Les beaux souvenirs

Francis Mankiewicz

The landscape is familiar: a lush, rainbow-colored summer on Quebec's Ile d'Orleans, complete with a grand old family home near the waterfront. As Viviane (Julie Vincent) steers an antiquated Chevrolet closer and closer to that destination, her face fairly glows with anticipation. If the stage seems set for a family reunion, the titles have already warned us away from assumptions; this second collaboration between Francis Mankiewicz and Réjean Ducharme promises more than a reworking of Thomas Wolfe.

Familiar landscapes, in fact, are at the heart of both Les beaux souvenirs and its sister film, Les bons debarras. But they work with each picture differently. The cool austerity of a rural Quebec autumn seemed to echo the darkness in Manon's soul. Les bons debarras was characterized by that darkness, and by the physical poverty that made the little girl desire to possess her mother at least partially understandable. Les beaux souvenirs is flooded with light. Manon's "soul sister" Marie (Monique Spaziani) is fair-haired and freckled faced, as quick to smile as Manon was to scowl. Fields of flowers sway in the breeze. The refined strains of a Mozart concerto fill the air. And there is something disquieting about all that sunshine.

What Mankiewicz and Ducharme seem to be about this time is a study in contradictions. Although the theme — that of obsessive love and the need to possess — remains the same, dramatic tension here is born of the clash between appearances and intentions, surfaces and depth. Manon is a 17-year-old woman-child whose apparent spontaneity and zest contrast with the doleful silence of her father (Paul Hebert). She is the last in a triumvirate of females who filled that family: her mother, Chiara, who in the end has left his side. When the wayward Viviane returns, a country-bumpkin Anglais in town (R.H. Thompson), Manon offers the only comfort Viviane is the daughter that followed in her mother's footsteps and, for the man, both those women have ceased to exist.

As she fights to win her father's forgiveness, it becomes obvious her appeal is wasted. The balance of power in this, home has shifted; it is the sunny, sweet Marie who controls now, who has made her home. Marie is the quintessential horror movie, with the devil as the girl next door.

The whole setup, at base, is sick: the mute old man who sees all women in his teenage daughter was a tyrant years ago — his possessiveness drove his wife and his eldest daughter away. You don't feel any empathy for him as he shoots drugs into his veins, and then trembles through a night of withdrawal pains.

The really tragedy is Viviane's need for this man's pardon. She's already on a crash course with suicide; perhaps she's just come home to die. It's a nasty picture of domesticity gone haywire, but these people are so screwed up that there's just no emotional road in to them. Viviane's sidekick Rick stands back and watches, but we're not standing with him either: he might have pulled her out of there in time, but he gets side-tracked by Marie, then disappears.

You find yourself looking at Les beaux souvenirs, and finally recollecting from it. Stylistically, it's handsome, sophisticated: that play of form against content works in its favour, and the performances are all very, very good, although R.H. Thompson is wasted as the monosyllabic goody two-shoes. Marie's desperate hunger, her desire to reclaim the souvenirs of her mother all stand to interfere with her sister's present. Manon is as adept at cutting emotional bonds as Manon was before her, and twice as scheming. Viviane, already at the edge of an emotional precipice, needs only push. Marie is left glistening at the centre of her father's universe, child-cum-mistress-cum-madonna — a kind of ribelle, satanic trinity.

Les beaux souvenirs may be the darkest fable of family relations since Elektra, and the levels of passionate obsession in the ordinary people suggest a cross between Greek drama and Tennessee Williams. The film is ripe with suggestions of incest, and the air around the house is positively tainted. Les bons debarras is almost benign by comparison. It lies the quietude, because of the similarity in style, theme and content, the temptation to examine suggestions of incest, and the air around Spaziani are all there, but our connection to the characters this time out is tenuous.

Manon, despite everything, was still a desperately hungry little girl. Marie is positively demonic. Alternately charming, petulant and downright possessed, she manoeuvres as though she's got the game plan written down somewhere, and is perhaps that big gun in her arsenal. Spaziani's face is enough to make you shudder after a while, because she's got a fire behind her eyes that reduces the special effects in The Exorcist to bargain-basement silliness. This girl may parade around in an adolescent's body, but she's got a spider's sensibilities, and keeps one as a pet to boot. You can't get close to her. It's almost as if her relationship with her father is a particular territory of the occult, of the demonic. And there is something disquieting about the whole set-up, as if the world has been taken over by a power that would be even more frightening if you could see it. But you can't get close to her.