

# Marathon man : Pierre Lamy

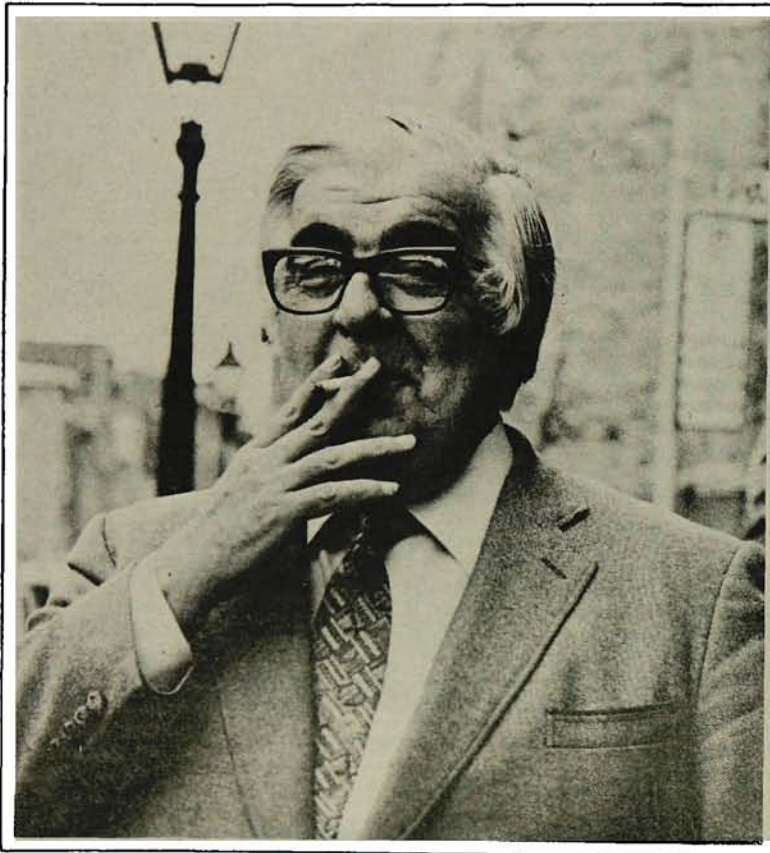
by Barbara Samuels

Whatever else is said of this year's Genie Awards presentation, one fact remains indisputable. The network broadcast gave most of the country its first – albeit brief – glimpse of a one-man national institution. The gravel-voiced recipient of the Air Canada citation for Outstanding Contribution to the Business of Film-making in Canada delivered a thank-you speech more concise than the title of his award. But that was to be expected. Louise Ranger, independent producer, head of L'Institut québécois du cinéma and a close associate since 1967 has called Pierre Lamy "the quintessential behind-the-scenes man." And after some twenty-four 'low-profile' years as one of this country's premier film producers, Lamy has finally been nudged into the spotlight.

The recognition from Air Canada came on the heels of another major award. At the end of 1981, Lamy was named recipient of the Albert Tessier Prize, bestowed annually upon a distinguished Quebec filmmaker as part of the Prix du Quebec. There is justice in all this overdue admiration, and more than a touch of irony. From the sudden explosion of Quebec film talent in the late '60s, through the oversized glitz and expenditure of the tax shelter boom and into the current, uneasy calm before the advent of pay-TV, the circle completes itself and deposits us back on Pierre Lamy's doorstep. The man's filmography reads like a history book for students of Quebec film culture; it also provides a thumbnail sketch of someone who adopted a credo of integrity at the outset, and stuck by it. Now embellished by this new wave of esteem, Lamy's career is a singular defiance of the axiom that good guys always finish last.

For a starting point, he goes back to his days at the Université de Montréal, where he was enrolled in the highly-regarded Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales. As president of the university's Artistic Society, he was heavily involved in the administration of plays and cine-club events. Director Claude Jutra, a medical student at the time, recalls appearing in a stage review mounted by the fledgling producer.

In 1948, Lamy moved to Vermont, where he handled administrative business for the Trapp Family Singers. By 1956 he was back in Montreal, and experienced his first taste of film production as administrator of the Youth Section at La Societe Radio-Canada. Television production was a brand-new field, and by taking on the first TV series ever produced by the Societe, Lamy became one of its pioneers. "The head of tele-



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vision production asked me to become a producer on *Radisson*," he recalls. "No one else knew anything about TV production, so we were all in the same boat. Half of the series had been shot by then, and it was very expensive for those days: \$1.2 million for twenty-six episodes. That's the point where I really became a film producer."

He left Radio-Canada in 1958 to work with Fernand Seguin, who had established Niagra Films Inc. in Montreal. A blend of TV series and commercials added to Lamy's portfolio, and he joined with his brother Andre (current executive director of the Canadian Film Development Corp.) in 1962 to found Onyx Films Inc. In many ways the birthplace of the Quebec cinema boom that was to follow, Onyx boasted a roster of names almost top-heavy with talent; in addition to the Lamys, Denis and Claude Heroux, Gilles Carle, Michel Belaieff, Roger Moride, and Guy and Claude

Fournier were among original staffers. The company began on familiar ground, concentrating on TV series and commercials to establish itself. But the incentives for feature production were clearly in place with the establishment of the CFDC in 1968. Lamy dates the Quebec film explosion from that moment. "We were all basically frightened of getting involved in feature films," he remembers. "There were so many risk factors. But Michael Spencer came to see us. He said, 'Look, if you're not going to do the films, who is? You're the company with all the potential. You're obligated to get into feature production.'"

They did so with commitment. Denis Heroux produced the company's first feature, *Pas de vacances pour les idoles*. Gilles Carle's screen debut came with *Le viol d'une jeune fille douce*; producer this time out was Pierre Lamy. Louise Ranger, who joined the company

as a kind of 'femme à tout faire', recalls the volunteer spirit that ruled those days and accounted in good part for the enormous output of product: "You did everything then. Unit, script assistant, makeup, whatever. *Le viol* was shot on weekends with volunteer labour. I think it took about six months to complete." Ranger was directly involved in Carle's second feature *Red*, shot in 1968. "We worked with a crew of 19 people. Two weeks of pre-production. And on top of that, we produced two TV ads during that two-week period. It was a rough shoot, but the desire to do that film was very strong. It was always a question of desire."

Producer Harry Gulkin encountered Lamy for the first time after the completion of *Red*. "He invited me to a screening of the film one day, because he wanted to know if it would work as an English-language dub." Gulkin describes Onyx as a "structure which has not yet been replaced in all of Canada, a set-up within which a group of directors and producers worked as a team, discussed projects, gave each other support." More than just the moral variety, as it often happened. When a financially strapped Claude Jutra turned to Lamy for help on his first film, *À tout prendre*, he was offered equipment and facilities, all free of charge. Lamy dismisses the period with characteristic modesty: "It was just a time when everyone helped everyone else."

Louise Ranger counts herself among the recipients of that help. After the exhaustive process of *Red* came to a close, she found herself confused by the whole event. "I asked myself whether people worked like this on films all over the world. I was convinced we'd burn out in five years if we kept this up." As a means of clarification, Lamy obtained a CFDC grant in 1969 that sent Ranger to France on an apprenticeship program. "I spent two months in Paris," she recounts. "I found out we were on the right track here; all we really needed were bigger crews, more people to do the same kind of work a few of us were trying to handle. It was really a question of confidence. Going to Paris enabled me to say 'Yes, I'm capable of doing it, and the methods we used on *Red* are more or less the right ones. All this experience came through Pierre. He was the one who really brought me into feature filmmaking."

Before leaving Onyx in 1971, Lamy also produced Carle's *Les mâles* and Claude Fournier's record-breaking *Deux femmes en or*. And the major activity on the Quebec scene still lay ahead. When Lamy decided to regroup his resources, he chose his associate carefully. Gulkin comments: "I think it's a measure of Pierre's taste and vision that he selected a man I feel is this

country's outstanding director. He was able to see - long before there was general recognition of the fact - that Gilles Carle was the guy to go with."

Les Productions Carle/Lamy Ltée was formed in 1971, with Louise Ranger and Jacques Gagné rounding out the quartet of key players. Another woman who spiralled her way up through Canadian film ranks after starting at ground level with Lamy is former film and video officer at the Canada Council, Penni Jacques. She joined the company near its inception, and stayed for two years. During that time, she learned all she could about film production by working the administrative gamut. "He has a flair for teaching," she remarks now. "He enjoys seeing young people learning from him; he takes great pride in that. There are so many people who went through his offices in one capacity or another, and are today an important part of the Quebec film scene." She credits her time at Carle/Lamy with providing the resource material for her Council position. "Using Quebec and that two years of experience as a microcosm for films, I drew from it the essential elements for a program that was Canada-wide." And echoing others, she adds: "My experience with Pierre was crucial in terms of where my life led."

Lamy's eye for talent is reflected in the names that hold the director's credits in the long string of films the company produced between 1971-75. Lorraine Duhamel, Lamy's executive assistant and de facto right hand since 1972 sums up his criteria for involvement in a film quite neatly: "Quality. He's always done quality pictures. He's stuck fast beside certain people, like Denys Arcand and André Brassard. The guys who make films of a certain calibre." Nowhere was that more evident than in the case of *Kamouraska*, a project which, at \$875,000, loomed in 1972 like a Hollywood megamovie over the otherwise modestly budgeted Quebec film industry. It was another undertaking Lamy brought in on his own terms, wrangling what was essentially a 'hot property' away from the competition despite overwhelming odds. "Both Anne Hébert (the author) and the book's French publishers wanted a French director," Claude Jutra recalls. "And Pierre called me one day. He said 'I can do the picture on the condition that you direct and Michel Brault shoots it.'" Lamy swung the deal, thereby launching one of Canada's first co-productions with France.

But the pressures were extraordinary. High costs, bitter winter weather and a

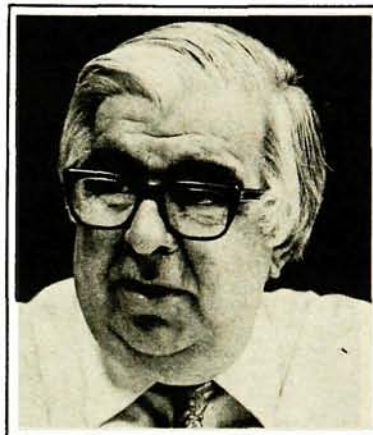
host of production problems turned the shoot into an endurance test. The troubles, however, brought no mad display of temper from the producer. "If Pierre gets into a rage," Jutra explains, "it's icy cold. The best description of his anger is this: absolute motionlessness. Silence. And he looks at you with cold, dark eyes. At the end of *Kamouraska*, when there was no more money, I refused to cut the shooting schedule, refused to eliminate scenes. So our confrontation took place at his house in Beloeil. It consisted mostly of long silences."

The ordeal of *Kamouraska* finally over, Lamy went on to produce a succession of features, among them *La mort d'un bûcheron*, *Il était une fois dans l'est*, *Gina*, and *La tête de Normandie St-Onge*. Examined as a body, the films produced during the five-year life of Carle/Lamy probably represent the highwater mark of that filmmaking era. It ended in 1975. Carle and Lamy parted ways, with Lamy going on to form his own company. That year, he was called in on *The Far Shore* by the CFDC, which asked that he oversee the troubled production. "The people at the CFDC began to look to Pierre as perhaps the senior producer in the country, in terms of getting them out of difficulty," Harry Gulkin explains. "He was able to create not just an effective administration, but he also avoided the kind of resentments that always seem to happen in those takeover situations." Lamy was called upon for similar reasons on *Who Has Seen the Wind* in 1977.

In 1976, he handled the production of the opening and closing ceremonies at the Montreal Olympics. It was a change of pace, one he enjoyed tremendously. And he opted for another. Later that year, he took time off to plan and construct two cinemas in Beloeil, Quebec, moving away from film production for quite a few months. Lorraine Duhamel notes that this break was taken not too long after the split with Carle, and speculates that Lamy "needed time to rethink the way he was going to function. I think he needed the breather. Maybe he was tired of the constant pressure."

Lamy filled the years between '76 and '78 with a string of TV series, and his stint on *Who Has Seen the Wind*, but returned to feature production in 1979 with *Contrecoeur*. He also teamed up with Michael Spencer to form Lamy, Spencer & Company Ltd., and it was through this new association that he made his first foray into film production with partial tax shelter funding. But the

terms were strictly his. "*Les beaux souvenirs* had a budget of \$1,250,000," he explains. "Of that, \$300,000 was tax shelter money, privately invested cash. It obligated us to no one; it didn't impose conditions on the film." His reticence to endorse the CCA is something he can only explain instinctively: "When the tax shelter came along, I wasn't eager to get involved. There was something in there that didn't jibe for me. I don't know; maybe a moral question. I had always worked on a small-scale, low-budget basis. I guess the whole overblown, expensive scene just turned me off." He refutes all suggestions that his reluctance had a touch of the visionary about it. "I was approached to pro-



duce an awful lot of things. I refused, but I only make the films I want to make. When you look back at my record, all the pictures I made weren't award winners. But I produced them at the time because I liked the subject, because I got along with the director. The pictures never started out as money makers; I never produced anything with the sole intention of 'cleaning up'."

Nor does he envision a glowing future for film production dependent upon the writeoff. "As far as I can see, the tax shelter principle is finished. It will always exist in one form or another. But the boom that busted isn't going to happen again. The way budgets broke down in the middle of that boom showed that the greatest percentage of the monies invested were going to cover costs incurred because of the size of the film; lawyer costs, accountant costs, star costs. Then all the other costs were inflated accordingly. So a picture that should have cost around \$1 or \$1.5 million comes in at three or four or five."

The Canadian option? "We can make movies. Within our own structure and on our own terms. But I feel that pictures costing more than \$2 million are out of the question."

He is also rather critical of prevailing attitudes in the two governmental agencies established to promote indigenous film. "It's worked out so that L'Institut and the CFDC have created a whole framework for the financing of films that forces pictures into categories. No two films are ever alike. So the realities of independent production are ignored. These institutions were originally created to help private industry; they used to have consultative committees at the CFDC. That doesn't exist anymore. It's coming very close to the same situation we've had for years in terms of the CBC and the NFB; if you fitted into *their* mold, you could co-produce with them. I think it's a basic mistake."

The future direction of Canadian film is of central concern to Lamy, and he sees it as being very much entwined with the pay-TV market. There is a personal note involved here; as one of the partners in Premiere Television, he awaits the CRTC decision with great interest. Should Premiere win the license, Lamy will become Vice-President of Programming, working with associates Moses Znaimer and Jean Fortier. "This will mean," he says, "leaving film production as a first-person film producer, but I'll be close to the production of films nevertheless." And if Premiere doesn't get the nod? "I'll continue to produce pictures privately, as I always have. Either way, TV will be involved. That market holds out the most money and the biggest audience. If that tax shelter survives, the amounts sought will be much less; pay-TV will be able to co-finance films as well. But we're looking at reasonable budgets. Not more than \$2 million. This is a viable structure. Everyone gets involved: L'Institut, the CFDC, the National Film Board and the CBC. We'll be working on films scaled down to our means. It has to be the start of a new credo."

That credo will not be new to Pierre Lamy. His *modus operandi* for years, it has seen him through cycles of boom and bust with his principles and his reputation intact. No small feat. And they're giving awards for it this year. "It's kind of nice that after sitting there for years with no kudos, he's finally been fully recognized," says an admiring Harry Gulkin. "He's a marathon runner; no good at all for short bursts. Pierre lasts the course."

## Filmography

(The following films are feature films unless marked (tv) for television series or (docu) for documentary films. Throughout his career, Lamy has also produced a great number of commercials and educational films. His credit on these films is as producer unless marked executive producer.)

### 1958-1962:

Niagara Films Inc.  
(executive producer)

Le roman de la science (tv)

Par le trou de la serrure (tv)

Les insolences d'une camera (tv)

L'homme devant la science (tv)

### 1962-1971:

Onyx Films Inc.

Les insolences d'une camera (tv)

Jeunesse oblige (tv)

Place aux Jérolas (tv)

Place à Olivier Guimond (tv)

Le viol d'une jeune fille douce

by Gilles Carle

Red by Gilles Carle

Les mâles by Gilles Carle

L'Expo 67 (docu)

Deux femmes en or

by Claude Fournier

Situation du théâtre

by Jacques Gagné (docu)

Education (tv)

### 1971-1975:

Les productions Carle-Lamy Ltée

La maudite galette by Denys Arcand

Les smattes

by Jean-Claude Labrecque

La conquête by Jacques Gagné

La vraie nature de Bernadette

by Gilles Carle

Kamouraska by Claude Jutra

Aux frontières du possible (tv)

La mort d'un bûcheron

by Gilles Carle

Les corps célestes

by Gilles Carle

Il était une fois dans l'est

by André Brassard

Gina by Denys Arcand

Pour le meilleur et pour le pire

by Claude Jutra

Tout feu, tout femme

by Gilles Richer

Les chevaux ont-ils des ailes

by Gilles Carle (docu)

La tête de Normandie St-Onge

by Gilles Carle

### 1975-1979:

Les productions Pierre Lamy Ltée

Far Shore by Joyce Wieland

Chanson pour Julie

by Jacques Vallée

Le soleil se leve en retard

by André Brassard

Who Has Seen the Wind

by Allan King (executive producer)

Innu Asi by Arthur Lamothe

(executive producer)

Frederic (tv)

Contre-coeur by Jean-Guy Noël

### 1980-1981:

Lamy, Spencer et compagnie ltée

Les beaux souvenirs

by Francis Mankiewicz

Hockey (tv)