

André Melançon's

La guerre des tuques

To disarm the chronically optimistic and their sidekicks – the pessimistic makers of comparisons with the superior efforts of more developed national cinemas – one might as well start with what *La guerre des tuques* is not. It is not *La guerre des boutons*, it is not *Les 400 coups*, and it is not *L'argent de poche*; in short, it is not an extraordinary film. Yet for all it is not, *La guerre des tuques* may well be the beginning of something important.

In its desperate flight from its own identity (or lack of one), mainstream Canadian filmmaking's slavish imitation of American mediocrity has time and again created local vacuums. If there is no such thing as a genuinely national Canadian hit film, there are plenty of examples of local successes, successful precisely because they filled a vacuum, and this from *Duddy Kravitz* for Montreal, to *Goin' Down the Road* for Toronto, to *In The Fall* or *Who Has Seen The Wind?* for the prairies.

The genius of producer Rock Demers – *La guerre des tuques* being the first of an eight-film series entitled *Tales For All* – lies in his grasp of the commercial importance of the local, doubly so when one realizes that there is nothing more grass-roots (nor simultaneously more universal) than children. For surely, part of *La guerre des tuques'* phenomenal success – the film has grossed \$615,000 in 13 weeks in Montreal – is due to the fact that it addresses that pathetically neglected moviegoer: the child.

In yet another sense is *La guerre des tuques* an important vindication of the local, and ironically so at a time when the word 'international' loudly pretends to be the answer to all our problems, especially the filmmaking ones. With financing from Telefilm, from Quebec's Société générale, and from CTV's Montreal affiliate CFCF, *La guerre des tuques* is something of a model for an entirely Canadian approach – and solution – to the problems of Canadian cinema. Indeed, in the light of the film's successful run, Telefilm head André Lamy has gone so far as to point to the \$1.3 million budget *La guerre des tuques* as being a model of profitability, or at least far closer to the solution than those intricately structured, tri-nationally financed cinematic megaprojects of dubious Canadian derivation.

That said, however, once one moves beyond *La guerre des tuques'* strong and successful deployment of the immense potential of the local formula, the film begins to show weaknesses. Briefly, two groups of schoolchildren, one of whom has a Saint-Bernard, spend Christmas vacation in the Baie St-Paul area waging a playful war whose strategic objective is to capture the defenders' snowfort. But is *La guerre des tuques* truly a children's film – a film for children – or is it a film that makes use of children for other purposes? These are not necessarily nefarious or exploitative purposes, for the intention of the film is to tell a moral tale, namely that peace is preferable to war, a moral that few would want to take issue with. Yet the film's moral, rather than building itself

up from within, suddenly intrudes with all the heavyhandedness of the adult world, for *La guerre des tuques* is less about the dog who stopped the war, as its English title suggests, than the filmmakers' seemingly arbitrary decision to stop the film with the *deus ex machina* of the dog's (accidental) death.

This both weakens the moral of the film, since it does not follow from the logic of the story as much as it seems an imposed, exterior moralism, and, I fear, rather wrecks the story for children. My six-year-old kept asking afterwards: "But why did the dog have to die?" If he couldn't understand it, it's because the film itself did not make this clear; and my explanation that creatures are killed in war, which wouldn't otherwise be war if nobody got killed, and that war is a terrible thing, just didn't seem to explain much.

The problem with *La guerre des tuques* is that you seldom stop suspecting hordes of adults hovering about off-camera, instructing, hectoring, moralising, and directing. If the children themselves are, on the whole, perfectly adequate to their roles, with all the enthusiasm and deadly seriousness of children, this ceases to work as soon as the children are made to be anything but children and turned instead into symbolic little adults. This is particularly noticeable in the "love interest" between Luc the attacking general (Cedric Jourde) and Sophie the defending Boadicea (Maripierre Arsenneau-D'Amour). However cute she may be, it would still seem that any boy playing soldier with Luc's fierce dedication (and, one suspects, deep psychological hang-ups) would simply not have the slightest interest in a girl.

Again, the adult world intrudes crudely upon the very symbol of the war between the kids: the snowfort. All it takes is one look to know that no kid on earth could have built this fort. The elaborate structure with its too-smooth sides simply screams of adult engineering. (In fact, so well-constructed was the fort that a special-effects expert had to be called in to demolish it.)

Even so, this still might have worked – the fort is, after all, François-les-lunettes' (Duc Minh Vu) fantasy. Had the entire film been, say, Luc's fantasy, all kinds of surrealism might have been possible. There is surrealism in *La guerre des tuques* – the final assault on the fort with the multi-colored ribbons and astounding use of kitchen utensils for helmets has all the beauty of a child's version of *Alexander Nevsky*. In this wonderful, intricate sequence, one can

clearly see how *La guerre des tuques* might have risen to the heights of *La guerre des boutons*.

None of the above – except perhaps for the death of the dog – could probably matter to children; on the day I saw the film the young audience just lapped it all up, howling with delight at the gags, and the sillier the better. Ultimately it's seeing those hundreds of little faces laughing (in French) at jokes written in their language, laughing along with a film set here, in our winter, starring kids that could almost be themselves, that matters far more.

A critic can – and should – say these kids deserve better. But one has to start somewhere, and one could do a hell of a lot worse than *La guerre des tuques*.

If this film is not completely the model it's cracked up to be, at least it's a good and positive beginning.

Michael Dorland ●

LA GUERRE DES TUQUES (The Dog Who Stopped The War)

d. André Melançon sc. Danyele Patenaude, Roger Cantin, with Melançon p. Rock Demers, Nicole Robert set p. Claude Bonin d.o.p. François Protat art d. Violette Daneau mus. comp. & cond. Germain Gauthier ed. André Corriveau p. man. Daniel Louis cont. Janine Senecal sd. Serge Beauchemin cost. Huguette Gagne gaffer Jean Courteau key grip Serge Grenier 1st a.d. Lino 2nd a.d. Louis-Philippe Rochon cast. children Danyele Patenaude 1st asst. cam. Paul Gravel 2nd asst. cam. Christine Perreault 2nd unit. cam. Jean-Claude Labrecque 2nd unit asst. cam. Nathalie Moliavko Visotsky set dresser Denis Hamel props Abe Lee, Michelle Forest asst. props. Claude Jacques, Gerard Venancio sp. efx. Gilles Aird make-up/hair Diane Simard unit man. Mario Nadeau asst. unit man. Luc Martineau boom Yvon Benoit grips Grégoire Schmidt, Michel Periard best boy Alex Amyot carp. Richard Boucher trainee grip Manal Hassib trainee d. Stella Goulet children's caretakers Gilles Cyr, Michel Hamel, Andreeanne Melançon p. assts. Bruno Bazin, Bernard Vincent asst. ed. Christine Denault hd. sd. ed. Claude Langlois sd. ed. Louise Côté sd. efx. Marcel Pothier asst. sd. ed./asst. sd. efx. Jocelyn Caron p. acct. Muriel Lizé-Pothier p. coord. Lorraine Du Hamel Baie St. Paul coord. Jean Gérin stills Jean Demers unit pub. Bernard Voyer, David Novek Associates Inc. anim. Animabec opticals Film Doctor titles Ciné-Titres lab. & post. p. Bellevue-Pathé Quebec (1972) Inc. mixing Pathe Sound cam. & lenses Panavision p.c. Les Productions La Fête Inc., with the financial participation of La Société Générale du Cinema, Telefilm Canada, La Société Radio-Canada and CFCF Inc. Cdn. dist. Cinema Plus (514) 521-1163, foreign sales: Films Transit (514) 526-0839 lp. Cédric Jourde, Julien Elie, Maripierre Arsenneau-D'Amour, Duc Minh Vu, Luc Boucher, Gilbert Monette, Mario Monette, Olivier Monette, Mathieu Savard, Maryse Cartwright, Steve Savage, Jean-François Leblanc, Nathalie Gagnon, Patrick Saint-Pierre Periz, Christine Dufort, Julie Martel, Carlos Da Costa, François Gratton, Lucy the dog (Dawn Animal Agency), Helene Arsenneau, France Bouchard Lavoie, Jean Gérin, Madeleine Villeneuve Bouchard, Lina Leblanc, Fernande Bouchard, France Panneton, St. Gertrude Youth Choir, Pierre Richard, Paul-Emile Tremblay, Eric Lavoie, and the pupils of Dominique Savio School, St. Urbain running time: 88 mins.

Les Rose's

Isaac Littlefeathers

This film may, as its producer and co-writer Barry Pearson suggests, represent a high-water mark in terms of the number of different levels of government and public agencies who have lent a helping hand to its production.

Although the project has been under development by Pearson and director/co-writer Les Rose since 1976, it was not until it became an early beneficiary of what Pearson calls the "fearless" new willingness of the CBC to co-operate with independent producers and Telefilm Canada that it really got off the ground. With the CBC's letter of intent to broadcast in hand, the project gained a commitment for a third of its \$2.2 million budget from Telefilm, and then, with a decision to move the production from Toronto to Edmonton, another half-million from the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation and Superchannel – not to mention wholehearted co-operation from the City of Edmonton. The CBC will broadcast the movie probably in the fall of 1985, and Superchannel has a second window thereafter. In the meantime, there has been a theatrical premiere and a two-week run in Edmonton via Pan-Canadian, and the producers are hoping for exhibition in key centres this spring.

So it would be nice to be able to say that *Isaac Littlefeathers* is as great a success as a piece of entertainment as it is as an example of the possibilities of the current production climate. But, to be truthful, the film rarely rises above a formulaic conception of its material, despite some aspects of storyline and situation that are unusual to the point of being bizarre.

The title character is an adolescent Métis boy growing up in Edmonton in the early 1960s under the protective care of an elderly Jewish shopkeeper. The offspring of a footloose, motorcycle-riding pro-hockey player and an Indian woman who apparently succumbs to despair and degradation, Isaac finds a home with the kindly, cheerfully philosophical Abe Kapp. At the beginning of the action he is feeling upset not only by the racist taunts of the local rednecks but because he doesn't get invited to his Jewish friends' bar-mitzvahs. (Before the movie is over he has been put up for a bar-mitzvah of his own – a prospect which gives rise to a couple of crude visual jokes about circumcision.) In what at times looks like an effort to leave no dramatic stereotype or ethnic minority unincorporated, the story has the 14-year-old hero encountering his itinerant real father a number of times, hobnobbing with a Jewish boy who goes nowhere without his Charlie-McCarthy-type ventriloquist's doll, acquiring a Chinese girlfriend, getting exposed to a few whiffs of Indian culture in the person of a blind old shaman, exciting the resentment of Abe's older daughter, and engaging in an escalating series of conflicts with the dastardly Varco clan (the father a slovenly foulmouthed drunkard, the sons a pack of cowardly bullies) culminating in a boxing match and a hostage drama where he holds old Varco at gunpoint. Hardly surprising, under the

● *La Guerre des tuques'* Jean-François Leblanc storming the fort



circumstances, that Isaac suffers from identity problems – something that might also be said of the movie as a whole.

The important role of Abe is an index of the film's willingness to be content with off-the-rack characterization. As played in his familiar manner by Lou Jacobi, he is a cardboard figure of limitless affection, optimistic resilience and practical wisdom, punctuated by an ineffably Jewish sense of humour. Similarly, the Varcos are caricatures of rottenness, snarling and snivelling their way through every scene. And torn between so many different conceptions (a lot of them trite) of where the scenario might be heading or what his character might turn out to be, the hero himself fails to stay in focus for any length of time. At a number of different points, in fact, the film is hurt by its inability to reject any temptation whatever to be "effective" – dramatically, humourously, cinematically – despite the damage that is done to a unified direction and structure by the desire to exploit every conceivable aspect of the scenario for a quick emotional response.

But perhaps it is somewhat unfair to subject this modest, essentially TV movie to the kind of scrutiny usually reserved for theatrical features. Certainly it is not without its achievements, especially considering the budget. For the money it really looks very good, with a consistent gloss on the images and some genuinely lovely panoramic landscape shots from cinematographer Ed Higginson. At a few points the budget limitations peep through, and although the look is smooth it is also rather too bright and closeuppy for theatrical viewing (it will look right at home on television). And, for the most part, the details of period settings and location and the general sense of production values are quite acceptable.

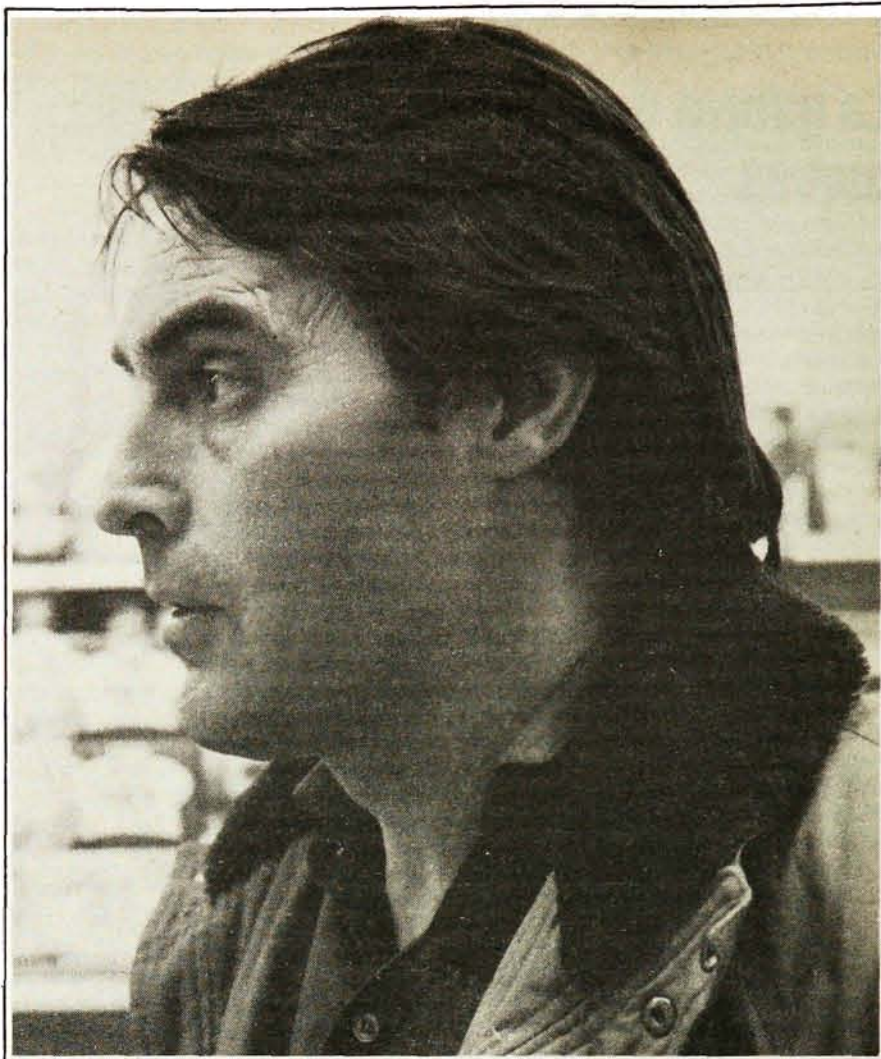
With a couple of exceptions, the performances aren't too bad either, again

particularly considering the lack of experience of some of the actors. In this context the central performance by novice Will Korbust must definitely be deemed a success. At 15 years of age and without the slightest previous dramatic experience, Korbust may not always be polished in his delivery of dialogue, but in every other respect he does a very creditable job. He does have screen presence and the producers are justified in having taken a chance on him. Most of the secondary roles are well taken, and one certainly doesn't have the sense that the film ran out of talent after the most important couple of parts.

Rose and Pearson – probably best known as the co-writers of *Paperback Hero*, and respectively the director and producer of CTV's interesting 1981 feature *The Life and Times of Alonzo Boyd* – have not perhaps done themselves full justice here. The movie will no doubt look somewhat better on TV, and also I should report that the audience I saw it with seemed to be enjoying it pretty well. At the least, *Isaac Littlefeathers* is a testament to the workability of current public mechanisms to aid feature production in this country.

William Beard ●

ISAAC LITTLEFEATHERS d. Les Rose sc. Rose, Barry Pearson p. Barry Pearson, William Johnston exec. p. Gerald M. Soloway, Ronald Lillie d.o.p. Ed Higginson, c.s.c. ed. Mairin Wilkinson mus. Paul Zaza art d. Richard Hudolin assoc. p. Douglas C. Hutton, Arvi Liimatainen p.c. Lauron International Inc., in association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, with the participation of Telefilm Canada, Allarcom Ltd., and the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation l.p. Lou Jacobi, Scott Hylands, William Korbust Lynda Mason Green, Tom Heaton, George Clutesi, Lorraine Behnan, Robert Astle, Mark Schoenberg, Bryan Fustukian, Geoff Brumlik, Brent Allen, Eiko Waida, Marek Forsyński, Glenn Davidson, Darren Heaps, Vincent Gale, Michele Thrush, Christine Daniels, Larry Musser, Tommy Fletcher, Robert Koons, Fred Keating, Steve Blackman running time 95 min.



● Derek May: fellow travellers, take notice

Derek May's

Other Tongues

Derek May's new film, *Other Tongues*, begins and ends on a shot of a suitcase, a kind of metaphor for the immigrant experience. Later, in a Greek tavern, someone makes the point that emigrants are like suitcases. They arrive with a suitcase – in which there are only blank pages – and no money, and they leave with a suitcase full of money. Between these two framing shots, May gives us not so much a portrait of the immigrant experience, for he is no didacticist, as a picaresque insight into the multicultural neighbourhood of St-Louis in Montreal. Through the shifting fortunes and love affairs of six people who live there, he expands upon the meaning of this central image.

May's earlier work – *Angel*, *McBus*, *Niagara Falls* – was informed by an immigrant sensibility: an outsider who is looking for a way into the culture that he has adopted. These films are dissonant and fragmented and full of absences – of landscape, harmony, narrative logic – but his art films – *Sananguagat* and *Pictures From the 1930's* – suggested that it was possible to overcome this through the synthesis of experience that art provided. However, the key film in May's unique and distinguished output was *Mother Tongues*, where he confronted his, as well as his wife's past and roots, and their present reality. It was a portrait of a bilingual relationship, she Québécois, he English, which resonated with the problems of the country as a whole.

Other Tongues is an extension of the concerns present in *Mother Tongue*, as its title indicates. While the first film analysed a bilingual relationship, *Other Tongues* extends its dialectic to the multicultural experience where English, Québécois and Greeks intermingle. There are four couples in this film, although only six people (it makes for interesting mathematics): Sam and Anna, Sam and Lise, Anna and Yiannis and, finally, May himself and Suzanne. Each couple somehow defies definition – Sam and Anna having a living arrangement that is non-exclusive, and in the course of the film they both get involved with other people: Sam with the gentle, blonde Lise, and Anna dueling with the sensually temperamental Greek, Yiannis.

These couples live tenuous relationships, where slipping into bed with someone else cannot conceal the doubts and absences that flicker through their thoughts. Sam and Anna, in particular, are trying to define a new kind of living arrangement to suit their needs, because, as Sam puts it, "Couples slaughter each other and reduce the other person to something they can deal with." Yet, he is 35 and would like children. Anna, even though she needs the company of other men, thinks maybe it's time she got pregnant.

The equation becomes confused when a different value system enters to trouble these serene waters. The headstrong Yiannis, cannot accept the fact that Anna, even though she has slept with him, is not his alone. As the opening line intones, "In Paradise, everyone gets what they want. Locally, things are more complicated." In some of the more marvellous interchanges, often arguments, the tone and content descends to soap-opera, which nevertheless makes it no less insightful. While Sam, Anna, Lise and Yiannis negotiate



● Robert Astle, left, and Lou Jacobi prime young William Korbust in *Isaac Littlefeathers*