

Rex Bromfield's **Melanie**

Back in the late '50s, there was a short series of films built around the central character of Tammy, an uneducated Southern girl who was an absolute fount of motherly wisdom. In films like *Tammy Tell Me True* and *Tammy and the Doctor* (with a pre-Corman Peter Fonda) she solved the problems of the rich and the well-educated with a dash of down-home country wisdom.

The Simcom production of *Melanie* could easily be called "Tammy and the Rock Star," with Glynnis O'Connor taking the old Sandra Dee role and rescuing on-the-skids, stoned rocker Burton Cummings from his own bad habits and writer's block, while rescuing her son, who has been kidnapped by her redneck husband.

Actually, this sort of throwback plot does not really hurt the film - much more damage is done by the absolute lack of focus and purpose. There are about three plot threads going here: Melanie's struggle for literacy, her battle to get her son back, and Rick Manning's (Cummings) struggle to get back on the road to stardom, but none of them ever really rise to the surface.

The scene at the divorce hearing is shot without dialogue as one of Cummings' tunes whines away on the soundtrack, as is most of her struggle with the ins and outs of letters and words. Melanie even seems to forget at times that she's there to hunt for her son.

While the film is more than competently made and well-directed by Rex Bromfield, it needed another draft or two on the script to bring out the dramatic moments. There are rarely any of the moments that one finds constantly in a film like Truffaut's *L'Enfant Sauvage*, or like the more emotional parent-child moments in *Kramer vs. Kramer*.

Despite this script problem, *Melanie* is not a bad picture. One feels no real urge to run from the theatre. Glynnis O'Connor, who is sort of a cross between Sissy Spacek and Barbara Hershey, is quite good as the eponymous heroine, suggesting quite well that she may in fact be illiterate - she masters just the right degree of embarrassment com-



● Everything's o.k. until they wise up. Rick (Burton Cummings) and Melanie (Glynnis O'Connor) play cut-out

bined with curiosity about what she's shut away from. Indeed, the best scene in the film takes place between O'Connor and Donnan Cavan, a punkie girl she meets on the bus to L.A. As they sit in a restaurant, Cavan realizes that Melanie can't read, and Melanie knows that she knows, and the whole scene is shot through with potential embarrassment and a very delicate sort of feeling.

Burton Cummings, in his feature film debut, is good until the last half hour of the picture, when he sobers up and flies right under Melanie's ministrations. Cummings is great as an obnoxiously stoned rock star, but as a sweet sensitive guy he doesn't have anything like the acting tools required to make the character interesting.

Trudy Young, as Melanie's friend who left Arkansas and lives in the big city is all right, but how can anyone who grew up watching *Razzle Dazzle* take this

woman seriously as an actress (we will not speak here of *Face Off*).

Bromfield's real triumph as a director here is the creation of interesting - even narrative - "walking on the beach" sequences.

A "walking on the beach" scene generally occurs after the starring couple realizes that they are in love. For five minutes or so, a bad song plays on the soundtrack and we are treated to the unedifying sight of two highly paid actors walking on the beach, eating in restaurants, playing touch football and shopping for cute things that they don't need. Usually, it is the best time to sneak out for a cigarette.

Bromfield's scenes, wherein Melanie learns to write and stretches her relationship with Manning and his lawyer, Walter (Paul Sorvino) actually move the story along, which is a minor achievement.

Yet stuck in the film are some very odd scenes. One has a Norman Maine-ish Cummings playing his songs at a party for his friends, all of whom walk out on him. I don't know why - the songs seem no worse than any other Burton Cummings songs that have sold millions of records.

One could ask the question "What does all this have to do with Canadian culture?" but that would be irrelevant. Simcom, as it proved with *Prom Night*, is not interested in making Canadian films, and I would much rather watch Peter Simpson's fair-to-middling American-style movies than, say, Garth Drabinsky's awful American movies. In *Melanie*, the producers have real, human-scale characters at work, which is a pleasant change from the slasher aesthetics of their Paul Lynch epic.

John Harkness ●



● John Savage only adds to the amateur effort

Charles Jarrott's **The Amateur**

There lurks a dark, reptilian instinct within us all. It goes like this: when something strikes out at you, strike back and chew hard. Having endured *The Amateur*, this primeval urge is now uncontrollable.

First of all, to entitle a film as such, must certainly be an act of masochism, because the makers of *The Amateur* have set themselves up to be skewered with catcalls and cries of amateurism. This is not to say that the film is ostensibly bad. But then again neither is an amateur. The looks may be there but it is backed by little substance or skill.

Producers Joel Michaels and Garth Drabinsky have once again lived up to their Romulus and Remus legacy by doling out the mega-bucks to come up with an appetizing package. And on the surface they've succeeded. *The Amateur* has all the trappings of a taut espionage thriller; along the lines of *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Marathon Man*. They've supplied a long list of stars: John Savage, Christopher Plummer, Marthe Keller, Arthur Hill and John Marley. Included in the price of admission is a European travelogue. (Accomplished smartly, so that Vienna not only serves as itself but Munich and Prague,

MELANIE p.c. Simcom Ltd. Production d. Rex Bromfield exec. p. Richard Simpson p. Peter Simpson sc. Robert Guza, Jr. and Richard Paluck d.o.p. Richard Clupka ed. Brian Ravok p. des. Roy Forge Smith p. man. Gerry Arbeid loc. man. (Canada) Brian Ross loc. man. (U.S.A.) David Nelson unit pub. Pat Whittingham p. co-ord. Judith Rubin loc. co-ord. (U.S.A.) Angela Heald cast. Mitchell-Polley Casting 1st asst. d. R. Martin Walters 2nd asst. d. Alan Goluboff cam. op. Fred Guthe focus puller Andy Chumra clapper/loader Marvin Midwicki ed. mix. Douglas Ganton boom op. Tom Hilderly cost. des. Julie Ganton ward. Gaye Gardiner make-up Shonagh Jabour hair Jenny Arbour p. accountant Robert Duckworth sc. superv. Pauline Harlow stills John Williamson asst. art. d. Barbara Matis 2nd asst. art. d. Dave Davis art trainee Birgit Siber art. dept. asst. (U.S.A.) Michelle Minch set dresser Angelo Stea asst. set dressers Enrico Campana, Gareth Wilson, Tony Bennett prop. mast. Anthony Greco asst. prop. mast. Joe Hampson gaffer John Berrie best boy Richard A. Allen elec. Bill Brown key grip Norman Smith 2nd grip Michael O'Connor 3rd grip Sean Ryerson gen. op. Greg Daniels transp. capt. Don Baldassarra p. asst. Michael Curran 1st asst. driver Tom Pinteric driver Curtis Brown orig. music Burton Cummings l.p. Glynnis O'Connor, Paul Sorvino, Burton Cummings, Trudy Young, Don Johnson, Jamie Dick, L.Q. Jones, Lisa Dal Bello, Yvonne Murray, David Willis, Donnan Cavan, Jodie Drake, Martha Gibson, Jim Martin dist. Twentieth Century-Fox.

and our beloved Toronto passes not only for Washington D.C. but Connecticut as well.)

And there's the promise of a cracker-jack plot: we witness a terrifying scenario hot off the front page. Terrorists (à la Bader-Meinhoff gang) seize the American consulate in Munich and brutally gun down an innocent young woman in front of the TV cameras. The sharp, emotion-wrenched message is clear: once and for all, something must be done about these barbarians. And we have the man to do it, Charles Heller (played by John Savage), the murdered woman's lover, a cog-in-the-wheel computer analyst at the CIA. Undaunted by his company's hands-off edict, Heller turns vigilante and embarks upon an elaborate and intrepid pilgrimage of revenge which leads him into Czechoslovakia, the known hide-out of the terrorists who executed his girl.

Heller is after blood, especially that of Schraeger, the steely-eyed Arian leader of the group (played by steely-eyed Canadian Nicholas Campbell).

Inarguably, the ingredients for a first-rate potboiler are all here. Michaels and Drabinsky have been astute enough to buy the right kind of cookbook. So what's wrong with *The Amateur*? Plenty. In fact, the makers of this film will be lucky to escape being boiled in oil by those unfortunate few who will be lured into theatres.

Writers Robert Littell and Diana Maddox foolishly expect us to swallow a plot that resembles Swiss cheese, with holes big enough for all those shiny Mercedes Benz production cars to drive through. Initially, they have Heller ingeniously blackmailing the CIA into helping him enter Czechoslovakia. Once in Prague, however, the writers wage war on plausibility by having Heller encounter a horde of James Bondian black-gloved spies, all carrying their KGB or CIA affiliations as if they were readily sold at the corner store.

Director Charles Jarrott fares no better. He comes off like some sort of Maytag repair man, deluded into believing that there are similar iron-clad guarantees in film. He is sadly mistaken. The need for a fine directorial touch is painfully evident throughout *The Amateur*. Suspense, and methods of creating it, seem completely out of Jarrott's grasp. (Not surprising mind you, from the man whose last "memorable" work was *The Other Side of Midnight*.)

The really sour points in this film, however, come from the performers, and in particular, John Savage. Never has a leading actor so savagely maligned the profession. His acting range is so limited, his presence so non-existent, that one wonders why somebody - somewhere along the line - didn't have the sense to pull the plug on this poor man's constipated excuse to be on the big screen. Savage literally mumbles and stumbles his presence so non-existent, that one wonders why somebody - somewhere near tension. One has to reflect on (and perhaps re-evaluate) his role as the war amputee in *The Deer Hunter*. In Michael Cimino's film, Savage seemed perfect as the shell-shocked veteran constrained to a wheelchair. But in *The Amateur*, given the full use of his arms and legs, he's at a total loss.

And there's not much to be said about Marthe Keller as Chuck's Czech accomplice. Ms. Keller has been in this kettle before and seems destined to forever play a European-accented woman caught on the wrong side. Only Christopher Plummer, as Prof. Lakos, adds the proper

flavouring to his part. Plummer is fully aware of the schlock being served here. He doesn't hold back on the ham, making his Lakos a Czechoslovakian Columbo with a dash of Sherlock Holmes.

How Lakos fits into the scheme of things, and how *The Amateur* limps to an end is not worth recounting here. Suffice it to say that Charles Heller finds his steely-eyed terrorist in a chandelier factory... a shoddy symbol that serves only to point out the film's shattering vacuity.

Oh, yes, there is a surprise ending. Heller's sweet taste of revenge is tainted, somewhat, by the disclosure that Schraeger, our steely-eyed terrorist, was not really a terrorist but working all along for the... (need it be said?). By this time, none of *The Amateur* comes as a surprise, but as welcome relief that the whole sloppy affair is finally over.

Stephen Zoller ●

THE AMATEUR d. Charles Jarrott p.c. Balkan Film Productions Ltd. p. Joel B. Michaels, Garth H. Drabinsky sc. Robert Littell, Diana Maddox, based on novel "The Amateur" by Littell exec. p. Mario Kassar, Andrew Vajna cam. John Coquillon, b.s.c. p. des. Trevor Williams sup. ed. Richard Halsey, a.c.e. mus. Ken Wannberg USA cast. Fenton-Feinberg Cda cast. Walker-Bowen p.man. Marilyn Stonehouse 1st asst. d. Jon Anderson prod. co-ord. Suzanne Lore exec.asst. to prod. Margaret Livingston ed. Stephan Fanfara asst. ed. Bruce Lange art d. Richard Wilcox cost. des. Suzanne Grace set dec. Rondi Johnson, Steve Shewchuk asst. to prod. Patricia McCarthy asst. to d. Margo Ley cam. op. James Turrell 1st asst. cam. Thom Ryan 2nd asst. cam. David Makin prop mast. John Berger asst. set dec. Dennis Kirkham asst. prop mast. John C. Rose draughtsman Richard Harrison loc. man. Michael Brownstone key grip Ron Gillham gaffer Chris Holmes 2nd asst. d. Otta Hanus 3rd asst. d. Bob Wertheimer 2nd asst. ed. Marta Nielsen sd. mix. Peter Shewchuk sc. sup. Sandra Ulosevich Marley sc. research Connie Josefs boom op. Herbert Heritage best boys Glen Goodchild, Tony Eldridge grips Wayne Goodchild, John Davidson stills Shin Sugino unit pub. Lynda Friendly makeup John Brock hair James Keller asst. makeup Patricia Green asst. hair Albert Paradis ward. mistress Aleida Macdonald ward. asst. Nadia Ongaro Steadicam op. Robert Crone elec. John Spurrell, Sam Hughes sp. efx. Gene Grigg, Michael Clifford, Leland (Bud) Fisher p. sec. Angela Heald stunt co-ord. R.L. (Bobby) Hannah gen. op. Herbert Reischl underwater cam. Rich Mason underwater cam. op. Bob Saad prod. cont. Heather McIntosh prod. acct. Lyn Lucibello, Lorraine Valentine, Joanne Jackson orchestrations Albert Woodbury mus. mix. sup. Len Engel re-rec. Joe Grimaldi, Austin Grimaldi, Dino Pigat sd. efx. ed. Dennis Drummond, Wayne Griffin, Michael O'Farrell asst. sd. off. ed. Michael Rea, John Szoges 2nd unit d. Richard Halsey 2nd unit cam. James Devis 2nd unit cam. op. Michael Rutter prod. asst. Tom Pinteric, Rich Watts, Alan Zweig trans. co-ord. Bill Jackson scenic artist Guenter Bartlik head painter Willi Holst const. sup. Ron MacMillan craft serv. James Carruthers background extras Film Extra Services prop stills Lynn Goldsmith Inc. Vienna crew: prod. sup. Hannah Hempstead prod. man. Otto Boris Dworak asst. to p. man. Andreas Debowski art d. Herwig Libowitzk p. sec. Gerda Haller asst. d. Gusti Brunjes prod. asst. Isabelle Groote, Carl Ludwig property buyer Juri Juda prop. asst. Reinhard Binder makeup, hair asst. Margarete Ehringer ward. asst. Lena Ilgisonis gen. op. Adolf Wazin gaffer Erich Kristufek grips Peter Holba, Eduard Richter elec. Norbert Erben, Waldemar Haidinger, Walter Lobarzewski, Anton Pniesz prop stills Lynn Goldsmith Inc. Washington D.C. crew: loc. man. Stuart Neuman trans. co-ord. Eric Young prod. sec. Victoria Eves title des. Douy Swofford opticals Film Optical title opticals Movie Magic Lp. John Savage, Christopher Plummer, Marthe Keller, Arthur Hill, Nicholas Campbell, George Coe, John Marley, Jan Rubes, Ed Lauter, Miguel Fernandes, Jan Triska, Graham Jarvis, Jacques Godin, Chappelle Jaffe, Lynne Griffin, Vladimir Valenta, Vlasta Vrana, Neil Dainard, Lee Broker, Tedde Moore, Maruska Stankova, Irena Mayeska, George Buza, George R. Robertson, John Kerr, Guy Sanvido, Robert Beatty, Walter Reyer, François-Regis Klanfer, Peter Wolsdorff, Henry Gomez, Erin Flannery, Lisa Schrage, Susan Young, Tony Kramreither, Paul Reymont, Aubrey Taylor, Roman Chabursky, Bob Lem, Fred Culik, Peter Langley, Harty Hornisch, Helmut Graef, Zdenek Gruner running time 112 min. 35mm colour Canadian dist. Pan-Canadian Film Dist. Inc. U.S. dist. Twentieth Century Fox.

Denys Arcand's

Le confort et l'indifférence

"Gouverner c'est rendre vos sujets hors d'état de vous nuire."

Machiavelli

"On aime ça d'même."

Beer commercial

One wonders what sort of film Denys Arcand would have made, had the *Oui* won the May 1980 referendum. For *Le confort et l'indifférence* only makes sense in the light of the No victory. Yet it is the reality of that defeat that lets Arcand amuse himself with unfair arguments against History. In this sense, Arcand's is a hypocritical film, but, in the same sense that Max Beerbohm once said "Every kind of writing is hypocritical," this is in part, the hypocrisy of art.



● Denys Arcand and crew

To be sure, when Arcand began filming as of 1977, there was no way to know what would be the referendum's outcome. Like the Toronto news producers who would send camera crews to Montreal at every provincial election to film what they imagined would be instant independence, there was still some hope perhaps of capturing great History in the making.

Sometime after the grim returns, Arcand began rereading the classics of political thought.

"I wanted a commentary, something from outside, by a foreigner," Arcand explains. "I began to read Aristotle's *Politics* and Clausewitz' *On War*, but it was only when I reread Machiavelli that I knew he was the one I wanted. It was hallucinatory. Something jumped out from every page!"

Le confort et l'indifférence is Arcand-Machiavelli's judging of Quebec society, and the dream of democratically achieving independence by referendum. Machiavelli (admirably portrayed by Jean-Pierre Ronfard) peers across Montreal from the vantage-point of his hotel room and, while sitting down to a hearty lunch, offers gems from *The Prince*, his treatise on how to acquire and preserve a monarchy. Against this background, the viewer gets to relive the events of the referendum from the tabling of the question to the cultural "highpoints" of the summer of 1980 (Canadiens' victory parade after winning the Stanley Cup, the Florallies, etc.).

Arcand's National Film Board colleagues (Pierre Perrault, Bernard Gosselin, Gilles Groulx) provided 10 percent of the

footage. For the remainder, Arcand worked with some 60 hours of film. The result, boiled down to 112 minutes, is a meditation that is sarcastic, cruel, brilliant, facile, sad, and yet mercifully very funny.

Only film could have caught the look René Lévesque gave the camera crews that accompanied him on his trip to Paris to speak before the French National Assembly. Greeted like a head of state, made to review an honor guard, Lévesque goes through the motions with some embarrassment, but when he recognizes the cameras from home he raises his eyebrows as if to say "Gee, for pea-soups, we've sure come a long way." The moment is heart-warming in the naïveté, but there's always Machiavelli's suave voice to remind us that this is no game for the sentimental or the naïve.

The Machiavelli excerpts work with especial brilliance in a scene where Ronfard explains that to win the loyalty of his minister, the prince must cover him with honors, positions and riches so abundant that he will oppose any change. Cut to Jean Chrétien listing all the ministerial posts he has held - as proof that there's opportunity for Quebecers in Ottawa.

Arcand realizes a brilliant montage of economic debate reduced to complete triviality over the costs of independence in which Trudeau, Lévesque, Ryan, Camille Samson, Gérald Godin and Bernard Landry all hurl statistics at each other in wild disarray. At one point Landry looks up from his reams of statistics and blurts out: "Il y a quelque chose qui marche pas ici" (Something isn't working out here).

A lot sillier, though still amusing, is the coverage given a *Oui-Non* boxing match involving indépendantiste goon Reggie Chartrand and some poor has-been who is flattened in 45 seconds. Ex-boxer Ronald Jones (of Gilles Groulx' *Golden Gloves*) provides sympathetic non-involvement to this sequence.

Pierre Trudeau (playing himself, namely The Prince) is appropriately hat-chet-faced, and suitably flanked by secret service gorillas, or reviewing troops in the company of Her Majesty, or waxing eloquent over our Rockies and "our" natural resources.

Of considerably less interest are the long scenes devoted to an evangelical "charismatic" rally at the Olympic Stadium, though it does provide the stunning image of Christ framed between an ad for Miracle Mart on the left and Steinberg on the right. But "poor ignorant" religion is just that, and Arcand's attempt to generalize it into a statement about the poverty-stricken dreams of Quebecers (as against the grand dream of independence) simply does not work.

Le confort et l'indifférence, reaction to which Arcand says "has surpassed all expectations," has already aroused controversy in the cultural pages of the press, and promises to enliven Québécois intellectual living-rooms for months to come.

For Arcand's film is one of disappointment, and above all, of disappointment in a people's inability to dream, to escape its servitude and live free. That the Parti Québécois had only its verbal version of that dream to go on is criticized as a lack of realism in a world where, as Machiavelli reminds us, a good army is everything. What, after October 1970, was the alternative?

The chief culprit, Arcand seems to be saying, is the miserable, comfortable Quebec people who traded their birthright for a federal pension cheque and