

Tamed forces of nature

In 1953, the film *Niagara* made Marilyn Monroe a star. Today, nature and sex are commercialised more than ever before.

By Stefan Howald, Niagara Falls

So this is the place where Marilyn kisses her lover, in the spray of Niagara Falls, while her depressed husband waits anxiously in their hotel room. The precise location is closed off by a barrier but the platform underneath the waterfalls looks like it used to. And still, the city calls itself North America's honeymoon-paradise, as in the film, when an American honeymoon couple crosses the Rainbow-bridge into Canadian Niagara Falls and gets tangled up in the drama of Marilyn alias Rose Loomis.

The film realized, for itself and the audience, that a star was going to be born. Since 1948, Marilyn Monroe had worked her way up in 17 films as the eternal blonde. Mid-52, a scandal had exploded concerning earlier nude pictures of her, which in 1953 hung in the Golden-Dreams-Calendar at petrol stations and barber-shops. *Niagara*, planned as a vehicle for leading lady Anne Baxter, was geared hastily to accommodate the special qualities of Marilyn Monroe who, as the evil villain, had been cast only as second female lead.

Lasciviously, the camera lingers on her. There is the longest walk of film history – 116 steps, mostly seen from behind which lovingly exposes MM's swing of her hips; the face with its big eyes, deeply red lips and golden locks; a dress to wear which, as the heroine explains to her husband, a woman has to train from the age of thirteen onwards; naked shoulders in bed; a shower scene, quite frivolous for the early fifties.

The press reacted appropriately when the film opened in January 1953. Two new wonders of the world can be discovered, exclaimed the New York Times, and it didn't want to choose between the waterfalls and MM; and, the New York Tribune wrote, the actress is wearing a dress which is cut so low you can see her knees: the dress is red, and the actress has very nice knees.

What is left of the scenery? In the film, visitors to the tunnel under the Falls get heavy-duty oilskins, yellow for woman, black for men, and the shoes of all visitors are replaced with wellies. Today, the visit is disappointingly ordinary,

routinely sober. Where the film shows lots of staff helping the visitors with their gear, today, auxiliary staff gives a perfunctory introduction after which one has to squeeze all on one's own into a cheap plastic rain cape.

Other locations have fared even worse. The bell tower where Marilyn comes to a bad end is at the moment drearily cordoned off, in the midst of a building site, the neoclassical bus station pulled down and public transport banished to a desolate suburban road. And behind the bell tower, once the undisputed landmark of the city, rises the tower of the new much higher Casino, which, even with post-modern irony, can only be called ugly.

Since Niagara, Marilyn has become an icon of the century. Yet in the city of Niagara Falls, her presence is astonishingly low-key. There are some small signs to mark the locations of the film. And she is included in *Movieland*, a collection of wax models from tinseltown. But strangely it is not Niagara which has been re-acted but the scene with her skirt whirled over her head above New York's tube-tunnel.

This might signal the peculiar ambivalence of MM. The film *Niagara* shows how danger invades the honeymoon-paradise. Monroe embodies sex as temptation. More often than not it has to go unfulfilled. Or it must be atoned for afterwards. Why, only a few years ago, the fatal attraction of the adulteress still ended in well-deserved punishment.

The other wonder of the world too has been affected by time. The Falls still overwhelm, but as a tourist attraction they are wearing thin. Conveniently, all the masses of water can produce electricity, which in turn illuminates the Falls with 18 high-powered floodlights during the night and supplies a Festival of Light with sculptures from American history and popular culture during the winter. But the tourist attraction, which delivers its own light to show off even more, is still not enough. For some time now, the former honeymoon couples have been returning with their kids to Niagara Falls. For them, a street with cheap attractions has been erected, ranging from Frankenstein's Castle to Guinness's World of Records. And a third attraction has become the biggest of them all: the Casino. On its three floors it recreates an artificial waterfall. But in its 3000 slot machines and on its 150 gambling tables it is gaming chips and money, which flow. Passion has finally frozen, solid and metallic.