

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre

Flowers to Cannes

by Barbara Samuels

Once again, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre will represent Canada at Cannes as his film *Les fleurs sauvages* is screened in the Directors' Fortnight. With 17 features to his credit since 1965, Lefebvre is Quebec's most prolific filmmaker, and one of Canada's most regular ambassadors abroad.

Below are two separate interviews with Lefebvre. In the first, Barbara Samuels speaks to him about his most recent film, and production conditions at present in Quebec. The second is reprinted from the British Film Institute Dossier No. 13, entitled "Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: the Quebec Connection." In it, he addresses himself to the question of national cinema and to the making of his own films.

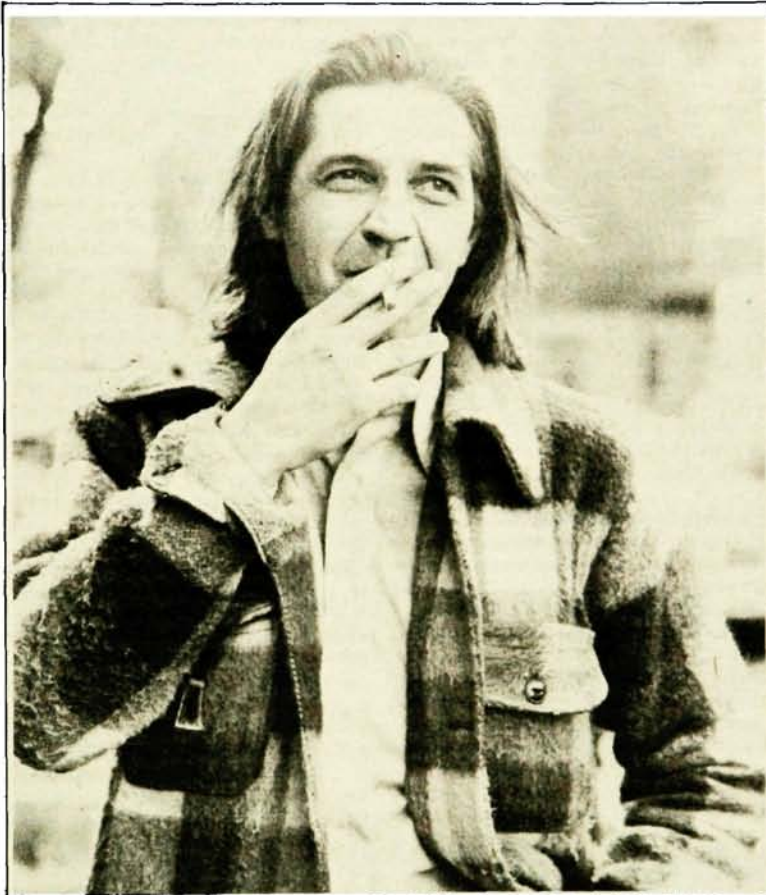
Cinema Canada: The story line of *Les fleurs sauvages* is very classic, very simple: you've dealt with the generation gap between an adult woman and her aging mother. What drew you to the subject matter?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Well, two years ago - summer of 1980, I think - I was very discouraged. The situation was rotten in Quebec, on the economic level, the human level. All those big films had transformed the spirit of the industry. It wasn't what it had been when we were making films 20, or even 10 years ago. So I decided I was going to give up filmmaking. But it's like wine. When you're used to drinking it, and you like it a lot, the taste just lingers somewhere inside you.

For two years, I'd had the chance to see a lot of mothers and daughters - my mother-in-law, the mothers-in-law of some friends. And then there was my own kid, eight-years old at the time, and his circle of friends, and it was a funny concentration in time and space. We had a lot of discussions at home about generation gaps.

I had an idea that I'd like to make a film about it. So I called Marthe Nadeau and asked her if she wanted me to write her a script. And then I did the same thing to Michèle Magny. Of course, the boy in my mind was always Eric Beauséjour, who'd played Paolo in *Avoir seize ans*. It was obvious that I'd ask Guy Dufaux to do the camera, and Josée

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Beaudette to be my assistant. First, I wanted to have a crew of friends, and then I'd draft the script.

Cinema Canada: You're dealing with a tale of non-communication between generations, and yet there are very close ties in the family you portray. Michèle and Pierre seem to be an ideal couple, beautifully balanced. The children give the unit another kind of equilibrium, and there's a different balance between Marthe and her grandchildren. And it's all set against an idyllic landscape, a gorgeous countryside; the whole thing's very pastoral. Is it supposed to be taken on a literal level?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Yes and no. It depends. I don't think there's any equilibrium possible between a man and a woman unless there's an equilibrium between them and the people around them. Pierre says at one point: "C'est la photo qui l'a déniaisée, qui a été son ouverture au monde." So Pierre can have a relationship with Michèle that's an extension of his relationships with other people, and vice versa.

Some people might think there's an autobiographical aspect in there, be-

cause it looks like the relationship Marguerite (Duparc) and I had, and especially because the film was shot in her house. And our relationship was possible because we had relationships with 'le monde ambiant.' I would have found it impossible to live with someone as one entity, feeding my entity. I don't believe in 'le couple ferme' at all; it's just impossible. And to me, those children are real children. They're the opposite of the child in *Les bons débarras*. She was a child coming from film, not life. I'm not judging *Les bons débarras*. I'm just saying I made a different choice. In a way, it's the first highly realistic film I've ever done. In another way, it's not at all realistic.

Cinema Canada: There's a degree of stylization in the film: the black and white sequences you've intercut with all that vivid colour, and then the flower symbolism. You've really "bookended" the film with the image of those wild flowers.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: It's funny, because I knew I had the script when I figured out that flower sequence in the room. It gave me the ending, which gave

me the basis for the film. When Simone says to Michèle that the reason she made bouquets of wild flowers in the past was because wild flowers were all they could afford, it's really very cruel. There's misery there, and a certain amount of guilt. But the flowers also end it positively, and I'd like the film to provoke some thought between people and their families on that level, to help them work through their relationships.

I want a positive film very badly. I wrote in my script at the beginning that to re-show and restate that there's a generation gap would only make the problem worse, and the margin I gave myself to explore the real feeling was the black and white sequences. But I wanted the positive aspect to come across strongest.

Cinema Canada: In terms of the format, you've given the story a very special treatment.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Yes, I almost wanted to use a dramatic line close to a soap opera, but I chose to stop that line every time there was a danger of really falling into soap opera. One of the ways I did that was to treat the film as a chronical. So all the situations had to be very clear. I wouldn't say 'intense', nothing's really intense in the film. It's very impressionistic, very 'en touche'. And by using that chronical form, I gave each day a different mood, a different style. One day even looks like a documentary, that party scene at the *Beaudrys*. So you had none of the usual conclusions you get in that kind of story. I didn't want to treat the subject on a 'psychological' basis. I didn't want to be very clear about the reasons for that gap, or the possibilities of bridging it. So I chose a form that was totally open, just showing pieces of life.

I'm very concerned with the problems of forms as related to subject, and the subject giving us that form. I wrote at the beginning of my script "un film pour que les générations qui ne se parlent ni ne s'écoutent puissent quand même entendre et voir ce qui pourrait se dire." Meaning that for people who don't speak to each other, the film is just a key, an unlocking of a door to possible communication between them. That's always been an obsession for me, that possible relationship between an audience and the screen. Leaving some space for reflection, not spelling everything out.

Cinema Canada: Has that audience remained primarily a Quebec one for you?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Yes, I want to share the experience of the film with the public here in Quebec. I'm trying to make a film that Québécois would like.

First and above all other audiences.

It's normal that Québécois were having some problems - and still are having them - with some of the films we're making here, because we're so brainwashed by format. I always think of the time my mother was terribly ill, back in 1960, and she asked me to take her to *South Pacific* for the third time. I wanted to say to her: "I won't take you to that shit; that's precisely the kind of filmmaking I'm against," but of course I simply took her to the film. I thought: what kind of answer could I give my mother? My answer has been my films.

Les fleurs sauvages is a way to make films here. At \$340,000, it's a direct response to people who are interested in making films about themselves, in talking about Quebec, and doing it our way. It's like cooking. You don't need a thousand bucks to make a good meal. I think our recent history proves that the more money you have, the less imagination you seem to put in.

Cinema Canada: But if your public has been trained to accept the *South Pacific* format, how do you sell them *Les fleurs sauvages*? It's a very leisurely-paced picture, no cross-cutting at all, a lot of tableau scenes and slow pans. Isn't there a certain limitation on the kind of audience you can reach with that form?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: I don't think so. *Les fleurs sauvages* has an easier form than *Les dernières fiançailles*. That film initially had problems getting started - especially here - but two years later, it was sold around the world. I don't think you make something accessible just by using one film language.

Les fleurs sauvages isn't as slow as *Les dernières fiançailles*, and there's a very practical reason for that. When I first approached Marthe Nadeau to play the mother - she'd acted in *Les dernières fiançailles* - she said: "*Les dernières fiançailles* was made nine years ago. I'm nine years older now. I can't do those long takes. I tire too easily, and my memory's not very good." So that gave me a key to the format.

The film's built like a mosaic. That's how I wanted to make it accessible - on every dramatic level. That's part of what

we lost here in Quebec over the last ten years. I had to relearn more direct, simple forms. The kind of structure I'd used in '73 on *On n'engraisse pas les cochons à l'eau claire* and *Les dernières fiançailles*.

I think the business mentality changed the form of Quebec cinema. If you look at most of the films shot in the last five years, they all have that tendency to be 'straight' pictures. *L'affaire Coffin*, *Les beaux souvenirs*, *Cordélia*; they all tended to look like "films." I think filmmakers now have a very limited idea about dramatic film, and I shared this problem. So I set out to make a very positive film, a reaction against the desperation of the current situation. We all tried to make something of beauty and simplicity.

Cinema Canada: You had an amazingly short shooting schedule - 15 days - and you worked in 16mm, and yet the film isn't restricted by either of these factors.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: It's a small film, and at the same time, it's a big film. The subject was so simple, so non-dramatic, in a way, that I wanted to give the picture a very special dimension. I think of film as music, really, as a movement in time and space that starts and ends. A very sensuous flow. So I asked Guy not to do photography, but painting. He made some tests, and finally chose to filter everything with an 81A brown filter that brings up skin tones, all the browns and reds. It also kills the green. Because the most difficult thing to shoot in 16mm is landscape in July. It's so thick and green.

Cinema Canada: When Eric is walking through the forest at one point, there's direct sunlight on the grass, and the trees, and yet the green doesn't bleed all over the place. It's so controlled.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Well, that's Guy's genius. We also shot with super high-speed Zeiss lenses, and almost all the film was shot at 1.5, which is totally non-Hollywood. The lighting was incredibly important. Not one scene is directly lit. It's all *clair-obscur*, all indirect. The interiors were lit from outside, with HMIs. Perfect daylight. Guy

exercised total control over the negative.

I think I've given up 35mm, first because it's too expensive, and second, because I think the most likely market worldwide is TV. So I prefer to have a good 16mm print and then make a blowup. The 35mm blowup is beautiful; I can't believe my eyes. And besides, 35mm is wonderful, but can you name three good theatres in Montreal where you can see a decent projection? On top of that, most of the copies in theatres are made from internegatives, which are usually not as nice as blowups from 16mm. And then they sell 16mm reduction prints to TV, and you're watching the film at home, and suddenly your image goes green. And I've had bad experiences making slash reduction prints from 35mm subtitled copies to reach the English market. I mean, the copy of *Rimbaud est mort* is just horrible, so green. It's not what the film could have been in 16mm. So I've covered that problem now by budgeting for a 16mm English subtitled print of *Les fleurs sauvages*. I intend to do that all the time.

Cinema Canada: It must be a little ironic to you that the only Canadian feature going to Cannes this year had an entire budget that would probably just cover coffee money on one of the big features.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Well, it's been like that since we started. It's all those little, so-called 'cultural' films made in Quebec that kept the Canadian Film Development Corp. alive, and made all those big productions possible. And when the big ones came in, the little ones were pushed aside. It's ironic to see the way things are swinging back to the way they were.

Cinema Canada: L'Institut québécois du cinéma reacted to the changed situation through Le Plan quinquennal. How do you think the new financing scheme will affect you?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: I think Le Plan is a kind of punishment. As though parents have allowed their kids total run of the house, and they suddenly find the kids are too undisciplined. So they say: "O.K. From now on, you'll obey us. Shoes off before entering the house,

beds made every morning..." whatever. I think it's very dangerous. I think a major problem here - both in Quebec and in Canada - is that we haven't any measures to make producers, young or old, really take risks. For example, "la prime à la qualité" [a prize based on merit] would be a very important measure here, the way it's been in Sweden... Now we simply have two monuments, the CFDC and L'Institut, who control everything. And I really look at it as a kind of punishment. And we're always yelling at L'Institut and forgetting the CFDC, which has a much more 'occult' way of doing things. At least there's a possibility with L'Institut of fighting back through the Board of Directors.

I think another thing that's caused a lot of problems is the overabundance of indirect financing. At one time, people were running between "l'aide à l'artisanat" at the National Film Board, L'Institut, The Canada Council and even private companies, and films ended up costing more and more money. And no one was responsible for the whole budget. There was something immoral about spending all that money without any kind of return.

Cinema Canada: And *Les fleurs sauvages* is a response to all that?

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre: Yes. A film for friends by friends. A very simple experience, the way we live a lot of experiences. That's my intention. It's not for me to say whether or not we succeeded. ●

LES FLEURS SAUVAGES d. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre p. Marguerite Duparc ec. dia. J.P. Lefebvre p. man. M. Duparc asst. p. man. Yves Rivard, Edouard Faribault p. sec. Claudine Fauque a.d., cont. Josée Beaudet d.o.p. Guy Dufaux asst. cam. Philippe Martel, Serge Gregoire ad. Claude Havanavicius boom Denis Dupont head elect. Jacques Paquet asst. elect. Daniel Chrétien key grip Marc De Ernsted stills Gilles Corbeil ed. M. Duparc mixer Michel Charron music Raoul Duguay, Jean Corriveau from a melody by Claude Fonfrède titles/opticals Yves Rivard lab. Bellevue Pathé Ltee blow up from 16 to 35mm by Film Optical (Quebec) Ltd. Lp. Marthe Nadeau, Michèle Magny, Pierre Curzi, Eric Beauséjour, Claudia Aubin p.c. Cinak Ltée (1981), with the participation of IQC, CFDC, Radio-Québec and Geoffron et Leclerc Inc. running time 152 min.

● Lefebvre and crew (below)

