The Tin Flute (This is a review of the English version of The Tin Flute/Bonheur d’occasion, which was reviewed in Cinema Canada No. 101.)

Claude Fournier’s

The Tin Flute

The deliberate and overwhelming pessimism of the novel Bonheur d’occasion, which appeared in 1945, created a powerful impact. Two years later when the English edition translated by Han- nel Josephson was published by Reynal and Hitchcock of New York, The Tin Flute was again greeted with a mixture of praise and shock.

On one level it could be seen as a dreary unrelenting tale of poverty and the results of poverty. But the book did far more than portray a poor section of Quebec society and the problems in their struggle for existence. In this first novel, author Gabrielle Roy subtly condensed the Catholic church in every line and on every page. Why were women trapped in childbirth to bear infant after infant until their health was ruined and all the lives of all their children stunted by the fevers and the malnutrition? They only conformed to this state of affairs but consider it a right and duty to propagate under the encouragement of the church. Roy herself was only aware of the poverty, herself being desperate for any kind of escape from the prison of their paternity, even leaving for a strange and distant war.

As an anti-war statement, the novel also indicted the politics of a country that benefited from the surplus population of unemployed males, useful for making soldiers, and of the irony of the Quebecois fighting for the English, or to protect a France they’d never known. It took note of the exploitation of the poor at all levels, of the profits of wars and of the economies that keep a proportion of the population poor and unemployed. Are these conditions familiar?

In transferring this novel to film, Marie-José Raymond and Claude Fournier, producer and director respectively with perhaps an undisclosed amount of assistance or influence from B.A. Cameron’s five scripts for a mini-series, have chosen to concentrate on the romantic story of young Florentine Lacasse and emasculated the tale of this family? The depression lasted longer, struck harder in St. Henri. Perhaps, even if these people had spoken English, or their economy was controlled by the French, they would still have been poor. Perhaps this is why the filmmakers decided to underplay the look of poverty of the period in creating a Canadian film in which, as the synopses states, “the trials and tribulations of the Lacasse family serve as the backdrop for this dramatic love story.”

Nevertheless, the feel of the period has been caught to the satisfaction of most contemporary viewers. The clothes, the uniforms, the make-up and music of the 40s have been carefully created. Although a certain freshness works against a true feeling of authenticity, does it really matter? This is, after all, not the novel but a filmed version of the romantic aspect of the novel.

The casting provides us with some fresh faces and introduces several actors new to film. Mirvyle Deyglun has been praised for her performance of Florentine in the French version. Although she looks well suited to the role, and from time to time handles a scene really well, in English her voice loses something. She often sounds flat, and since post-synchrony gives a thin sound to much of the dialogue, there is an unnatural quality to some of her speeches.

On the other hand, Marilyn Lightstone, playing her mother, espouses some kind of French quality while perpetually smirking away with that I-have-a-secret quality she imparts to many of her matronly roles. Yet despite that almost intolerable look of patience and humour and inner strength is she now a Canadian symbol for Motherhood? Lightstone gives life and coloring to several scenes with some remarkably effective emotional climaxes, thus saving the film from a dullness and emotional monotone that also permeate the novel.

Michel Forget plays the father as a man made of maple syrup, and though this interpretation doesn’t assist the depth of the film, it does provide us with a sweet character. Most interesting, perhaps, was the small role of the younger sister, Yvonne, who is determined to become a nun. Charlotte Laurier endows Yvonne with a strength, pathos and singularity which indicate once again what an interesting actress she is. Also, Linda Sorgini, as a friend of Florentine’s, shows a good screen presence.

The boys look right, and like Deyglun and Sorgini, have primarily theatre experience. But unfortunately they must rely on their general appearance to a large extent, for the necessary effective close-ups to demonstrate their film acting, are few and far between.

Symbol of Canadian Motherhood: Marilyn Lightstone as Maman Lacasse

Though the film aims to tell a love story, the direction at times appears to work against the intimacy necessary for a successful performance. One must understand that although Florentine and Jean find a mutual attraction, belied by their bantering tone with each other, their love is not the work. Jean is both anxious and ambitious; he sees Florentine and her poverty, her family, and her future, as a trap. He is torn between his happiness and his own sense of destiny. However, he will not get involved. Pierre Chagnon gets little chance to demonstrate these emotions, though he has a good appearance for the part and a gentle smile, which one could wish. Consider the crucial scene however, in which he has escorted Florentine home and stands ready to determine not to see her again. He raises her lips to be kissed. At first reluctant, he finally kisses her passionately, pushes her away, and then, as she tries to keep her distance, he leaves. A marvellous scene, a filmic moment that should work perfectly.

But the performers, wonderful as actresses, are given too much work and the minute and almost imperceptible nuances that will indicate the intensity of the scene are lost in the distance of the shots. Here, the use of a long shot at the beginning intellectualizes the moment. The following medium shot isn’t close enough for us to feel the physicality of the scene, and we never get close enough to catch the look in the eye that reveals the character’s emotion. In fact, the way the sequences are handled results in an overdone romantic tone finally, rather than a full awareness of the relationship and its fate, of the meaning of his denial and her hopes; of his brief bitter tenderness and her ecstasy and confusion.

Again, during the party sequence, where Jean’s friend Emmanuel plays charmingly by Martin Neufeld, falls in love with Florentine, it is her tiny waist, her moving body, that enthral him, that excites him, that makes him want to feel and sense the grit again, want to awaken the despair and anger with which Gabrielle Roy coated her pages, with all of its bitter, dark beauty.

Yet this is a likeable Canadian film, a carefully adapted version of a popular novel that is a memorable part of Canada’s culture, a novel of a period of our country and a view of some of its ways we all too seldom see. If it is a little sugared and softened, it will still sexily hard and dramatic to those who know.
little of the last war, or the last depression, and have established views of life through Hollywood movies rather than the real drams of Canada’s own past.

Natalie Edwards


Bob and Doug discover MGM: “Bigger because it’s movies, eh?”

Strange Brew: The Adventures of Bob and Doug Mackenzie

Towards the end of Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas’ stint at SCTV, station owner Guy Caballero (Joe Flaherty) decided, given the amazing popularity of those loveable hosers, Bob and Doug Mackenzie, they should be allowed more exposure. So he gave them their own national special, complete with new hairdos, cue cards, union dancers, and guest appearances by Joyce DeWitt (Andrea Martin), Morgan Fairchild (Catherine O’Hara) and Tony Bennett (Tony Bennett). It was, of course, a disaster, and Bob and Doug were pulled off SCTV and told to clean up the studio.

The only way for the sketch to end properly — and for Bob and Doug to end properly — is for them to have to carry a case of beer slowly through the empty studio, coming to rest finally on the beer-case-littered set of The Great White North, about which we would find Bob and Doug hanging, twisting slowly in the air-conditioning. This did not happen. (Tony Bennett gave them a pep talk on facing up to adversity, and now, a year after the departure of Bob and Doug (and Thomas and Moranis) from SCTV, they are back with their first feature film. Strange Brew: The Adventures of Bob and Doug Mackenzie, written by, directed by, and starring Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas.

The strangest thing about the tremendous success of the Mackenzie Brothers is that they were, essentially, a throwaway, designed to placate the CBC’s desire for Canadian content. For those of you who have never seen their spot, The Great White North, it goes something like this: Two archetypal Canadian lads (“G’day. I’m Bob Mackenzie and this is my brother, Doug.” “How’s it goin’, eh?”), wearing toques and parkas and clean­ soled rubber boots, sit before a map of Canada – The Great White North — and discuss elements of profound importance to the identity of Canadians: beer, back bacon, soakers, and all-night donut shops. Occasionally, they would come up with a topic of genuine importance — like how to get a free two-four by growing a mouse in a bottle — or Star Wars. Usually, however, they would argue, always being at least two lines apart, and try to make people think he was a hoser. After two minutes, the credits would roll and vainly attempt to explain the program as being produced by the Canadian Identity Crisis Centre.

The powers at MGM thought that the two could make it as movie stars, and now Strange Brew is upon us, and strange it is.

The picture begins with Bob and Doug on their expanded movie set (“This is bigger, because it’s movies, eh?”) preparing to show their new Super-8 effort, Mutants of 2051 A.D., featuring Bob as the last human on earth after world War IV and Doug as a “fleshy-headed mutant.” The film breaks, however, and they face a riotous crowd in the University Theatre (they are in the audience, watching their own film), and are forced to flee into a back alley, where they give their dad’s beer money to a man who tells them how his children saved their allowance. This sets in motion the real plot of Strange Brew, as Bob and Doug pull the old mouse-in-the-beer-bottle trick, to get a free case, are sent to Elsinore brewery where a power struggle is taking place between Pamela Else­ nore (Lynee Griffin); her uncle Claude (Paul Dooley), and the sinister Brew meister Smith (Max Von Sydow), who wants to conquer the world with a psychotropic beer that will be launched at Oktoberfest.

In the tradition of most comic teams, Bob and Doug are completely oblivious to the various plots and machinations that surround them, acting only as unconscious catalysts until the end, when they are able to come to the rescue with the aid of their beerdrinking pet, Horse — the famous Toronto Streakdog (an able performance by Buddy the Dog).

The picture as a whole possesses an engaging tackiness, with transparently fake special effects, ripoffs from half-a-dozen popular films, and the sort of dead performances in the supporting roles that one always finds in the lesser vehicles of Abbott and Costello (although the underlying sweetness of the Bob and Doug relationships is more reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy, minus the per­verse sexual undertones). What it needed was someone who could bang out a coherent plot in which to fit their antics. The result is because it’s movies. eh?”

The most interesting aspect of the film, when many contemporary come­dies are going for the lowest forms of sexual humour, is its relative chaste­ness: the romance between Pamela and Jean La Rose (a wonderfully dead­pan performance by Angus McInnes) is played straight. On the offensiveness scale, there was one fart joke and two urine jokes — one underplayed, and the other positively Swiftian, a relief in these overheated times.

Moranis and Thomas are extremely gifted comics, and Bob and Doug Mackenzie are far from their brightest creations. One remembers with great fond­ness them paired as a drunken David Brinkley and Walter Cronkite inveighing against the evils of alcoholism, or their remake of Play It Again, Sam. With Woody Allen and Bob Hope. One also recalls Moranis’ assortment of rabbis and his Sunrise Semester Ventilotoquim Instructor (Ventilotoquim, from the Leutonian word Wenteroquilis, meaning to put words into a wooden object’s mouth) and Thomas’ fast-talking pith­men and choleric critic, Bill Needle.

Let us hope that the relative lack of commercial success of Strange Brew does not prevent them from further venturing into movies, because Strange...