



Pool's splash

by Suzanne Gaulin

Léa Pool's second feature film, the enigmatic *La Femme de l'hôtel*, has just achieved something of a triumph during its festival début at the recent 8th World Film Festival in Montreal. Sold out for its three public screenings, *La Femme* was awarded the Carlsberg International Press Prize for the best Canadian feature out of competition, earning the accolade 'world-class' so seldom affixed to Canadian cinema.

If *La Femme* has been favorably compared in style with the filmmaking of von Trott, Ackerman or even Robert Bresson, those familiar with Pool's 1980 feature, *Strass Café*, will recognize that the 34-year-old, Swiss-born director has above all pursued and refined her own distinctive approach to the contemporary themes that underlie her filmmaking.

La Femme de l'hôtel is one of the new Canadian features whose production was made possible through Telefilm Canada's Broadcast Fund. Telefilm even bent the rules of the fund a little so as to allow Quebec's publicly owned broadcasting network, Radio-Québec, to join with Radio-Canada in contributing to the film's half-million dollar budget.

In preparation for the screening of *La Femme* at Toronto's Festival of Festivals, Léa Pool was interviewed for *Cinema Canada* by actress and playwright Suzanne Gaulin. And David Winch provides a reviewer's overview to a complex film that certainly should occasion greater critical examination.

Cinema Canada: Where did the idea for *La Femme de l'hôtel* come from?

Léa Pool: From three titles of poems by Baudelaire. "À une passante," "Chacun sa chimère," "Anywhere out of the world." It's a sort of method I've used when working with dissimilar elements. And these three titles represent what the film means to me.

Cinema Canada: Although *La Femme de l'hôtel* tells the story of three women, one doesn't experience it as a feminist treatise but rather as a collage on the theme of alienation. Is the essence of "woman" situated within a discourse on urban alienation?

Léa Pool: My view of these women is that they aren't part of the world of 'discourses,' they are somewhere else; outside and beyond definition. That is why perhaps the women appear to be so profoundly free. They are free because they aren't part of someone's 'discourse'; they don't belong to any side or anyone. Essentially, *La Femme* is not a feminist treatise, nor, in my opinion, is it a story on the theme of urban alienation. I don't believe there is any didactic posturing in the film; I abhor all 'discourses,' whatever their provenance.

Of course, the theme of alienation is present, it's subjoined, underlying. We live in the world of estrangement and these women have been hurt, wounded, perhaps destroyed by this world, by the city, by the violence of cities. They may appear to be passive but I don't think they are, actually. These women are not submissive. And although *La Femme de l'hôtel* isn't a political film, in the sense of a discourse or treatise, it is a subversive film because these women exist outside the system. They are not battling against the system, they are displaced. Their

passivity is oppositional, indifferent to the stupidity of the world.

But the women are creative. *La Femme* is a film about creation and love – and maybe that is more dangerous than analyses and treatises.

These are not women of power. They have chosen neither the weapons nor the methods of the people in power. Estelle, the character played by Louise Marleau, is neither rebellious nor passive. Rather, she's a stranger. She exists within a marginality that does not question itself, its own strangeness. And I think this is fundamental. The women are uprooted, without backgrounds, unanchored. They float on the edge of what's current and contemporary. They are adrift and so we don't quite get to know them – yet that's also why they are free.

Estelle approaches life and the city in the same way that Andréa (the filmmaker played by Paule Baillargeon) approaches her creation, her film within the film. They wander, like the fictional *chanteuse* (played by Marthe Turgeon), in an inner world, in madness. They are open and receptive and because they don't expect anything, they can remain open to everything.

Louise Marleau, in one interview, perfectly summarized, in my opinion, the character of Estelle who is the woman of the film's title: '*La Femme de l'hôtel* is a being delayed, a person who clings to life and meets head-on, with a child-like availability, everything that comes her way because she has no future.' I like this description.

Of course, these three women want to meet each other. Because they find themselves on the same territory, the terrain of exile, of not belonging. For me,

if there is difficulty in communicating or living what underlies the film, there is also, in the exceptional intensity of their meeting, a great source of hope. If I could, in my own life, experience these qualities, I'd have the impression that life makes sense.

Cinema Canada: And yet the city – Montreal, this island that doesn't seem like one, as Andrea narrates – plays an essential part in the film. Would you comment on your treatment of the city in *La Femme*?

Léa Pool: I'd like to say something about women and the city because it's important. I sense there is a special relation between women and cities but it's not easy to talk about it. Some of this appears in *Strass Café*... the woman who wanders through the city. Women are exiled in the city, in their own cities, dispossessed, chased away. There is no more room to breathe in the city. But it is women who will renew a sense of space to the city. There is quotation that I like, but can no longer recall who said it: "A space enters the city: a woman."

I don't know how apparent this is in the film; it was a wish, something desirable that we wanted in the screenplay; namely, the development of the city as an important element in the action and content of the film. After all, the content of the film largely revolves around the mobility of the characters.

The city is invariably cold and anonymous. People who get lost there stay lost – and the women in the film are lost. But they don't actually believe they'll find an anchor because there is no harbor for them. It's the same for the (scene of the) man crying in the metro: an instance of what was particular being expressed in

universal terms. In this image, which occurs towards the end of the film, all the solitude and pain in the city is restated. What's represented is the inability to comfort such pain. The city no longer retains dimensions where human experience can be dealt with. Nevertheless, I like the city. I couldn't address myself to anything else. So yes, in this sense, there is an element of 'discourse,' though I don't like the notion, on urban alienation. But it is ornamental, part of the scenery. It's a setting for the characters, with its violence and curious beauty. And it's obvious that if the women meet when the film begins, in spite of their wandering, lack of identity and difficulty in living, then it's clear that they all share something that hurt them previously. But the film doesn't inquire as to the cause.

It begins from this point: Estelle finds herself in the hotel waiting to die; somehow life has hurt her too much. This isn't necessarily a feminist statement but it's not by chance that the principal characters in the film are women. I'm more interested in women, more concerned, inspired by them, but there is no willful desire to exclude men. Yet at the same time I hope the film will be as meaningful to men as well as women. That's what I hope...

Many men worked on the film and their sensibilities are in evidence. Whether it was Michel Langlois who worked on the screenplay, or Michel Arcand with the editing or the cameraman, Georges Dufaux and Daniel Jobin, these men understood the content of the film. The ideas developed should interest men as much as they do women, and I hope men care about these things.

Cinema Canada: *The film is structured like a puzzle whose unity only becomes clear at the end. How do you see this?*

Léa Pool: The film is constructed somewhat like a detective story in that clues are reconstructed towards an event, an action. The only difference is that, instead of action, or where we expect to find it, what we find is emotion. It's the emotional charge that is reconstructed. Its clues are the pieces of peoples' lives and the fragments of their stories. And I think this is of interest because the spectator can participate in assembling the story, imposing his or her own emotions or pain, onto the women in the film.

Cinema Canada: *Character development doesn't appear to be your main concern; can we speak instead in terms of archetypes?*

Léa Pool: Yes, I agree that there is something universal about these three women, but I'm not exactly sure what it is. Perhaps it is their shared genuineness or the complete lack of the everyday in the film. These three women are roughly the same age and, to my mind, correspond to three archetypes, similar to three parts of the same person. Estelle is that part that is the least social, the most passive. She's the part that's inside, spiritual and intimate. The Andréa character is the externalized part, active, more conscious. She acts and creates because she is aware and intelligent. She reacts to everything, her whole body trembles, unlike Estelle who inhabits the world of glances, looking as beauty looks upon suffering, unconstrained, surrendered.

The third woman, the actress (Marthe

Turgeon), embodies the connection between the extremes. She's the link between the unconscious and conscious personalities. She is also the physical part of the "femme," the carnal woman. She acts too; she kicks in the door in the asylum and breaks the glass. She takes the blows for the other two. Yet on the other hand, she is Andréa's creation; Andréa, the filmmaker, invents this third woman, as the main character of her film.

It will be interesting to see how the audience reacts to these three women. Because each person will have their own judgement on what's likeable or otherwise in these characters.

We also deal with archetypes on the level of love. The three women, in my view, make up a fourth... who is *the woman*. I think they (the three women) are timeless, in the sense that they aren't quite fixed in a specific period and they aren't identifiably caught up in the latest fashion or what have you. Still, for me, they are very modern. How they live their lives, their searching quality, lends itself to a notion of modernity. We don't know what they are looking for, but they



● The women of *La Femme de l'hôtel*: Louise Marleau, Paule Baillargeon, and Marthe Turgeon

are looking. They haven't given up. Rather, in a variety of essential ways, it is *the world*, or the world they live in, that has stopped. Because they aren't part of some domestic scene, someone's wife or mother, they remain somewhat anonymous. This anonymity permits us to project our own desires and imagination and possibly is responsible for these characters having a universal quality.

At the same time they can be likened to blank pages on which we can write many stories. But they are dense, very present and not confused about being someone else. As it turns out, what they show of themselves, what they give, is that which we insist on seeing.

I wanted a certain anonymity so we could slide from story to story, from person to person. If they had been too defined, this whole structure of slidings would not have worked. These women are able to reveal themselves. In their struggle to create, they surpass our ability to always understand. It's difficult to grasp all the elements in a creative process. Some of it slips through our fingers. What people experience is far greater than the creative mind, the imagination, can explain. I wanted these characters, particularly Estelle, to reflect

this. Part of her is always beyond us. In order that the singer's life can become (confounded) with Estelle's troubled past, there had to be an element of mystery, a certain flexibility. It's important that not everything is stated. The construction (of the film) is somewhat between the lines, unspoken. It's an open film. All the images taken together should create a single image: of a woman.

Cinema Canada: *But the film is ultimately optimistic...?*

Léa Pool: There is an important solidarity between these women and a solidarity, or sharing, of suffering. They recognize, in their solitude, a common plight. There is a well-turned phrase from Henri Calet: "Ne me secoues pas, je suis plein de larmes." This is *La Femme de l'hôtel*. It is a sensitive film, but I don't think it is sad. It gives me courage and the impression that I'm not alone. The idea being that for some people it may be necessary or at least worthwhile to deal with madness, or some kind of loss of self-identification, in order to later find oneself, so that

Cinema Canada: *One could say you quote video as well.*

Léa Pool: More than a quote, the whole film-within-the-film is done on video. Video is a step forward in the creative imaging process. It has the quality of recording the creative act itself. Strictly speaking, the video image is inferior to film. It's a blurred image—moving forwards, backwards—it stops, disappears. However, all of this, to my way of thinking, reveals what the creative process actually is. Moreover, video is more spontaneous and immediate. These features are part of the recording quality.

Cinema Canada: *Yes despite that immediacy, it appears to be your view that people are dominated by their past. I'm thinking of the beach chairs on the deserted deck that refer to the painting on the mantle of Estelle's hotel room. The wind blows through them like ancient ruins.*

Léa Pool: Well, that's funny, because I don't see it quite like that. It's not a *passéiste* film. If there's an element of this, the past, in the film, it's not an objective. The temporal is undefined. No future, past nor present. Time's exploded, atomized.

I find myself fascinated by empty places, abandoned witnesses to the past, places which no longer serve any purpose. So here reference to the past is unconscious. Everybody talks about their past, we struggle with it all our lives. How can people know what others have lived in their past lives? How can such things ever be shared? Sometimes this can be a source of discouragement. So even though *La Femme* isn't dominated by the past, there is something that I now recall telling Louise Marleau when I was describing her character to her, "Her insides are full of ruins." Many people are made up of these ruins and it's from there that rebuilding begins.

Cinema Canada: *Bunuel once said that "films are a superior way of expressing dreams, emotions and instincts" and also "The cinema is an involuntary imitation of dreams." These quotes bring to mind both the images and the montage of La Femme de l'hôtel. Any comment?*

Léa Pool: I'm more concerned with communicating emotions in a film, as opposed to telling a story. My notion of having succeeded involves being able to touch a viewer personally, deeply, without their going through some process of rationalization. Free of a precise storyline, there's a possibility for more self-identification on the part of the observer. The method allows for some introspection. Telling a story, as a technique, shuts out emotional involvement or at least our emotions exist only in relation to the story itself.

I always hope that the spectator is left with some questions. Structurally, the writing reproduces, somewhat, a dream sequence. Or more precisely the memory of the dream. It begins by trying to recall something from the dream. Little by little the fragments and pieces come together, and suddenly, the image is forcefully revealed. The image recalled is a fleeting one, and we find ourselves again out in the night, at the end of a queue in a darkened theatre. A dream remembered as the structure of a film is an instinctive method; it calls forth emotions, not rationalizations. I don't see my films as 'intellectual'! I work

INTERVIEW



with association and I really like collages. Sometimes I wonder why I've associated certain images, I stop and worry about what they mean. I can get lost in this, not having a straight-forward story. I mean it can cause insecurity. In spite of all this, of course, there is a story.

Cinema Canada: *It may be different in Europe but in America women filmmakers are something of a rarity. Do you think the film-going public can change this situation?*

Léa Pool: I don't think there is any victory in Europe yet, but there are women directors making popular and successful films. I'm thinking of M. von Trotta whose last two films did well in New York and elsewhere in the U.S. These are intimist films about women. There is a definite public which wants to see different films and this simply hasn't been developed or exploited. They just don't have the same resources as other films. Part of this involves encouraging people to want to see movies that are more tender, or poetic or more introspective. A market has to be created, just like some people have created a market for violent films. I want to make attractive and personal films, films that will find their way to a large audience. I believe there's an enormous potential market for films like *La Femme de l'hôtel*. I'm convinced that publicity is the reason why people see big-budget films. If we had the same kind of backup, people would be attentive to this type of cinema, but we don't have the resources for expanded distribution at the moment.

Cinema Canada: *If we assume that wider distribution, for the sake of argument, where does *La femme* fall?*

Léa Pool: There's no middle ground with a film like this; for a producer or an investor it's either yes or no. They know what they're getting involved in. It's not a script that was created by a group of people. It wasn't really changeable; at any rate, I wouldn't have agreed. I can't see a producer adding parts to it or, you know, having the relationship between those characters as a function of the commercial well-being of the film. That would only reduce the film's value.

We should trust directors. *Auteur* films stand or fall as they are. But it's easier to manipulate a closed story, and if it's a big-budget film the producers take charge. Of course they're not directors.

Thinking about making money is entirely different. I'm not against producing popular films. If my film is bought and makes money, great! Conciliation is possible, but I certainly don't

think a film made by several people, each adding their own commercial bit, will end up being a good film. I believe I can make personal films that can be successful. Great filmmakers, successful too, started with small films: Bergman, Carlos Saura, Wim Wenders, Godard... Now, here, it's all got to happen right away. We put our stake on the film, not the filmmakers. Developing directorial talent and seeing the longer term seems a more likely strategy than going for an instant, two-month hit.

Using actors and actresses in interesting combinations, good dramatic artists, is a way of approaching some of these difficulties. There are excellent players here and they can help carry a film. The three women in *La femme*, seen together, are captivating. And having Paule Baillargeon and Louise Marleau as leads has never been done before. Dramatic talent generally seems to be underrated.

Cinema Canada: *There's no doubt that you've gotten excellent performances from Paule Baillargeon, Louise Marleau and Marthe Turgeon. How was it to work with them?*

Léa Pool: It was fantastic to be able to work with professional actors and ac-

tresses. It was my first experience of that and it was marvellous. The solidarity that exists among the women in the film was also part of the making of the film. We recognized each other and met in a fundamental way; there was a solidarity and mutual understanding of our respective suffering and shared hopes. While I had precise notions about the characters, my ideas were not rigid. I made suggestions, the actresses too, and we discussed them. We weren't in a power-struggle. I wasn't trying to prove something and nor were they. They always tried to understand and respect what I was trying to say. At times they were much better at expressing what I was trying to get at. Their craftsmanship and experience were of great assistance. It was formidable and touching to see the love and energy they brought to the film, and it was disturbing to see the characters come to life. Once the decision was made to cast Louise, Paule and Marthe as the leads, I never doubted that choice. They are three great actresses and I'm proud to have worked with them. And I must also mention Serge Dupire who plays Andrea's brother: his presence in the film is superb.

Cinema Canada: *Can you tell us*

something about your next film?

Léa Pool: A little, not much. I'm working it now. It'll have a name like *Anne Trister*. It's about absence of such things, during the death of a father. Anne loses her father. That's where we'll begin, with the interment at the graveyard. *Anne Trister* will be much more physical as a film, more direct. I can't say much more, I don't have the details. But I can tell you that exile and creation as themes still interest me, and are likely to for some time.

Cinema Canada: *The Paris review Autrement, referred to you and Yves Simoneau as representative of a new trend in Quebec cinema. What do you think they're talking about?*

Léa Pool: Well, they referred to Simoneau's film *Les Yeux Rouges*, which I haven't seen. So it's difficult to say very much. My impression is that our films are very different. Certainly, there's room for more research of form in film. It seems that each time someone is in touch with themselves, truthful, people start talking about a new trend or vogue. That's probably what they've got against Simoneau and me.

(Translated by Leo Rice-Barker)

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