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 shoot film about one of our most resonant subjects? Gilles Carle, the National Film Board, to make documentary features? Le confort et l’influence. 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 Le Plouffe and its imminent sequel.

At its premiere at the Montreal Festival in August, Jouer sa vie received the warmest of 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 special mention. The film’s lack of significance than the Board’s press kit implies since most world-class Quebec features respected the Quebec independent boycott of the festival. Since then, an English version, The Great Chess Movie, has bowed in the Toronto Festival, so as Directors, New Directions (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 serious and sound international chess competition—not a bad approach for an activity so cerebral and so apparently uncinematic. Carle intercuts sequences of the chess tournament and of sidewalk duals (far more lively with running commentary by Quebec grand master Camille Coudari, billed as “Vladimir Bogoljubov”) with columns also known as the surrealist archivalist dramatist, Fernando Arrabal. Although for me the glimpses of the social life of the chess scene seemed more remarkable, the film’s primary focus is on the three international champions of the seventies. The American Eccentric Bobby Fischer, often referred to in the film and seen in library footage only: Soviet defector Viktor Kortchnoi alone co-operated fully with the filmmakers though with no very memorable result. The most interesting of the three, current champ Anatoly Karpov appears close only in very unconvincingly formal interview and a refreshing press conference but his icy combination of innocence and arrogance steals the show.

You may wonder whether static tournament, 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 Kortchnoi and Karpov had a little less of a star quality.

Denise Davis as a glancing 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 itself very political. Kortchnoi is depicted as “choosing freedom”, the unbeatable Karpov is equated himmically with images of Krem­ lin’s arm’s parades; but the spoiled-brat wheeler-dealer whiz-kid, Fischer, escapes scot free. Are Fischer and his network deals and millionãre chess patrons not equally symbolic of Reaga­ nomics and El Salvador?

Ultimately, however, despite the tire­ some Soviet-bashing and mild lumpen­ gnerism. Jouer sa vie is a pleasant and witty documentary. But, as the gimmickry 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 documentary 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 conceived a 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 feature’s 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 Carleau, 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 Quebecois novel, Maria Chapdelaine.

One final note on another political aspect of Jouer sa vie that is closer to 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 thinking of the notorious NFB is keeping relevant documentaries in the theatres while Ottawa and Quebec City councillors are still deciding whether there’s a will and a way to deny that Arcand’s Confort, Klein’s Not A Love Story, and even the underwater Coastauve­ leur, Les pieges de la mer, have contributed immeasurably to cultural and political atmosphere have 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 Ham­ monguey 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 two founding cultures, as they say (although I hate the vision of that now that seems to be preferred to subtitling for such exchanges). Never­ theless, it’s very suspicious that an in­ nocuous film on chess gets Vernoned 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 documentary 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 consid­ ered 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 feature’s 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 Carleau, 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 Quebecois novel, Maria Chapdelaine.

Tom Waugh

REVIEWS

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The road has taken a lot of the great director to Martin Scorsese at the end of The Last Temptation. And the first superstar he named who hadn’t died before his time, wore out by time to time, died in the course of events.

Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave

Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave began as a play by Maynard Carter, who Sneezy Waters, a well-known figure in Country music, had taken to Toronto’s Horse­ tine Theatre 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 was created by Carles and his intended concert.

Williams, by that time, had been fired from Nashville’s Grand Ole Opy, gone out of business, was living in the bottle and the closed circuit. Collins, Waters, and director David Acomba, however, choose to concentrate on Williams’ electrically magnetic presence and the bittersweet genius of his songs, thus avoiding the pitfalls of the period. Marry Mark Rydell let Bette Midler fall in The Rose.

By way of opening up the play, Acomba begins the film with Williams in the car, being driven through the night. As he drives in and out of consciousness, he imagines stopping at one of the roadhouses, setting up and putting on his show in the car. From the time he is give the scenes return 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 the period, similar to the period of the early fifties, just before the arrival of rock and roll. Neither Waters nor Acomba treat the period contempora­ ously, and there is no irony about Williams being a poet. The show is that of which Williams’ performances known - Lovelace Blue Blues, Cold Heart, Your Cheatin’ Heart- and the upmode Jambalaya and Settle The Woods On Fire.

Sneezy Waters’ skill as a performer is the key to the success of Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave. He remains with his audience much more successfully than did George Hamilton in the previous film on Williams, in the 1964 Your Cheatin’ Heart. In the