

Legends of the National Film Board

The creation myth : Jacques Bobet & the birth of a national cinema

by Michael Dorland

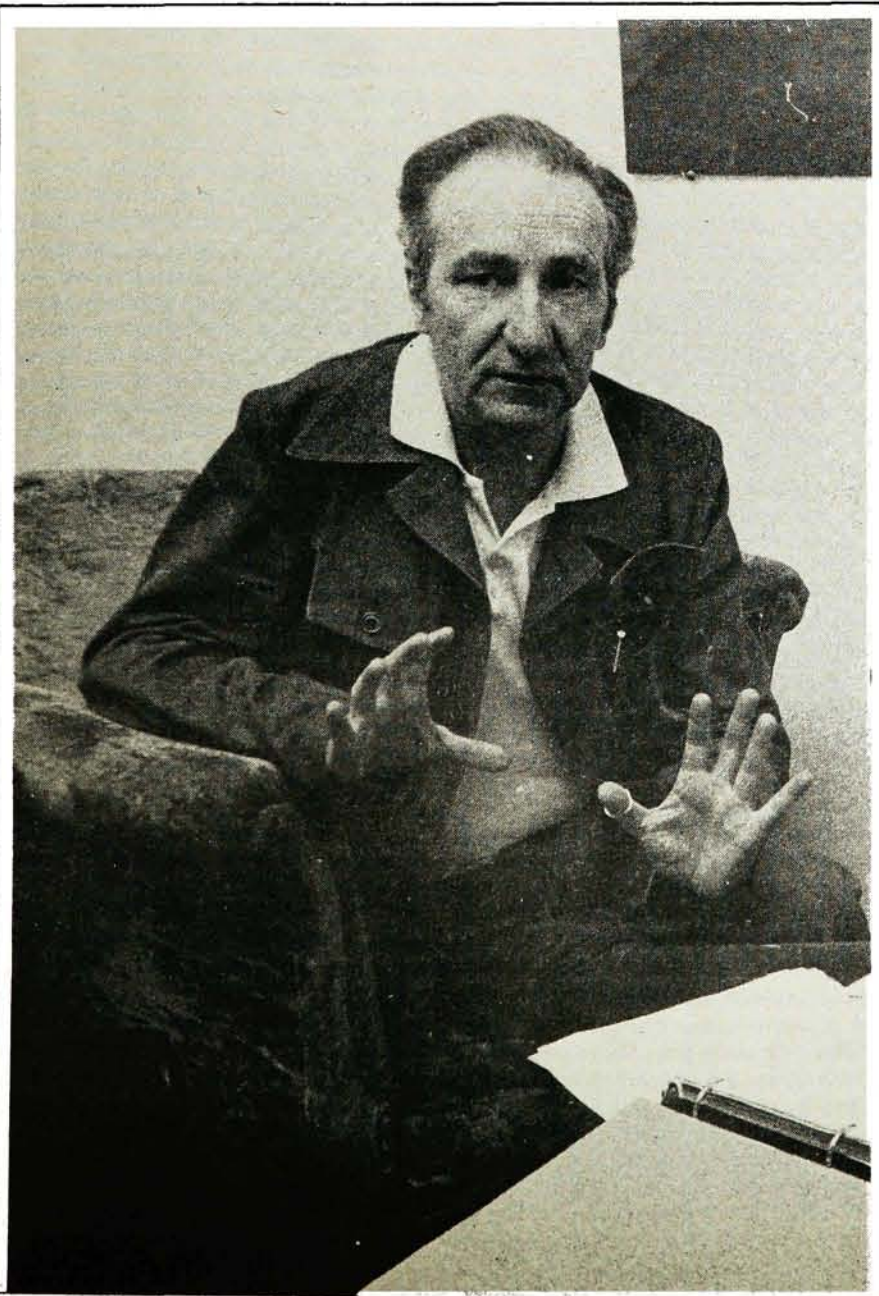


Photo : Claire Beaugrand-Champagne

The National Film Board as we know it is about to disappear. Within a month, the federal Film Policy is expected to implement recommendation 64 of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee (Applebaum-Hébert) that "the National Film Board should be transformed into a center for advanced research and training in the art and science of film and video production."

Eighteen years ago, in an "Open Letter to the Government Film Commissioner," (*Liberté*, no. 44-45, May-June 1966), NFB producer Jacques Bobet had anticipated the Board's fate in these words: "If the NFB does not take part with force and continuity in the growth of a great Canadian cinema, it will lose everything, including its 'traditional (documentary) mission.' All that will remain will be a half-empty warehouse which filmmakers will look upon with contempt as a place where (less talented) youngsters can get training at government expense. And that training itself will be what France's IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques) has become: formalistic, old before its time and sterile... Under these conditions, one might still attempt to convert the Board into a school, or an international film centre for under-developed countries, or even a National Centre for Didactic Film, but there is little likelihood that anything worthwhile will come of it."

Sadly, Bobet has seen his prediction come all too true. Today, at the end of a 37-year career at the Board, the father of the Québécois feature film has become, as he puts it, "a pariah."

Jacques Bobet joined the NFB, then in Ottawa, in 1947 at the age of 28. A former teacher of literature and philosophy in France, Bobet was, until 1956 when he became a producer, in charge of French versioning of over 500 NFB films, directing some as well.

As producer, Bobet was the man behind such Quebec cinema classics as Pierre Perrault's *Pour la suite du monde* (1964), *Le règne du jour* (1966) and *Les voitures d'eau* (1968), Gilles Groulx's *Le chat dans le sac* (1964) and Gilles Carle's *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z* (1965).

From 1968-70, Bobet headed French production's programming committee, subsequently returning to producing. Over 40 more films resulted, notably *Jeux de la XXI^e Olympiade* (1977), *Deux épisodes dans la vie d'Hubert Aquin* (1979), and more recently *Comme en Californie* (1983).

Since 1982, Bobet has been involved with coproductions between the Board and the private sector, beginning with the Cousteau Foundation/NFB production, *Les pièges de la mer*. As of April 1983, Bobet became executive producer of Studio C (French feature-film production) which collaborated with Radio-Canada and International Cinema Corporation in the recent making of *Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe*.

Bobet leaves the Board to return to his first career: teaching – not literature, philosophy or cinema – but, instead, a subject which has been a life-long passion, namely music. As he said before the following interview began: "What does any of this mean compared to one note of Mozart?"

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Cinema Canada: *What I'd like you to talk is not so much the official point of view but your own personal perspective – what you saw, what you were a part of, that whole incredible process and its hopes. Basically, what was the dream of the Board?*

Jacques Bobet: The heart of the matter – and as I'm retiring in April, I think I can bring some perspective to it – is that I am not at all sure the documentary alone, according to its traditional definition, can justify the existence of a place like the National Film Board. We were executed by Applebaum-Hébert and if we can get up on our feet again, even with the best will in the world on our part, will that be enough to keep us from getting shot down once again? That's the heart of the question.

At the present, the Board is trying to reorganize itself to return to its traditional mission, to its documentary mission, but modernized, reorganized, with a new spirit. And that's fine, that's great. The main thing is that *something* happen, that some sort of structure get re-established, that some sort of spirit return from somewhere. Because finally, in this place, we've never done anything other than perpetually rediscover ways of making films.

When Grierson, (Raymond) Spottiswoode, and Stuart Legg who had been big boss of the World In Action, series left, they left cinema here completely up in the air. For them the war was over and so the action was going to be somewhere else. Some of them who throughout the war had dreamed of going to the States did just that as soon as they got the chance and the others returned to the Home Country, because even being in a disorganized, impoverished Europe was better than remaining in Canada.

Cinema Canada: *Why was that?*

Jacques Bobet: Because they were European. Just the other day I was reading something, trying to understand why Mozart, who dreamed his whole life about going to England to join Haydn, when he finally got a serious offer, never went. Why? Because he lived in the capital of the world – Vienna. And it was the same for the founders of the Board for whom Canadian cinematography was nothing more than a wartime experience. They came here, they did what they could, they did good work – there's no doubt that the films that were made then were good films – it was a good school. But as soon as the war ended they dropped everything. An interim commissioner served for six months and then he read in a newspaper one night that he'd been replaced by Mr. (Arthur) Irwin. In other words, the postwar Board got off to a very, very wobbly start.

All things being equal, the Board could easily have disappeared at that point. Someone once jokingly said that the only reason it continued was that nobody had the wits to think of a good reason for it to disappear. The same gag reappeared when they moved us to Montreal (in 1956) – because no one had been quick enough to think of a reason to suppress the Board, so now there it was on Côte de Liesse. This place has always existed from the beginning under a threat, has always been very susceptible to fear. They're frightened of everything.

And each time there was a crisis they'd bring Grierson back, many times over the years, and he'd do a little tour and say what was probably true: Ah, the Board, the miracle of my life! And that I

don't doubt, as he never thought the thing would survive anyway, so he too fell under the spell of the miracle: Hey, look at that, they're not dead! And as soon as he'd left again, the politicians and especially the cinema authorities would say, Oh, you know Grierson doesn't like that. Should we work in 16mm color? Oh, Grierson doesn't think colour adds very much, and so forth. Grierson's name was used. I didn't know the man personally and so I can't even feel resentful towards him, but I thought they added his name to every sauce. Everyone was too ready, and especially in the French unit, to bow down before the unknown wishes of a man they'd never met, and who'd never done anything for French production. An amusing detail: two or three years ago, Forget instigated a pretty neat thing, the Videothèque for all the people who want to see our films on video-cassettes, and it's very well done. And he said "I think I'd like to name the videothèque after Grierson." And there I jumped up: "Listen, name it anything but that." "What then should I call it?" "Call it after yourself, call it the Robert Forget room, and that'll be just fine." You see, that inability to say it's us who kept the Board going, us and nobody else, is fundamental. And so we took over – I shouldn't perhaps say "we" because I wasn't there right away; I arrived in '47 – but we weren't going to let Canadian cinema die.

Cinema Canada: *And what was it that brought you here?*

Jacques Bobet: Happenstance. I was on a scholarship, I had my professorate in France in literature and philosophy and I'd gotten another one in music that's going to be of some use to me now, and I got this fellowship to go to Columbia to study the use of audio-visual methods in education. We came over, four or five young Frenchmen, the first post-war students to come to Columbia. And while I was there, more or less specializing in audio-visual film for schools, they said, 'You should go to Canada because that's where the most interesting work in documentary is being done.' So I arrived here at Easter, and they said, 'Why don't you come back when you've finished in New York?', I came back six weeks later and I stayed. I married and my children were born here. And from that moment on I've been in cinema, and I can say that I've lived through just about the entire experience of the development of the French documentary at the NFB.

At that moment the Board was much greater than Canadian cinema as a whole which wasn't much at all except for a few little companies like Crawley Films in Ottawa, which was almost a subsidiary as Crawley himself had just come out of the Board. Today, it's the Board that's much smaller than Canadian cinema, but then we were able to do a lot of good. Yet even then there were very precise ambiguities that went back to the creation of the Board. Grierson had sold (the government) on the idea of an information outfit, a communications outfit, and when I arrived, I was told: "You see those little 10-minute reels of 16mm, it's *those* that are going to let British Columbia know what's going on in Quebec and what's going to let Quebec know what's going on in BC." It's ridiculous to say so, but it was going to be a long process: in 10-

minute bits, it was going to be very, very slow. When television arrived, we saw that this could be done much faster and that it wasn't in 10-minute reels that you were going to teach British Columbia about Quebec or vice-versa.

We had to start all over again, to reinvent a kind of cinema, because the English had left nothing behind. There were a few people who'd been more or less considered among "the boys"; there was Tom Daly, Guy Glover, there was Gudrun Parker; young people full of good will who had decided to work together and who probably at that moment saved the Board. We built the place, in that abandoned barn where we were in Ottawa, recreating an experience which had hitherto taken place in a closed shop. What's fascinating about these years is that the NFB was really a laboratory. Everything that was going on in cinema, you could see it at the Board as though under a microscope: there was a kind of determinism that allowed you to predict what would happen and also to analyse what was happening. The ambiguity was that the government imagined – and does so to this day – that the NFB

in the last analysis, if you had to choose between quality and the budget, within reason you went with quality. Now this was a time when film didn't cost much: we had the money, an honorable budget; life was a lot freer for the Board then.

So all these elements were ambiguous – and one thing I should mention is that if you put all these filmmakers and technicians under one roof all year long, and they're a young group who have to reinvent everything, they are going to enrich one another, with the result that their total efforts will amount to much more than the individual efforts alone. And this became truly apparent when the hand-held camera arrived, when we began doing *cinéma-vérité*. And *cinéma-vérité* would not only ravage traditional filmmaking; it would create a specifically Canadian style of filmmaking.

Cinema Canada: *How did that first re-definition of post-Griersonian cinema come about? Was it conscious? Was there a specific moment when it was said, okay, let's do that kind of thing?*



was an information tool. On the other hand, the principles, the basic principles of the Board should have helped us understand that we wouldn't end up with an information outfit but something else. They gave us a renewable budget which in the world of culture – and I am speaking of culture – is fantastic because it allows for a continuity from one year to the next. They gave us a certain independence from politics, and a mandate that was also cultural, namely that we do our work in Canada. For a long time, they said, "There's no point going abroad as long as there are Canadian topics, and it's in Canada that you have to do them." To go abroad we needed an absolutely imperious reason that involved vital Canadian interests. That's why one of the first films we did abroad was done during the (1956) Suez Crisis because there were a lot of Canadians in the UN peace-keeping force sent over for the cease-fire. There was another thing, and that became very dangerous later, but then it was just about obligatory. Under Grierson's influence and that of the first NFB filmmakers, there was a spirit in the place that meant that,

Jacques Bobet: At that time, the entire structure of the Board did not revolve around three or four studios. There were (units) as we called them because we were all terribly English, and there was a very heavy English influence throughout the place. There were 20 units – one for agriculture that produced only agricultural films, one that did a weekly or monthly newsreel, another for the arts, another for youth, and so on. And each of these units had its own turf, though the system fell apart as each unit tried to branch out into other areas. At the heart of the Board's programming was a lady, Marjorie McKay, who all year long took down suggestions for film ideas. Every year, for eight to 10 days, these large meetings of all the unit directors took place to decide what they would do for the upcoming year. And it was very funny, because someone would say, for example: We need a film about salmon fishing. Okay, let's go to BC, then. But Mrs. McKay would reply, well, we haven't done anything in the Maritimes for a long time, so couldn't we do salmon-fishing in Nova Scotia, in Anti-

costi maybe? Or she'd say, bush pilots is a wonderful idea for a film but couldn't we do it in Alberta instead of northern Ontario? In other words, there was a complex interaction between the geography, the topics, the availability of filmmakers, and distribution. We really tried to satisfy everybody. As soon as the meetings were over, the filmmakers would go back to the films they wanted to do, and so we'd meet again one year later: Ah, yes, bush pilots, an excellent idea but we should really try to go to Manitoba this year... And so it happened that in the NFB's principles there really was the expectation that each filmmaker would do creative work, cultural work, and so that kind of cultural principle came to dominate and the Board became a cultural outfit much more than an information outfit.

Cinema Canada: Was this by design or by accident?

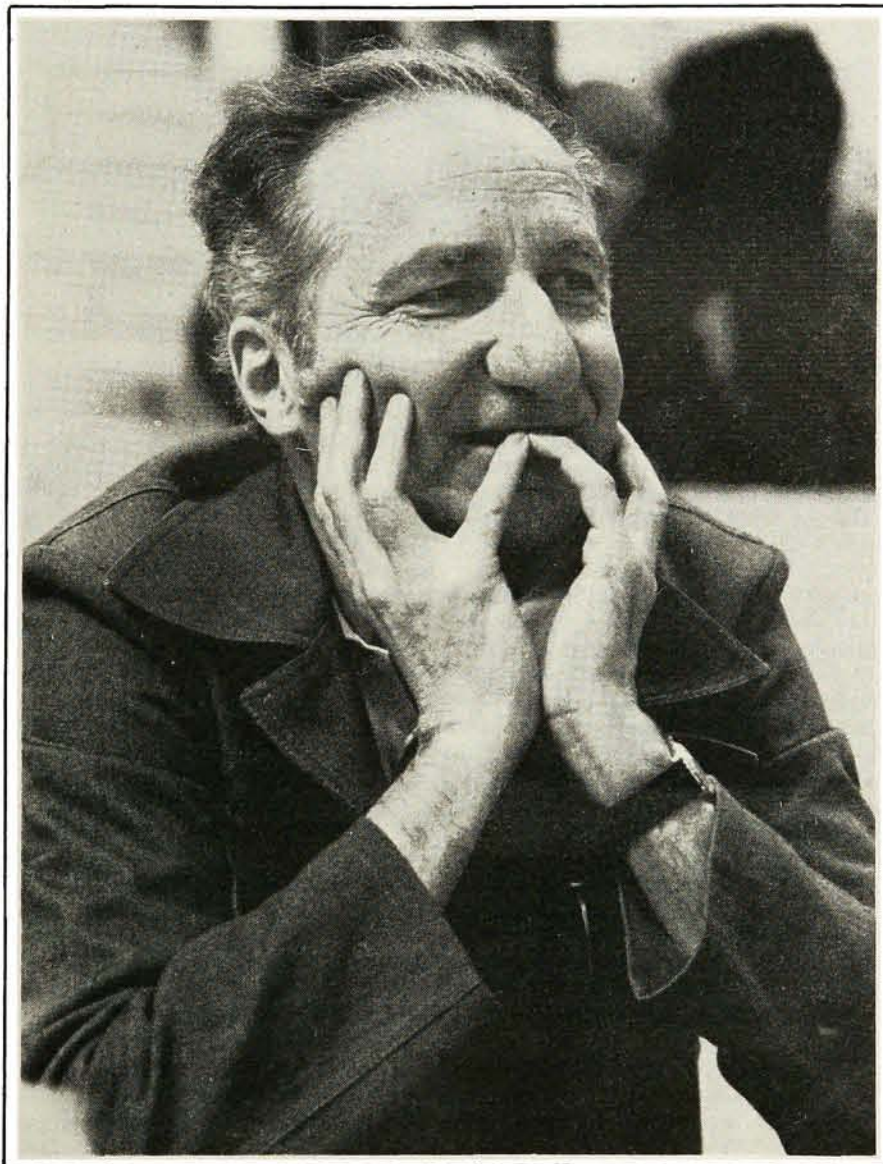
Jacques Bobet: I think it was in the nature of the place itself – because you had all these people under one roof, because they interacted with one another, because they didn't have to worry about money or political interference. It was really only the politicians in Ottawa who seriously believed in the idea of information from sea to sea. To us it was obvious that we were creating cultural, quality works. And slowly that idea imposed itself. There were other reasons too, that would be too long to explain. In a sense in those years we had to take advantage of the filmmakers, a kind of abuse of confidence that unhappily went too far. But there were so few filmmakers then! There was no film school, no special training, all we could say was: Throw yourself in the water and swim. A film would be made, we'd look at it and say: Well, it's very hard to judge on the basis of a first film, go make another one. So a second film would be made. Money wasn't being doled out in an eye-dropper. With the second film, we'd say, fine, or the guy himself would leave, because it didn't suit him. There was a tremendous interaction between crews and newcomers, a strong human response. A guy would suddenly know whether he was a part of it or not. It was an action experience directly on the terrain – as soon as a newcomer came back from a shoot we could tell right away if he'd integrated with the group or not, if he was now part of the "cinema gang." It may sound silly but it was tremendously human and efficacious – at least until everything got too big and too complicated. It was easy to say to a director: Okay, do it and we'll see afterwards. And you could do that because filmmaking wasn't expensive then. It allowed us for years to practice a recovery of cinematographic methods – remember there was no school; this was the only way. Admittedly, filmically it wasn't very brilliant, because the kinds of films that came out of this were not terribly utilitarian. They could have been and they could have been good, but the fact is that, overall, it was a kind of cinema that disappeared very rapidly, that had no staying power. Especially when there was no great catalyst, as there had been during the war-years.

Cinema Canada: What made this kind of filmmaking disappear? A lack of distribution?

Jacques Bobet: No, lack of quality. The films were distributed just about everywhere, but the films themselves didn't really capture the era. Yet they

permitted a rebirth of cinematographic methods and slowly the filmmakers acquired their craft and began to feel out the rudiments of their own personalities. Then they were able to quickly make the transition to more personalized works. It allowed the beginnings – indeed, it was the beginning – of a Canadian cinema. Let there be no doubt: we gave those people, all year long and year after year, the possibility of becoming cinematographic auteurs. We didn't call it that then, the word didn't exist, but it was that that was preparing itself. It was true of Michel Brault on the French side as it was for all the young people who began a little later in the same spirit.

Cinema Canada: In other words, the beginning of feature filmmaking was this feeling that, okay, this is what we're doing, or was it a progression, as you were saying, of cultural creation coming from an internal dynamic?



Jacques Bobet: Okay, now we're coming to a critical period. The move to Montreal (in 1956) was a very important date, like the arrival of full-scale television. Because from then on the Board's *raison d'être* as an information outfit because flimsy indeed. Very flimsy when CBC could make 52 films on a topic even before we had completed one. Despite ourselves – and that pleased me – we found ourselves pushed towards an *auteur* style, a genre that's more and more personalized and makes for excellent cinema if you have a good director and rotten cinema if the director's no good. At that point we had to be able to pull the rug out quickly and say, Okay, that guy's not a real filmmaker, maybe he'd be better off going to make information films somewhere else.

Cinema Canada: What was the reaction to television? Was it conscious to the degree of saying now we have to do something different? How did you experience this technological rupture?

Jacques Bobet: For several months, there was a very rough battle at the Board. Very, very rough. There was a tremendous debate among the unit heads, the filmmakers, everyone. We're talking now about the very beginnings of television. Nobody knew what it would be. We're not talking about the creation of CBC-TV. The issue was: what group was going to have rights over television? Now CBC radio already did the sound from coast-to-coast, and we did the image. Yet there was this moment's hesitation at the Board, just at that moment when it could have said: Television, that's us. That would have changed everything. Or it would have changed nothing, it would perhaps have simply inverted the names. But it was now, for the first time, that the Board's lack of

Cinema Canada: This again being a left-over from the Grierson tradition?

Jacques Bobet: Yes, there was this emphasis on quality, there was an *auteur* mentality as opposed to the vulgarity of television, though it wouldn't have been called that then. And at the same time came the arrival of the hand-held camera. So the move to Montreal on the one hand and the portable camera on the other would be the two determining elements in the development of a Canadian cinema, especially on the French side.

When I arrived at the Board in '47 there was a so-called French unit, called "the French unit" in English, and it was falling apart, literally from month to month; they'd hire young people who were unhappy in Ottawa, who felt they didn't belong, that the place was totally English or at any rate run by English-Canadians to whom they were the underlings. The French unit head was an Englishman and the unit was falling apart.

Cinema Canada: Was that something you felt also?

Jacques Bobet: Of course, though they felt it much more than I did as I had all the innocence of a European who'd just arrived, who rolled up his sleeves and said, Well, what do we do now? You see, I arrived as a representative of French culture. The English were more polite towards me; they were a little more respectful because I represented a branch of the great tree of French culture. I had all the proper education and I could write fast. So I had a certain respect. But the French-Canadians, the Quebecois who weren't known as Quebecois then, felt much more strongly than I – for generations they had felt frustrated by the English who always ran the show – they weren't happy and they were leaving. Among the people in the French unit, there was Jean Palardy who later published the famous book on church ornamentation and early furniture in Canada. He used the Board for years to pay his trips as he picked up furniture and collected photos; for him at least the Board had some kind of use. Let's see: there was also Pierre Pétel, Yves Jasmin; they were the first generation. There was Jacques Brunet who was nominally head of the French unit as a trial run just when I arrived. But that only lasted about a month because Brunet then left for Europe, and so they put another Englishman at the head of the unit and he did practically nothing at all. It was absurd. There was Roger Blais; there were some Quebecois who did a lot of work – Victor Jobin, and Bernard Devlin who worked like a horse. Roger Blais would produce at least a film a month, possibly two. He'd take off – shoot – for him filming was very simple: long shot, close-up and that was all there was to it. They worked on the English side and they worked well; they spent their most creative years working with English crews.

With the second generation, the same thing happened: large crews where the talented Quebecois first made their mark before being able to free themselves: Michel Brault, for example, emerged from Tom Daly's unit. And other young Quebecois, like Georges Dufaux. But they all started out working for English production. And, meanwhile, in my corner I was redoing everything in French since I was there to bilingualize the Board. There was only one thing I could do and that was set up

ambition revealed itself, and would be repeated over the years three or four times. We backed off: "No, no, we'll contribute to television, but in our personal manner."

Cinema Canada: Was that a political decision or did it come from within the Board itself?

Jacques Bobet: From within. Clearly, it must have been transmitted higher up, but the Board itself was already dragging behind. There were plenty of excuses; after all it was still a formative time for documentary, we could still comfort ourselves with the hope that culturally documentary could really suffice to justify the identity of the Board, could be what made it visible. And at that time it was true,

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some kind of continuity; it was our only hope. Because otherwise to start and stop every year, to change crews, to question everything – we'd never have made it. So I got a secretary, then a budget, then some assistants, and gradually, gradually, it happened.

Now nobody disputed the fact that there should be film production in French. But nobody took charge and from year to year – no, from month to month – the situation got worse. Pétel was able, if I remember, to shoot two films in Parc Lafontaine and *La terre de Caen* which wasn't bad. Roger Blais worked in English for the most part; Bernard Devlin worked entirely in English, and then there was me.

It was ironic because this was the time of our first cultural review commission, the one headed by (Vincent) Massey with Father Lévesque who represented the French element. And one day I was in the cafeteria at the Château Laurier and someone came up and tapped me on the shoulder and said, Let's go, I'm taking you upstairs. This guy was the secretary of the commission and he said, Hurry up because Father Lévesque is waiting to see you. And Father Lévesque, after questioning me for two hours, admirably summed up the situation: "At this moment at the Film Board, bilingualism consists of you and a secretary." And that's what it was.

After we moved to Montreal, I had a slightly larger group so that we could produce better scripts and even do a little research. I had some talented guys: Jacques Godbout, Marcel Martin, Gilbert Choquette. I had one or two editors, including Werner Nold and later Yves Leduc; I'd even gotten a studio. And at that moment the portable camera arrived and that was a shattering change for Canada. To be sure it meant changes everywhere but for Canada it was something special that I'll try to analyze. I can't guarantee the truth of what I'm saying, only the myth. And I can't guarantee what remains with me because I never took any notes – I've never been oriented towards the past.

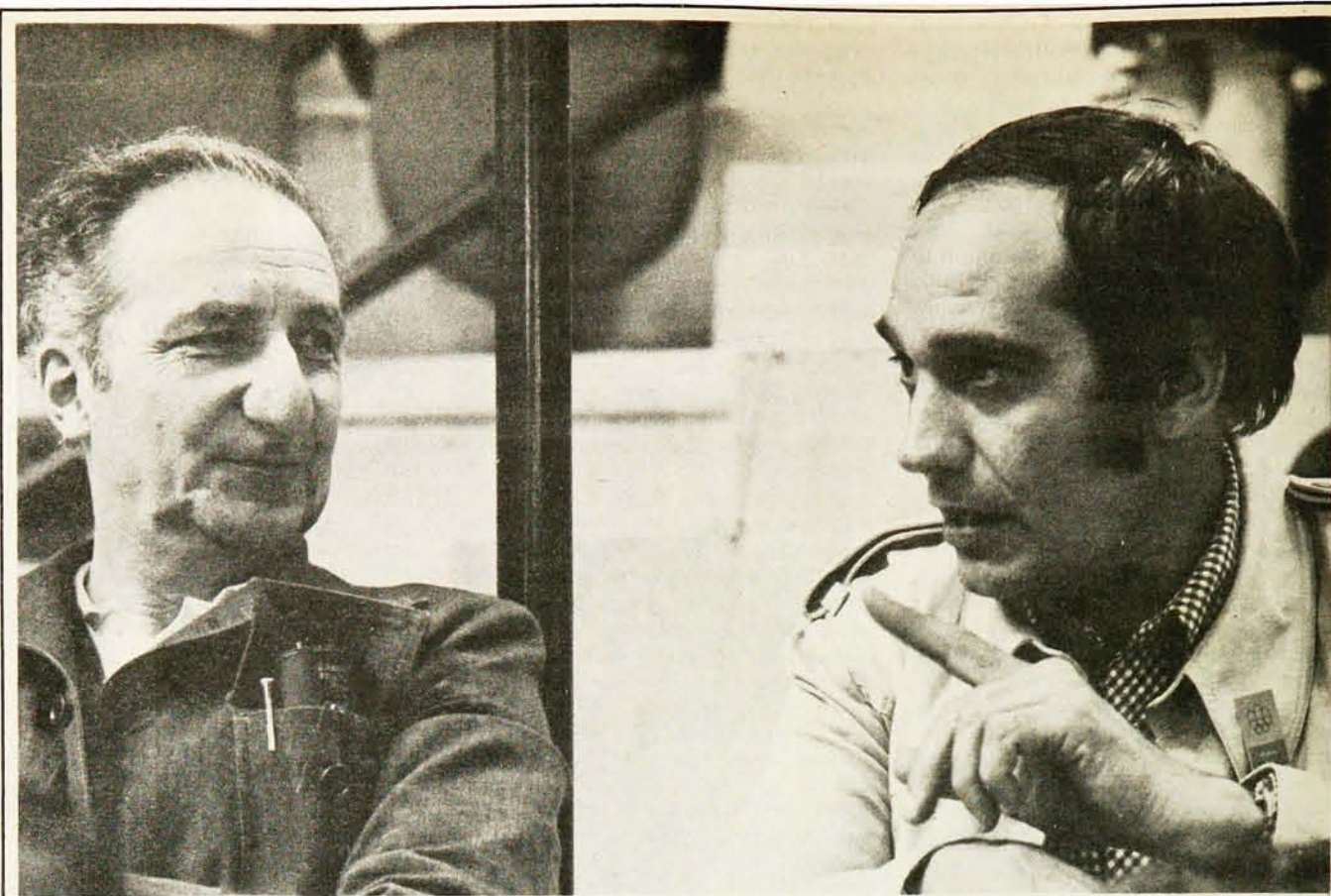
At that moment the portable camera arrived in many countries at once, starting before us with Pennebaker in New York, and in France with Jean Rouche – Michel Brault was involved with that. So here and in other countries, that camera arrived and suddenly everybody had mobility. But it was only in Canada that a style of national cinema resulted...

Cinema Canada: ... from the combination of the Board plus the hand-held camera?

Jacques Bobet: There was the group, but there was something else that was fundamental. Many of the filmmakers then – and I've got to say it in quotes so as not to insult anybody – were culturally "illiterate." If there was one thing they had in common, except for people like Jacques Godbout, it was that they loathed writing. They hated writing and most of them couldn't write. A guy like Gilles Carle always had a good pen, Claude Fournier too, Godbout obviously; but for the others to have to take a pen and write half-a-page, they'd first get down on their knees: "Listen, you write it, I'll sign it." They hated the idea.

Cinema Canada: And of course that determined the whole approach to filmmaking: go and shoot the film and do the scenario afterwards.

Jacques Bobet: Of course. We'd say: You don't have a script – can't you see



● Executive producer Bobet and NFB film editor-in-chief Werner Nold during the planning of *Jeux de la XXI^e Olympiade* (1976)

that they write scripts in other countries? So we'd try and write scripts for films about bush pilots or udder diseases – imagine doing that with a bunch of people utterly rebellious at the idea! Having done that, having done our scripts along traditional documentary lines or some vague recycling of Hollywood cinema as we were also using actors, off we'd go to try to shoot what we'd written. Well, there wasn't much reason to write scripts finally because it was abominable. Because of preconceived ideas in a domain that called for the greatest spontaneity in documentary, we made some very bad films, very bad. We'd say: If you don't write it out first we won't approve your budget and you won't be able to shoot. When that portable camera arrived, it was a marvelous liberation. Even then the administration was still saying: We'll print up the script of *Les enfants du paradis* and you're going to study it to see how it's done. They'd ask people like Labrecque, Gosselin, Michel Brault or Gilles Groulx who did not want to read, who didn't enjoy reading and, even more, did not want to "analyze" films, for whom that was something done by European intellectuals. If analysis of scripts was required, fine, but not here. And that was marvelous.

We had enough money to make films and to keep on shooting. A lot of footage was shot, and with very little attempt at scripting, the absolute minimum scribbled on a desk corner, just enough to get the approval of an English production head who himself couldn't read French. So it really wasn't as stupid as it may seem. There was a kind of delegation of power that was making itself felt. The fact remains that the first two feature films we made in French, Gilles Groulx' *Le chat dans le sac* and Gilles Carle's *Leopold Z* were decided upon on the basis of a page-and-a-half synopsis.

And this was the birth of French production. I'm speaking of the years '55-'56, '58-'60. Once in Montreal, the guys no longer felt in exile as they had felt in Ottawa. They were home and suddenly

recruiting people was no longer such a problem. There were people who already had a certain artistic quality, who had done this or that. Gilles Carle had just graduated from Beaux-Arts; Godbout came from teaching. Staffing was easier, people stayed and a group took shape. Not just directors but the cameramen who had worked so long with English crews began to repatriate to the French side because now there was work in French; editors began to specialize on the French side also. So that when Pierre Juneau arrived in 1963 (as director of French production) all he had to do was codify a change that had already taken place, an osmosis that redirected the Québécois to the French side.

Now the hand-held camera in a very short time would alienate us completely from both the administration and the Board's technical services. The technical services, ever since Grierson, (Stuart) Legg and Spottiswoode, were renewed from England and that had continued. Those were people there who'd been formed in a hard school: a shot was done this way and no other, you didn't point a camera into a light, you didn't shoot against the sun light, your camera angle was like this – all good principles even for the documentaries of another era, to which one could come back to one day but after we'd first assimilated other things. So all the technical services said it was just awful, especially what was being done in French production. And the film editors! Whenever a new editor was needed in the place, hop! the phone call or telegram went out to England and three days later a young editor fresh out of Pinewood would arrive and say, No, no, this is how you make your sound-track: if you show a passing truck you have to hear the truck, if you show a tractor, you have to hear the tractor...

Meanwhile we were out shooting, and there were still some pretty bad films, but all of a sudden, you began to see in the films, for the first time, how people really walked, how they moved,

how they really sat, how they ate, how they dressed, how they talked to one another. At that moment, we became witnesses, terribly candid witnesses, not only technically because it was all happening at once, but at the same time, we were witnessing the appearance of Quebec. And I speak of Quebec because a group had crystallized that could say: Ah, that's us, that's our province.

Let me tell you a little story, the story of Labrecque's first film on the French side – *60 Cycles*. That little film was known as the "terror of Film Festivals" because it won I don't know how many prizes. It's a savage little film, wildly orchestrated, cut with a sickle and with an incredible vitality. And what struck me while we were making that film – Gosselin, Jacques Leduc was cameraman and I was with them on location – and they'd say: We can't take out that shot, that's the Ile d'Orléans, everybody has to see the Ile d'Orléans, it's ours. And it was like that for all of Quebec: Ah, the Ile aux grues, we have to have the Ile aux grues in the film. From the time that the English had hold us: films about Quebec, go ahead, make them, it's up to you, why should we have to make them for you? Now, all of a sudden, they were doing it, and they were doing it with a feeling of human possession, with poetic possession. *Their* Quebec: they were showing it, they were putting it on the screen. And you see that in *60 Cycles*, which is really a rather brutal little film the way it was made but with a marvelous vitality, and though you don't imagine it now, that was already a representation of the taking hold of the Québécois landscape. For the first time, French-Canadians were taking possession of their province and putting it on the screen. It's curious – and it was a marvelous period. We had all seen a lot of films and when you've seen a lot of cinema, your head is stuffed full of clichés about how people should move, how they should go in or out of a room – you're used to a classical montage. And if in the first three minutes of a film, you've established that classical montage

climate, you can't get out of it. You have to keep it. But if you don't introduce it – and that's what we discovered – if in the first three minutes you break that routine pattern of shot/reverse shot in the spectators' mind, after a little while people just don't think about it any longer. From the word go they accept that the film has been edited that way, and they are obliged at that moment to redirect their attention to the film's emotions, to something finally far more important than a simple take/reverse angle.

Cinema Canada: And it was this visual-physical anchoring that gave the feature film? What was the relationship?

Jacques Bobet: Yes, of course. What happened was a sudden sobriety, a kind of mental clarity. There's no other way to describe it. All of a sudden, all the Canadian filmmakers sobered up. On the English side as well. Everything suddenly straightened out. Michel Brault moved over to the French side; John Spotton and Colin Low also collaborated. There occurred a sort of natural osmosis, without nationalist undertones, because it happened among people in the same domain suddenly discovering something simultaneously. And they were in seventh heaven. I can still see Michel Brault coming out of an editing room, dancing – he must have been then 26 or 27 – Another masterpiece! Every film we did made us feel that it was a masterpiece. And I remember that Pierre Juneau organized the first international meeting of filmmakers here: there was Truffaut, Kobayashi, many people, the whole French New Wave was there. And in the middle of it someone said, Let's go see Gilles Groulx's film, the test print is ready of *Golden Gloves*. Everyone rushed off, Truffaut, Polanski, the whole gang. And it was just impossible, it was too beautiful – at one stroke Canadian film had come to life. From one day to the next. André Bazin of the "Cahiers du Cinéma" sent me a little note through somebody, saying: That's it! You've got it! You've done it! Six months before, while he was passing through, Bazin had asked me, "Are you still doing the same little shit?" And six months later...

Above all it was true. I can't justify the films we did before that except on the very vague pretext of "information" and they weren't even that because the research was never enough, not for a good information film. We never did very good research. We didn't have the internal background that would let a guy do proper, literate, university-level research. Though gradually we tried to improve on that, it was never one of our strengths. You have to look with suspicion at Film Board films' content, but there's no suspicion required if you're talking about the climate of a time, the portrait of an era. It's like George Dufaux's eight films five years ago about that South Shore high-school (*Les enfants des normes*) which were passed off an in-depth analysis of the education system. And it was that but with the passing years, you see that it's more: it's an incredible document on the teenagers of that time. In that sense, much of what we did was better than we thought. And so the hand-held camera, the candid eye, allowed us to show from the inside an authentic image of the province and all of a sudden in Europe there arose this reputation that Canadian film meant something. We didn't steal that reputation. I'm not reneging on that. We worked

for it. The efforts that we made in those years, the finest years of our lives, the best years of Canadian filmmaking, were a formidable flowering of Canadian cinema – and it was good. Well, not completely good, but all those films had a similar quality, even though we were always being accused of making the same films, there was a distinctive freshness. You had people who were not intellectuals, who had no preconceived positions who were putting things on screen and asking themselves: What does this mean? There, on the rushes, on the screen, was the total sensibility of young Canadians. At times it was intellectually impossible to justify, but they knew that this was the way it had to be. It was a wonderful display of talent.

Cinema Canada: And then what happened?

Jacques Bobet: What happened was that finally the candid eye was a very dangerous tool. In other words, with the popular classes, with the working class, you can aim a camera at them and they'll just continue saying whatever they're saying. It doesn't disturb them. But the moment you begin filming the bourgeois class, the property-owning class, that class, feeling the camera, will begin to lie. That class must justify its existence, it must justify its privileges, and it knows it. And if it never thought about that before, the mere presence of a camera will suffice, will make them begin to wonder: How are people going to see this? And then it's fatal for the bourgeoisie. God knows that putting politicians on camera caused a whole generation of them to vanish – they didn't vanish, they're still there – but what I mean is that Trudeau's arrival completely changed the tone of electoral discourse. The politicians just couldn't go on beating their breasts and declaiming that 'My father was a farmer', not with that omnipresent camera there – that sort of thing simply disappeared.

So the more we wandered away from the popular classes, the more the phone began to ring in the commissioner's office. And it didn't matter whether it was the commissioner at the time or any other; it made no difference: the people in charge of the Board realized that our films were making the Board very, very vulnerable. We weren't allowed to talk about Dominion Textile or put them on screen and make them say what they said: it wasn't true; it was because we'd faked the editing, because we'd deliberately taken clips out of context, we'd changed this or that, we'd deliberately aligned the images to have a murderous effect on the factory boss, the foreman or the guy – all of which was true. We went very far that way – to such a degree that a guy like Dufaux who knows very well what he's doing with a camera, has developed a cold prudence that hurts him because of his concern over harming others. Dufaux isn't worried about the commissioner's office; it's personal: Could I have done something that'll harm the other? He's one extreme; others were far less conscientious. It became clear that if we continued in that direction the administration would no longer back us. When Fernand Dansereau left the Board, he told me: 'Watch it, because ever since we began the candid eye, the entire administration is convinced that we're making bad films.' And what he said was true and very accurate. But it didn't strike us that way because we were aware that it was good filmmaking, that was intelligent and sensitive. We knew

that, with each film we made, we were breaking new paths. The results from the festivals were marvelous. We always had something to send to a festival, we were working a lot, the money was easy enough to get. We were creating a style, imposing the notion that Canadian documentary was something very new and alive. If there's one word that can describe all those films it's that: they were alive. The films were more or less competent, more or less exact politically or socially; they were savage and alive; they made you feel that things were stirring. And filmmaking personalities were beginning to emerge. For a number of years at the beginning, the cinéma-vérité style, the hardware, the camera, the candid style was greater than the personalities; this very rich system was greater than personal differences. You had the most varied people working together: at one end, you had Anne Claire Poirier, at the other end Gilles Carle, then Godbout, Michel Brault – people who today have managed to unite their personality and their craft. And at a given moment it became clear that a number of these people through their temperaments were drawn towards dramatic filmmaking. Suddenly something attracted them, their imaginations took over, and they wanted to make films that reflected their sensibility. You could hear it in the corridors; all at once there was talk of fiction and features. So I said: Sure, why not? And we began with, I think, four films about women. We had to have some common theme.

Cinema Canada: It was as easy as that – sure, why not?

Jacques Bobet: More or less. We said: Let's give it a try. At that time things were easier. We decided to try, to make four experimental films about women. And that's what we did the first year: a film on Pauline Julien; Pierre Patry did one; Dufaux, Clément Perron, Gilles Carle. And the year after we said: Let's do films about winter. Because the Board was beginning to ask questions: What exactly are you going to do? 'A super-subject, very Canadian, films about winter.' And so we did a series of four or five films about winter and among those films, on a page-and-a-half synopsis, was *Le chat dans le sac* and immediately afterwards Gilles Carle's *La vie heureuse de Léopold Z*. But it wasn't as if this happened without anyone knowing about it. It would be easy to say, ho, ho, we really got them, they didn't know what was going on. (Film commissioner Guy) Roberge knew perfect well where we were going; he had no illusions about all that. In fact he'd understood something. He said to himself: At least while they're doing that I'm not having problems with the head of Dominion Textile or I don't know who, the ministers or the parliamentarians.

Cinema Canada: Making features was better than social agitation.

Jacques Bobet: Well, it had its supporters in the place. It kept us from getting too involved with social agitation or politics. But Roberge understood something that we didn't. He let us go ahead, saying: It's not very important, nobody's going to want to see your films anyway. Why not? we'd reply. 'Look don't bother me about features; they'll never get distributed.' And we'd reply: You'll see, we'll do it; we'll create a whole new style of feature... such innocence. But he, at that moment, began to

create the basis of what would become the CFDC. For him, now was the time because if we were going to do features, the Board would find itself polluted, so it was the time to create a track for the young people who wanted to make features. But I didn't agree with the way he went about it.

Cinema Canada: You mean the idea of international coproductions?

Jacques Bobet: Well, Pierre Juneau was very much in favor of coproductions, he thought about that a lot, he spoke about it a lot; he organized them; it was all very intelligent. Everything that man has ever done has always been very intelligent. But it was too soon for us, from the point of view of the spirit of the place. At the very moment when we were all agog over what the candid eye was showing us, there he was saying "Let's do a coproduction; we'll bring in scriptwriters and you'll see how it's done." But the filmmakers said: We don't want those others.

We weren't there yet. Things like that didn't interest us. And so we come to another one of these turning-points that were badly taken. We had succeeded in stretching the documentary to include fiction, we had produced a few films with a highly original tone. To be sure, at first they seemed a little bizarre because they were a mixture of documentary and fiction that didn't win us many friends in the end. Gilles Groulx had done *Le chat* and two other films that have since disappeared that are extremely revealing of the whole climate, *Où êtes-vous donc?* and *Entre tu et vous*, three films that you can look at now and say: Yes, those guys were creating an entirely new style of dramatization. And it was the same with Carle and *Léopold Z*. Now Carle left the Board and he was gobbled up by the tides of commercialization. And I've always wondered – and I still do even though it's one of those questions that you can never answer because history doesn't repeat itself – I've always wondered whether or not we wouldn't have very rapidly ended up with a far, far more original style of dramatization than what we came back to later. Because we did come back to dramatization and we did begin to make films based on screenplays.

But it was then too late and the inflation was already upon us: the cost of film, of trips, that would never stop increasing. From that moment to today and for the next years to come, inflation will create an ever-increasing disparity between rising costs and the Board's budget. And meanwhile the budget of the Board throughout those years was being dispersed across too many things, and too many means of distribution. Onto leftovers from the past that were never cleaned up, new systems were added and newer ones after that. Everything cost more and more. Not only did we have foreign offices but above all, once you start talking fiction you're talking films that are an hour-and-a-half in length which are going to cost a lot more than half-hour films. Now the administration was watching us with a far more acid eye: Whoa there, before we put in \$200,000, we need a screenplay, we want to see pages, so who can write? And we wrote; we even had everything retyped by a secretary who could spell. We gave it a try, you know. It's hard to say whether or not we should have followed the other road. My inclination would have been to go with what had developed spontaneously.

There was a very definite adminis-

trative stiffening: "It's a lot of money and where are they going to go your films? We have no distribution for things like that, and so what's the point?" And the Parliament is going to ask: You're doing what? You're making films for a laugh, to enjoy yourselves and with the taxpayers' money to boot? There was always that ambiguity.

Don't forget that the Board is a place that for years would hide McLaren's salary. There was an 'experimental' budget somewhere in Guy Glover's unit; they didn't dare say this was McLaren's budget because the normal reaction from Ottawa would have been: How is that Mr. McLaren can make films for his own enjoyment? And that's where we were coming from. It's too easy to forget the kind of puritanical straitjacket that we come from. You mustn't forget that *La poulette grise* was censored because you just didn't talk about things like that then, that this concept of "egg" touched upon a lot of obscure matters that were best left well enough alone. McLaren would probably find all this very amusing today, though I'm not even sure...

On the one hand, a certain number of good directors whom I can count on the fingers of one hand, who did manage to develop more and more of their own personalities and make films true to themselves. *La bête lumineuse* is Pierre Perrault ground up in a coffee-grinder and splattered onto a screen. It's pure. These people are now mature and on the verge of the great works of their lives. And on the other hand, both in production and distribution, things dragged along. We don't even have the pretense any longer of having once been a great filmmaking school, a major filmmaking centre that put Canada on the map. And now what? We can't go on; if we don't have the vision to renew ourselves, if we don't have the ability to come up with something different, we find ourselves under Applebaum-Hébert's guillotine. And this is exactly what I wrote Mr. Roberge in '67, that we would end up being demoted to a training school, a waystation for pilgrims. Fifteen years ago, I described to him in black and white exactly the sort of thing that would come out of Applebaum-Hébert. I said that was what we would

you've got a place that has four good films a year and 14 mediocrities, that's very costly, that's a hair-raising waste of money. If on 14 films you can't produce 10 that are good, then don't do it. And I'm only speaking of French production. For years now we haven't managed to do an honorable percentage of decent films. I can't go running out in the halls shouting to people, "Look, it stinks what you're doing," but for me - and I've always viewed this place as a laboratory experience - we're sterile. For years now you've had a number of directors who've been able to develop personally but at the detriment, if you want to look at it that way, of the corporate image. Though frankly I couldn't care less about the corporate image because I know that when you try to improve that image deliberately, it fails. Inevitably.

Cinema Canada: How do you explain that sterility?

Jacques Bobet: Too much security. I could lay down a lot of reasons but mainly too much security for a number of filmmakers who could do much better if they were provoked. Not enough contact with the outside. A place that's always closed like a fortress under siege is deplorable. I spent the entire summer on a production with 80 technicians. A controversial affair: *Les Plouffe II*. I don't want to get into the cultural worth of *Les Plouffe*, that's not my responsibility - it's my responsibility in the sense that it's written by a Canadian, the producer is Canadian, and the two directors both came out of the Board, so I could do my share honestly. And the other side of that coin is that I want to complete Jean Beaudin's film (*Mario s'en va-t-en guerre*), and I want to do the Mankiewicz (*Les fous de Bassan*). So these were two very controversial productions - and, not a single filmmaker from here was bothered to go down there to say hello. So - financial problems, age - and let's not forget, pretension. There's nothing that sterilizes faster than pretension. Now I may myself be its first victim, but I can say that the moment you start to take yourself too seriously, that you forget that what you do anyone could do as well... Every year I go to the Grierson Seminar which is a seminar of little films, and I look at our films and I say to myself: Still as pretentious as ever. With great expense, we make films that others can do better at less cost and especially less sentimentally. And I regret that, but I can't stand it. I can't stand it; it eats me up and I'd do anything, even coproductions, to get us out of that.

Cinema Canada: Do you think the Board can still make it?

Jacques Bobet: Perhaps there's still time (though it's been a year and a half), perhaps there's still time to convince Ottawa that we have a new image. Maybe not. At least something will have been attempted. We don't have died at the same spot. They believe that the image can be remade in line with the Board's traditional mission. It's the grace that I wish for them.

I'm not saying it's a valid experience. I've got no prejudice against it; it's an option, as Pierre Juneau would say. It's not my option, but it's an option.

Cinema Canada: What do you see happening now?

Jacques Bobet: In the months to come, we're going to witness an enormous inflation. You'll no longer be able to make a film for one million, a million and a half; it'll be four or five million,

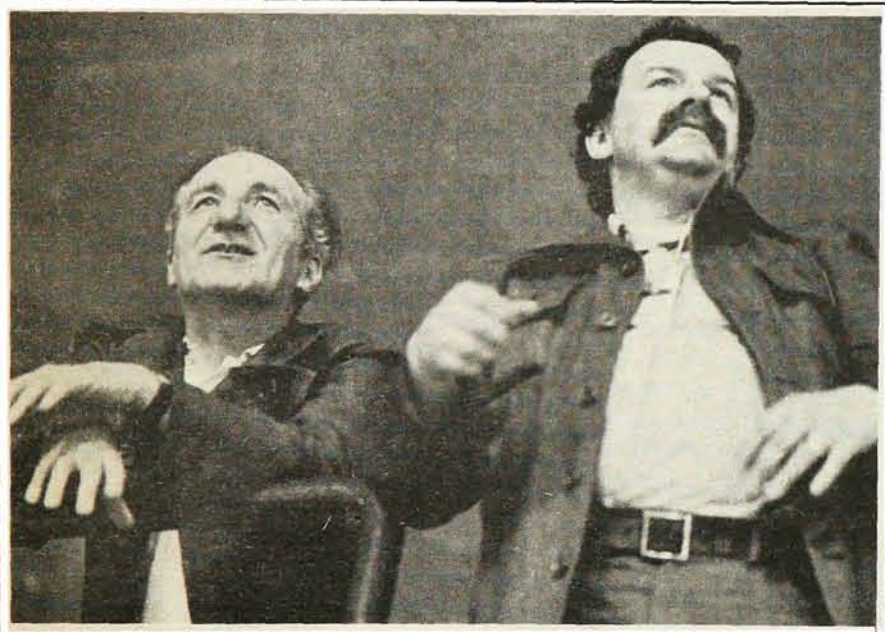
otherwise you just won't be part of cinema. They'll be very expensive films. Why? Because they're going to try to wipe out all the little producers who can still produce a film for one million two or three because it's the small producers who are ruining it for the larger producers.

Think about it: if you're taking 10% of the total budget of a film, you've got every interest to have a film at \$4 million instead of \$400,000. So the smaller producers have got to go. And as rapidly as possible, you've got to envelop the directors, the Canadian filmmakers with foreign scriptwriters who'll produce better scripts, and of course your foreign coproducers to bring in the additional money. In other words, they'll secrete a whole milieu around the brave little Canadian director, be it Jean Beaudin or somebody else. And the producer will say: Listen, for the box office you'll need that guy from the States, and we'll get you So-and-so's music, and each time the budget'll get higher and higher. When you hire Michel Legrand, you've bought yourself half-a-million dollars' worth of music, or some screenwriter, and each time you've boosted your bottom line without the slightest risk. So that's what's going to happen. Indeed, those few producers who work in French, what they want is to ensure as rapidly as possible a monopoly of competent Quebecois directors, so that the other guy doesn't get them. And if there's to be a war between (Denis) Héroux and (Harold) Greenberg, it'll be that: who can lay his hands on Gilles Carle before the other? who can grab Denys Arcand, who is going to tie up Madame Hébert's screenplay before the other one can? These are the worst possible conditions for a film industry. It's a very dubious attitude and the filmmaker has to carry all that around his neck.

And the CFDC can flatter itself that its money has a cultural connotation. But for the producers the CFDC isn't a quality control commission, or a readers' committee, it's nothing, it's a bank where the producer goes to get his money and says, Christ, give me the money because that's what you're there for. If that's the CFDC's cultural influence, it's not enough.

But once you get rid of the Board, there won't even be whatever cultural influence is left, and the government will have alienated itself from or abdicated from or separated itself from a cultural tool that it never took seriously, that they always assumed was just an information tool. But they ought to know, if you look at the United States, that there's an enormous difference between The Voice of America and what we've been. And the government will find itself in a position where it won't even have a foot in the door any longer and will have sacrificed whatever capital this place has acquired, a lot of talent, years of experience and all that. And if they think that one day they'll be able to reconstitute that, it's an illusion.

A cultural agency is a miracle, it's always a miracle. Even if you put together the most extraordinary conditions - money, continuity, talent, freedom from political interference, and the need to promote the country itself - even then there are no guarantees - and two or three times for us it almost fell apart. It was a miracle that all of a sudden it happened that Canadian cinema began. Cultural miracles are subtle, and every country in the world knows that.



● Bobet and long-time friend, director Jean-Claude Labrecque in 1976

Cinema Canada: What about Roberge and the idea that became the CFDC?

Jacques Bobet: The Board began to close on itself. It went back to its traditional mission. We went back to the documentary. There was no money for features. And it took a long time for us to screw up our courage to begin again. Years wasted, utterly wasted...

Cinema Canada: And meanwhile the Canadian film industry...

Jacques Bobet: The film industry grew, which wasn't a bad thing, except that we'd lost our visibility. They said: Don't forget your traditional mission, the Board is a documentary outfit. And so we come back where I began: Is that traditional mission, that documentary vocation, sufficient to assure the identity and the visibility of a place that spends \$75 million a year when there are innumerable, more rapid means of information communication than ours, and even to talk only about filmmaking when there are almost 200 production houses in Canada that make documentaries often better and certainly cheaper than we do and with far less pretension? Those years of glory that we experienced were legitimate and one can be nostalgic about them and say, Yes, we did it. But those years were followed by a decade characterized by a dual phenomenon.

be turned into if we didn't change.

But then I'm practically a pariah around here these days and I understand that. And I feel that at this moment the Board is trying finally to rediscover its traditional mission, but better. And I agree with that. The distribution programmes and the production programmes have to be purged to try to re-establish some coherence, to orient the Board toward more powerful subjects, to give it some unity of action.

Cinema Canada: Do you believe in that traditional mission?

Jacques Bobet: I believe only in one thing: What are we going to do now? Or are we just going to wait around until we go before the firing-squad once more? Now they're saying: Forget about doing coproductions; we've got neither resources nor personnel to do that, so forget about it and let's beef up our traditional mission. And I say, fine, at least something is being done. Because to me, it wasn't out of personal affinity that I was trying to get onto the screen a type of filmmaking that could be anybody's, it was because I felt that something had to be done. Let's move one way or another, because the only really fatal sickness is not to move at all. Because the only truly costly thing, if you're talking money, is mediocrity. If