



The True Nature of.. Micheline Lanctôt

by George Csaba Koller

Micheline Lanctôt is a petite, blonde woman with a husky voice and a marvelous disposition. She is also an outstanding actress, a talented graphic artist, a warm loving human being, and a Québécoise, par excellence.

Deep within the bowels of Montreal's luxurious Place Bonaventure two years ago, confined in comfortable but windowless, concrete-bunker type office suites, Micheline Lanctôt was working next door to Gilles Carle. Their versions of how they met differ. According to Carle, he crossed her in a corridor, then watched her surreptitiously for several days, before offering her the starring role in *The True Nature of Bernadette*. The way Lanctôt remembers it, she knew of the film and was aching to meet Carle, so she asked a mutual friend to bring them together over lunch.

In any case, the star director of Les Productions Carle-Lamy and the young 'animatrice' of Potterton Productions combined their considerable talents during the following months, to create one of the best motion pictures this country has ever produced. Potterton may have lost a graphic artist, but Canada found her best actress for 1972, and the career of Micheline Lanctôt, 'vedette québécoise', was irrevocably launched on an international scale.

La Vraie Nature de Bernadette was the first Québec feature to be officially entered into the Cannes competition, and Lanctôt was hailed by the French press as a real find. Whirlwind promotion tours, inane interviews, and more honors followed. She was awarded the French-Canadian *Mérites* for being the Discovery of the Year, and also the best actress Etrog at the CFA festivities in 1972. She could not make it to the Cinesphere presentations last year, because she was too busy working.

Since '72, Micheline has starred in Aimée Danis' *Souris, tu m'inquietes* for the Film Board, in Michel Bouchard's *Blanc Noël* for the Montreal co-op, in Gilles Carle's *Les Corps Célestes* now playing in Montreal theatres, and in *Voyage en Grande Tartarie*, an independent, personal feature film shot

recently in Paris. Her first English-speaking role was that of Beverly in George Bloomfield's *Child Under a Leaf*, and her second is the major female lead in the Ted Kotcheff, Mordecai Richler collaboration, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, presently being wrapped in Montreal by John Kemeny's Minotaur Productions. Needless to say, Micheline is perfectly bi-lingual.

My first encounter with Lanctôt, other than the infatuation I felt after seeing "Bernadette", was during the shooting of a minor scene for the Bloomfield movie. It was at night on Montreal's busy St. Catherine Street, and the shooting lasted way into the early morning hours. Micheline was calm, perfectly poised throughout, and emitting a warm glow in the midst of the chaos. She smiled each time the director called her to stand a few feet in front of the cold, rectangular face of the big Mitchell on the dolly, and she seemed to deliver her lines as if in a pool of light contentment in the midst of all these heavy energies, shapes, and instruments converging to catch her every word, gesture, and even eye tremor, in order to magnify them a hundredfold and fill the lifeless screens of movie theatres coast to coast with the Lanctôt magic. Only after being called upon to repeat the same, long monologue over and over again did she betray the slightest sign of tension, a blue-veined had gripping her co-star's arm, seeking gentle reassurance.

The following evening we met for dinner in a Stanley Street restaurant. She was even more lovely that I had remembered her from the night before, and managed to thoroughly enchant this writer/editor far from home. Listening to her raptly for two and a half hours, I realized what a tough assignment it would be to try and capture her on paper. For those who've seen *Bernadette*, well, she was *that* and more. Sitting across

from you in energetic conversation, Micheline Lanctôt exudes a wonderful vibrancy, an admirable exuberance, that mere words cannot describe.

Born in Québec's Mississquoi county, she seems to have absorbed some of the sunshine of that region's apple orchards. While at school, she became intensely involved with college theatre, and graduated with a Superior Diploma in Music. She rushed off to Europe to study art first hand, then came back to "struggle very hard" through one year of history of art courses at the University of Montreal. Micheline continued to be active with amateur and semi-professional theatre groups, but was often discouraged at auditions because of her fairly deep voice:

"It was restrictive to be a 17-year old, with the voice of a 35-year old woman. I felt silly up on stage. So I did a complete turn-around. I was naive then, I thought you just went and did things. In all, I spent three years in animation, from '67/'68 to '71. But I never had any formal training. I thought if you like something, just go and do it."

She made up a storyboard for a film of her own, took it to a conference of animators, and landed a job at the National Film Board. But there she ran into "complicated civil service problems" and couldn't do what she wanted to. So she wound up at Potterton Productions, working on such projects as *The Selfish Giant*, which was nominated for an Oscar, and *Tiki-Tiki*, Gerald Potterton's feature length mixture of a live-action Soviet children's film with brilliant animated footage of a monkey on a motorcycle who decides to make a movie.

Micheline loved working on this one so much, that she was willing to break into the title song, even in the middle of a crowded Montreal restaurant:

"Tarara-rarara, Tarara-rarara, TARARA-RARARA — TUMMMM! Hey-hey! Tiki-Tiki! Hey-hey! Tiki-Tiki!"

Her fantastically open, warm, and unassuming personality negated the possibility of anyone nearby being at all offended.

In fact, she got so animated while talking about and remembering her animation days, that she gave an impromptu performance right then and there of a scene from "The Selfish Giant," complete with low and high pitched voices, frantic gestures and mimicry.

Recalling the tedium of the industrial assembly line, she had countless happy stories to tell about the things they used to do in those animation cubicles at Potterton to keep from going crazy. About the big hunk of a highly talented graphicist from England who became so enthused at one point that he crushed the ribs of a petite Québécoise in a loving bear hug. Or the pornographic versions they used to think up of the children's films they were working on. Or tip-toeing to the piano at the end of an exhausting day and doing the lead chords to the monkey song at deafening decibels. Then they'd all join in the chorus and their sanity would be saved.

Although she lovingly remembers the nuttiness of those endless days at the drawing board, Micheline also has a high regard for the art of animation and still considers herself one of its practitioners. Knowing full well the mercurial nature of the acting business, she still free-lances when time allows and considers graphic art on film *the* total art form with the fullest freedom of any. And the way she talks about the importance of correctly timing a scene, cuing a shot, creating perspective, and the various other tricks up a graphicist's sleeve, it can only inspire confidence in her abilities.

Besides possessing an excellent sense of humor, Micheline Lanctôt is also very seriously outspoken about certain topics that directly effect her life. To hear her discourse on Québec politics, for instance, one discovers her sympathies for the separatist side soon enough, but they're tempered with an affinity for 'les anglais' which is missing in most young Quebeckers, along with her own set of criticisms of leftist tactics. About Paris, France, where she was scheduled to appear before the cameras the following day, she hasn't a kind word to spare. "It's a ghastly city, don't ever go there." (I've

continued on page 73

