

Lea Pool's *La Femme de l'hôtel*

Léa Pool's *La Femme de l'hôtel* is a complex film: mirrors and self-conscious symmetry, echoes and coincidences all combine to blur the lines separating fiction from reality. But then the film's aim is above all to jettison the "rational" approach to emotional problems. As in a dream, Pool's vision advances and retreats and reflects back on itself. And it is to her credit that she has been able to orchestrate *La Femme de l'hôtel*'s many elements, uniting the film's protagonists in a single search for self-worth.

The 87-minute work uses a classic film-within-a-film formula to create the ambiguity needed. Andréa Richler (played by Paule Baillargeon) is directing a film in melancholy November Montreal. The film concerns the emotional burnout and disorientation of a popular singer (played by Marthe Turgeon), whose success has undermined her. Her life is disconnected, dispersed to an anonymous audience, and she feels that she can no longer play the role of 'the singer' which her public demands. Eventually, in the film-within-the-film, she breaks down, and lives in and out of a rest home.

As Andréa Richler is struggling to make the actress' performance convincing, the director runs across Estelle David (played by Louise Marleau), who has sought refuge and isolation in the same hotel where Richler's film is being shot. She immediately senses that Estelle, too, is living through the kind of anomie that the singer is trying to convey. Richler approaches Estelle, and a very tentative relationship ensues. Gradually, however, Estelle's feelings and insights begin to overpower those of the singer's, and Andréa Richler becomes obsessed with defining these feelings of estrangement and isolation.

La Femme de l'hôtel has the texture of a Marie-Claire Blais novel - a women's world of dark feelings and dark passages, claustrophobia and a self-created 'underground'. At the same time, however, Léa Pool has cast Paule Baillargeon in the role of the director Andréa, whose curiosity and wide-eyed vitality provide the film with a sense of restless inquiry. Yet Andréa's 'rationality' too succumbs: Who is the 'femme de l'hôtel'? Why is she, also, an exile in her own city?

The answers are never 'given', rather, they are hinted at, half-understood, glimpsed fleetingly. For example, Estelle has come to the hotel as a last resort, but she is completely free to come and go as she pleases. The 'freedom' she enjoys, however, is the freedom of anonymity and aimlessness; like the singer who bangs her head furiously against the locked doors of the rest home where she is forcibly confined, Estelle is also confined. But her barriers are more elusive: she cannot even find the door to bang against. As Sartre would observe, she suffers the vertigo of her freedom.

Andréa Richler, too, feels a sense of exile, and she shares with Estelle a fascination with places which don't belong to anyone. For someone who feels she does not belong anywhere, a

place which is nobody's in particular is somehow reassuring. Estelle and Andréa, then, are most at ease with each other when they talk sitting on the couches in a home-furnishings showroom. There is comfort and order there, but no one to answer to, no one to please.

Louise Marleau, as Estelle, has to make the most of a role which calls for blank stares, a wan look, and a constant sense of not quite connecting with where she is. She sleepwalks through her days, avoids contact, and only very slowly shows a dawning sense of her own worth. And this confidence is once again derived through one of the many vivid reflections which traverse the film: just as Andréa Richler can see clearly in Estelle the discomfiture she is trying to define, so too can Estelle see clearly in the singer the emotional exhaustion she has been living through. Somehow, though, each person is opaque for herself. Only through others can one glimpse oneself.

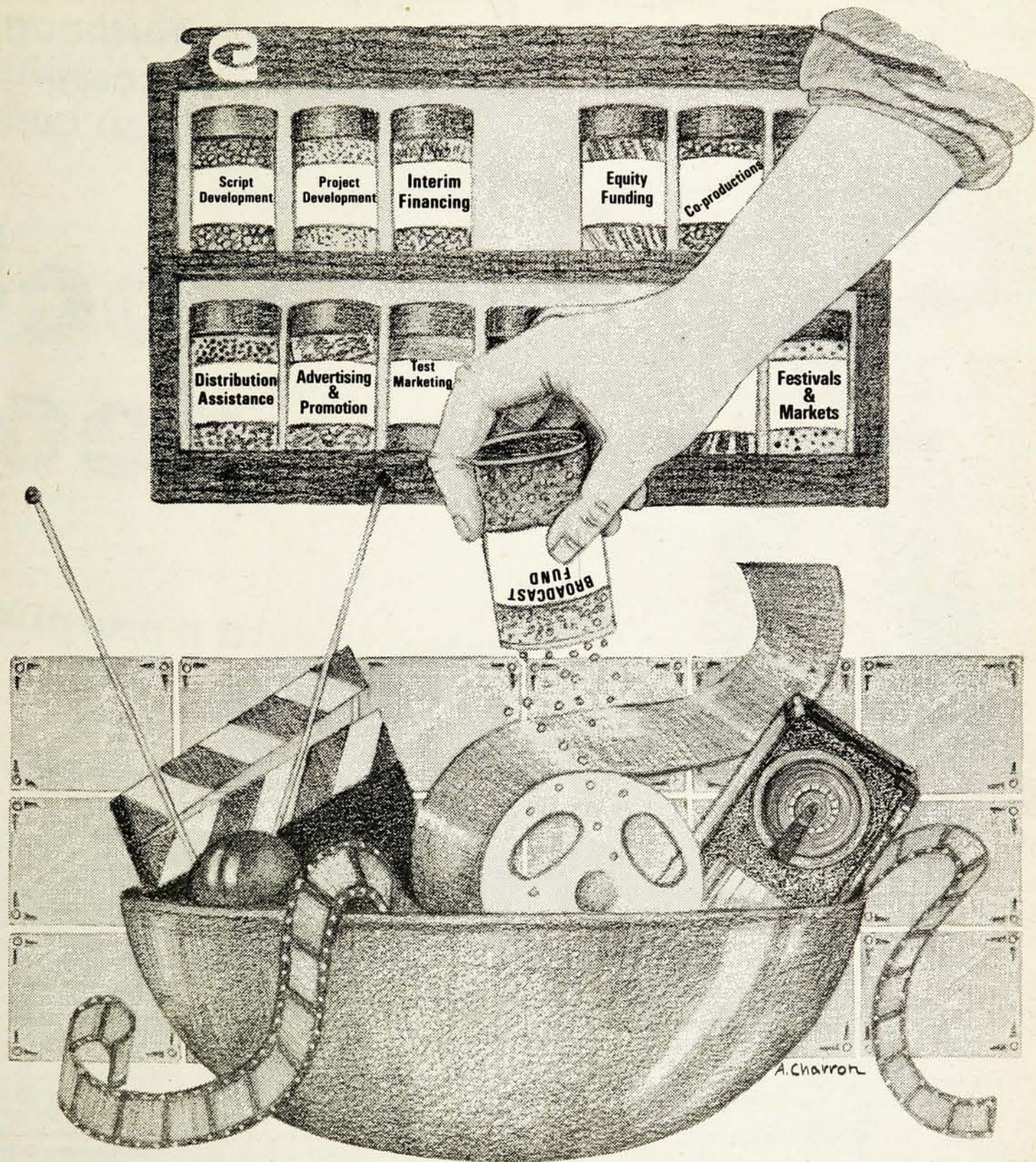
Pool has said of *La Femme de l'hôtel* that she is trying to create "a market for poetry; a market for strong and beautiful personal films," an effort which she recognizes in the successes of other women directors, particularly Margareta von Trotta. And like von Trotta's *Marianne and Julia* or *Die Freundin*, Pool here focusses on a precarious relationship between two women, a relationship whose ambiguity is never quite resolved.

Pool's success is in working against a desolate background - yet never letting the viewer lose sight completely of the distant horizon of meaning and hope. The hotel, then, becomes less a place than an emotional eddy, which one passes through before once again connecting with the world outside.

David Winch ●

LA FEMME DE L'HÔTEL d. Léa Pool sc. Pool, Michel Langlois, with the collaboration of Robert Gurik, based on an idea by Léa Pool d.o.p. Georges Dufaux cam. Daniel Jobin art d. Vianney Gauthier cost. Gaudeline Sauriol sd. Serge Beauchemin ed. Michel Arcand orig. music Yves Lafrierre p. Bernadette Payeur p. man. Daniel Louis 1st a.d. Michel Gauthier 2nd a.d. Louis-Philippe Rochon cont. Ginette Senecal 1st asst. cam. Pierre Dupeppe cam. trainee François Girard gaffer Daniel Chretien key grip Robert Lapierre Jr. grip Philippe Yvon boom Yvon Benoit on-set props Daniel Hysmans props master Pierre Gauthier dressers Marianne Carter, Brigitte Lair make-up Diane Simard hair. Richard Hamsen, Donat Hallessey loc. man. Mario Nadeau p. coord. Micheline Cadieux p. assts. Luc Martineau, Bruno Bazin asst. eds. Martine Waltzer, Robert Packwood unit admin. Berangere Maltais p. sec. Suzanne Castalino sd. efx. Marcel Pothier mixer Henri Blondeau titles Michel Laroche lab. Bellevue-Pathé & Film Opticals musicians Robert Lachapelle, Richard Perrotte. With the financial participation of Telefilm Canada, the SGC, Radio-Quebec, Bellevue Pathé and the National Film Board of Canada. p.c. ACPAV world sales: Films Transit Inc., (514) 526-0839 cdn. dist. J.-A. Lapointe Films Inc., (514) 331-7832 unit pub. Daniele Gauthier (514) 384-1361, 331-7836 colour 35mm running time: 87 min. l.p. Paule Baillargeon, Louise Marleau, Marthe Turgeon, Serge Dupire, Genevieve Paris, Gilles Renaud, Michel Vinet, Serge Christiaenssens, Elie Oren, Michel-Antoine Nadeau, Francine Ruel, André Breton, Francisco, Raymond Cloutier, Kim Yaroshevskaya, Gil Remillard, Denise Dubois.





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