

The Film Bar Salon

Bar Salon is an event, a major event, in the history of Québec cinema: it is Québec's best film and it reveals its director, André Forcier, as Québec's most talented filmmaker.

The story line is almost banal in its simplicity. The bar salon of the title is going under, as is the marriage of its owner, Charles Méthot, a man in his fifties with failure written all over him. His daughter Michèle, a cashier in a fish market, is obliged to work evenings in the bar, serving the few remaining clients. These comprise the gallant Major Cotnoir, personification of another day and age with his refined manners and impeccable French; Leslie, a woman in her late fifties who is often too drunk to stand on her own two feet and whose mode of expression is as vulgar as the major's is courteous; Julien, whose wife openly cuckolds him with their lodger; Robert, a taxi driver of singularly little ambition, engaged to Michèle; an assortment of layabouts who play pool, drink beer, and fight; and François, a mute, played by Forcier himself. Charles accepts a job as manager of a more successful bar salon in the suburbs owned by his so-called friend Larry. He quickly begins an affair with the topless dancer of the establishment who equally quickly abandons him, stealing his car in the process. Charles returns twice to his own establishment. The first time to celebrate its closure, the second time for the reception following his daughter's marriage to Robert. With his business bankrupt and his already mortgaged house up for sale his ailing wife's observation that he was never really a bar salon type is more than he can take. She receives a hefty slap for her pains. Freeze. End.

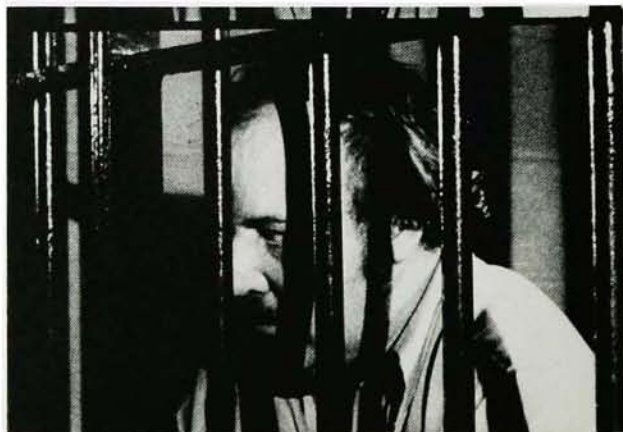
Forcier's world is a kind of sub-proletarian nightmare. His characters live a hand to mouth existence, wallowing in alcohol and sex, blaming nobody and expecting little. The atmosphere is amoral and apolitical. Forcier is not preaching, and he is too intelligent to put marxist slogans

into his characters' mouths. They don't even blame "les Anglais". Indeed, the English and the English language are conspicuous by their almost total absence. A radio tuned to an English station, an occasional phrase here and there, and that's all.

If alcohol is constantly to the fore, an integral part of daily life, sex is the other major component. It is ever present and comes in many varieties. Michèle visits Robert only to find him with the ten year old Amélie. Leaving Amélie in the company of the Major for the day Robert whispers the information that 'she sucks'. Offered a cat as an inducement she only asks its weight, for Amélie pursues a lucrative business selling cats to a Chinese restaurant. Robert and François spy on Michèle as she tries on her wedding dress. Charles is no sooner at his new job than he's in bed with the dancer.

Forcier examines his world with lucidity and tenderness, with accuracy and humour. He describes his chosen milieu with an authenticity that has never been seen before in a Québec film. But his supreme achievement is to have us look at this closed world as he does; with sympathy and without condescension. And in so doing he has created the most authentically 'québécois' film to date. **Bar Salon** could not have been made anywhere else.

Bar Salon is of sufficient stature to invite comparison with the great works of poetry, literature and cinematography, and Forcier is Québec cinema's first poet. The first comparison which comes to mind is Vigo, particularly for the tenderness of Forcier's vision and the terrible nostalgia for a kind of childhood innocence. The humour with which he presents a world almost too awful to contemplate is reminiscent of the genius of Céline. Think of *Mort à crédit* (Death on the Installment Plan). Renaud's *Le Cassé*, though more violent, comes to mind, as does the work of Réjean Ducharme. To return to Vigo and particularly to *Zéro de conduite* Forcier's characters are





really children, aging children, but children just the same.

Les Grands Enfants (The Big Children) was a title at one time suggested for Forcier's first feature *Le Retour de l'Immaculée Conception*. It would be even more apt if applied to *Bar Salon* for these are characters without guile, wearing their emotions on their coat sleeves. Consider the character of Charles, who stumbles from failure to failure and humiliation to humiliation, in both his business and his sentimental life. He is the born loser incarnate, and the quintessence of vulnerability.

And let no one be fooled by the grainy black and white photography, the low budget, or Forcier's youth. (He was 25 at the time of shooting.) *Bar Salon* is as carefully written, constructed, lit, photographed, and directed as any Hollywood film of the great period. There is nothing improvised — all is carefully calculated, including the ambiguity through which Forcier achieves his multiple levels of meaning and demonstrates the complexities of human intercourse.

In his direction of actors Forcier imposes an exceptional unity of tone, all the more remarkable considering the mixture of professionals and non-actors. His outstanding success is to have Guy L'Ecuyer give what is surely the best performance of his long career, in the difficult part of Charles. It is as if he had lived his life for this role. The photography by François Gill is outstanding. The lighting, composition and movements are magnificent. The grainy black and white deep-focus style, sometimes done in long sequences, is ideally suited to Forcier's chosen subject. Jacques Marcotte, a non-professional actor, plays Robert. He also co-wrote the scenario and dialogue with Forcier, and his contribution should not be overlooked.

Bar Salon is Forcier's second feature. He started his first, *Le Retour de l'Immaculée Conception*, in December, 1967 at the age of 20 and did not have an answer print



until June, 1971. This too is a remarkable film, though it was mainly appreciated only by professionals within the field. The strain of holding together a complex film over such a long period tends to show through. The successful outcome of this four year odyssey is as much a testament to Forcier's strength as to his talent, and both are considerable. A short made in 1966, *Chroniques Laborieuses*, and a short made for the NFB in 1974, *Night Cap*, complete Forcier's filmography.

Bar Salon was among the first films made as part of the CFDC's "high risk" programme — CFDC would invest 60 per cent of the budget in films of young filmmakers, the budget not to exceed \$100,000. So *Bar Salon* was made for \$60,000 cash, with actors and technicians investing part of their salaries in the production. It was shot in 27 days in December, 1972 and January, 1973 in Super 16mm, black and white and blown up to 35mm. At the avant-première at the CEGEP St. Laurent on April 4, 1974, it drew a standing ovation — a good start for a film which had been turned down by the pre-selection committee of the Canadian Film Awards. It is said that it was the rejection of this film more than anything else which moved fourteen filmmakers to sign the manifesto which eventually brought about the collapse of this hitherto annual event. Then began the search for a distributor for *Bar Salon*. It was eventually Roland Smith, president of Les Cinémas SMC (Québec) Ltée, who agreed to play it in his Montréal cinema, the Outremont, and in his Québec City cinema, Le Cartier. The premiere was on February 26, 1975.

Two things had helped the film in the interim. First: enthusiasm in the Film Division of the Secretary of State Department secured it a place among the films sent to Sorrento (a festival devoted to the films of one country each year) where Italian critics were unanimous in their praise of a film in which they saw traces of their own post-war neo-realism. Second: in December L'Association québécoise des critiques de cinéma gave their annual prize to *Les Ordres* but were sufficiently impressed by *Bar Salon* to create an 'honourable mention' in recognition of its outstanding qualities. An English sub-titled print has been prepared and was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April, 1975, as part of the Fourth Annual New Directors — New Films series comprising ten films from nine countries. Possible sales to England and France are held up because the producers lack the \$15,000 necessary for the international rights (remember, the actors and crew had deferred their salaries). But what is more critical: there are presently no plans for showing *Bar Salon* in the rest of Québec or in English Canada.

—D. John Turner

the man andré Forcier

André Forcier told me, "I am the President of the Young Liberals of East Quebec". I believed him. With him it could be possible. Twenty-seven years old, tall, slim, at once timid and warm, watchful behind a fringe of hair, he still resembles no one else. He punctuates his speech with hand gestures he never quite completes and is constantly afraid he has expressed himself badly. Candid by nature, his intelligence makes him reticent. He has the air of a child who has decided not to grow up. Seriously.

When I met him, he was in the process of finishing his third feature script in collaboration with his friend Jacques Marcotte who co-wrote and acted in *Bar Salon*. It had not been easy to persuade him to be interviewed. I started from my almost limitless admiration for *Bar Salon*. Answering questions at first without volunteering anything, perhaps out of discretion, perhaps out of wariness — he recounted his decade as a Quebec filmmaker.

Joseph François Marc-André Forcier, born July 19, 1947 (sun in Cancer, Aquarius rising, moon in Leo, and "everything else" in Gemini) was brought up in Greenfield Park, an anglophone working-class suburb of Montréal on the south shore of the St-Laurent. He received his education at the classical college in Longueuil where, one day, a professor decided to institute a cinema course. Subsequently, Forcier and his classmates — among them François Gill and Jacques Chenail — managed to persuade the administration to replace their course in religion with a course in cinema! Forcier had considered going into Law or Geology, but after shooting some 8mm films, he soon became passionately interested in film.

In 1966, they made *La Mort vue par . . .* (Death seen by . . .) which won them first prize in a CBC competition. With the prize, \$200 worth of raw stock, and \$545 earned wrapping parcels, Forcier started his first 16mm film *Chroniques Labradoriennes*. Undertaken with the help of Onyx Films, it was a twelve-minute colour film set in

1973 describing the activities of a group of Québec guerrillas intent on recapturing Labrador. The film was shown commercially at Verdi for three days in October of 1967 with two films by Godard. In December of that year, he began shooting his first feature, *Le Retour de l'Immaculée Conception* in 16mm black and white. The final print was ready by June 1971 — four years to complete an 87 minute film. But consider the conditions under which it was made: scrounging leftover bits of film, borrowing equipment from Onyx and Les Cinéastes Associés when it was free, never knowing which actors would show up any given weekend, convincing his crew to work without salaries, sticking as closely as possible to a carefully elaborated script, paying for it completely out of his own pocket except for some grants from the CFDC for completion — totalling not more than \$15,000 and received in dribs and drabs. Hitherto, it has enjoyed only "parallel" distribution but was selected to participate in a week of New Québec Cinema organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in February of 1972.

The production of *Bar Salon* was a much less tortuous experience. This time the CFDC made its investment of \$60,000 before shooting began and, for the first time, Forcier elected to use some professional actors. He found it useful to adopt a different approach with each actor in order to get the unity of style and tone which contributes so much to the success of the finished work. He is satisfied with the result, as were critics Claude Digneault of *Le Soleil* of Québec City and Gilles Marsolais of Radio-Canada — both of whom have written eulogous reviews, recognising *Bar Salon* as *the* Québec film.

André Forcier's third feature, to be called *L'Eau chaude l'eau froide* (Hot Water Cold Water), takes place over a period of one and one half days in a rooming house in the east end of Montréal and deals with "shylocking" (loan sharks). Shooting is set for August with a budget of





about \$250,000.

But between *Bar Salon* and this next film there is another – in 1974 he made *Night Cap* (16mm, colour, 36 min.) for the National Film Board using the same actors as before. Forcier readily qualifies *Night Cap* as “bread and butter” work and leaves it at that.

L’Eau chaude l’eau frette was originally to be called *Kraft Dinner*, a reminder of the days when Forcier lived in a rooming house feeding almost exclusively on macaroni bought with money obtained from the return of beer bottles that he and his friends had emptied the night before. Using the world of shylocking as a backdrop, “this will be a love story with a really beautiful story line and a happy ending – which some will find amoral” he explained. Jacques Marcotte will play one of the shylocker’s strong-arm men and Albert Payette will play an unsuccessful French style Québec writer – the kind of québécois who studied in France and is now more french than the French, even to the extent of wearing the classic dark blue beret.

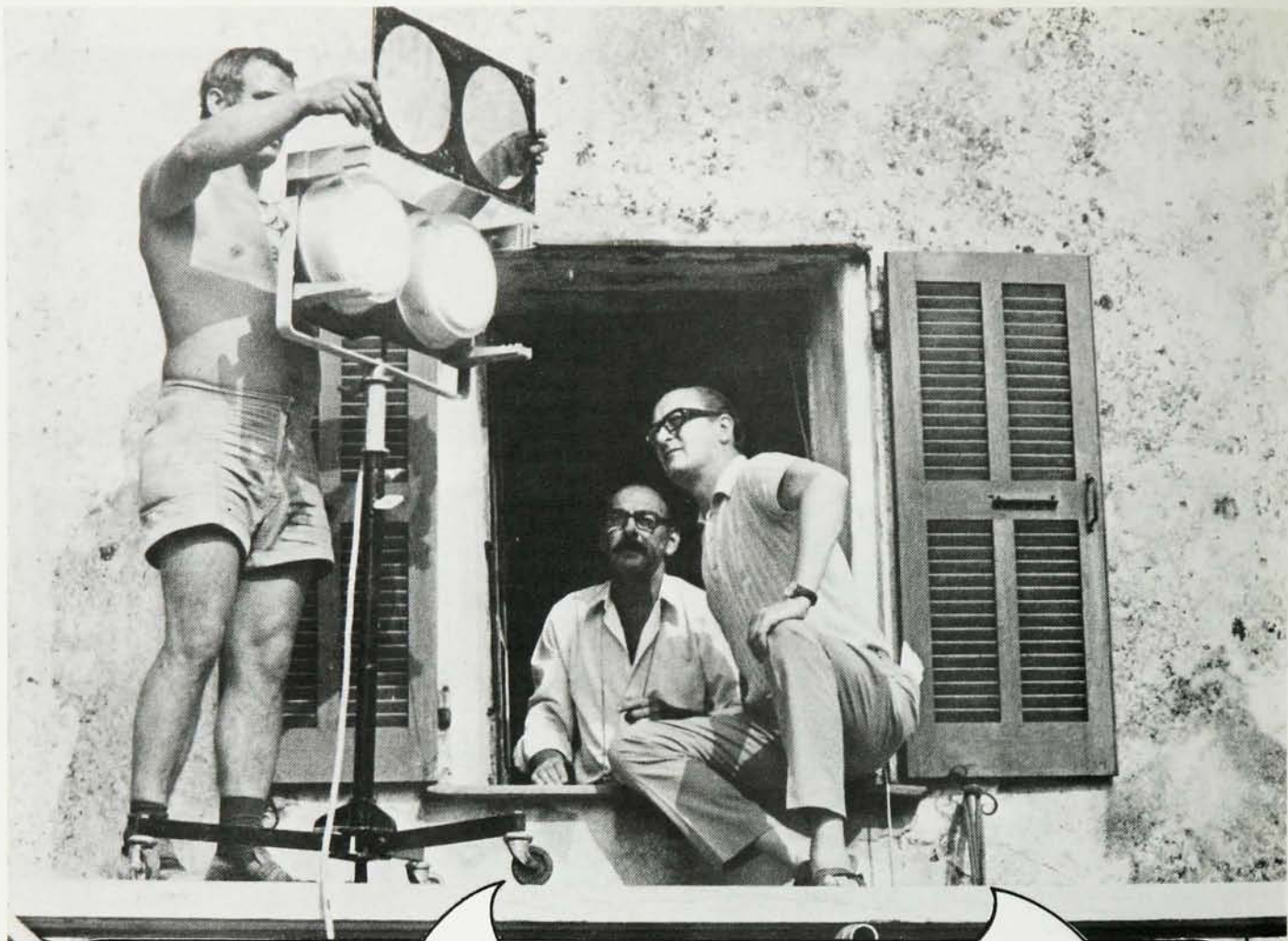
“Les Films de la Gare” is the name of the company founded to produce *L’Eau chaude l’eau frette*. Why “De la Gare”? “It’s poetic – that’s all” Forcier replies. Anyone who: admires Vigo, lists among his favourite films *Touch of Evil*, *Tirez sur le pianiste*, *Bande à part* and *Identification Marks: None*; likes baseball, reads Jean Renoir and *Montréal-Matin*; adores Gregorian chants, the Beatles, Charlebois, la Bolduc and the french folklore of Louisiana, can perfectly well call his company “Les Films de la Gare” and tell the first interviewer who comes along that he is the President of the Young Liberals of East Québec.

Forcier’s parting words: “J’ai hâte de tourner!”

*Interviewed by Micheline Morisset in Montréal, March 29, 1975.
Translation by D. John Turner.*

–Micheline Morisset





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