buff and I learned so much from her and gothic literature and films and that's carried with me a little bit now."

In creating the frontier drama, Esterhazy



RANDALL KING

(who has a BA in history from the University of Winnipeg) steeped herself in the writings of Canadian pioneer women such as Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr-Traill. "I wanted to get a sense of what their voices were like. Women writing in the 19th century presented a good opportunity to study how women wrote and thought in that period."

The resulting lead character required Canning to likewise immerse herself in a world where she was obliged to spend much of her work day in wind, rain and mud on a Manitoba prairie. This would be the second time Canning had to rough it in Manitoba, the first being her work on the TV movie *Taken in Broad Daylight*, in which she played a kidnap victim.

"In that one, we were out in the middle of the night, filming in a ditch," Canning says with a laugh. "But I really like working that way."

"I really love waking up in the morning, and saying: 'OK, I'm stepping outside of the hotel right now and stepping into the storybook.'"

"It really felt like that every day," she says. "I remember one night shooting the scene around the campfire with Mathieu (Bourguet) and Ferron (Guerreiro) and myself and looking at them and saying, 'How cool is this? How odd is this to be actually sitting out here in the middle of a field?'"

"It really felt like something from another time. Not a lot of imagination is required," she says. "Obviously when you're an actor, you're always using your imagination, but just to be surrounded and immersed in that world made

things so much easier for us."

*Black Field* was the first time Canning ever worked with a female director, and she asserts the experience was unique.

"Not to make a large generalization, but she really is one of the most clear directors I've worked with," Canning says. "I would have moments where she would just walk up to me and whisper a word in my ear and it would set off a light bulb, and I saw the same thing happening with the other actors."

"As soon as I ended up in Winnipeg, she sat down with me and wanted my opinions on the character," Canning says. "She told me so much about the character and yet she gave me so much freedom to play with her. She always wanted to hear my thoughts every day while shooting, before every scene. For her to take that much time was incredible, Canning says. "That's a rarity in film and in television."

For her part, Esterhazy says she feels an obligation to create more three-dimensional female characters than may be found in Hollywood fare.

"I've been inspired by women (directors) like Jane Campion and Catherine Breillat and women writers who create very complex female protagonists (that are) very human and very imperfect."

"I find too often in filmmaking women are either secondary characters or cardboard characters and stereotypes," Esterhazy says. "It's nice to see people live and breathe and make mistakes."

## Beautifully shot gothic drama an impressive first feature

By Randall King

### MovieReview

#### Black Field

■ Starring Sara Canning and Ferron Guerreiro  
 ■ Cinematheque  
 ■ 14A  
 ★★½/2 out of five

resolve to maintain the family farm while caring for her 14-year-old sister Rose (played by the ethereally lovely young Winnipeg actress Ferron Guerreiro).

The situation may resemble an especially bleak variation of *Little House on the Prairie* until a man arrives on the homestead to add a large helping of sexual tension. David Latouche

(Mathieu Bourguet) is an itinerant French-Canadian trapper who asks for a place to rest his horse. The proper Maggie refuses. David stays anyway, working for his board.

He stays long enough to insinuate himself into the heart of Maggie's naive younger sister. Rose may be seen clutching a children's book, but she is evidently harbouring notions of more adult entertainment. Hence, one morning, Maggie wakes up to find both of them gone. Her day-long foot trek to her next door neighbour's home yields the information that David is a fugitive wanted for questioning by the local detachment of the Northwest Mounted Police in connection with a murder.

In making this movie, Esterhazy attempted to transplant the gothic

genre of the Brontë sisters to a desolate Canadian prairie setting, and she succeeds most spectacularly in the look of the film. In collaboration with gifted cinematographer Paul Suderman and production designer Ricardo Alms, Esterhazy saturates the frame with striking images — diffused, lantern-lit interiors and the gorgeous, bare-treed desolation of an early prairie spring.

Esterhazy's script yields surprises too, with both the women characters demonstrating knife-edged animus that, while entirely credible, is not at all anticipated.

The film has its minor flaws. In the role of a possibly dangerous seducer, Bourguet comes off more as a weedy conniver. He's no Heathcliffe.

As Rose, Ferron Guerreiro vividly

portrays the notion of sexual awakening as a destructive force, faltering on the technical side: Her lack of a strong accent suggests she and the very Scottish Maggie were raised by different families.

Sara Canning, however, commands the screen as Maggie. Her performance embodies the yin-yang of tenderness and ruthlessness that embodied the frontier woman.

Presumably, writer-director Esterhazy has those qualities herself in getting this film made and in endowing it with surging emotion beneath the chilling exteriors.

With *Black Field*, she announces herself as a Canadian filmmaker to watch.

randall.king@freepress.mb.ca