

Shooting for the Best

by John Locke

Francis Mankiewicz's latest film proves that it's not the money but the thought that counts.

has now become a cliché — often used by Chabrol and DePalma, among others.

Still, the cinematography in tandem with the editing produces some very memorable sequences. There are startling but successful cuts from dark images to very bright ones. Manon is sleeping. Then instantly a cut replaces her repose with a howling red chainsaw. Or the night sequence, in which Manon is devastated upon hearing her mother confess that she is pregnant, followed by a straight cut to a window flooded with intense light, the camera movement revealing the mother routinely preparing breakfast. An important part of the editing style consists of these straight-cut transitions between sequences which might have been linked by fades or dissolves. The result is a clean, clear narrative rather than a

murky, lyrical one.

Les bons débarras is the story of a mother and daughter, and the mother's mentally slow brother. Mankiewicz avoids dwelling on the family's economic hardship, to concentrate on their personal relationships. Still, we vividly see a family at the lowest end of the great North American middle class. And it sinks in. In this, the film's social statement is powerful instead of preachy.

Charlotte Laurier's brilliant portrayal of Manon is reminiscent of Robert Bresson's "Mouchette." Both girls are the central figures in their narratives; both are hovering at the edge of poverty with only one parent in view; both are independent and aggressive. But Bresson's child/woman resolves her problems by committing suicide, beautifully, while Mankiewicz's child/woman shows herself to be in active control of her life by the end of the film. Perhaps this could be taken as a comment, contrasting young women of the '60s with those of the early '80s.

The performances are uniformly excellent. The one actor who destroys the flow of so many Canadian films with a poor performance in a small role cannot be found here. While Laurier's is the single most extraordinary performance, she is not alone. Marie Tifo as Manon's mother, Germain Houde as the brother, and Gilbert Sicotte as Gaétan (Manon's mechanic friend) are all remarkable. Marie Tifo has an intensity and presence perfect for her role. Thankfully she avoids projecting a star quality which would be out of place in this film. Although Germain Houde has a look that occasionally resembles Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, he deftly walks a tightrope between appearing to be slightly insane, strangely introverted, or simply not all there. It is a difficult role, played well. The grown-up-kid-

garage-mechanic, Gaétan seems familiar with his small-town style of '60s wildness and long hair. Gilbert Sicotte does a good job in this secondary role.

Fortunately, all of the performers — except perhaps Laurier, who is too young to be judged in this respect — avoid the Hollywood-glamour and girl/boy-next-door stereotypes. They look a bit ordinary, but have an ability to 'hold the screen.' Just what is needed for this film and for future non-American Canadian films.

Although the narrative, the acting and the human significance of this film are all admirable, it is the little touches added to every scene (Michel Poulx's notable art direction and Diane Paquet's costumes) that make the film so special: the humorous portrayal of the village policeman shown under the credits; the decision to shoot at the height of the fall foliage in the Laurentians, and on and on.

Les bons débarras is a film that succeeds because both the major, and minor decisions were carefully, sensitively, and knowledgeably made. Congratulations Francis Mankiewicz. Congratulations Canada. Congratulations Quebec.

The hope is that Mankiewicz will be able to resist the offers he will have to direct trashy international films. If he has the courage to continue to make a series of low-budget, modest, regional films, his work could represent a new beginning for Canadian, and particularly Quebec cinema. It would be good to see him make a series of films using virtually the same cast, production team, and general location. Frequently, filmmakers are prematurely tempted to move on to the New (story, cast, production team, Money) before having explored one style fully. Courage Francis Mankiewicz! The Mercedes can wait; Canadian cinema is in a crisis.

● Best Film Director of 1980, Francis Mankiewicz (right) getting the goods from David Cronenberg (who's not doing too badly himself!)



All those interested in the future of the Canadian film industry should take a good look at *Les bons débarras*. It perhaps best represents the direction our national cinema should take if it is to establish itself internationally as a distinct cinema of quality. Francis Mankiewicz's film has it all: it is a superbly crafted, beautifully acted, sensually and intellectually satisfying film reflecting its regional origins. And it is low-budget.

Many films have good moments: one will have fine cinematography, another first rate performances; but too few films manage to achieve an overall, consistent, high level of excellence. Low-budget films made outside of the film capitals suffer most. With enough money a Hollywood/Paris/Rome director can easily hire a team whose expertise should assure at least technical competence. But all too often Canadian films with one really good performance, or interesting cinematography, ultimately fail because of weaknesses in other areas. It is terribly difficult to assemble a film team which can maintain quality from the origin of the story idea, through production to the release print. *Les bons débarras*, if not flawless, is still a very fine film for having achieved a consistent level of excellence — appropriately reflected by its dominance of the Genie Awards.

Michel Brault has created wonderful images in the film — as might be expected from a cinematographer of his stature. When a police car drives off down a highway, the camera is positioned so low that there is an unusually strong sense of the road and the receding car. This demonstrates an effort to develop the story through shots which go far beyond the ordinary, but stop short of being gratuitous. Such attention to images is seen throughout the film. Take, for example, the narratively effective and visually arresting shot of young Manon (the central character), as she decides not to go to school. The single shot over her body reclining in bed focuses on the school van pausing outside to wait for her, then continuing on its way without her. Another shot uses a rising camera to reveal Manon reading *Wuthering Heights* in the bath. The character's economic poverty is not allowed to dictate an oppressive poverty of images.

Despite the film's visual richness several quibbles can be made about the cinematography. The most serious one being that some of the sequences, particularly those around the home of the wealthy woman, make excessive use of the "diffuse images/burned-out windows," 1970's-style of cinematography. Though this technique makes narrative sense in the fantasy-like environment of the wealthy, the diffuse/burned-out look is beginning to resemble a relic of the past. Similarly, there is a sequence where the camera revolves around Manon, to represent someone circling her on a bicycle. A perfectly good idea, except that this type of shot