Gilles Carle's prepared bio is an impressive one — the kind politicians have, full of universities attended and a long list of literary credits. Carle smiles in acknowledging the similarities and quickly goes about setting the public man's facts straight.

Born in Maniwaki, he came to Montreal to study art history at L'École des Beaux-Arts because he wanted to be a painter. Although he did graduate, it took him another 25 years to get his diploma. "I didn't have $15.00 at the time. The Quebec government finally sent it to me with their compliments."

His next stop was at McGill University. "I don't remember why, but one morning I decided I would be an ambassador so I registered at McGill." His stay was a short one, prompted by boredom at the University's lecture time. On how to write letters in 'due form.'

At the Université de Montréal, he received a certificate in literature, but he wasn't impressed with the experience or the certificate. "A certificate only certifies that you went there, not that you're brilliant and you studied — just that you showed up.

If nothing else, his erstwhile attempts at conforming to academia introduced him to fine literature, including Marcel Proust. "I was quite young when I read Proust and I decided I would be the French Canadian Marcel Proust. But I had two things against me. I wasn't a homosexual and I wasn't a good writer, so I never became either one or the other."

Nevertheless, the publicity man's bio says: novelist, playwright, poet — not bad for a failed Proust. Unfortunately, nothing more was said about the substitute. None of his plays were produced and his poems were, in his own words, "not very good." On the other hand, the process of elimination that took him to McGill and then to L'École des Beaux-Arts because he wanted to be a painter. It was a traditional incomprehension, a traditional flight between artists and bureaucrats, but the sort of flight that under the right conditions can be very creative, if both groups accept an atmosphere of being part of a family. There's a similar way to hate your brothers and to love them — if the family is creative, you might want to kill the accountant, but you never do. What happened at the Board is that they killed us.

Cinema Canada: What you just described sounds a bit like Fantastique according to the film you see. All my ideas for films came to me between the ages of 18 and 25, but I could never sell them. For 15 years I wrote without hope of ever having one idea accepted. Now I am grateful for that because I'm here with them and I can go on making them into films for the next five years — it just takes time to get people to accept your ideas.

Kevin Tierney is a freelance writer in Montreal who teaches film and writing at John Abbott College.

Gilles Carle portraits by Lois Siegel
body should be afraid of change in this business. After I had left the Board, I started to feel cheated. What we'd had there could have exploded into something brilliant. We had seen only the first little bang of the beginning and it could have developed tremendously and produced some amazing films. The talent was there, the ideas were there, and the producers were there, but the administration killed it. Going out into the private sector was like starting all over again.

It's interesting to think of all this now because Les Plouffe is a bit like the National Film Board coming down into the centre of Montreal or Quebec City and working in real life, with ideas and scenes - that's how I see it. What is the Plouffe family? Why was I so interested in it? It's not just that the story by Roger Lemelin is well written, or that it talks about people I like, or because it re-creates the atmosphere of that period - which is, in spite of the temptation, I've tried to avoid cliches. It's because Les Plouffe is really a beautiful joining together of documentary and fiction and I can graft 'une fiction sur un documentaire.' And there you have a contradiction: what you create is fiction but it's already there as a sort of document. Simultaneously, it creates your culture, while being born of that culture.

Another thing which I found very useful with Les Plouffe was time - I had over four hours to work with. I never knew how to finish my films before, so I dropped them. Somebody would come along and say okay, that's it, we're out of money, and I'd work faster and try to tie things up. It was nice to have more time.

Cinema Canada: How was the length decided on?
Gilles Carle: Well, Denis Heroux was the first one to call me and he asked me if I wanted to do Les Plouffe; and I wasn't really very interested because I remembered the television series as being the All in the Family of its day: a little cute, well directed, good actors, bad sets and generally, a little old-fashioned. Heroux gave me the script which had been done by Marcel Dubreuil, but it was mostly a teleplay, not really suitable for a film. You see, at that point Les Plouffe was being thought about as a film TV movie. Anyway, Heroux persuaded me to read the novel and that was it. It was a novel which was a novel, active and alive and full of characters. I told Denis that if he were interested in doing it as a feature and if I could re-write the script and work with the author, I'd do it. And that's what happened.

At first, Lemelin was undecided because he wasn't interested in doing what he had already done for television: but by the second re-write, he became very involved because he began to see that the film would finally make it possible to take Les Plouffe out of the kitchen and into the streets of the city and the world.

As for the length, the length was already there. We had to do six hours for television because the CBC put up over a million dollars, and there was no argument about how long the film version would be either. We thought there could be one format for Quebec, another for English Canada and another for the rest of the world, which is the new way to make films. As authors, we either have to accept this idea and keep on making films or reject it and stop working. We have to become what I would call 'collective authors,' not only private authors. It's good to have Les Plouffe in Quebec where people will remember their own history; it's good to send it to the rest of Canada in perhaps a shorter version, and it's good to send a version that looks like an international film to the rest of the world. What's important is to know in advance what you are doing. It's like The Godfather or Close Encounters of the Third Kind, they knew they would be re-editing and making longer or shorter versions, that's the way it works. I could take any one of the characters in Les Plouffe and make another film because they are so true to life, so likeable. In the United States they have Gone with the Wind, in France they have Les miserables, maybe Tess in England, and we have Les Plouffe which is the most popular book ever in Quebec.

I got caught up in it because I fell somehow that I knew about this world. During the shooting I felt that every actor in the film and all the technicians knew about it too - it felt very natural for us Quebeckers. I didn't have to say much to the actors or even the extras because they knew what to give, they knew how to re-live what had happened before them. It was like a little American guy doing American Graffiti, there's something in the blood, in the mind, in the chromosomes, in the culture. You see, it's very interesting about Les Plouffe is that it starts with individuals, then it becomes collective, it becomes something that deals with the entire nation. And the conflicts which are in the book are the same conflicts in existence today.

Cinema Canada: Will you personally supervise the editing of all the various versions, including TV?
Gilles Carle: Yes. I have the final cut on it - it's all in my contract.

Cinema Canada: How do you explain the high level of interest in this film?
...what's very interesting about Les Plouffe is that it starts with individuals, then it becomes collective, it becomes something that deals with the entire nation. And the conflicts which are in the book are the same conflicts in existence today.
a critical response; a film doesn't exist in a way - it's like a man without a woman or a child without a mother. What is very creative, of course, is when there is a certain kind of tension between the two. You are better off with a bad review for the right reasons than as a good one for all the wrong reasons. That's the worst thing that can happen to you because you feel cheated - and that's the way I feel.

I know when my films have been appreciated because I get letters from people; sometimes they come ten years after I’ve made the film. I used to get letters about Léopold Z. and The Rape of a Sweet Young Girl, and now I’m getting responses to The True Nature of Grandmère but they’re so many years later. It’s the same with the critics, they’re always at least one film behind. Five years from now they’ll be talking about The Angel and the Woman. However, it isn’t because the film destroys nationalism, which is why it was so hated here. But I feel I can film a shooting showwall for the sheer beauty of it. I don’t have to say how much he earns an hour. When you make a science fiction film do you have to say what the pilot’s salary is? I did The Angel and the Woman for the sheer beauty of white snow, which to me is like a canvas on which you paint. Fantastica was the same thing. But that philosophy had been completely rejected in Quebec, just like the attitude I expressed in Léopold Z was rejected in its time. Today, if you’re not sociological, you’re nothing. But if you think about it, what was Charlie Chaplin doing during the first World War? He was making Charlie Makes Sausages - not very exciting, but very sociological, and absolutely marvelous. So I’m sort of pleading for the freedom to get away from the usual ideas, away from what is fashionable in the intellectual world.

When I shot The Angel and the Woman, I knew I was going to be completely destroyed by the critics. I knew in advance. I expected it and I wasn’t surprised; but I’d like to do that once in a while. I looked through the reviews for a little caption that said something good about the film - and you know how easy it is to do that. They say, ‘This film is far from brilliant’, and you take out the ‘brilliant’ and surround it with dots. . . . ‘ . . . brilliant’ . . . and I couldn’t even find that.

Then one day I learned that the same film had won a critics’ award in Europe - and it forces you to ask yourself some questions: why is it that your own people are so hard on you and see things in a film that are totally different from what audiences in Europe have seen? In Europe, they see a dialogue between two people, between reality and unreality, between a true woman and a man who is an angel. But here they talk about the sex in the film, about the titillation. It’s not because there’s sex in a film that it is a sex film - people have a tendency to see one scene and make the whole film. When I did the sex scene in The Angel and the Woman, I shot it for real and in the most beautiful way I could. And just before I did that, I shot an eating scene in complete silence, except for a few little background noises. This is the equivalent, isn’t it? Yet nobody noticed that - they noticed the sex and forget about the supper, which makes me think people are hungry for sex.

Cinema Canada: The budget for Les Plouffe was five million and for The Angel and the Woman, it was . . .

Gilles Carle: . . . $250,000. And it was the perfect experience. I’m very naïve sometimes and I thought myself, fantastic: I’ve just made this film and the Festival de la Critique Québécoise is about to begin. Of course, I’ll be invited with my little 16mm black-and-white film because it’s the kind of film they should be interested in.

We had bought the camera ourselves, processed the film in the basement with a machine we bought for $300 - we would stand there waiting with a flashlight to look at the quality. Ron Hallis, Francois Protat and I did the optical transfers. Fifteen people had done the whole thing. And the Festival? They didn’t even want to look at it. Ottawa came to look at it for Cannes and they came out after 10 minutes and wouldn’t even talk to me. I felt very strange about the whole experience - I kept asking myself, who have I hurt? Finally I started to discover that my new ideas for filmmaking were reaching people the wrong way. It was as if I were trying to destroy people’s ideas about films. The critics destroyed the film as I had predicted and the only positive response it got was from a couple of people who wrote letters to Le Devoir saying how much they had enjoyed the film.

I felt bad, not because of the critics, but because I couldn’t help thinking about the people who had worked with me for no pay. When we learned the film won an award in Europe, I felt slightly relieved of some of the guilt I felt about having put all the other people through this experience. I felt that the award, at least they wouldn’t feel they had worked for nothing. And I still think it’s one of my best films.

Sometimes in my films like in Fantastica, I feel almost like a painter and a musician. At the same time, when people see films like this, they are a little unsatisfied because it’s a bit like dreaming and never waking up. You have to wake up to appreciate your dream. And particularly with Fantastica, there is no apparent moment when you wake up, so in a lot of ways it couldn’t be appreciated. I would like to be able to speak like a filmmaker and not like a phonetic scientist or a phoney sociologist or a phoney anything. There are two films that I’ve been impressed with in the last few years, Nashville and Apocalypse Now, because Altman and Coppola talk like filmmakers. They don’t talk like novelists or anything else; they use the language of film. What do we have to work with? Colors, music, the sounds of words, documents, images, painting and movement. But people are so deeply into the literary world that they would like us to keep on talking like a novel, complete with chapters - and this I don’t agree with.

Cinema Canada: Yesterday I told someone I was coming to interview you and he said, “Carle is the greatest film director this country has produced.” Although I didn’t pursue the point, I suspect that by “country,” this person was referring to Canada. Do you accept this idea?

Gilles Carle: I feel that it’s probably wrong. First, this country stands for a few things that are not only unacceptable but impossible. Let’s take this country as an idea, because it’s only an idea, not a country. This idea which is called Canada would like you to make certain kinds of films which are impossible - you cannot make bi-cultural films and you cannot make bilingual films. You’re from one culture, from one nation, not from one country. When I do a film here, I do it in French and I do it as a Quebecois because I’m a part of this culture. Afterwards, I live in a country called Canada which I can accept or not accept. No matter where I shoot a film, I will still be a Quebecois shooting that film because the culture is the oxygen of the soul, it is the most important thing in life.

So when you say Gilles Carle is the best filmmaker in Canada, that’s from something they want to see. From inside myself, I can only define myself as a Quebec filmmaker who is sold to Canada. Not that I am a nationalist because I’m not. I hate nationalism. Being a Quebecois does not make you better than being a Canadian or an Italian guy in Pittsburgh. But the fact remains that you cannot be from two cultures just like you can’t have two mothers.

Cinema Canada: But that culture can have two elements. It seems to me that there is no big deal made of the fact that Lewis Furey’s character in Fantastica speaks English.

Gilles Carle: Not really there, the way I like English people to be here in Quebec. If Quebec has to become monolithic and not pluralist, if this government or any government here decides that to be a Quebecer you have to be Catholic and French, then I’ll leave because the whole idea is horrible. Freedom for people first. The songs are things they want to see. From inside myself, I can only define myself as a Quebec filmmaker who is sold to Canada. Not that I am a nationalist because I’m not. I hate nationalism.
was that nobody pointed it out. If only people would look at the sex in my films the same way. (Laughter.)

Cinema Canada: Yet in an interview you gave in 1977, you said that in your early films there was always a bit of the idea "Quebec d'abord."

Gilles Carle: Well, at first, with Léo Z, we were trying to put forward what you could call the Quebec culture — what the original Quebec culture was. But then you feel you've succeeded a bit at that and so you start to ask yourself about what that Quebec culture is and what it should be. When you start to answer that question, you begin to realize that it shouldn't be only one thing, but should be rich and full of everything.

If Quebec culture is only what was in Léo Z, then I don't want to live here anymore. If it's only what I've shown in The Rape of a Sweet Young Girl, I don't want to live here anymore. You go on thinking and you get to the point where you want to help develop new aspects, new paths to follow. In The Angel and the Woman, you see the results: let's dream a little bit. Let me to bring back the dream because it's nourishing. So I'm trying to make new kinds of films that try to say what I did in Léo Z, it is only one little accurate aspect of Quebec culture.

Cinema Canada: In that same interview, you went on to say that the election of the Parti Québécois in '76 brought about a change in people's psychology and that it was no longer necessary to have Quebec first and foremost, now the audience would perhaps be able to see a film as a film.

Gilles Carle: Yes, something changed but I don't think it was the fact that the P.Q. came into power because the P.Q. is only a switch from the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie to the French-speaking bourgeoisie. What really made the difference to us was the passage of the language law because that was very, very important to this people.

It's not, as some people have said, a surprising or racist law. It's happened almost everywhere: it happened in Texas, in California and in Manitoba in 1985. The first thing they did was make English legal, right? It's a big change because you no longer feel in danger when you can use your own language the way, let's say, the Swedes do. It gives you a sense of security and it's a nice feeling. It's not against other people.

It's important in the way that there are three levels of language. The way you speak speaks of the place you come from. And the emotions which are conveyed by the words you use is what makes it so difficult in another language. I'm speaking English now and it's difficult, not only to convey ideas, but also to convey the kinds of emotions that I might like you to read through my language. Then comes the emotional level, the words which are said and they mean precise things. Language is very important in that way, too. If you don't let people talk, you're not only destroying their freedom of expression, but the freedom of emotions and the freedom of the place you come from to be part of the world. And that's a terrible thing to do.

Cinema Canada: Some critics seemed to feel that Fantastica was the end of a cycle for you; that in the films you were, in a way, exercising the devils that are to be found in your work. Are you surprised at the reaction to Fantastica?

Gilles Carle: Maybe it is. I don't really know. But I was surprised by one thing; I used to tell myself that the critics had no eyes, and now I say they have no eyes and no ears — and the problem was that I made a film for the eyes and the ears. How do you explain Lewis (Furey) being nominated for the Cannes Film Festival and accepted it immediately. Really, it's a long story and one I'd rather not go into.

Cinema Canada: That in the same interview, you said that the critical response to your work in general is that while the critics never seem to like a particular film, they take your work as a director very seriously.

Gilles Carle: They do! No, before, I developed an idea of what I wanted to put on the screen and I wrote a sort of mini-opera. I gave that to Lewis with some idea about what I wanted and he wrote it completely, making it his own. But the three women are there, and lots of other things. But it's his music.

Cinema Canada: What's interesting about the critical reaction to your work is that while the critics never seem to like a particular film, they take your work as a director very seriously.

Gilles Carle: It is true. I don't want to be a great filmmaker. In fact, I think the whole idea of being a great filmmaker is stupid. Nobody considers themselves to be a great filmmaker. You just do your job, you make films. There are so many films that I used to consider great, but when I see them today, they look like nothing; so you just don't know. Let the people of the future decide about the future and we'll decide about the present. Our only real potential is that we do things that we think are sincere and true — of course, we also have to think that they are important or we wouldn't do them. Everything looks at a film, I think I'm creating a masterpiece — it's like being a painter. It's hard for me to imagine a painter working on a canvas and saying to himself, now we'll see something exciting. What we achieve is something else and that's hard to know. I used to think that other people knew more about that than I did myself, but I wasn't that impressed. And thafs a terrible thing to do about their own lives — they may not succeed but it's important to try.

Cinema Canada: Other critics point to your work as being full of potential, and speak of you as being "near great," not yet having realized the potential.

Gilles Carle: It is true. I don't want to be a great filmmaker. In fact, I think the whole idea of being a great filmmaker is stupid. Nobody considers themselves to be a great filmmaker. You just do your job, you make films. There are so many films that I used to consider great, but when I see them today, they look like nothing; so you just don't know. Let the people of the future decide about the future and we'll decide about the present. Our only real potential is that we do things that we think are sincere and true — of course, we also have to think that they are important or we wouldn't do them. Everything looks at a film, I think I'm creating a masterpiece — it's like being a painter. It's hard for me to imagine a painter working on a canvas and saying to himself, now we'll see something exciting. What we achieve is something else and that's hard to know. I used to think that other people knew more about that than I did myself, but I wasn't that impressed. And thafs a terrible thing to do about their own lives — they may not succeed but it's important to try.

Cinema Canada: Some critics seemed to feel that Fantastica was the end of a cycle for you; that in the films you were, in a way, exercising the devils that are to be found in your work. Are you surprised at the reaction to Fantastica?

Gilles Carle: Maybe it is. I don't really know. But I was surprised by one thing: I used to tell myself that the critics had no eyes, and now I say they have no eyes and no ears — and the problem was that I made a film for the eyes and the ears. How do you explain Lewis (Furey) being nominated for the Cannes Film Festival and accepted it immediately. Really, it's a long story and one I'd rather not go into.

Cinema Canada: That in the same interview, you said that the critical response to your work in general is that while the critics never seem to like a particular film, they take your work as a director very seriously.

Gilles Carle: They do! No, before, I developed an idea of what I wanted to put on the screen and I wrote a sort of mini-opera. I gave that to Lewis with some idea about what I wanted and he wrote it completely, making it his own. But the three women are there, and lots of other things. But it's his music.

Cinema Canada: What's interesting about the critical reaction to your work is that while the critics never seem to like a particular film, they take your work as a director very seriously.

Gilles Carle: It is true. I don't want to be a great filmmaker. In fact, I think the whole idea of being a great filmmaker is stupid. Nobody considers themselves to be a great filmmaker. You just do your job, you make films. There are so many films that I used to consider great, but when I see them today, they look like nothing; so you just don't know. Let the people of the future decide about the future and we'll decide about the present. Our only real potential is that we do things that we think are sincere and true — of course, we also have to think that they are important or we wouldn't do them. Everything looks at a film, I think I'm creating a masterpiece — it's like being a painter. It's hard for me to imagine a painter working on a canvas and saying to himself, now we'll see something exciting. What we achieve is something else and that's hard to know. I used to think that other people knew more about that than I did myself, but I wasn't that impressed. And thafs a terrible thing to do about their own lives — they may not succeed but it's important to try.
Where Canadian film comes together.

BELLEVUE Pathé

MONTREAL
Motion Picture Laboratories
& Sound Studios
André Collette, President
2000 Northcliff Ave.
Montreal, Quebec
H4A 3K5
Tel: (514) 484-1186

TORONTO
720 King St. West
Toronto, Ontario
M5V 2T3
Tel: (416) 364-3894

PATHÉ SOUND &
POST PRODUCTION CENTRE
Joe Grimaldi, vice-president
121 St. Patrick St.,
Toronto, Ontario M5T 1V3
Tel: (416) 598-2521

A DIVISION OF
ASTRAL BELLEVUE Pathé LIMITED

May 1981 – Cinema Canada/45
Mutual Films Corporation is pleased to announce that Filmplan International’s production of **THE FRIGHT** has been acquired for worldwide distribution by Twentieth Century-Fox.