Back's "Crac" Shot

by Joan Irving Herman

He planned to stay home and watch the Academy Awards on TV with the family. Should his name, Frederic Back, be in the envelope for Crac, the film's executive producer at Radio-Canada, Hubert Tison, would accept the Oscar. But the Academy refused to give the award to anyone else. (The story goes that an Oscar disappeared last year after an eastern bloc "official" accepted in the place of the filmmaker.) So Frederic Back was there to climb on stage in a hastily borrowed tux to say his quiet thank you's and salute Quebec.

No need to add that more people will have viewed Back on television and perhaps wondered about the French-speaking filmmaker with the black eyes. Patch, than will have seen Crac, his award-winning tale of a charmed old rocking chair that refuses to be discarded or forgotten.

It is colored pencil animation but that is no adequate description of the color and vividness of images like Crac's technique evokes. Like the other award-winning films, made at Radio-Canada in the animation department, Crac was commissioned as a film for children. The films are distributed on the children's circuit of the UER, or European Union of Broadcaster. Back is one of those few filmmakers who is not piqued whatsoever by the fact of having made all his films for the children's market - because they are not only for children.

"My films are my gift. I put the very best of myself, of what I believe very deeply, into my work," says Back.

"I decided sometime ago that I didn't have enough talent to make revolutionary films. Therefore I would make films that communicate something, films that renew and give new life to the viewer. So you see filmmaking is not just an occupation for me."

"Awards are important because they confirm that I have succeeded and that I have a reason to make another film."

"The ceremony surrounding the awards and certainly the west coast elegance of Academy Awards night hold remote enticement for Frederic Back.

Born in Strasbourg in 1924, he lived his early years in a third floor apartment that looked out over the 11th century Notre-Dame Cathedral and behind the Chateau Rohan (the Rohan family motto: King I cannot be, duke I disdain. Rohan I am). As World War II closed in, his father, a musician, moved the family to the western region of France. In Rennes, Frederic attended art school - his boyhood ability to draw was disciplined under the eminent illustrator Meheut. "I had dreamt of being a peasant but that was going to be difficult during those years, so I turned to my passion for painting. The love of the land and nature is still very much part of me, as you can see in my films."

For three years, Back had studied with the fervor of someone who knows he won't be able to hold out against fate and conscience forever, and the school was finally bombed by the Germans then occupied as a hospital.

Disillusioned by the war and by the attitude of the French, Back began to think about the cold picture-book land he knew as Canada. In 1948, with no visa, he boarded a flimsy hulk of a Japanese freighter that drifted for days in the North Atlantic with no power. When he arrived he met the woman he had been corresponding with for seven years - his pen pal, through the organization (1968). Back was also known for his work with painted glass and mural paintings; he had completed a number of large commissions, including the stained glass mural in the Place des Arts metro.

Viewing a retrospective of Back's films made over the past decade requires little more than one hour of your time. But these lusty short films will have restored the spring in your step.

"They don't fundamentally differ in theme; the stories must often describe being in Eden and being lost from it. The child is lost, love or nature is disregarded and destroyed, and it is found. The old family rocking chair ends up in a museum of contemporary art. It is the only object in the country everything was done by hand. Everybody had work. They didn't make much but the distribution was just. They had the forests to live off and they lived well by the forest."
visit and who are unsure of the aesthetic they encounter in the abstract paintings hung there.

"We've been through realism and hyper-realism in art and now we find it was a dead end. Looking back to the traditional painters we can accept that many were not great painters yet they left us images of what life was like then. They witnessed and recorded their era. Crac isn't an attack on contemporary art though I am sometimes dismayed at the lack of feeling in non-figurative art."

"Most people," says Back, "want above all to be original. To me this is exaggerated. What is important is to say things that reflect the way people live day to day. People are extraordinary, they are fantastic! Many may find this banal but they shouldn't think that way. We are surrounded by the miracle that we wake up to every morning. We have our health, we are not in jail. This is what my films are saying. Really they are not extraordinary."

Frederic Back is just that kind of humble man; nevertheless it is shocking to hear him disparage his drawing talents after having viewed Inon ou La Conquete du feu in which he animated the Algonquin legend of the animals' search for fire using bold flat lines and smoky colors that reminds one of AWAKDS the drawings in the caves at Lascaux. Is he being playful? Perhaps a little.

"Working alone and having the advantage of time, I can continually work on and improve my scripts. Every detail in each film is considered many films. That means three years of 16-hour days huddled over the animation disc in his metal-walled cubby hole of an office at Radio-Canada. Working gruelling days to complete Crac last year, he had an accident using fixative in an unventilated room and lost the use of one eye. Though he tires more easily now, the drawings are accumulating."

"It's based on the magnificent story by Jean Giono about a sheep farmer who loses his wife and daughter and goes to live in the mountains. There he passes his days planting trees, until he has reforested an entire mountain. "The story has an application in everything that man does," says Back. "Our daily actions do, finally, have an impact on others and on all that surrounds us."