

Life Classes — Searching for a Lost Heritage

Life Classes, which began shooting in Cape Breton on September 19 and is scheduled to wrap in Halifax on October 30, seems to have run like a charm. Any feature where the major problems in production can be counted on the fingers of a couple of hands qualifies as a complete success in my book.

In the last week of production the film is on schedule and on budget (at the very modest figure of \$622,000) and everyone from the producer to the focus puller seemed to agree that it had all run very smoothly. *Life Classes* is director Bill MacGillivray's fourth dramatic film and his second feature after *Stations* which was released in 1983. In contrast to the latter, which was shot on trains, planes, buses, and ferries, as well as conventional non-moving locations, from Vancouver to St. John's, and was a hornet's nest of logistical as well as other problems, MacGillivray told me that in writing the script of this film he wanted to keep the structure of the production simple (al-

though, to Art Director Mary Steckle's considerable consternation, one simple scene called for the construction of a small house to be demolished while an actress strolls along a beach reading a letter!). With this in mind the film is shot principally in two localities, one in Ingonish in Cape Breton and the other at various locations in Halifax.

This, combined with a financing package involving money from Telefilm, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, First Choice and CITY TV in Toronto, which was securely in place before production began, have undoubtedly contributed to the relative stability of the project. The other factor, as several members of the crew mentioned, is MacGillivray's own equipoise and balance. He is very much of the auteur school of filmmaking being the writer, director, film editor, and part producer of this film (as he was of *Stations* and his previous hour-long drama *Aerial View*). As such the film depends very much on his vision and he has an acute sense of just the effect he is trying to achieve in each scene. This knowledge gives him a calmness and organization which, in time, infects most of the crew. An acid test of how a production is going, the crew actually seemed relaxed and well rested in the final stages of the shoot.

The lead character of *Life Classes* is played by Newfoundland native Jacinta Cormier, who most untypically for a Newfoundlander is half-French and half-Gaelic. She has been a singer and pianist on the Atlantic music scene for some time and this is her first major film

role. The script tells the story of a young woman from Gaelic Cape Breton, Mary Cameron, who searches for a lost past and heritage. She leaves her hometown pregnant after deciding not to marry the irresponsible father of her child and comes to the big city of Halifax. There she supports herself and her child by working in a large department store where she meets Gloria, a student at the local art college. She begins modelling to try and help make ends meet. Her experiences there motivate her to take up the brush herself. Slowly she discovers her heritage through her art and finds a purpose to her life. The film finishes with Mary returning to Cape Breton to the community she had once left behind.

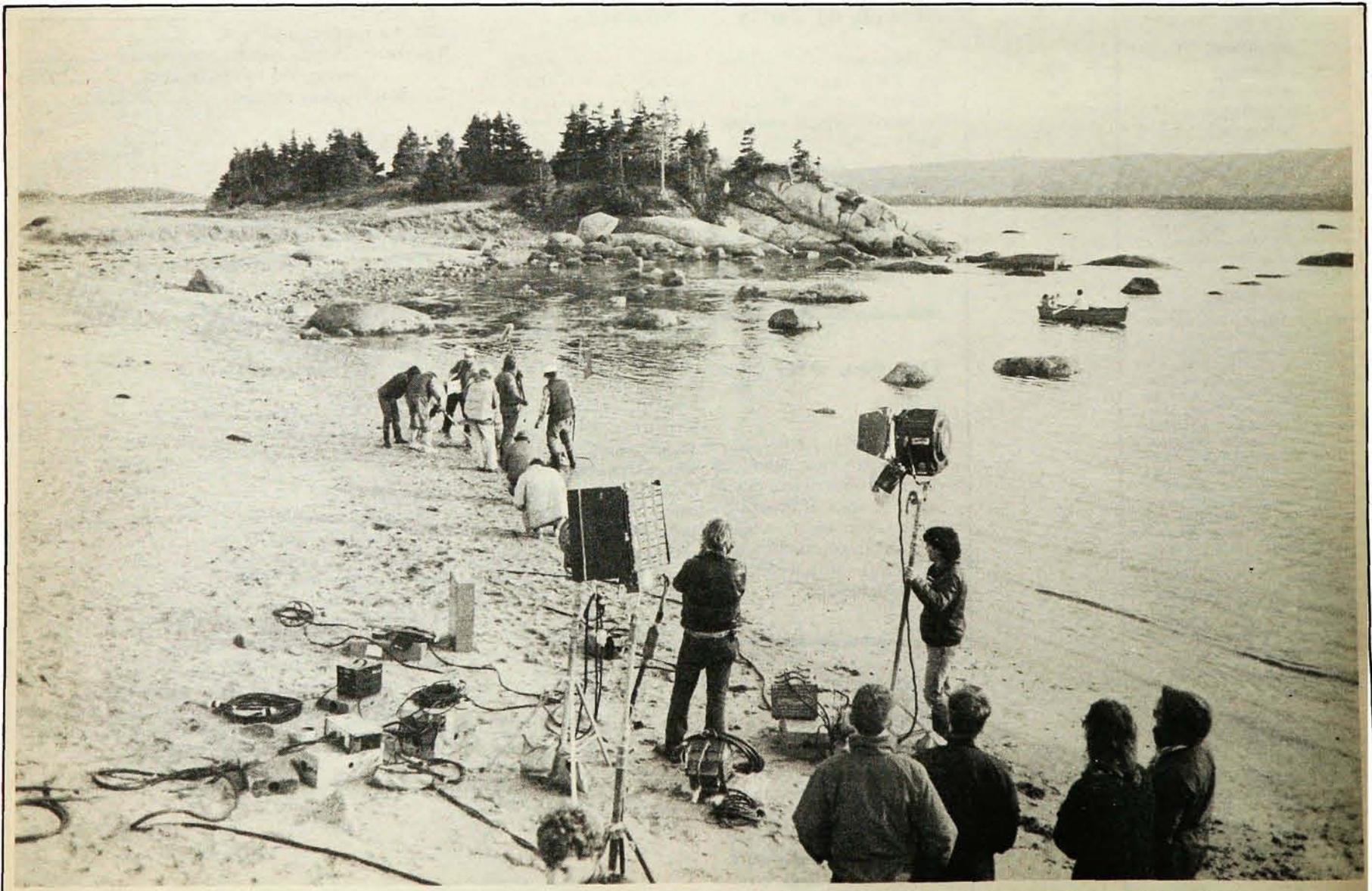
Ms. Cormier feels that her background has been an asset in creating the role of Mary. She sees the character as one she herself might very well have become had she not left home at the age of 15 to pursue a career as a performer and musician.

The cast seems to be weighed heavily in favour of musicians with freewheeling vocalist, composer, musician (founder of the legendary band, "Buddy and the Boys") and Cape Breton native Leon Dubinsky playing the lead male role, Earl. He plays Mary's boyfriend and the owner of a pirate satellite-dish video service. This is his first major role in film although he has often acted on the stage. He told me he felt that in going from performing Shakespeare on stage to MacGillivray's very understated filmic style, he had spanned the entire spectrum of acting experience.

This film is another artistic collaboration between MacGillivray and cinematographer Lionel Simmons who has been the former's cinematic eyes on virtually every one of his films (documentaries as well as dramas). The film is being shot on a modified Aaton in super 16mm with clear plans to go for the blow-up to 35mm in the hope of a theatrical release. This has been the source of some concern since producer Stephan Reynolds told me that he felt labs in Canada were not yet fully prepared to properly deal with the new format. There have been some problems with emulsion scratches from both the lab and the camera but nothing so serious that it can't be repaired through wet-gating. In an unusual twist (particularly for a Maritime production), the bulk of the production equipment was rented out of Boston since Simmons found that the busy shooting season in Toronto and Montreal had tied up much of the gear he was interested in.

The crew numbers 28 people and there are eight principal roles and over 180 extras and minor parts. MacGillivray himself will be doing the editing and the schedule calls for a fine cut by the middle of February and a release print by the end of April, '87. If post-production continues to go as smoothly as production has we can expect that by the spring *Life Classes* will join *Stations* and *Aerial View* in a trilogy chronicling the quandaries, values and ethics of contemporary Atlantic Canada.

Christopher Majka •



• On the waterfront in Ingonish with The Picture Plant

Un Zoo la nuit

Almost immediately after being ushered on to the set of Oz Productions' \$1.9 million **Un Zoo la nuit**, co-producer Roger Frappier proudly points out that the camera team (except for director of photography Guy Dufaux) is exclusively made up of women. "You'll observe," he says, "that on this set, women hold positions traditionally occupied by men." First assistant camerawoman, Nathalie Moliavko-Visotzky, later adds: "This is the only two-woman camera team I can think of (in the private sector)."

According to Nicole Matton of the STCQ (Syndicat des techniciennes et techniciens du cinéma du Québec), Visotzky's remark is highly relevant, considering that there are only two first and three second assistant camerawomen in the union.

Upon examining the set, however, an interesting contrast emerges. We are in a small, typical Italian restaurant in Montreal's West End. Among the array of Italian liqueurs, pastries, and confections, filling the bar's wall unit are numerous pictures of male hunters and fishermen posing with their catch. Overlooking the typical football machine in the corner, the espresso machine on the counter, and the poster of an all-male soccer team, stuffed heads of deer, wolf, bear, and moose hang on the walls. Undoubtedly, a male universe.

To a certain degree, this is a reflection of the entire film, which contains only two secondary, female characters. "That is not to say the film is anti-woman or anti-feminist. Not at all... Quite simply, it's a film that is more interested in men than in women," says Dufaux.

Zoo is primarily the story of a relationship between two men: a father and his son. Marcel (Gilles Maheu), the son, has just been released from prison. His father, Albert (Roger Lebel) is now alone, and dying. What's more, two corrupt cops relentlessly pursue Marcel, forcing him to renew their illegal association. With fatal walls closing in on

them, Marcel and Albert, who never really got along, now urgently make up for lost time. Albert constantly dreams of the hunt, and so Marcel wants to oblige him one last time. Yet the woods are too far for the little time they have left. Where else to go but a zoo in the night...

The emotional range of the characters is what attracted Maheu and Lebel to this film. Says Maheu, "The violence of certain scenes (which depict male rape, murder, and "hunting") will shock people since it's beyond what is normally seen in the media... but the tenderness between father and son, so clearly presented, will also break down some barriers."

Made-up and in costume, Maheu, dressed in black and with his dark hair slicked back, possesses the hard, urban look of his character. Yet beneath the slightly weathered face, his small brown eyes, like his laugh, have the warmth of a child. Interestingly, he embodies this composite of emotional opposites.

At 38, this is Maheu's first film role. His background is in theatre, specifically the European school of corporal theatre as taught by Etienne Decroux, Yves Lebreton, and Eugenio Barba.

Maheu talks about distinctions between theatre and film acting. "To me, cinema is inward, while theatre is outward. In cinema, there is an implosion; in theatre, an explosion... film involves a different kind of concentration and technique, whereby there is no chronology to your performance, where your movements are more finely orchestrated with respect to the frame, and where characterization is expressed in time spans of 30 seconds."

Earlier in the day, Maheu's scene was broken up into two shots, each of which lasted about 30 seconds.

Director Jean-Claude Lauzon remains soft-spoken in his criticism after each take, occasionally hugging Maheu after a successful one. There appears to be no tension on the set; the first assistant director hardly has to raise his voice to achieve total silence. Part of the reason for this is that for five to six weeks prior to shooting, nearly the entire film was rehearsed on video. This permitted Lauzon and crew to have a more practical focus on how to construct the film. For Maheu, this allowed more opportunity to study his character, while at the same time establishing a rapport with his fellow actors, most important among them being Roger Lebel.

Lebel is a veteran performer of theatre, television, and film, and as such has that kind of ubiquitous face that is nevertheless still hard to place. Lebel is a graduate of the Conservatoire d'art dramatique in Quebec City. He's worked in television, theatre and in such films as **Les Bons Débarras** and **Réjeanne Padovani**. Presently, he can be seen as Police Chief Lamothe on the TV series **L'Agent fait le bonheur**.

With such an extensive background, how did he study for this role? "Well, I'll tell you one thing I didn't have to study - Albert's cardiac problem. I did a play once at Place des Arts called *The Last of the Don Juans*. It's the story of a man who at 50 decides to risk an affair for the first time in his life." What happened? "Nothing. I had a heart attack by the second act of opening night. My second one. Although I was back to work the next day." We both laugh heartily at a not-so-funny situation made funny by Lebel's good nature.

The other thing that is evident is Lebel's confidence in Lauzon, who knows what he wants in all aspects of

production. He should. He has been trying to get this film off the ground for over four years.

Zoo's screenplay is also written by Lauzon. This idiosyncratic world of men and hunting and some of the events in the film are autobiographical. Hence, there are questions that can be answered only by him. "Ask Jean-Claude," is a common refrain on the set. By early afternoon however, film publicist Pascale Hébert informs me that Jean-Claude prefers not to be asked anything. During the shoot he needs to concentrate on only one thing, and that is making his film.

Hébert explains: "He is under a lot of pressure. This is his first feature. (He made a short called **Piwi** in 1981 which won the jury prize at the Montreal World Film Festival.) He doesn't have a string of hits behind him. Also, contrary to a decade ago, young filmmakers are not protected by the tax shelter wave or the NFB. He can't afford to miss his chance."

Sherif Atallah •



SdR shoots Yves Saint Laurent for the Dominion Fashion Collection
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• Ready to roll, director Lauzon with Guy Dufaux and Nathalie Moliavko Visotzky



photo: Lyne Charlebois

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