

Jean-Claude Lord's

Toby McTeague

In a film industry whose origins come out of the documentary, the Canadian fiction film is still something of an anomaly. *Toby*, the latest feature by Jean-Claude Lord, stays clear of documentary tendencies and struggles with that most elusive of fictional characters, the Hero — and this in a country where heroism in fiction, particularly in fiction films, is viewed with a mixture of skepticism and awkwardness. As a result, in *Toby*, skepticism enters via references to feminism, the breakdown of the family and the treatment of Indians in Northern Quebec, though none of these conflicts are allowed to detract from the universal qualities of the hero. And awkwardness stems not so much from the inability of Canadians to deal with heroes as from the natural rejection of formulaic American heroes in films such as *Rocky*, *Rambo*, etc.

Filmed entirely in the Lac Saint-Jean region, *Toby* effectively captures the awesome natural beauty of the landscape. The dog-sledding sequences are strung together in a stunning montage of valleys and forests. In the same style as Jean Baudin's *Mario* (1984), Jean-Claude Lord manipulates the landscape narratively, instead of relying on its pictorial beauty as mere decorative inserts.

In addition to formalistic similarities, both *Mario* and *Toby* depict familial relations between males and the unbalancing of these relations by female "outsiders." While *Mario* creates an increasingly imaginative world between

the two brothers, *Toby* remains superficial in its depiction of father-son and sibling relations. But considering that *Toby* is intended for children and young adolescents, it is not surprising to find that depth of character has been sacrificed to an action-oriented storyline.

Toby's father, Tom (a dead ringer for *Miami Vice's* Don Johnston), is a National Champion Dog Sledder but the family has since fallen on hard times. If he doesn't win the next Championship race, Tom will be forced to sell his home and his dogs to Crowe, owner of Crowe's Nest Bar. No explanation is given to how or why Crowe has become such a powerful influence. As the personification of evil, Crowe wears a fur coat and a moustache, but he stops short of working as a part-time seal hunter. Following an airplane accident, Tom is unable to race and the family's future rests on young Toby (Yannick Bisson) and his revolutionary new dog-sled, "Toby's Flyer." More than win the race money, Toby must also earn the respect of his father; his younger brother, Sam; his new teacher, Jenny; and his first girlfriend, Sarah.

As a veteran director whose films include *Bingo* (1973), *Panique* (1977) and *Visiting Hours* (1981), Lord has been described by some Québécois film critics as "the most American-styled of our directors." If films like *Bingo* or *Toby* are any indication, Lord's "American" approach to filmmaking derives mostly from the films' content and narrative structure. The films are superficial and entertaining, while the stories are a dynamic blend of comedy and drama that avoid dealing with deeper issues (such as motivation). Whether American or Canadian, the narrative structure of a heroic story will always depict the same series of demoralizing personal events, physical and mental restoration and, finally, victory. And whether the climax features a car-chase or a dog-sled race, the stylistic ap-

proach is identical: fast-paced editing and a thumping musical score.

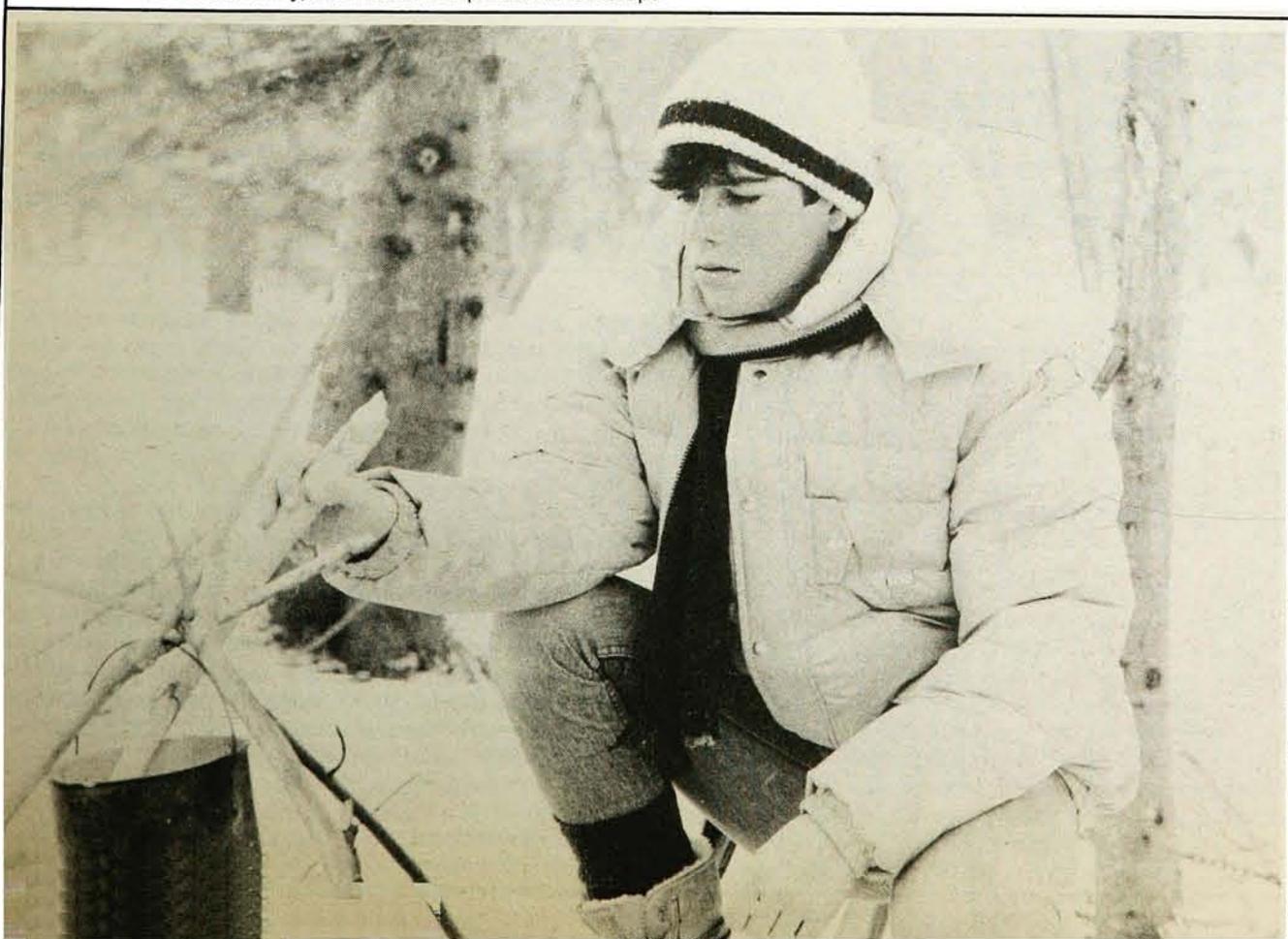
An English version of *Toby* played a couple of weeks in Montreal and the surrounding area. A dubbed French version opened March 21 in Montreal and has so far been more successful. (The English version of *Toby* opened in Ontario during Easter weekend and audience figures are pending.)

Québécois features with adolescent themes increasingly appear to be the way to success. Since 1984, Jean Beaudin's *Mario*, Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine*, André Melançon's *La Guerre des tuques*, and Michael Rubbo's *Operation beurre de pinottes* have all succeeded either with critics or audiences. In the absence of audience figures in *Toby's* case, it may still be possible to say that, in either language, the film is stilted and the characters lack depth.

Ed Matthews •

TOBY d. Jean-Claude Lord p. Nicolas Clermont exec.p. Pieter Kroonenburg, David J. Patterson sc. Jeff Maguire, Djordje Milicevic, Jamie Brown, from a story by Maguire and Milicevic asst to p. Julie Allan d.o.p. René Verzier art d. Jocelyn Joly asst.art d. Raymond Dupuis mus.comp. Claude Demers ed. Yves Langlois p.man. Wendy Grean loc.man. François Sylvestre 1st a.d. David Hood 2nd a.d. Anne Murphy 3rd a.d. Tommy Groszman cont. Marie Lahaye 1st asst.cam. Paul Gravel 2nd asst.cam. Marteen Kroonenburg sd. Patrick Rousseau boom Véronique Gabillaud stunt coord. Jérôme Tiberghien key grip Serge Grenier grips Greg Schmidt, Michel Bertrand best boy Claude Fortier, Jean-Paul Houle elect. Jean Trudeau, Yvan Bernard props Ronald Fauteux set dec. Marc Fiquet on-set props Simaon Lahaye sp.efx. Bill Orr cost.des. Michèle Hamel cost. Blanche Boileau dresser Fabienne April hair Bob Pritchett make-up Gillian Chandler 2nd unit cam. Douglas Kiefer 2nd unit cam. cost. Bert Tougas, Michel Bernier stills Piroška Mihalka asst.ed. Janet Lazare sd.efx.concept. André Galbrant sd.ed./dia. Danuta Klis asst.sd.ed. Hélène Crépeau, Pierre Béland mixers Michel Descombes, André Gagnon dog sleds Judy & Bryan Pearce trainer Raymond Ducasse l.p. Yannick Bisson, Winston Rekert, Andrew Bednarski, Stéphanie Morgenstern, Timothy Webber, Liliane Clune, Evan Adams, George Clutesci, Hamish McEwan, Tom Rack, Anthony Levinson, Mark Kulik, Joanna Vanicola, Doug Price, Ian Finlay p.c. Filmline International Inc dist. Ciné 360 Inc 35mm colour, running time: 95 minutes

• Lead Yannick Bisson in *Toby*, an effective manipulation of landscape



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