The individualistic drive
of
Danièle Suissa

A Cinema Canada interview
by Connie Tadros

Danièle J. Suissa is a deliberate person. In her filmmaking, her work for television and theatre, in the creation and administration of her own company, she has moved ahead with determination and patience, building a career for which she holds herself, alone, responsible.

Suissa came to Canada to visit in April 1968, drawn by her parents who had visited Expo the previous year and decided to settle in Montreal. Born in Morocco, brought up in Paris where she worked with such directors as Hossein, Astruc and Allegret, having studied in New York and worked in Los Angeles, she commissioned a study of the Canadian film industry that fall to see whether Canada was the place she should come to live and work. The result was the creation of Production DJS Montreal Films International Ltd.; Suissa arrived with her own company, a film project written with Anais Nin based on Nin’s book Une espionne dans la maison de l’amour and starring Jeanne Moreau. Her welcome to Canada was the refusal of the Canadian Film Development Corporation to consider the coproduction.

In the following years, she shot industrial films and commercials. She has directed at least two plays a year since 1972. Her work for television began at the CBC in 1974 with Summer Mornings and, by the early ‘80s, included six episodes of the Judge series and Kate Morris, Vice-President. By 1981 she had reincorporated, this time founding 3 Themes Inc. to reflect her work in the three media. She went on to produce and direct two feature-length television specials, part of her project De l'amour et du théâtre: Divine Sarah and Évangeline Deusse.

As president of the producers’ association in Quebec in 1983-84, Suissa opened up the association to television and organizing the successful two-day conference on financing and coproduction which took place during the 1984 World Film Festival. Now, as vice-president of the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, she is working to recruit Québécois members in sufficient numbers that the ACC may truly claim national, as opposed to primarily Toronto, status.

On Sept. 26, her first theatrical feature film, The Morning Man, will be released in both English and French in Montreal. The film is based on the true story of Robert Ménard, a convicted bank-robber and escaped convict who, after having proven to himself that he could go straight, hosting a radio talk-show as “morning man” for many months, turned himself in to serve another 30 months in prison before public pressure led to his release.

Suissa worked indefatigably to render the psychological truth she found in this story – the strength of the individual and his capacity to challenge himself. As a woman who produces and directs, and an individual who entered the Canadian film industry from abroad, Suissa knows the determination it takes to make one’s way alone, fueled by ability and pride in one’s work.
Cinema Canada: The Morning Man was a first feature film, both for you and S.D.A. How did the project begin?

Danièle Suissa: The project started with Gaston Cousineau who owned the rights. He had read the story in the newspapers some years ago and he got in touch with convict-turned-radio-an- nouncer Robert Ménard and told him he wanted to do a film based on his life. Ménard told him that he had already been approached by a writer from Toronto, Clark Wallace, and that Clark was already writing a story about him and maybe they should get together, which they did. They went to Telefilm Canada, got their money and wrote a screenplay.

In the meantime, Gaston closed his production company in Quebec City and came to Montreal. While working with Pierre Lamé, he became directeur-général of the AFPPQ (Association des producteurs de films du Québec) while I was president. We became friendly and then one day he said to me: “I have a story and I’m convinced that you should be the one to do it because I don’t want to do it with a ‘cop-and-robbers’ approach; I would like to do it with emotion—who this guy feels and all that.” So he gave me the script to read.

Gaston had already talked to Filmline about it, and Filmline agreed that I should do it. I proposed to Filmline that we do a co-production because I have a pool of investors who had already invested in Divine Sarah and Evangeline Deusse, and who were ready to go on with me. And then the hassles started. It was months and months because Filmline had other projects and, in the meantime, I got so enthusiastic over this one that I stopped everything else. But, whenever they were not moving forward, I was stalled. So I got impatient with that and finally I suggested to Gaston that 3 Thèmes develop the whole project. Then Telefilm Canada insisted I had to have another producer because I was going to direct and they felt 3 Thèmes could not be both director and producer.

Cinema Canada: Despite your track record?

Danièle Suissa: Yes. Telefilm Canada is a wonderful institution and they have helped The Morning Man very much but I am still very angry at André Picard for insisting that I could not both produce and direct, especially since, of course, I was going to hire a line producer and we ended up hiring Monique Mesnier whom I had approached.

Cinema Canada: How do you understand Telefilm’s reluctance to let you do it? They had already invested in Divine Sarah?

Danièle Suissa: Yes, I asked all those questions and Picard kept saying it was another type of budget and it was another type of work... I’m still very upset at him. Not that I had disadvantages with S.D.A. It’s been a wonderful relationship but, in the process, I have lost a lot. I lost a lot of control over my film after 19 months. I was the one who got Telefilm Canada’s money, the Société générale, the pre-sale to the CBC, part of the private investors and then S.D.A. came in, and, I admit, to bring one element that was strongly missing which was the balance of the private money. But in exchange for that, they really wanted a lot financially and also image-wise. They’ve been wonderful all through the shoot, they let me be completely in control of the film so it is really my film. I am still officially a producer of the film, but there were little stipulations like insisting that the credits say “S.D.A. in association with 3 Thèmes presents” while I think it is “3 Thèmes in association with S.D.A.” or “S.D.A. and 3 Thèmes”. The kinds of things that at first upset you and then you say, well, my film is more important. But I do hope Telefilm Canada is not going to do that to me each time, because I want to continue to produce. This time I was lucky. S.D.A. are wonderful people because they know their ability business-wise but they also know that they have no experience and, except for Gaston who has an inclination for the story, they do not have any creative tradition or expertise. They were wonderful because they didn’t pretend they had any. But if Telefilm forces me to go again with another producer who doesn’t behave like that, why should I put in all the effort of developing a film if afterwards I lose the creative control? I fight so hard to pay the rent and keep a company open and all of this to keep control.

Cinema Canada: But if Telefilm’s argument was that the budget was larger, it was a feature and you didn’t do one before, why was S.D.A. acceptable? S.D.A. didn’t deal with those budgets or done features either.

Danièle Suissa: Well, because S.D.A. was a bigger company and they are better administrative people, Picard had great respect for François Champagne but they also insisted that they hire Monique Mesnier. I can’t blame Telefilm Canada for being very protective of the money they are putting in. It belongs to all of us, that money, and they should be very protective. But on the other hand, we have seen them make so many mistakes and, as you say, I had a track record. Divine Sarah and Evangeline Deusse were delivered on time, on budget, with more production values even than the budget allowed for because I did not spend my contingencies on these productions. We used the contingencies at the very end to improve the product, add more music and make beautiful posters and pamphlets. So it’s not as if I had run out of money before.

Cinema Canada: Your career has always been very deliberate. From the study that you had done to see whether you should come to Canada, to the work you’ve done for television. It’s all very efficient, very “together.” So feeling somehow compromised in the control of your biggest project must have been very difficult. Do you see those compromises on the screen?

Danièle Suissa: Yes. I compromised in the sense that because of the way it was all set up and because all the difficulties with Telefilm delayed the process, I did not get either the rehearsal time I had asked for or the pre-production time I wanted. And I am a director who does a lot of homework. But it is worthless to do the homework unless after you’ve done it you have the time to share it with the people who are going to work on the film. Bruno Doyon, my young lead, needed more preparation than he had. I know, he has the talent and he could have gone much further in the direction I wanted to take The Morning Man which was really seeing the context—it’s a beautiful poster and pamphlets. Everything on his shoulders in a 25-day shooting schedule with three days of rehearsal.

Cinema Canada: That’s all you had? Danièle Suissa: That’s all I had. We shot The Morning Man in 25 days, with three days of rehearsal. Which we couldn’t even call rehearsal because of ACTRA rules. They were called “readings.” So, in that sense...

Cinema Canada: How were you able to help him prepare?

Danièle Suissa: We spent evenings, and mornings and all the time we were together but we also only had four weeks altogether...

Cinema Canada: Had be ever done film work before?

Danièle Suissa: No. He had done two plays with me at the Rideau Vert. His first step on the stage was in one of my plays and then he did a couple of television soaps—Les Moineaux et les Pinsons, for Télémétrie and others but he soon realised that this was not the type of career he wanted. He decided to go to Los Angeles to learn English because he wants an international career.

Cinema Canada: Is Robert Ménard as good-looking as Doyon?

Danièle Suissa: Not quite, but Robert is a good-looking man: tall, slim; he’s got natural elegance. His face is a bit good-looking man: tall, slim; he’s got natural elegance. His face is a bit rougher than Bruno’s but what Bruno has on his face, Ménard has in his body.
The Morning Man

That elegance of mind gives him a harmonious behavior and I felt that though Bruno was so small, it would have been a big mistake to choose an actor who would have had the street-boy look because that's not what Robert Ménard is. I would have liked to go a bit further with Bruno into the elegance and not only the physical elegance because I feel that we could have gone much further but it meant the actors would have been exceptionally more on the set and unfortunately as I said before, we did not have the time to do that. I had 42 locations and we shot it in November/December. I'm not sure you know but I think I got very close to what I wanted to do with it. I know we all had what it took to do it. But that's my sadness, I still think we made a good film.

You said something earlier that was very interesting because it is true. I have made a very deliberate career plan. Years ago when I was in Hollywood I was offered a seven-year contract by a major studio as a writer and, in the meantime, read as much as I could. Sudden I realized that there was very little in this film? Already in the film experience I had showed that in The Morning Man. I did The Morning Man with a video assist and I personally framed each shot. So, I'm fascinated by picture but I'm the one who experiences the story, by the music of the story, by the sound of the emotions and sometimes I look at my crew and I see that they are missing so much. I wish I could share that with them, they are missing so much.

Cinema Canada: How does one communicate this feeling of enthusiasm, responsibility and creativity? There have been moments where filmmakers, as a body, were able to express themselves as a group and there was something happening. I think of the early '70s.

Daniele Suissa: I do my cultural work, my quality work for those who can appreciate it. I have no problem with that. It's very simple, unlike the distributors, that there are more of those people than we think. I want to reach different layers of people. But if you always want to give, if you don't do your work, you will want to get something for yourselves is accomplishing a lot of what I want to do. I want somebody to ask me for that and to know exactly what they want. And if you know exactly what you want, I'm going to give it to you. And that was so exciting. And our relationship grew and grew through the film because each night at rashes I was happy. I was getting what I dreamt of and he was doing his dream. And the wonderful feeling to sit down with somebody who is proud of what he has done. It's fantastic. But other people that I push like that do not understand and on the other hand, you have to protect them. And they start buckling and not liking me and they start having big problems.

Cinema Canada: When I see the kinds of projects 3 Thèmes has been involved in, especially De l'amour et du dépit, I'm very clear that you are doing projects that are culturally important. Yet, because you produce yourself, you are very aware of the market and the language in which you do your work, which comes to you with a lot of pressure. How do you gauge them? Can you tell me a bit about that?

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Daniele Suissa: Yes. They are both finished and it will open in both versions on the same day.

Cinema Canada: How do you find it works in French?
Daniele Suissa: Beautifully. I am very proud of the French adaptation. I worked very hard on it with Vincent David so that it would be as close as an original version. Therefore I personally directed all the actors during the French dub as a performance and not as a reading. Bruno dubbed himself, and we asked Kelly Ricard to dub Kerrie Keane. And I think it was a brilliant stroke because Kelly is so Saxon in her thinking process and because she is a fabulous actress her thinking process is obvious on the screen. So it was very difficult when we tried to put a French temperament, a French voice and a French rhythm behind this girl. Kelly with her beautiful French which has a slight accent but her Saxon thinking process fits into Kerrie in a fabulous way. Even I caught myself at times watching it – especially the scenes between Bruno and Kerrie because he had dubbed himself and could find all the emotions he had during the shoot – thinking that it was an original version. I am very happy about the French version.

Daniele Suissa: I don’t know. To me, culture is more universal. I’ve travelled a lot, I’ve lived in many countries. I myself am a mixture of many origins – family from Morocco, from Spain, from France and I’m a mixture of all sorts of cultures, and I feel that there are two different things. There is the ‘patrimoine’ that every country must retain and it’s beautiful. But there is also a sense of international culture – just culture for the sake of culture. I hope I’m as interested in American literature and Spanish literature as I am interested in French literature and, loving music, that I’m as interested in the German composers as I am in the French and Italian composers. It’s just a matter of my own richness and I feel that for people who are in entertainment, in the cultural industries, it is almost a duty to be widely knowledgeable.

You know, I had a funny experience. I did an industrial film some years ago for a company that was making prefab houses and we shot the pictures and then added the narration in French and in English. Then, they told me they wanted to send the thing to Brazil (it was cardboard houses for emergencies) and I speak Portuguese, so I ordered a Portuguese version from a translator and overlooked the recording of the Portuguese version. Then they asked me for a Spanish version. And I spoke Spanish before I spoke French because my grandmother is Spanish, so again I directed the narrator who did the Spanish version. And they finally came to me and said: We want to try our product in Russia, could we have a Russian version? So there I laughed and I said: that’s where I stop. But it’s not true, because I cannot stop. So, the translation company who had done the Spanish and Portuguese did the Russian version and I called CBC International and got a gentleman who could do the narration in Russian and we went into the studio. And of course he had specific lines to say on specific pictures. We had asked the translator to copy the footage exactly to the sentence. And all of a sudden I pushed a button and I said to the man: what did you say just now? And he said the last line in Russian again. I said: no, I don’t understand your language but tell me in English or in French what you just said. And he told me and I said: that’s what I thought. You are a scene ahead, this is your next line. And my mixer who had mixed all the other versions looked at me and said: don’t tell me you speak Russian too? And I said no, but my guts told me it was not the right sentence because of his emotions. Because of the emotion he put under the line I knew it was not the right moment. And that’s what I am talking about when I say entertainment, culture and cinema is an international thing.

You should be able to turn off the sound in a drama, and still retain 70 per cent of the emotion through all the layers of the subtext and the way the story is told. So, if you have knowledge of a more international culture, there are going to be things in your framing, in your display, in your understanding, in the melody of your images that are going to appeal to more than one nation, more than one culture.

Daniele Suissa: It is not an intellectual preference. I’m not a militant, and I don’t say I don’t like to work with men, it’s not true. Unfortunately, I always end up liking to work with certain individuals who end up being men and I end up enjoying working with certain individuals who end up being women. And that’s what the selection has been. The individual. Then it became so obvious that the individuals were more and more women. I find that, first of all – and Monique Leyrac and Yvette Brind’Amour are very good examples. We don’t get distracted when we work together. If we sit down to do a job, by the end of the hour or two hours we set aside to do that job, that job is done. I find that very often with my male partners, we start something and then we jump on to something else and then they say: this one will do that part, and they have a great tendency to farm out what they were supposed to do. Whereas with women, if it’s got to be done, it’s going to be done and that’s it. Fini. Over. Monique Leyrac is a fabulous example. Monique is so demanding on herself and I love her and I respect her for that. It’s so fantastic. And I hate people who are self-indulgent. I keep scolding myself all the time. I feel that I never work enough. I’m always demanding more and more of myself.

Cinema Canada: You’ve often worked with women producers: Maxine Samuels in the beginning, Anne Frank, Monique Messier, Yvette Brind’Amour, Monique Leyrac. When you talk about being able to render something without hurting people, without damaging, without offending their dignity, is there something in the ability of women today to work together which is qualitatively different than what would have been possible 15 years ago? And is this a preference on your part?
Daniele Suissa: It’s not a preference. I don’t work with women just because they are women. I work with people who I think I can work with, and I think that’s the same for men as well.

Cinema Canada: What about the responsibility of the filmmaker towards the community in which she is working? You’ve been very active and positive in the APFQ and now in the Academy of Canadian Cinema & TV and it obviously takes a lot of your time. What is your perception of one’s responsibility, where does that come from?
Daniele Suissa: Well, it comes from my philosophy of the individual. The work I do for the collective I really do for the individual. I want my work to reach excellence and if I can contribute with my efforts for the industry to reach excellence, it will be a success with the audience. And I don’t do it out of socialistic compassion, I do it out of individualistic drive. I think people as individuals have given up too much. We’ve given up our identity as individuals in a world where everything is wishy-washy. Every time I fight at the APFQ, the end-result will serve the whole industry but the personal fight is a strong belief that something was right or wrong and an effort to correct something that can be corrected.

If we had a bit more pride in what we do, we’d think: if we do this, we’d make money. I have directed 250 commercials. I’ve heard a lot of my peers saying I’m doing it for the money. I was proud to do commercials. I think it has taught me a lot of discipline. I find that wonderful discipline, a wonderful school. And I also like to help some one who has manufactured a product, be proud of that product, and create a proud image of what he/she has, I hope, proudly manufactured. It kills me when I see gas stations have to sell hamburgers and hamburgers have to sell you a refil in your car. It’s almost as if they were not proud enough of the quality of their hamburger so they also have to give you a bonus on the refil on your car.

Yesterday I had that conversation with my distributor. I said: are you going to have prizes and things like that for the exhibition of my film? And he said: yes. And I must say that hurts me. It hurts me to think that in order to bring people into the theatre we are going to give them something else other than the film.

And again this would be my conclusion if you’ll allow me – I do my work as a screenwriter, as a director and I do it for the people who are going to listen to the story and that’s the audience. And that’s really where I hope the film will be a success – with the audience.
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