series, manages to transcend these problems. There is a certain ineffable quality surrounding the project, 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 Robert Foxworth and Farnsworth, who bring to life the complexity of emotional undercurrents at work in their characters. One gets the unforgettable 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 his deft handling of 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 juvenile fare, and it is necessary for a director working in the realm of family entertainment.

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

Joyce Nelson


FILM REVIEWS

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-Canadian, 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 filmakers who saw, in the fate of the Francophone minorities, a grim prediction of the Quebecois 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 interludes 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 occasionally occasion him some pain.

Christine, the child, is aged between seven and nine, and lives with her mother (Patricia Nolin), who is fading wearing into the bitterness of a bleak and penny-pinch ing middle-aged. 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 for this year, 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.

As one 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, the “great Lake Winnipig,” or one of Canada’s inland, continental lakes – 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 Lake Winnipig – about three-quarters into the film – that the fable reaches its dramatic climax.

As M. St-Hilaire tells Christine: “The water eternal, as is Life. And it knows – because it will still be there after all our descendents 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 realistic tradition in Canadian cinema – too breaks down. For other than showing how Christine is able to show the water as an imaginative substance; only as well matter. What causes M. St-Hilaire to cry when his imaginative vision is confronted with the reality of the lake is structurally paralleled 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 death, 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 nature; de-realization, 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’s, as if, for the young child, 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 laws of nature; and, in this manner, followed the successful, if painful, transition to the realm of the cinematic imaginá.
MINI REVIEWS
by Pat Thompson

THE ORDINARY BATH
Some xylophone music and some bubbles, and it's off to the fantasy land for children created by writer Dennis Lee and artist Jon McKee. A small boy is left to play for a while in the bath before bedtime. Narrator Lee informs us that the lad is no fool as he announces, "Always splash, that's what water is for." Then he adds that the boy "knew how to turn on the taps," and proceeds to do so. The winged Bathub Creature comes out of the tap, and it's sort of fun -- the boy, his duckling and the creature having a good time. But then the Nasties start to rush from the tap -- oozing, roaring, and shimmying. One swank, one was covered with lumps which had faces, and another exploded: "Why did I turn on that tap?" moans the boy -- but do not despair, the duck saves the day.

A cunning little gem from Mirus, it may appear too animated but, in reality, Jon McKee's drawings for the book are moved and manipulated to give life and, quite honestly, to have them in the driving music and imaginative sound effects, things really swing along. Of course, Dennis Lee's language is gorgeous -- the beasts hopping sit/slap, and are bumpy and bumpy and blubbery and bumb.

The film was enthusiastically received by hordes of tiny tots at its premiere in Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. The film's launchings festivities of the 1985 Children's Book Festival in November.

A film by Mike Fukushima (Sheridan College Animation Dept.) 1985. 2/1-2 mins. Col. 16mm.

THE COMPUTER BLUES
A whirlwind amalgam of pixilation mixed in with a lad playing computer games and with wind-up cars, and a low transport scene to a sort of circus. A little plasticine animation is then tossed in, and then the keyboard is 'boomed in' with globes...whew! A little less excess -- please.

A film by Mark Kingston (Ryerson) 1985. 7 mins. Col. 16mm.

WOMEN AND PILLS
A documentary on valium addiction, which is obviously well-researched, and drawing on interviews with women relating their cases, but somehow the heart isn't touched. Perhaps it's a bit too textbook in approach, as the format is predictable and pretty rigid. Real-life stuff these days has to have more feeling than this.

A film by Kathy Nicolaichuk (Ryerson), 1985, 27 mins., col. 16mm.

AFTER THE ARGUMENT
A carefully arranged, well thought out, single five-minute take of the debris after a male/female argument. Here again, perhaps without a heart to it, but certainly crisply executed.

A film by Christopher Ball, 1985, 5 mins., col. 16mm.

ACRUALLY EXISTENTIALIST ATTUNED TO THOSE IMPORTANT MOMENTS OF PASSAGE IN WHICH, IF LIFE LOSES SOMETHING, IT IS ART'S (IN THIS CASE, CINEMA'S) Gain, Le vieillard, in its quiet simplicity, is, as A. Seillière says at one point, "a feast of hope." All in all, no inconceivable artistic accomplishment for a film that emerges from the depths of a slowly dying collective in what remains of the French conquest of the West. Indeed, Le vieillard is something of a monument of commemoration.

Grenier, of course, had a lot of good fortune in the making of this film -- a Gabrielle Roy story to adapt; a script by Clément Perron (Mon Oncle Antoine) who has brooded long and hard over the meaning of childhood and filmmaking; an actor of the stature of Duceppe and a giant little talent in Lucie Laurier; the delicately baroque music of Normand Roger; a devoted crew of the competence of people like D.O.P. Thomas Vamos. And, in Manitoba at least, where the transport service's recognition it merits among Francophones, an enthusiastic audience turnout.

But in Quebec, an ex-bastion of francophone that prides itself on its cinematic sophistication, it was met with, at best, yawns; at worst, an unconscionable insult.

Maybe that's why Grenier, a Quebecois, has decided like Jutra once, he'd rather work as a filmmaker out of Toronto.

Michael Dorland