

Francis Mankiewicz's

## Les beaux souvenirs

The landscape is familiar: a lush, rain-bow-coloured summer on Quebec's Ile d'Orléans, 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 débarras*. 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 débarras* was characterized by that darkness, and by the physical poverty that made the little girl's 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 freckle-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 depths. Marie is a 17-year-old woman/child whose apparent spontaneity and zest contrast with the doleful silence of her father (Paul Hébert). She is the last in a triumvirate of females who filled that family home, and the only one who hasn't left his side. When the wayward Viviane returns, a country-bumpkin Anglo in tow (R.H. Thompson), Marie offers the only welcome. 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 the transition from possessed to possessor. Viviane's insistence on the past, her memories of their childhood and her desire to reclaim the souvenirs of her mother all stand to interfere with her sister's present. Marie 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 to be pushed. Marie is left glimmering at the centre of her father's universe, child cum mistress cum madonna — a kind of nubile, satanic trinity.

*Les beaux souvenirs* may be the darkest fable of family relations since *Elektra*, and the levels of passionate obsession in these ordinary people suggest a cross between Greek drama and Tennessee Williams. The film is rife with



photo: NFB

● "Marie is positively demonic." Monique Spaziani, Paul Hébert

suggestions of incest, and the air around the house seems positively tainted; *Les bons débarras* is almost benign by comparison. And therein lies the quandy. Because of the similarity in style, theme and content, the temptation to examine *Les beaux souvenirs* as a companion piece to the first picture is strong. Mankiewicz has even cast the film with look-alikes: Charlotte Laurier and the open-faced Spaziani are very similar in type, while Julie Vincent recalls Marie Tifo with ease. And the body language is the same. One may finally learn to beware females who are quick to embrace in Mankiewicz movies — they're as tenacious as boa constrictors. The similarities are all there, but our connection with the characters this time out is tenuous.

Manon, despite everything, was still a desperately hungry little girl. Marie is positively demonic. Alternately charming, cajoling, petulant and downright possessed, she manoeuvres as though she's got the game plan written down somewhere, and sex is perhaps the biggest 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.

The whole setup, at base, is sick: the mute old man who sees all women in his teenaged 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 real 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 sidetracked by Marie, then disappears.

You find yourself looking at *Les beaux souvenirs*, and finally recoiling from it. Stylistically, it's handsome, sophisticated; that play of form against content works in its favour, and the performances are all very good, although R.H. Thompson is wasted as the monosyllabic good ol' boy. The focus is necessarily and finally on Spaziani. She is the centre of the film from her first closeup to the last, lingering whiteout, but she's fascinating by dint of her repulsiveness. What Mankiewicz may have done, in a sense, is redefined the role of evil

and its effects as a film genre. *Les beaux souvenirs* is the quintessential horror movie, with the devil as the girl next door.

Anne Reiter ●

**LES BEAUX SOUVENIRS** d. Francis Mankiewicz sc. Réjean Ducharme d.o.p. Georges Dufaux mus. Jean Cousineau ed. André Corriveau art d. Normand Sarrazin p. man. Francine Forest sd. Claude Hazanavicius a.d. Jacques Wilbrod Benoit (1st), Nicole Chicoine (2nd) cont. Marie Lahaye unit man. Michèle St-Arnaud, Ginette Guillard (asst.) asst. cam. Daniel Jobin (1st) Sylvain Brault (2nd) boom Denis Dupont sd. ed. André Corriveau, Anne Whiteside sd. mix. Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll elec. Maurice De Ersted, Denis Baril (asst.) grip Marc De Ersted, Jean-Maurice De Ersted (asst.) hair/make-up Diane Simard ward. mistress Blanche Boileau ward. dress. Fabienne April, Renée April stage prop. Pierre Fournier, Denis Hamel (asst.) exterior props. Jean-Baptiste Tard stills Takashi Seida, Attila Dory p. sec. Nicole Hilaréguy, Ginette Pouliot, Lucie D'Amour p. asst. Claude Jacques, Gérard Laniel admn. Denise Deslauriers, Evelyn Regimbald, Luc Lamy assoc. p. Françoise Berd exec. p. Jean Dansereau, Pierre Lamy boom Esther Auger elec. Walter Klymkiv, Guy Rémillard asst. elec. Gerald Proulx, Jean Trudeau, Claudé Derasp, Alain Jacques stunts Lynn Fournier, Danielle Fournier, Yves Fournier stunt coord. Marcel Fournier titles Serge Bouthillier neg. sd. Estelle Potvin sd. efx. Ken Page sd. efx. rec. Louis Hone, Yves Gendron mus. rec. Tim Hewlings (Son Québec Inc.) rushes synchro. Germain Bouchard coord. Edouard Davidovici l.p. Monique Spaziani, Julie Vincent, Paul Hébert, Robert H. Thomson, Michel Daigle, Mélanie Daigle, Isabelle Perrez, Lionel Géroux, Georges Delisle, Rémy Girard, Patrick Faladeau, Pierre Morin, Nicky Roy, Andrée Lachapelle, p.c. Co-production between National Film Board of Canada and Lamy, Spencer et Compagnie Lite running time 113:38 min. dist. Les Films Mutos