

## Gilles Carle's **Jouer sa vie** (The Great Chess Movie)

Is it a sign of the times that two of Quebec's finest directors recently returned to their old stamping-ground, the National Film Board, to make documentary features? *Le confort et l'indifférence*, Denys Arcand's mordant analysis of the referendum defeat, appeared last year with quite a splash, and now we have Gilles Carle's *Jouer sa vie*, a modest and likeable feature on chess, sandwiched in Carle's career between *Les Plouffe* and its imminent sequel.

At its premiere at the Montreal festival in August, *Jouer sa vie* received the warm respectful applause rightfully due a pleasant minor work by a major director. It was also one of two Canadian features singled out by the international press for official praise (though this is less significant than the Board's press kit implies since most world-class Quebec features respected the Quebec independents' boycott of the festival). Since then, an English version, *The Great Chess Movie*, has bowed in the Toronto festival's New Directors, New Directions series (Carle may be a new director in Toronto...), and, though an attempt at a commercial run in Montreal was short-lived, the normal NFB outlets are expecting brisk traffic.

Witty and low-key, *Jouer sa vie* is more a meandering personal essay than a systematic analysis of international chess competition — not a bad approach for an activity so cerebral and so apparently uncinematic. Carle intercuts scenes of the high-level tournaments and of sidewalk duels (far more lively) with running commentaries by Quebec grand master Camille Coudari, billed as co-director, and a French chess columnist also known as the surrealist-anarchist dramatist, Fernando Arrabal. Although for me the glimpses of the social history of chess seemed more promising, the film's primary focus is on the three international champions of the seventies. The American recluse Bobby Fischer refused to appear in the film and is seen in library footage only; Soviet defector Viktor Korchnoi alone co-operated fully with the filmmakers though with no very memorable result; the most interesting of the three, current champion Anatoly Karpov appears up close only in one very uncompromisingly formal interview and a begrudging press conference, but his icy combination of innocence and arrogance steals the show.

You may wonder whether static tournaments, knowledgeable authorities, and uncooperative or uninteresting subjects can add up to a movie. Carle apparently wondered the same thing, resorting at times to distractingly cute music, snappy intertitles, and half a dozen clips from the chess scenes of world cinema, all in an attempt to soup up the film. The clips are of course wonderful, from Pudovkin's *Chess Fever* to Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* to Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, but they

tend to make you wish that Korchnoi and Karpov had just a little of the flair of Bette Davis as a glaring Elizabeth I, dramatically sweeping away the chessmen to lose her match but win the scene.

The dramatic weakness also has an ideological dimension. *Jouer sa vie* is very intent on criticizing the Russians' cold-war manipulation of the chess scene, but this denunciation of the politicization of chess is in itself very political: Korchnoi is depicted as "choosing freedom"; the unbeatable Karpov is equated filmically with images of Kremlin arms' parades; but the spoiled-brat wheeler-dealing whiz-kid, Fischer, escapes scot-free. Are Fischer and his network deals and millionaire chess patrons not equally symbolic of Reaganomics and El Salvador?

Ultimately, however, despite the tiresome Soviet-bashing and mild longueurs, *Jouer sa vie* is a pleasant and witty documentary. But, as the gimmicky suggests, Carle doesn't have enough command of the documentary medium nor enough confidence in his subject to crack the very hard nut that chess turned out to be. Two decades ago, Carle got started making short documentaries for the NFB, like everyone else in Quebec. I recall those films as also having been pleasant and witty (though the NFB in its wisdom has withdrawn most of them from circulation). In retrospect, however, those early documentaries were out of touch with the tremendous creative ferment that was going on elsewhere in the arena of direct cinema, both inside the Board and out. Carle considered documentary a "limited" genre at the time and could hardly wait to launch his career in features. In fact he put his foot in the features' door by means of a documentary on snow removal, which of course turned into *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z*, and the rest was history. Returning to roost after all these years and all that Carole Laure, Carle still gives the impression that he considers documentary a minor genre. And though we should be glad for this fruitful pause back within the documentary fold, it's probably all for the best that Gilles Carle is now back on the set surrounded by lighting setups and costumes, adapting still another classic Québécois novel, *Maria Chapdelaine*.

One final note is about another polit-

ical aspect of *Jouer sa vie* that is closer to home in its implications than the Russian bear-baiting; that is the way the NFB is itself playing politics with film distribution. Again. Of course I'm delighted that the NFB is keeping relevant documentaries in the theatres while Ottawa and Quebec City culturecrats are still deciding whether there's a will and a way to save our cinema. Who could deny that Arcand's *Confort*, Klein's *Not a Love Story*, and even the underwater Cousteau vehicle, *Les pièges de la mer*, have contributed immeasurably to the cultural and political atmosphere here in Quebec — despite or even because of the controversy that all three films have set off (and despite the urgency of the subjects that the NFB is still timidly boycotting, like abortion and gay rights)? I'll take these films over *Humongous* any day. I'm also delighted that English Canadians will be treated to *The Great Chess Movie*, an all-too-rare extension of the dialogue between the two founding cultures, as they say (although I hate the voice-overing that seems to be preferred to subtitled for such exchanges). Nevertheless, it's very suspicious that an innocuous film on chess gets versioned for the Anglos, while the infinitely more important and better film, *Le confort et l'indifférence* (a film that would really contribute to the dialogue and become a staple of high school history classes until the end of the century) does not. On what possible grounds is this film being withheld from the English Canadian circuit? The NFB is rightly upset about the mess the Ontario censors made of distribution plans for *Not a Love Story*. Internal censorship is apparently another matter.

Tom Waugh ●

**JOUER SA VIE (THE GREAT CHESS MOVIE)** d. Gilles Carle, Camille Coudari cam. Pierre Letarte, Thomas Vamos asst. cam. Seraphin Bouchard, René Daigle, Serge Laforune, Martin Leclerc, Jacques Tougas elec. Maurice De Ernsted ed. Yves Leduc ed. sd. Michel Bordeleau mix. Jean-Pierre Joutel research Coudari narr. Pascal Rollin graph. Louise Overy, Val Teodori p. Hélène Verrier ad. Joanne Carrière, Monique Létoirneau lp. Anatoly Karpov, Viktor Korchnoi, Robert Fischer, Ljubomir Ljubovic, Jan Timman, Vlastimil Hort, Igor Ivanov, Michael Valvo, Tigran Petrossian, Vassily Smyslov, Boris Spassky, Mikhail Talh. Jose-Raoul Capablanca, Max Euwe, Isaac Kashdan, Miguel Najdorf p.c. National Film Board of Canada in cooperation with the Société Radio-Canada 16mm colour running time: 79 min., 40 sec.

● Arrabal sits for an interview with Gilles Carle and producer Hélène Verrier



## David Acomba's **Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave**

"The road has taken a lot of the great ones," Robbie Robertson said to Martin Scorsese at the end of *The Last Waltz*. And the first superstar he named who had died before his time, worn out by the road, was Hank Williams.

Robertson's remark is typical of the respect with which Hank Williams is still held. He died nearly 30 years ago on January 1, 1953, at the age of 27, in the back seat of his Cadillac, somewhere on a West Virginia highway. It is this respect that is the key to the success of David Acomba's film *Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave*.

*Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave* began as a play by Maynard Collins, which Sneezey Waters, a well-known figure on the Ottawa Country music scene, had premiered at the Beacon Arms Hotel in Ottawa. From there, Waters had taken it to Toronto's Horseshoe Tavern and general acclaim. It was conceived as a re-creation of what might have happened if Hank Williams had not died on the road that night, but arrived in Canton, Ohio, and played his intended concert.

Williams, by that time, had been fired from Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, then as now the fountainhead of country music, and was living off the bottle and the needle. Collins, Waters, and director David Acomba, however, choose to concentrate on Williams' electrifying musical presence and the bittersweet genius of his songs, thus avoiding the pitfalls of maudlin melodrama into which Mark Rydell let Bette Midler fall in *The Rose*.

By way of opening up the play, Acomba begins the film with Hank Williams in the back of his car, being driven through the night. As he drifts in and out of consciousness, he imagines stopping at one of the roadhouses, setting up, and putting on his show with his band. From time to time, the scene returns to the car, but by and large, it remains in Hank's mind.

The barroom is typical of any small town in America, and it is here that Hank seems most at home, playing his songs for the people. Acomba captures perfectly that transitional period of the early fifties, just before the arrival of rock and roll. Neither Waters nor Acomba treat the period contemptuously, and there is no irony about Williams' flattering remarks about Eisenhower and Nixon. Gradually, the audience in the theatre, like the audience in the bar, becomes caught up in the music, from the "hurtin' songs" for which Williams was best known — *Lovesick Blues*, *Cold Cold Heart*, *Your Cheatin' Heart* — to the uptempo *Jambalaya* and *Settin' The Woods On Fire*.

Sneezey Waters' skill as a performer is the key to the success of *Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave*. He recreates Williams' performances much more successfully than did George Hamilton in the previous film on Williams, in the 1964 *Your Cheatin' Heart*. In the