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 cliche — often used by Chabrol and DePalma, among others. Still, the cinematography alone, 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 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 take a bite out of reality, 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 Proulx's notable art direction and Diane Paquette's costumes) that make this 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."

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