Sonatine:
'Film maudit'

A conversation
with director
Micheline Lanctôt

by Connie Tadros

As an animator, an actress and a film director, Micheline Lanctôt has excelled, richly earning the Award for Excellence which the Academy of Canadian Cinema gave her in 1981. It's too tempting to talk about a Renaissance Woman, but in lining up her achievements, that is difficult to avoid.

Trained as a musician at the Vincent d'Indy conservatory in Montreal, Lanctôt began animating at the National Film Board in 1967. Like other French filmmakers of the period, she left the Board and found work in the private sector at Potterton Productions where she worked on The Selfish Giant. It went on to win an Oscar nomination but she, a woman, never got credit for the drawings she contributed.

As she worked at her drawing table, Gilles Carle watched her, and began to fit the character of Bernadette to the warm, energetic and outgoing person he saw. Casting her in La vraie nature de Bernadette led Lanctôt to the Canadian Film Award for Best Actress in 1972; she was nominated again for the award in 1978 for her role as Lucky in Blood and Guts. Meanwhile, she had played Yvette in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz and had left Montreal for Hollywood with the film's director, Ted Kotcheff. During three difficult years there, she animated the titles for two of Kotcheff's features, organized a retrospective of Quebecois film, and commuted to Montreal for work in features and on television.

She became a public figure in Quebec when she held down a starring role in an immensely popular Radio-Canada series called Jamais deu sous toI, and eventually left the series in an effort to regain her privacy.

The Handyman, a film she wrote and directed, followed just three months after the birth of her little girl, and the film's success took her to the Director's Fortnight at Cannes, and was well received, especially by the audience at the Festival of Festivals where it played for the first time to an English-Canadian audience.

Now, her second feature, Sonatine, has been invited to the Venice Festival and will be shown out of competition. Lanctôt admits that it is a difficult film, contrasting sharply to the light wit of her first feature. But it is a film which is intensely personal, and which required all the talents and training she could bring to it.

Sonatine (a small sonata) is a film in three movements. In the first, an adolescent rides the bus every Friday evening, establishing a warm and tenuous relationship with the bus driver. In the second, another adolescent boards a ship, hoping to meet adventure, which she does in the figure of a warm and protective Bulgarian sailor. In the third part, the girls, best friends, contrive to challenge an indifferent public with announcing their impending suicides and imploring passersby to stop them. Lanctôt discusses the film, and the tensions from which it stemmed.

September 1984 - Cinema Canada/7
Cinema Canada: You gave a television interview just after you came back from California, and what I remember best about it was the tone. You were steaming mad, raging about Hollywood and the effect it had on you. I had a very real sense, as well, that a lot of what you thought and felt about art, about culture and about yourself had flown out of you - that you had a very clear perception of just what you wanted to do now.

Micheline Lanctôt: This was an entirely new process for me. I left L.A., I never stopped once to think about it, but you are absolutely right. There was an emotional pulldown in L.A. and it resulted in Sonatine. Everything that I had felt was good about cinema became crappily, and I felt I had to do something else.

The notion of cinema as the American studios make it, where all is gross, crass, commercial, debilitating, was just indigestible - impossible for me to relate to, impossible to me to use as a model, impossible for me to find anything that agreed with what I believed and what I felt one should do. I made films. And I guess it must have generated a whole process of rethinking. I really found nothing in Los Angeles that could approximate what I felt I should do.

Cinema Canada: Was this something that came to you when you were in California and caused the move back to Quebec?

Micheline Lanctôt: No. The move back was visceral. I felt so cornered that it was a purely unconscious, spontaneous reaction. I just got out. I didn't want to go back there.

Cinema Canada: When I watched Sonatine with its themes of not communicating, not understanding, feeling estranged, wanting in and not being accepted and recording one's own notions which don't correspond to those of others, it struck me that this was the echo of that other rage that I had heard many years ago. Was this something that came back to you?

Micheline Lanctôt: That particular theme is always prevalent in me, in everything I do. It's my stamp. The thing I suffered most in my life, whether true or imagined, was feeling outside. I was the third child in my family and when it comes down to the third... there is 'me' for the first, there's 'me' for the second but the third always seems to be too much, you were too busy with the others' needs... Anyway, whatever it was, it branded me with the notion that I was different from my family, I was never accepted, and that stayed with me and made me go through a terrible teenage period. So, Sonatine is a direct reflection of that, but it was embodied when I was in Los Angeles and, of course, ever since I began going out into the world, I keep repeating the same patterns. I keep putting myself in the model that I lived through as a child which is being outside a situation and being left out. I don't think those tensions will ever be resolved but it was unlivable in Los Angeles because on every level it was too tangible, too palpable. Plus the fact that I didn't like the physical area, the physical aspects of L.A. and plus the fact that being a woman, being somebody's wife in L.A. is just about the worst position you can imagine and it almost destroyed me... so it was flight, instant flight and it resulted from all this estrangement.

Anybody can feel estranged in L.A., but it's worse if you are a woman and if, on top of that, you are a Quebecker and you speak French and you have your kind of personality, which is not exactly average. If you combine all these elements, you cannot fit, plus the fact that I can't lie. So when I met all these people they just could read utter contempt on my face and it became impossible. I couldn't go anywhere. They could read very square what I thought of them. And they were obnoxious to me personally and professionally. It killed any chance I should have had of doing anything in L.A. I just had to open my mouth and speak to them and they knew... I was very alone. There is no glory to me in working for people I despise. I can't do that. Some people do. Some people will manage, anybody who is in L.A., ends up that way. They end up working for people they have no respect for. And it's a hard contradiction to live with. I couldn't...
Lanctôt on Hollywood

I had to come back to Montreal. There. I felt that I just was being used. I just couldn't function. I have total, total disrespect for Hollywood. If you're not a great, you're just ostracized. They want you to cater to their very whims. It still makes my hair stand on end. When I see a film, and I read the titles and see the names. I go yuk. They're all creepos. They came in my house and ate my food, and they wouldn't even have the decency to say "Hi, how are you?". I've been introduced to the same guy thirteen times, and every time he would say "Hi, darlin', how are ya?". What's your name? The thirteenth time, I got very fed up and said "Fuck you." It's a terrible place to be. A really terrible place to be. If you're with somebody else - if you're there with somebody else... you're never a person. You're only as good as your bankability.

All the stories you hear about Hollywood... they're true. I've lived it. I've lived the A's and B's parties. They have the A list and the B list. I went to a party at Robert Wagner's house and we went with friends of ours, and there was a room for the A's and a room for the B's. The A's are people with a title, and the B's are just minor secondary people and agents. And you had to stay in the A room.

And I've been to parties with valet parking, where they will only park Mercedes and Porches. They wouldn't park our car because it was a rented Pinto. It's insane. There are many thousands of things that I've seen happen. It makes me sick. These are things that I just loathe. I cannot talk about it without the hair crawling up my neck. The clothes and the pompadour hairdo and the suntan... I just cannot... it makes me sick.

My future was elsewhere. Hollywood was totally foreign to me, so I had to come back. (From an interview by Susan Avcough)

Micheline Lanctôt: Exactly. That is perfect. This is what it's meant to do. The metro is an actor in their life. The metro is really treated as an actor and a lot of people resent it because, first of all, they get very aggrieved by the noise. The metro is, in a way, responsible for the girls' death and the metro is the father.

One of the scenes in the film that best sums up the film for me I had to fight for, tooth and nail. No one understood it. It's the one when they are sitting and waiting at the Jolicoeur station, and the metro is coming in... they are waiting and exchanging cassettes, listening to each other's and the metro rolls in, and Louise (Marcia Pilote) waves and she runs after it and she says: "Papa!" and the metro goes away. Well, Rene Malo thought it was a useless, wasted piece of footage and I said, it's exactly what the film's about. The metro is the father and the father image that is the foundation of their entire life that counts. The exchange of the cassettes is a ritual. The whole scene is coded - you would have to be a crypto-linguist to understand it, but it's all there. It wasn't obvious when I shot it but when I was editing it I thought, there's something in that scene that is more than meets the eye and one day I watched it on the big screen and when she runs and she says: "Papa!"... it really came to me. I was looking for your father about this search for the father image - that the subway was the father and the father was in a way responsible for the death, and these signs make the people very uncomfortable at the end. And if the people had identified with the girls. the papa image that is the one that is the real perception of the subway. As it is, the only people they can identify with in the film are the people sitting in the subway. And there is this terrible sense of indifference. One reason why the film was so unpopular is that people feel totally incomprehensible... they become almost to the film.

Micheline Lanctôt: But the film is so ominous because we are surrounded by people like that. People pass me on the street and they have Walkmans on their ears, and I wanted to have them. I would watch them and I didn't want them to hear. There is even the fear that the girls can hardly communicate to each other except through their Walkmans and the cassettes that they exchange.

Micheline Lanctôt: Well, I think there is a breakdown in communication. There has been for a long time. The Walkman was the epitome of that. The encapsulation of the individual. It's not necessarily a bad thing because it all goes, in my mind, with the sociological phenomenon of the computers and it's going to put people in touch with their own souls a lot more. But it's certainly very hard to live through, for our generation anyway. Because we were not brought up with that. I don't think the girls mind. They have adapted to the situation. I think, that the generation that will follow them will be positive. Their generation is not "sacrificed." but it is a sort of mutant generation.

Micheline Lanctôt: The sound was all post-sync. And I made the score that runs after it and she says: "Papa!" and the metro goes away. Well, Rene Malo thought it was a useless, wasted piece of footage and I said, it's exactly what the film's about. The metro is the father and the father image that is the foundation of their entire life that counts. The exchange of the cassettes is a ritual. The whole scene is coded - you would have to be a crypto-linguist to understand it, but it's all there. It wasn't obvious when I shot it but when I was editing it I thought, there's something in that scene that is more than meets the eye and one day I watched it on the big screen and when she runs and she says: "Papa!"... it really came to me. I was looking for your father about this search for the father image - that the subway was the father and the father was in a way responsible for the death, and these signs make the people very uncomfortable at the end. And if the people had identified with the girls. the papa image that is the one that is the real perception of the subway. As it is, the only people they can identify with in the film are the people sitting in the subway. And there is this terrible sense of indifference. One reason why the film was so unpopular is that people feel totally incomprehensible... they become almost to the film.

Micheline Lanctôt: But the film is so ominous because we are surrounded by people like that. People pass me on the street and they have Walkmans on their ears, and I wanted to have them. I would watch them and I didn't want them to hear. There is even the fear that the girls can hardly communicate to each other except through their Walkmans and the cassettes that they exchange.

Micheline Lanctôt: Well, I think there is a breakdown in communication. There has been for a long time. The Walkman was the epitome of that. The encapsulation of the individual. It's not necessarily a bad thing because it all goes, in my mind, with the sociological phenomenon of the computers and it's going to put people in touch with their own souls a lot more. But it's certainly very hard to live through, for our generation anyway. Because we were not brought up with that. I don't think the girls mind. They have adapted to the situation. I think, that the generation that will follow them will be positive. Their generation is not "sacrificed." but it is a sort of mutant generation.

Micheline Lanctôt: The sound was all post-sync. And I made the score that
thick. I made a score for all the effects and it was very, very thrilling to do because I suffered a lot from not being able to manipulate the sound on *The Handyman* but for this one I said, we're doing everything over again. I had a very good guy, sound assistant Michel Char­ron, and we took all the sounds from the busses and the boat and it really was all written down. Here you can hear the trains, there the splash of the water. It was really like a concrete music score and it paid off because most people relate to it. The whole passage on the boat relies on the sound track for punctuation. Somehow you hear these strange sounds and all the life on the boat comes in the sound. You hear the sailor's accordion, something rumbles down in the boat. The pumps - everything was cued in to heighten and carry tension throughout the piece because so little happens in the image. It was meant to orchestrate tensions and in a sort of way to compensate for the visuals and that was fun to do. (Sound mixer) Michel Descombes and I had such a wonderful time, it was extraordinary.

*Cinema Canada*: So where does all this lead you? After *The Handyman* you decided to really give the audience something to chew on, and that was *Sonatine*.

*Macheline Lanctot*: I don't know. I think both films were experiments. I'm learning my way through cinema. I can only imagine that the third film will be somewhere in between. I certainly do not want to purposely alienate an audience. I don't wish that. *Sonatine* would never have been made had it not been for the Institut's plan quinquennal. I don't think I could have raised the money. I know now that *Sonatine* is not a sellable film, and I think I know exactly what has to be made to make a sellable film. But I don't want to. What I now have to find is a voice. And that's what I'm looking for and that's what I'm going to try and find. There are a very few filmmakers that I really admire nowadays and the ones that I find myself really relating to are not necessarily the best but the most personal. Somebody like Jacques Dillon (*Le Pirate*), for instance, mesmerizes me. I don't think I've ever seen such highly personal films. He's just now starting to be comfortable with the type of film he's making but I'm sure it wasn't easy for him.

*Cinema Canada*: But certainly, the list of directors you have worked with as an actress is pretty impressive. What did you learn from these directors in terms of directing?

*Macheline Lanctot*: You don't learn anything as an actress. You are too wrapped up in your own self to learn anything about directing. You learn something about behaving on the set, but that was the problem with *The Handyman*. When I got onto the set I knew nothing about camera places and techniques of filming, and sheer instinct got me through - plus my training as an animator that came back, thank God.

*Cinema Canada*: Now, when you look at your career - music, animation, acting, writing, directing - how does the directing fit in with the rest?

*Macheline Lanctot*: It's the sum of the parts. Directing is the activity that takes most out of you. It appeals to everything. You have to know everything to be a good director. Most good directors I know are culturally rich. Most of them
either have an architect's formation, or design, music or literary training. You have to have to know human beings, you have to know acting, you have to know light, photography, design, architecture, you have to have to be a director. You are determining every single shot you make and if you don't have these qualities, if you're not visual, if you don't have these technical aspects and taste and culture, you can't do that and you can't rely on everybody else to do it for you. You can hire good people, but the decision of what the vision is yours, if your vision is not really a sum total of all these parts, it's lacking something. It's not as whole as it should be and I guess that's why I became a director.

It's not so much that I wanted it, but it was such a logical step from all my training. Because my training didn't serve me in anything I did. My training as a musician didn't serve me as an actress, my training as an actress didn't serve me as a musician. I don't use the skills and I had to find something when I opened, I can't do, and more. And in directing there's place for more.

It's very satisfying. It certainly the most satisfying thing I've ever done. I still prefer animation as an art, it's still to me the golden art of art, but there are all in things that I could profit as an animator and that are better used in making films as a director.

**Cinema Canada: One last question. When one starts documenting your career, it's pretty impressive: anima-tion, composing, directing, and on an Oscar-nominated feature, being awarded the Canadian Film Award for Best Actress in '72 and then getting nominated again a few years later: being given an Award for Excellence from the Academy in '81 and having films at the Directors Fortnight at Cannes and now at Venice. What more do you need to convince you that, in fact, you do communicate with people and they do appreciate what you do?**

**Micheline Lancot:** I don't know. I guess more and more of the same. An animation film, a musical film, I decided it was the end of his work. I keep doubting. I keep thinking I'm going to be out of a job any minute. This is my one driving obsession. And there is something in me that has to... that comes from my mother. I was an anorexic child. Only one person saw that in the film - a psychoanalyst. He said, this is an anorexic film. The girls eat their deaths. They eat the pills and they drink the milk: everything is anorexic. This was an anorexic film, it's an anorexic film. It's the way he wants to prove to people he exists by dying and that's exactly what the two girls do. They have to prove they are there by killing themselves. I never thought of the film that way, of course, because it's too close to me, I don't delve into those things, when I heard that, I turned the film down. I saw the film.

I suffered a lot when I was young because my mother felt I had too much facility for everything and she kept saying, you can do better. So I'm persuaded that everything I do is just a tenth of what I can do and that I have to do better.

**Cinema Canada: So you're still work-ing to do better?**

**Micheline Lancot:** I have to. To please my mother.