

# REVIEWS

## Claude Fournier's **Bonheur d'occasion**

It's the easiest thing in the world to dismiss *Bonheur d'occasion* (*The Tin Flute*) as just another six-handkerchief weeper. God knows misery and tears abound in this two-hour French-language adaptation of the late Gabrielle Roy's novel of the same title in which young Florentine Lacasse, daughter of Montreal's working-class St. Henri district, learns that when you're poor life isn't about what you want, it's about what you can get.

Father shiftless, mother perpetually aproned and pregnant, little brother dying of TB (and in the bountiful arms of *les Anglais*, no less) – hell, the sacred heart polychrome is practically bleeding onto the antimacassars as the neighborhood wolf seduces our Florentine on the parlor couch, leaving her pregnant and then leaving her, period.

I was going to say that the movie's greatest virtues are really negative ones – it's not dishonest, it's not insincere – but when you come right down to it, *Bonheur d'occasion's* real strength lies in its fidelity to its source.

You don't go to this picture expecting a great movie; *Bonheur d'occasion* isn't a great novel, despite unrelenting attempts by high-school lit teachers throughout the nation to elevate it to classic status. The book must have seemed old-fashioned even when it first appeared in 1945, since it harkened back to the style and values of the social realists of the previous decade, with its dogged, uninspired prose and over-emphatic stoicism.

The movie plods along so reverently in Roy's wake you can practically feel the pages turning (the whole thing has been boiled down from a much longer version destined for television), and yet that reverence carries us along too. Roy

was closer to Steinbeck than to Dostoevski – there's something broad-shouldered and strongbacked about her work, and *Bonheur d'occasion* gets that on film along with her deep understanding of what poverty does to most people. In her books it doesn't usually make them heroic or mad or even criminal, it just reduces them to so much less than they might have been under different and slightly better circumstances, forcing them to compromise in ways most of us never have to.

Veteran Quebec director Claude Fournier gets the right look for the book – St. Henri's dirty snow and peeling paint and a sky choked with blue-black smoke from coal-burning furnaces and the trains that sever St. Henri from the very feet of Westmount. Not that reproducing the *quartier* could have been that hard – St. Henri now looks much as it must have done in 1945, still shabby and cut off, although gentrification is blooming at the edges of its tree-lined parks now the Metro goes there.

A lot of trains run through *Bonheur d'occasion* – their proximity signals poverty as much as starchy food and cold-water flats. Rumbling to the syncopated saxophone of the movie's theme, they chug mournfully along through the darkening air. Unfortunately the movie takes its shape as well as its mood from these trains: it lumbers along, car after car filled with so much misery and pain, that instead of registering the enormity of it all, we end up counting the cars and longing for the caboose. The movie has a muffled clacking regularity about it. Nothing builds, every scene seems to strike exactly the same note of futility. This may be true to the monotony of poverty itself, but surely what we need here is a film about the poor and not a poor film.

What saves *Bonheur d'occasion* from leaving us absolutely numb is the central performance of Mireille Deyglun as young Florentine. Her Florentine is no beauty, but you sense that with more money she could be. Her clothes are ugly and cheaply fashionable, her hair too sculpted and her lips too red, even for the war years, giving her the hardness

we associate with Warner Bros. shop-girls of the same period. And yet Deyglun, with her wide-set eyes and blunt features, reveals in the most unobtrusive ways just how vulnerable and worn-down Florentine is as she schemes her way upward into respectability by conning a man she doesn't love into marrying her. For an experienced film actress, such a carefully shaded (and frequently funny) Florentine would be a major accomplishment; as Deyglun's first screen role, Florentine is nothing less than a triumph.

Marilyn Lightstone, who plays Florentine's mother with decidedly mixed and bathetic results, has been cackling to the press about the movie's reception at the Moscow Film Festival earlier this summer. The Soviets thought *Bonheur d'occasion* was portraying present-day Canada. "I think it appealed to the Russians," Lightstone said, "because they like to see North Americans in pain." She went on to say that an introduction was added to the film to explain to Moscow audiences that it does not depict current conditions. Maybe that's true, maybe families of ten no longer live in slum conditions in St. Henri. For that maybe you have to travel farther east to, say, the Centre-Sud district, where the average yearly income for a family of four is \$7000 and where life expectancy is ten years less than on the western end of the Island of Montreal. In another 40 years or so, maybe someone will make a movie about that.

Will Aitken ●

**BONHEUR D'OCCASION** d. Claude Fournier exec. p. Marie-José Raymond and Robert Verrall p. Marie-José Raymond sc. Claude Fournier and Marie-José Raymond add. writing B.A. Cameron based on the novel by Gabrielle Roy assoc. p. Dorothy Courtois Lecour and Paterson Ferns ed. Yves Langlois p. man. Sylvie de Grandpré 1st a. d. Mireille Goulet sc. sup. Monique Champagne mus. François Dompierre theme song performed by Diane Tell lyrics Nancy Ward and Mouffe p. des. Charles Dunlop sd. rec. Jacques Drouin cost. des. Nicole Pelletier make-up Marie-Angèle Protat hair Gaëtan Noiseux stills Attila Dory color 35mm running time 121 minutes dist. Ciné 360 Lp. Marilyn Lightstone, Mireille Deyglun, Michel Forget, Pierre Chagnon, Martin Neufeld, Charlotte Laurier, Linda Sorgini.

## Jules Dassin's **Circle of Two**

When *Circle of Two* was finally shown, after several false starts, on CBC's winter series of Canadian films, it brought to an end the rather sorry history of the Film Consortium of Canada. The hopes engendered six years ago after the unexpected success of *Outrageous*, that Bill Marshall and Henk Van Der Kolk would be the bright lights of the English-language film boom, have been proven to be yet another of the many mirages that came and went in those years. In fact, *Circle of Two* stands as a prime example of what went wrong.

The first, and perhaps the most basic mistake the producers made was to attempt to adapt Marie-Terese Baird's novel "A Lesson of Love" at all. This was a book about which reviewers used words like "wooden," "unbelievable," and "preposterous" with considerable frequency, and it never achieved a best-seller status that could offset these negative comments.

Then there was Tom Hedley's script. He did a creditable enough job translating the story from the provincial town of Windsor in England (best known as the site of a major royal castle) to Toronto, and for once that city played itself. But Hedley is something of an incurable romantic in genres where sentimentality proves deadly – as the scripts for the quirky *Mister Patman* and the frankly silly *Flashdance* bear witness.

And *Circle of Two's* plot offered more than a few sinkholes for Hedley and director Jules Dassin to fall into. It is the story of a romance between Sarah Norton, a 16-year-old private-school student, and Ashley St. Clair, a sixtyish artist who has been suffering from a creative block for ten years. Sarah first meets him in a theatre where she has snuck in to see a porn film, and then again in a Yorkville restaurant after she has a fight with her boyfriend. For some reason, Ashley is fascinated by this superficially precocious girl, and she agrees to sit for him. Sarah, meanwhile, works overtime trying to seduce the reticent painter. Paul, the erstwhile boyfriend, gets into a fight with Sarah, who fractures his skull. Sarah's parents, who consider Ashley just a dirty old man, lock Sarah in her room, where she goes into a deep depression. Eventually Ashley and Sarah reunite, but are forced to admit the end of their platonic relationship.

Under Dassin's heavyhanded direction, this turns out to be as dismal as it sounds. Tatum O'Neal should have known after *International Velvet* that she had no talent for drama. The perky insouciance that won her the Academy Award at the age of nine for *Paper Moon* has totally vanished, leaving the same pretty blandness that characterizes her father's dramatic roles. O'Neal is never able to take Sarah any higher than temperamental brattishness.

Richard Burton, who plays Ashley, fares only marginally better. That rich intonation, as it has in many films before, can cover a multitude of defects, including the ravages of several decades of hard living and even harder drinking.

● Triumphant first-timer: Mireille Deyglun as young Florentine Lacasse steals the show in *Bonheur d'occasion*

