

# REVIEWS

## Claude Fournier's The Tin Flute

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

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 Hannah 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 Montreal and its inhabitants in their struggle for existence. In this first novel, author Gabrielle Roy subtly condemned 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 poverty? Why did the husbands not only concede to this state of affairs but consider it a right and duty to propagate under the encouragement of the church, until they themselves were 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 benefitted from the surplus population of unemployed males, useful for making soldiers, and of the irony of the Québécois fighting for the English, or to protect a France they'd never known. It took note of the exploitation of the poor on all levels, of the profiteers of wars and of the economics that keeps 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 almost all the background men, their crackerbarrel discussions, their various fates and the drives they follow to escape. In making the film little more than the tale of a pretty working girl who gets pregnant but fortunately is able to find a way to save herself, and her family as well, the filmmakers have drained the novel of much of its anti-war, anti-Catholic, political statements, and because of this it is appropriate perhaps that they have also removed the question of the two languages that haunts our country.

Shooting the film in both French and English, rather than utilizing sub-titles, has caused problems both technically and psychologically, however. Yet as a new commerce, the choice may have been necessary. Nevertheless, it does cause some awkward moments: in the

pathetic sequence in the English hospital to which the dying Lacasse child has been taken, the Québécois mother worries that no one will understand her little son's needs. But the English nurse Jenny, with good will, a few toys, clean sheets and care, has more than compensated for her lack of French. The scene stumbles because the language issue is invisible when everyone is speaking English. (In the French version of the film this episode includes another small child that Daniel tells his mother is French too. "But he doesn't even talk yet", the distraught mother exclaims, adding an extra and symbolic note of pathos to the situation.)

How important is the issue of language anyway? Would it alter the poverty of this family? The depression lasted longer, struck harder in St. Henri perhaps, but 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 synopsis 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 cars, 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. Mireille 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-synching 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, effuses some kind of French quality while perpetually smirking away with that I-have-a-secret-joy 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.

Though the film aims to tell a love story, the direction at times appears to work against the intimacy necessary for romance. For instance, we must understand that although Florentine and Jean feel a mutual attraction, belied by their bantering tone with each other, their romance will not work. Jean is too anxious and ambitious: he sees Florentine and her poverty, her family, and her future, as a trap. He is torn between his attraction for her and his resolve not to get involved. Pierre Chagnon gets little chance to demonstrate these emotions, though he has a good appearance for the role, and as handsome a sneer as one could wish. Consider the crucial scene however, in which he has escorted Florentine home and stands ready to leave, determined not to see her again. She raises her lips to be kissed. At first reluctant, he finally kisses her passionately, pushes her away, and then, as she waits, kisses her closed eyes and quickly leaves. A marvellous scene, a filmic moment that should work perfectly.

But the performers, wonderful as they appear, are more tuned to stage work and the minute and almost imperceptible nuances that will indicate the thought and sense of a scene are often lost in the distance of the shots. Here, the use of a long shot at the beginning intellectualizes the moment. The following midshot 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 actor's emotion. In fact, the way the sequence is 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, played charmingly by Martin Neufeld, falls in love with Florentine, it is her tiny waist, her moving body, the rhythm of the dances they share, that enralls him. The camera should love her body, move about it, show us what he discovers. Instead, the sequence is brief and shot at too much distance to create intimacy. Claude Fournier has perhaps taken on too much himself with his work in writing, as well as shooting and directing the film. He could use a skilled collaborator.

If one complains about the loss of the novel's depths, it is because this film, being Canadian, has had to use the pull of the popularity of the novel to help create an audience. That audience, however, will come with expectations. For those who think of *The Tin Flute* as a romantic, soap-opera tale of Florentine (and many of those who read it in their own adolescence certainly will) this film will provide a pleasant reacquaintance, like a cross between a Readers' Digest condensation and a Classic Comics. For those who want more, want to feel and sense the grit again, want to reawaken the despair and anger with which Gabrielle Roy coated her pages, re-read the book.

Yet this is a likeable Canadian film, a carefully adapted version of a popular novel that is a memorable part of Canada's past. Here is a period of our country and a view of some of our people that we all too seldom see. If it is a little sugared and softened, it will still seem harsh and dramatic to those who know

● Symbol of Canadian Motherhood: Marilyn Lightstone as Maman Lacasse





little of the last war, or the last depression, and have established views of life through Hollywood movies rather than the real dramas of Canada's own past.

Natalie Edwards ●

**THE TIN FLUTE** d. Claude Fournier p. Marie-José Raymond mus. François Dompierre ed. Yves Langlois p. man. Sylvie de Grandpré p. des. Charles L. Dunlop cost. des. Nicole Pelletier sc. Claude Fournier, Marie-José Raymond add. writing B.A. Cameron based on the novel by Gabrielle Roy exec. p. Marie-José Raymond, Robert Verrall assoc. p. Dorothy Courtois Lecour, Paterson Ferns 1st a.d. Mireille Goulet sc. sup. Monique Champagne sup. acct. Manon Bougie-Boyer budget cont. Georges Desforges, Tamara Lynch p. sec. Micheline Cadieux loc. man. Michel Dandavino 2nd a.d. Pierre Plante cast. Isabelle Lajeunesse lighting d. Savas Kalogeras sp. cam. asst. to Mr. Fournier Jean-Marie Buquet cam. assts. Zoe Dirse, Bernard Fougères stills Attila Dory make up Marie-Angèle Breitner-Protat hair Gaetan Noisieux ward. Michèle Dion ward. assts. Martine Fontaine, Céline Coulombe, Sylvie Rochon, Michèle Pelletier key grip Marc de Ernsted gaffer Guy Remillard elect. Jean-Maurice de Ernsted, Guy Cousineau art d. Denis Boucher set dec. Elinor R. Galbraith prop. buyers Charles Bernier, Melanie Johnson, Daniel Larose asst. prop buyer Guy Lalande prop. master Jacques Chamberland assts. props. Jean-Vincent Fournier, Timothy K. Walton const. man. Jean Parisien carp. Jacques Charron, Eugène Monette, Léo Marchand, Armand Bibeau, André Brochu scenic artists Jak Oliver, Alain Giguère, Marsha Chuk, Ross A. MacKay period vehicles Jacques Arcouette sd. red. Jacques Drouin post-synch. Peter Fernandez, Paul Zydel boom op. Jean-Guy Normandin p.-prop. coord. Grace Avrith sup. asst. ed. Rita Roy asst. ed. Jonathan Leaning chief sd. ed. Bernard Bordeleau sd. eds. Michel Bordeleau, Diane Le Floch music rec. Louis Hone mixers Hans Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll mus. THE TIN FLUTE song by François Dompierre lyrics by Mouffe sung by Diane Tell, with the participation of Eastman Jazz Ensemble, from the Eastman School of Music, New York, dir. and mus. cons. Rayburn Wright p. assts. Martine Beauchemin, Philippe A. Pager, Luc Martineau, Maurice Pion, Anne Grandbois, neg. cut. Arlene Sawyer timing Denis Cantin titles Jean-Marc Brosseau lab./studios The National Film Board of Canada.



● Bob and Doug discover MGM: "Bigger because it's movies, eh?"

## Rick Moranis & Dave Thomas' **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 that, given the amazing popularity of those loveable hosers, Bob and Doug Mackenzie, they should be allowed more than two minutes each week. So he gave them their own network 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 in mid-special and told to clean up the studio.

The only way for the sketch to end properly – and for Bob and Doug to end properly – would have been to have a camera track slowly through the empty studio, coming to rest finally on the beer-littered set of The Great White North, above 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 throw-away, 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, vans, 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 out of synch and suspecting the other of trying 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 Elsinore (Lynne Griffin), her uncle Claude (Paul Dooley), and the sinister Brewmeister 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, Hosehead, the famous Toronto Skunkdog (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, because plot might have given the film the relaxed amiability of the best of the Hope-Crosby Road pictures.

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 Ventriloquism Instructor (Ventriloquism, from the Leutonian word *Venteroquilis*, meaning to put words into a wooden object's mouth) and Thomas' fast-talking pichmen 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*