

Kevin Sullivan's

# Anne of Green Gables

In 1908, Lucy Maude Montgomery could have had little foreknowledge that her novel, *Anne of Green Gables*, would ultimately become a "hot property" in the era of voracious media hype and entertainment. The book has inspired two Hollywood feature films (in 1919 and 1934), a CBC-TV musical in 1956, the perennially popular stage musical at the Charlottetown Festival since 1965, a BBC musical mini-series in 1972, and now the two-part made-for-TV movie *Anne of Green Gables*, directed by Kevin Sullivan and aired on CBC prime-time Dec. 1-2.

In a sense, Montgomery's classic story has become a kind of political cipher passing back and forth among countries and interests eager to exploit the popularity of a book, now translated into 30 languages, with passionate fans around the world. This time, the Canadians have scored the coup, taking the dramatic story back from the Hollywood studios, back from the British, and shaping it to the dictates of Canadian television — with an eye, of course, to the worldwide television market.

If this seems a cynical way to begin this review, it appears necessary: given the fact that director Kevin Sullivan is already hinting in interviews about "talk of a half-hour series as a sort of sequel" to his 198-minute-long production. As the *Anne of Green Gables* phenomenon heats up again in this latest round of hoopla, one is moved to return to Montgomery's original text, finding there not only a wisdom and peacefulness that goes beyond all the subsequent media incarnations, but also a literary flavour that puts those reincarnations into perspective.

Inevitably, a television production based on a well-known novel invites such comparisons. Kevin Sullivan's two-part made-for-TV movie of *Anne of Green Gables* is strangely uneven in its two-part division. Part I, which closely follows the book in both spirit and plotting, has an energy and exuberance and emotional depth that somehow outshine Part II, where Sullivan and co-screenwriter Joe Wiesenfeld have taken greater liberties with L.M. Montgomery's novel. Arguably, the places where *Anne of Green Gables*, the TV series, veers away from *Anne of Green Gables*, the book, reveal more about the realities of TV marketing and packaging than about the particular flavour of Montgomery's work. My hunch is that Sullivan did not quite know what to make of the character of Anne once she has emerged from her delightful, irrepressible pre-adolescent stage (Part I), into the dreamy, but ambitious scholar fully intent on her studies. In other words, Sullivan did not know how to handle the emerging character of Montgomery's independent woman.

The best thing about *Anne of Green Gables* is its casting, and therefore, its superb acting. Megan Follows, Colleen Dewhurst and Richard Farnsworth are

simply perfect for the roles of the high-spirited, imaginative orphan girl and the elderly sister and brother who adopt her into their Prince Edward Island home. The entire production depends on the chemistry among these three principals, and they carry it off beautifully. In fact, all the actors in this film seem exactly right for their parts, and Sullivan gets fine performances from beginning to end. In particular, as a director he is sensitive to the nuances conveyed by the lift of an eyebrow, the turn of a head, the blink of an eye. In revealing the landscape of the human face, Sullivan shows himself to be especially suited to direction for television, which depends upon close-ups and medium-shots for its effectiveness.

Ironically, however, this very strength becomes a weakness in dealing with a book like *Anne of Green Gables*, which has, as one of its primary literary elements, a strong evocation of place. The vividly described landscape of Prince Edward Island so thoroughly informs the book that it has inspired hundreds of thousands of tourists to visit P.E.I. to experience first-hand the sense of place so fully created by L.M. Montgomery. And yet, the television screen is inadequate for conveying this dimension; it is best suited to interiors and close-ups. The handful of exterior scenes in *Anne of Green Gables* acknowledges this inadequacy of the medium.

And so, Sullivan has had to focus his television adaptation along other lines, sacrificing the evocation of the sense of place to the elaboration of character. This, in itself, could be a justifiable decision, given a book rich in character and human interaction. But Sullivan seems to mistake emerging character for Romance, especially in Part II. He and Wiesenfeld have greatly expanded the

role of Gilbert and altered the relationship between him and Anne so that it veers off in the direction of romantic soap-opera.

Where Montgomery maintains, just pages from the book's end, that "There was no silly sentiment in Anne's ideas concerning Gilbert. Boys were to her, when she thought about them at all, merely possible good comrades," Sullivan shifts the story significantly: making Anne a rather modern, flirtatious teenager angling for Gilbert's attentions, if somewhat ambiguous about her own desires.

This decision to romanticize the relationship between Anne and Gilbert somewhat subverts the spirit of feminist independence running through Montgomery's text and shifts the focus to an underlying sexual subtext that is not present in the book, but which probably is thought to make for good television. Thus, Sullivan and Wiesenfeld add scenes in which Marilla (Colleen Dewhurst) expresses concern over Anne's having been seen holding hands with Gilbert, and pointedly tells the latter that Anne is still quite young. These scenes, more in keeping with current familial concerns than with anything in the novel, are undoubtedly an attempt to 'modernize' a story that is in no need of modernization. But whatever the motivation behind them, such changes are in line with other liberties taken with Montgomery's text, especially the death of Matthew.

In the original, Matthew's weak heart is ultimately undermined by the failure of the bank in which he has placed his life's savings. He dies of a heart attack upon hearing the news — a scene which has been replaced in *Anne of Green Gables* by his lyrical demise while bringing home the cows. No bank failure, no shock of economic destitution. "The

whole concept of a bank folding and Matthew having a heart attack just seemed too conventional, too trite," says Sullivan. "We tried to make it a little bit more peaceful and beautiful than that." Yet surely Montgomery intended the economic dimension which runs throughout the book and is especially noticeable in its final scenes. It is part of the thematic opposition between practical, factual realism and Anne's imaginative flights of fancy: an opposition which structures the entire book and gives Anne depth of character through her struggle to maintain her fiercely imaginative spirit. The economic cause of Matthew's death is a particularly painful way for Montgomery to underline the societal factors that cruelly limit one's dreams and circumscribe one's aspirations. While no one would argue that Montgomery's novel is a political tract, it does have certain dimensions of sociopolitical awareness. By diminishing such dimensions, *Anne of Green Gables* loses more than it gains.

There are other problems in the production, including an omnipresent musical track, the occasionally awkward conflation of scenes from the original, some obvious editing errors (in the trip from the train station and the tea-party scene), and a predilection for tableaux in which characters are arranged with no blacks to the camera — regardless of how stiff and awkward that may make the seating arrangements. A predominantly stationary camera and a reliance primarily on dialogue to carry scenes make the production visually less interesting than it might have been. Moreover, the sense of time passing seems somewhat scrambled, largely by being hinged upon a confusing series of exams confronting Anne.

And yet, *Anne of Green Gables*, the



• *Anne of Green Gables*' star Megan Follows: CBC's all-time winner at the ratings



series, manages to transcend these problems. There is a certain ineffable quality surrounding the production which makes one feel mean-spirited to have noticed its faults. No doubt, this is mainly the result of the superb acting by Megan Follows, and the truly touching scenes involving Follows, Dewhurst and Farnsworth, who bring to life the complexity of emotional undercurrent at work in their characters. One gets the unmistakable sense of a cast and crew who cared deeply about this production and gave to it fully.

Certainly, Kevin Sullivan emerges as a director capable of eliciting excellent performances and able to meet the demands of doing a period piece that accurately evokes the look of the distant past. He also seems sensitively in touch with the pains and joys of childhood, a rare quality in any case, but especially necessary for a director working in the realm of family entertainment.

Finally, however, it is the quality and spent of the original story itself that shines through here, despite the twists and shifts and alterations and problems encountered in Sullivan's production. One wishes, somehow, that L.M. Montgomery herself could reap the rewards.

Joyce Nelson •

**Anne of Green Gables** d./exec.p. Kevin Sullivan p. Kevin Sullivan, Ian McDougall assoc.p. Trudy Grant p.man. Nick Gray sc. Kevin Sullivan, Joe Wisenfeld d.o.p. Rene Ohashi art d. Carol Spier ward. des. Martha Mann unit/loc.man. Lin Gibson p. coord. Fran Solomon 1st a. d. Otta Hanus 2nd a. d. Kim Winther t.a.d. Jeff Wilkinson, Ron French, d's observer Bronwen Hughes office p.a. Paula Ncedham craft/serv/p.a. Martha Bean con. Nancy Eagles p. acct. Dorothy Precious asst. acct. Carol Jurchison asst. art d. Alta Louise Doyle art. dept. trainee Katherine Mathewson set dressers Martin Weinryb, Gary Jack, asst. set dresser Danielle Flury asst. props/floor props Vic Rigler asst. props Gina Hamilton const. sup. Kirk Cheney hd. carp. Ian Fraser asst. hd. carp. Myles Roth scenic artists James McAteer, Nick Kosonick asst. cost. des. Derek Baskerville key ward.620? Delphine White asst. ward. Maureen Gurney, Kat Moyer, Sherry McMorrin make-up Shonagh Jabour asst. make-up Jane Meade hair. Ivan Lynch asst. hair. Jocelyn MacDonald 1st asst. cam. John Hobson 2nd asst. cam. David Perkins stills Rob McEwan sd.rec. Stuart French boom Michael LaCroix key grip Christopher Dean 2nd grip Gordon Forbes best boy grip Dan Narduzzi gaffer Maris Jansons best boy David Owen elect. Frank Foster gennie op. Cactus Simscr trans. coord. Michael Curran dr. capt. Jerome McCann drivers John Bray, Ron Coles, Robert Bartman, Dave Brown eds. Moe Wilkinson, James Lahti sd. ed. Steven Cole cast. Diane Polley extras cast. Faces & Places animal wrangler Lionel's Pony Farm p.c. Sullivan Films Inc., CBC, PBS/Wonderworks, TV-60 Munich/ZDF, with the participation of Telefilm Canada. running time: 198 mins. 16mm. Col. l.p. Megan Follows, Colleen Dewhurst, Richard Farnsworth, Patricia Hamilton, Schuyler Grant, Jonathan Crombie, Charmion King, Jackie Burroughs, Rosemary Radcliffe, Marilyn Lighthone, Paul Brown, Miranda Deponcier, Jayne Eastwood, Dawn Greenhalgh, Vivian Reis, Samantha Langevin, Cedric Smith, Christiane Krueger, Joachim Hansen, Jennifer Inch, Trish Nettleton, Mag Ruffman, Sean McCann, Robert Haley, Michael Tait, Robert Collins, Dave Roberts, Nancy Beattie, David Hughes, Fiona McGillivray, Wendy Lyon, Zack Ward, Sharon Dyer, Rex Southgate, Juliana Saxton, Molly Thom, Jennifer Irwin, Sandra Scott, Jack Mather, Peter Sturgess, Ray Ireland, Dawn Taylor, Patrick Allard, Adrian Dorval, Martha Cronyn, Martha Maloney, Morgan Chapman, John Conway.

## Claude Grenier's **Le Vieillard et l'enfant**

As the first (and, for demographic reasons, very likely the last) French-language dramatic fiction film to emerge from Franco-Manitoba, Claude Grenier's one-hour *Le Vieillard et l'enfant* merits greater attention than it has so far received. Especially from Quebec where there's a long-standing concern with the linguistic and cultural future of the Francophones of the other provinces, and perhaps even more so in the Quebecois cinematic milieu where such, no doubt now forgotten, films as *L'Acadie l'Acadie*, once played an important role in politicizing Quebec filmmakers who saw, in the fate of the Francophone minorities, a grim prediction of the Québécois future itself.

Not that *Le Vieillard et l'enfant* is a political film; far from it. But the all-too-rapid dismissal of this film during its brief passage on two Montreal screens in late-November-early December by the daily newspaper, radio and TV critics, on the grounds of not enough jolts per minute, indicates an imaginative dullness that is grossly unjust to *Le Vieillard et l'enfant* which is nothing if not a film about the imagination.

*Le Vieillard* is a cinematic fable about a child (Lucie Laurier) and an old man (Jean Duceppe) who meet at the privileged interstices of the beginning of life and the end of life. In other words, at that critical cultural moment when the past articulates and transmits its vision to the present that will become the future and, in turn, a past, and so on. And in cinema especially – because of the medium's youth – such

moments possess an added significance that calls for a particular attentiveness; even more so in a cinema like that in Canada which is barely out of its infancy.

M. St-Hilaire, the character played with the usual excellence that has made Duceppe one of Quebec's outstanding transmitters of the classical theatrical tradition, is himself a man with no past, or, more accurately, a severed past. He comes most likely from France – the film only refers to the photo of a sailing ship on which he says he crossed the sea. He has lived, since then, in Manitoba – the film is set at the height of the Depression in the summer of 1935 – for some years; was once married; had children, the exact number he can't recall, among them a favorite daughter about whom he also says nothing, other than that she was beautiful, and whose memory visibly occasions him some pain.

Christine, the child, is aged between seven and nine, and lives with her mother (Patricia Nolin), who is fading wearily into the bitterness of a bleak and penny-pinching middle-age. There is no father, nor reference to one, though there are references to family in rural Quebec, where mother and daughter in previous summers would visit, but cannot this year for lack of money.

Christine, a lonely child, wanders among the prairie sea, brooding over the recent death of a grandmother, and grappling with the meanings of life. In this context she encounters M. St-Hilaire.

Aside from the natural affinity of the very young and the very old, what he has to give to her is, in one word, a vision. For one, the very ancient French-Canadian linguistic and cultural claim to the continent. For another (or what's the same), a vision of the imagination which specifically takes the form of his taking her to see with her own eyes the

site of the imagination itself; in the film, "great Lake Winnipeg," or one of Canada's inland, continental seas. *Le Vieillard et l'enfant*, then, is a fable about the quest for – and confrontation with – the Canadian imagination.

It is after Christine and M. St-Hilaire's arrival at the shores of great Lake Winnipeg – about three-quarters into the film – that the fable reaches its dramatic climax.

As M. St-Hilaire tells Christine: "The water is eternal, as is life. And it knows – because it will still be there after all our descendants have gone. It will be our witness, for the lake waits for all of us, one after the other." And, then, he breaks down and weeps.

Similarly, the film – or more exactly the realist tradition in Canadian cinema – too breaks down. For other than showing a body of water, the film is unable to show the water as an imaginative substance; only as wet matter. What causes M. St-Hilaire to cry when his imaginative vision is confronted with the uninspiring materiality of a mere lake is structurally paralysed by the Canadian realist film's inability to get beyond the brute facticity of Canadian nature. For the only way beyond it is death: M. St-Hilaire's realization of his own imminent death, and, again, parallel to it, the death of the realist tradition itself.

However, the imaginative vision breaks down to the extent of being grounded in naturalism. De-naturalized, it can continue on its way, for it is from de-naturalization that cinema is born.

M. St-Hilaire takes Christine back to her mother. He bids them good-night and walks off down the street into the Light – into, that is, the diffused back-lighting of the cinematic apparatus itself as it recasts the surrounding trees and lawns in the re-naturalization that follows the successful, if painful, transition to the realm of the cinematic imagination.

What Claude Grenier has illuminated with *Le Vieillard et l'enfant* could be described as a 'fictional documentary' that reveals with stunning clarity the transition beyond realism. *Le Vieillard* is slow-paced and basically uneventful, like much in Canadian cinema, but also

• *Le Vieillard et l'enfant's* Jean Duceppe and Lucie Laurier on the shores of the imagination



**LE VIEILLARD ET L'ENFANT** d. Claude Grenier sc. Clément Perron, with Grenier based/on the story by Gabrielle Roy, "Le Vieillard et l'Enfant" l.p. Jean Duceppe, Lucie Laurier, Patricia Nolin, Michèle Magny; d.o.p. Thomas Vamos ed. Michèle Groleau mus. Normand Roger arr. Normand Roger, Denis L. Chartrand; sd. Martin Fossum art d. Aaron Johnston cost.con. François Laplante narr. Yvon Rivard sd.ed. Alain Sauvé, Danuta Klis; mus.rec. Louis Hone mixer Hans Peter Strobl 1st a.d. Lise Abastado 2nd a.d. Denis Lavoie cont. Francc Boudreau make-up/hair Diane Simard pre-prod. Laurence Paré cast. Lise Abastado loc.man. Ginette Hardy gaffer Frank Raven key grip Michel Chohin cam.asst. Charles Lavack boom Richard Dupas props.? Avelin Gautron cost.asst. Marie-Marthe Guénette asst.elec. Mike Fones grip Bryan Sanders gen.op. Rod Merrells set.des. Avlin Gautron add.cam. Charles Lavack stills Robert Barrow p.assts. Dennis Connelly, Lucille Fournier, Sylvain L'Archevêque, Raymond Lemieux, Don Sharpe, Marie Laurier; loc.scouts. Aaron Johnston, Dennis Connelly; post.p. Edouard Davidovici titles Serge Bouthillier post.synch. Cinélumc p.sec. Marie Fournier admin. Carol Smith p. René Piché exec.p. Raymond Gauthier. Couleur, 16mm and videocassette; running time: 51 min 17s p.c. Production française/Ouest Office National du film du Canada with la Société Radio-Canada; dist. NFB/ONF.