

Robert Ménard's

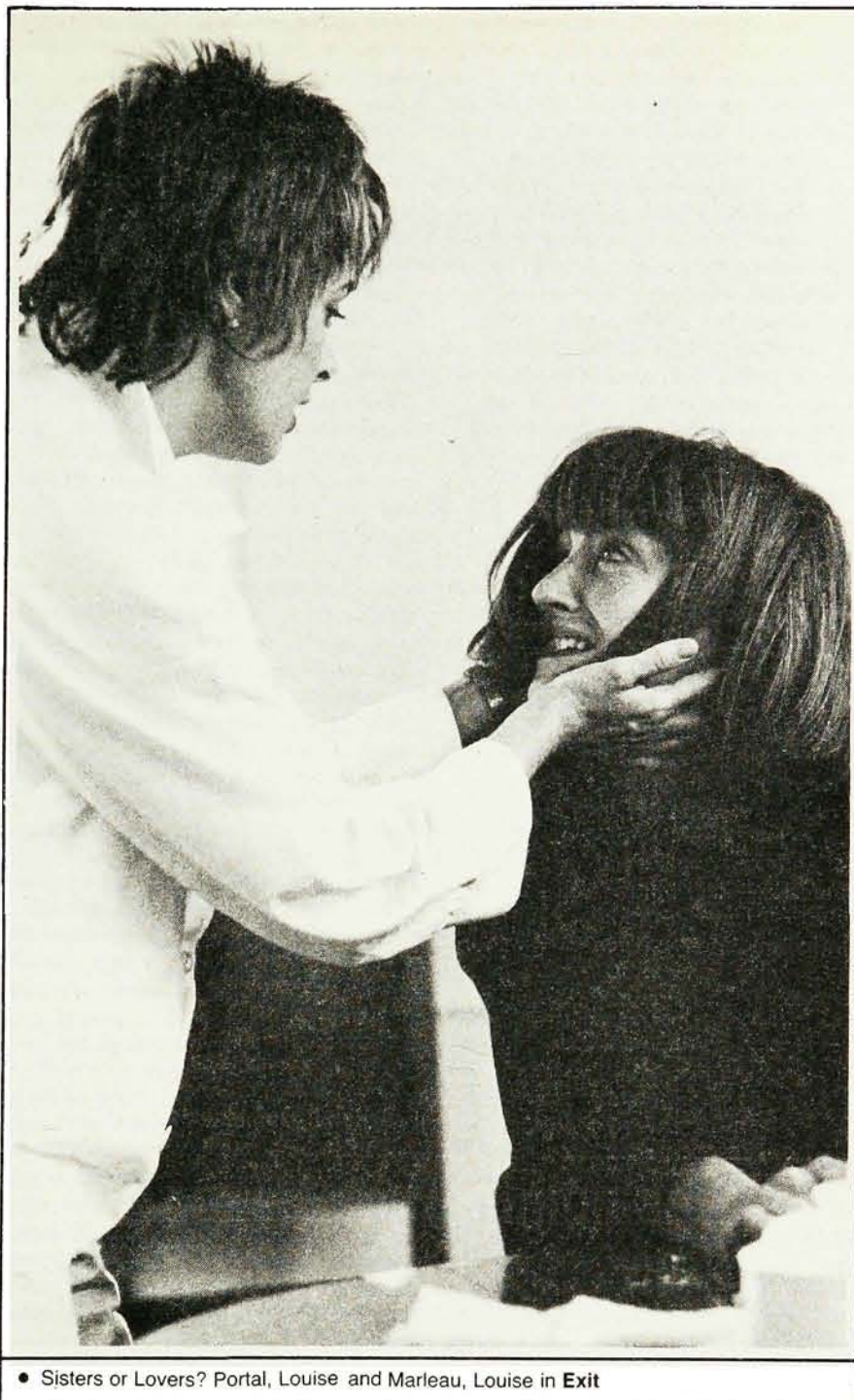
Exit

The same evening I saw *Exit*, I happened to catch Louise Marleau on TV promoting this "psychological thriller" she's the star of. And Marleau gave a very concrete version of the various motivations of the character Marie, the ghost-tormented composer whose descent into creative madness she portrays. What was interesting about Marleau's account was how much clearer it was than the film I'd just seen.

Exit is a film that, on the surface at least, had everything going for it: Quebec's Garbo as its lead; the legendary Pierre Mignot as director of photography; Robert Ménard as director (Ménard's earlier feature, *Une Journée en taxi*, was excellent); and a supporting cast that includes such talents as Pierre Curzi, John Wildman, and Louise Portal (who plays, Marleau revealed on TV, Marie's sister, though you wouldn't know this from seeing the film). And yet *Exit* doesn't work, at least not for this reviewer — despite Marleau, despite Mignot, despite Wildman who never amounts to more than an overage Ricky Schroder, and despite *tutti quanti*. Or rather it just collapses into Outremont melodrama, a Perils of Pauline saccharine saga which, if it is about anything, is about the sanctity of private property, all of which may of course be exactly what its producers (and broadcaster Tele-Metropole who kicked in a third of the budget) intended.

Yet there is in Québécois film and TV production a definite genre one could call "Outremont melodrama" which ranges from silly soap-operas of the *Jamais deux sans toi* variety to serious soap-operas of the *M. Le Ministre* kind to the scathing *Déclin de l'empire américain* or the trendy *Anne Trister*. What there's never been yet, in this genre, is a film that would attempt to explore some of the unconscious terrors of social arrivisme, the dark horrors of owning a big house on Bloomfield; in short, the psychic or internal costs of embourgeoisement, the total lifestyle commitment to keeping, up appearances come what may. And, taking *Exit* seriously for a moment, this is what the film might have been, but isn't.

Another thing *Exit* might have been, still taking it seriously (if less so), is an allegory for creativity. Once upon a time, Marie, brilliant young composer, was in love with John (John Wildman), her rival at the Conservatory. For reasons never explained, he is killed in an "accident" and she's left feeling mighty guilty. So she quits composing, marries a guy in a silk suit with an Audi (Pierre Curzi), has a kid and a big house on Outremont Park, and runs her own successful music school for children. Marie's got it made, right? Wrong! There are creative yearnings that take the form of hallucinating John at the piano tormenting her with a concerto



• Sisters or Lovers? Portal, Louise and Marleau, Louise in *Exit*

he'd written for her. Hubby, perhaps annoyed by her harping on about John, dumps her, but she keeps the big house, the kid and the Volvo, renting out the garage to some sleazebag (Michel Côté) she takes up with. There are (very) veiled intimations of (sexual) kinkiness between her and Simon, the guy (and a gun turns up in his van). But there's not enough mystery to satisfy her creative yearnings. She keeps hallucinating John tickling the ivories. In the propriety of her Outremont living-room, no less! And this drives her crazy.

Much craziness later, Marie pulls herself together enough to go consult a spiritualist (who seems to do a whopping trade in assuaging the psychic terrors of unhappy bourgeois). She explains that access to the creative is blocked by a thick layer of junk called "the astral" which at its lowest levels consists of criminality (and bad movies?) and at its highest, religion and spirituality. John, the medium explains, is trying to prevent Marie from breaking through to her creativity. (Actually the sequence with the medium contains a very interesting theory of psychic mem-

ory that would be worth going into in more detail if *Exit* were a better film. As it isn't, I won't.)

Marie screws up her courage and returns to the big Outremont house. There, armed with her piano, she battles with the ghost of John until her creativity has beaten him into submission and he vaporizes. Marie, now reassured that she too is a creative genius, wanders out of the big house, truly hers at last, and in the early morning sunlight, goes for a swing in the park. There, no doubt, to contemplate a career in real estate. Roll credits.

There's still another level of reading one can give *Exit*, one that's gender-specific within the general allegory of creativity. And this would be about women grappling with the guilt of abandoning the mother/house role — it's significant here that one of the first shots of Marie's kid shows him wearing vampire make-up — and becoming ego-based "creative" types of their own, like men. But there's little to be gained in overloading *Exit* with interpretations, since the film itself can't support them or, at best, only does so weakly.

For the principal problem with *Exit* is not Marleau who gives it everything she's got (from "sexy sultriness" to wailing and shrieking) nor the technicalities of filmmaking (though a boom mike wanders into the top of the frame at one point, which is always exasperating) nor the script, which despite a certain emotional woodenness from time-to-time, seems to pull itself together; it's the direction. And here the failing is that of a misreading of basic codes: why have menacing and creepy Michel Côté machoing about bare-chested and in tight jeans unless he's going to actually do something to Marie, not as it happens to ask her to dance for him? Why have Louise Portal soaking in the bathtub to menacing music while the camera travels slowly in towards her unless something is about to happen to her, instead of just cutting away to the next scene? Why have Portal and Marleau floating about naked in a pool, Portal tenderly holding Marleau, unless it's to lead up to sex of some or other kind? But Marleau informs us Portal is Marie's sister, so what's the point of the scene? After much dramatic carrying on by Marie at her school late one night and her hallucinating that Simon is strangling her, followed by his sudden arrival, the film cuts to the next day as the children are getting ready for class, when Marie's assistant makes what appears to be a horrifying discovery when she looks into the room Simon and Marie were carrying on in the night before; why does the viewer not get to see what the assistant saw? Because there's nothing there. And that, regrettably, must serve as a judgment about *Exit* itself.

Well, not utterly. The one thing *Exit* does have to show for itself is a thumping musical score by Richard Grégoire and Marie Bernard, including some wonderfully passionate pianowork. It's real movie music that plucks at the heartstrings with such gusto you can feel your handkerchief getting drenched as you sit there. It's the kind of sentimental excess that could allow a film director to get away with murder. Ménard doesn't.

Michael Dorland •

EXIT d. and p. Robert Ménard p. and sc. Monique H. Messier prod. sec. Johane La Barre p.man. Lorraine Richard p. co-ord. Nicole Hilaréguy loc. man. Luc Martineau p.a. Lucie Bouliane. Claude Laflamme, Marie-Claude Larouche p. acct. Daniel Demers, Louise Supré 1st a.d. Michel Gauthier 2nd a.d. Louis-Philippe Rochon cont. Claudette Messier d.o.p. Pierre Mignot cam. Jean Lépine 1st asst. cam. René Daigle 2nd asst. cam. Sylvie Rosenthal photog. Pierre Dury sound Serge Beauchemin boom Thierry Hoffman gaffer Daniel Chrétien elec. Marc Charlebois, André Sheridan key grip Emmanuel Lépine, Robert Auclair art. dir. Françoise Séguin assist to art. dir. Blanche Boileau sets Patrice Bengle assist sets Ian Lavoie cost. des. Michèle Hamel ward Martine D. Picard hair Pierre Sindonbs make-up Réjean Forget pub. Suzanne Villeneuve l.p. Louise Marleau, Michel Côté. Gabriel Panaccio, Louise Portal, John Wildman, Pierre Curzi, Sophie Clément, Marie-Michèle Desrosiers, Germain Houde, Lise Roy, Luis Saraiva, Claude Tremblay, Pierre Aubert, Francine Ruel, Sarah Salvy, Diane Miljours, Tristan Bernier, Jean-Bruno Cordeau, Gaston Perrault, Jr., Lorraine Prieur, Emilie Phaneuf, André Pélouquin, Estelle Holmes, Anne-Marie Leduc, Lauréat Lestellier, Christine Séguin, Michel-René Labelle. p.c. Les productions Videofilms Ltée with financial participation from Telefilm, la Société générale du cinéma du Québec and Télé-Metropole Inc. colour 35mm running time: 97 min.