



Struggling to keep her sanity, Marguerite (Céline Lomez) battles for survival.



Freedom at all costs for the rebellious *coureur de bois*, Étienne Brûlé (Raymond Cloutier).

Spirit of the River to China

Marooned in the Land God Gave to Cain

Peter Rowe's *The Spirit of the River to China* and *Marooned in the Land God Gave to Cain* are blends of documentary and melodrama in an attempt to recreate history. "Gritty Sixteenth-Century Realism," according to *Maclean's*. The stories are true, the telling of them raises some questions.

River to China depicts the confrontation between the young Father Jean de Brébeuf (Guy Thauvette) and the *coureur de bois*, Étienne Brûlé (Raymond Cloutier), who has been assigned to assist Brébeuf in his mission to convert the Hurons. Brûlé resents Brébeuf's attempts to undermine his freedom. He sabotages the mission by refusing to translate to the Hurons, and by his direct affronts to Brébeuf, through pranks that demonstrate his unremitting contempt.

Brûlé endures by converting these humiliations into all but welcomed harbingers of inevitable martyrdom. Brébeuf proves himself Brûlé's equal but, much to Rowe's credit, not Brûlé's superior. Both

men are on the path to martyrdom. We begin the film with Brûlé's recurrent nightmare — a nightmare that grew out of his torture by the Iroquois. By the end of the film, Brûlé's secular independence, like Brébeuf's theological contributions, is firmly enshrined by our knowledge of his morality.

Marooned, though more optimistic, is an equally poignant tale. In the summer of 1548, a vengeful ship's captain deliberately maroons Marguerite de Roberval (Céline Lomez) on a deserted island off the coast of Labrador. Joined by her lover, François, she begins a two-and-a-half year battle for survival and sanity. François cannot adapt to an environment that is both idyllic and potentially lethal. He dies. Marguerite gives birth. The baby dies. Yet, by the time she is rescued, Marguerite de Roberval has succeeded in becoming the first white woman to come to terms with the New World wilderness.

Marooned is sustained marvelously by Lomez's performance. Her expressions of quiet strength and her ability to portray cathartic suffering are reminiscent of Carole Laure's early work. She clearly outshines the performances of Thauvette and Cloutier who, though convincing, appear hampered by accents deliberately thickened for no apparent reason. (We realize from the outset that their English dialogue is to be taken for French.)

In both films, Rowe makes the most of

his limited resources. The borrowed artifacts from the Huron Indian Village at Midland, the few sets, the abundant nature photography are all used in a manner that prevents the viewer from missing what might be regarded as higher production values.

If Rowe displays the usual Canadian talent for making due, he is, unfortunately, also constrained by the common Canadian striving for thematic adequacy. Perhaps this is the curse that goes with the Griersonian legacy. Perhaps it is simply the constraint of his backers, the CBC and potential educational rentals. But both these pocket epics are cluttered with mad pursuits of every possible avenue of social and personal exploration.

River to China is not simply focused on that rather complex moment in the evolution of imperialist conquest: the transfer of power from maverick explorers to the first representatives of the conquerer's social order. It must also teach us something about the way of life of the Hurons and the Iroquois. We learn about Brûlé's background and psychology, about Brébeuf and, of course, about the nature of faith as understood in Seventeenth-Century France.

Marooned is even busier. In its 27 minutes, the film takes up: Marguerite's coming to terms with the natural world around her; nature's cycles; Marguerite's affair with François; François' poetry;

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the irony of superstition becoming valid (as Marguerite sinks into a satanic paganism on the Isle of Devils) and, parenthetically, the mores and social order of Old and New France. Should we still feel that we have not had enough, voice-overs frame both films with factual narrative.

It is not that we don't want to learn about any of these things. It is just that the combined presence of so many motifs robs the films of a sense of integrity and, paradoxically, makes us see them as incomplete. They are not, as advertised, shorts. Rather, they are manic features and, as such, are a bitter commentary on the priorities of our current film industry. Indeed, Rowe might not be capable of a *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Dersu Usala* — films with themes not dissimilar to those seen here. But, having seen Rowe's work, it is impossible to believe that there are no Canadian subjects worthy of epic treatment, no indigenous approaches to that treatment, and no alternatives to horror or cops, the next time someone puts up \$10 million for a "Canadian" feature.

As is, *River to China* and *Marooned* work in the same way that Griffith's short films worked to transform abundant subject matter into concise presentation. Ideas are reduced to physical metaphors; subtle changes become overly dramatic heroics. Brébeuf befriends the Hurons by rescuing an Indian maiden from the rapids. He and Brûlé finally settle their differences by playing the old Indian fire

game, joining hands over a burning ember until someone cries uncle.

Like Griffith, Rowe's treatment of time can be effective — or abusive. Marguerite, after a two-minute pregnancy, gives birth upon discovering François's corpse. A little later, her descent into paganism consumes 90 seconds of screen time, during which we see much wood burning.

Certain ill-conceived aspects of the films — poor lines, for example — leave little room for forgiveness. Marguerite's protestation that François "is not a sewer rat — he's a poet" might be eclipsed if there was more room for better dialogue: as is, it diminishes his characterization for the remaining 15 minutes of his life. Similarly, both films' monotonous, overblown music would not be so unbearable if thinned out among more silent passages.

If done well — as they are here, despite their flaws — films of this particular format can be engrossing. There can even be, as Griffith proves, a little room for charm. Realistically, however, subject matter that wishes to break out of unnatural time constraints will eventually call for substance in a way that cannot be denied. Griffith solved this problem by inventing the feature. Perhaps we can do the same.

Seth Feldman

Marooned in the Land God Gave to Cain

d. Peter Rowe p./sc. Barry Pearson, Peter Rowe exec. p. Gerald M. Soloway d.o.p. Paul Van Der Linden or. mus. Bob McMullin series theme composed by Michael Spivak ed. Allan Collins art d. Carol Spier, Alfred Benson (asst.) cost. design./construc. Antoinette Ellard props Robert Paquette cine./winter scenes James B. Kelly CSC p. man./a.d. Barry Berghorson 2nd a.d. Holly Dale cont. Marie-Thérèse Boily, Nancy Eagles p. co-ord. Marjorie Lamb sd. rec. Brian Avery boom John Gundy sd. ed. Arnie Stewart sd. re.rec. Len Abbott stunt co-ord. Dwayne McLean stunts Karin Pike, Ed Hannaford make-up Pip Ayotte spec. efx. Martin Malivoire lighting Barry Reid, Jock Brandis key grip Lee Wright construc. man. Bill Harman 1st asst. cam. Michael Szucs, Rick Wincenty 2nd asst. cam. Wendy Walgate 2nd unit cine. Wolf Ruck asst. ed. Carolyn Zeifman grips David Zimmerman, Carlo Campagna best boy Sandy Carroll props asst. Michael Rea ward. asst. Sara-Gene Foster p. sec. Angela Gruenthal pub. Bonnie Palef titles N.A.C. stills Jonathon Kay, John Williamson p.a. Rick Meldazy, Karyn Schwinghamer l.p. Céline Lomez, Jean-Jacques Blanchet, Jean-Louis Roux, John Friesen, Winston Rekert, Ara Hovanessian narrator Donald Brittain p.c. Rosebud Films (1979), produced with the assistance of the Canada Council col. 16mm running time 25 min. dist. Rosebud Films.

The Spirit of the River to China

d. Peter Rowe p./sc. Barry Pearson, Peter Rowe exec. p. Gerald M. Soloway d.o.p. Paul Van Der Linden or. mus. Bob McMullin series theme composed by Michael Spivak ed. Allan Collins cost. design./construc. Antoinette Ellard props Robert Paquette p. man./a.d. Barry Berghorson 2nd asst. d. Holly Dale 3rd asst. d. Lazar Avramov cont. Marie-Thérèse Boily loc. man. Marjorie Lamb sd. record. Brian Vary boom John Gundy sd. ed. Arnie Stewart sd. re. rec. Len Abbott stunt co-ord. Dwayne McLean make-up Pip Ayotte spec. efx. Martin Malivoire gaf. Barry Reid key grip Lee Wright cam. Michael Szucs (1st asst.), Wendy Walgate (2nd asst.) 2nd unit cine. Wolf Ruck asst. ed. Carolyn Zeifman grip David Zimmerman best boy Sandy Carroll props asst. Michael Rea ward. asst. Isabelle Depelteau p. sec. Angela Gruenthal pub. Bonnie Palef titles N.A.C. stills Jonathon Kay p.a. Rick Meldazy, Martin Myers, Karyn Schwinghamer l.p. Raymond Cloutier, Guy Thauvette, Graham Greene, Fern Henry, Robert Daviau, Erroll Kinnistino narrator Donald Brittain p.c. Rosebud Films (1979), produced with the assistance of Wintario col. 16mm running time 25 min. dist. Rosebud Films.



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