

Denyse Benoit's

Le Dernier havre

Le Dernier havre (*The Last Harbor*) is a film scripted and directed by Denyse Benoit from a novel by Yves Thériault. One of the great names of Québécois literature, both popular and critically successful, Yves Thériault is a man with little education. He is known for his stories of the common man in Québécois society; the woodsmen, fishermen and farmers of French-Canadian origin, as well as the Indians and Eskimos.

His two best known works, *Agaguk* and *Ashini* have as their principal character an Eskimo and an Indian respectively. In *Textes et documents*, a collection of comments on his own work, Thériault states that there is within him a continual concern with the hopes and aspirations of minority groups faced with the power of the majority. In the same article, however, he refutes the pretensions of critics who have found in *Ashini* (the story of an Indian chief who wants to give back to his people their pride and their ancient way of life) a symbol for the dispossessed French-Canadian. However, in reading his novels it is hard not to see his concern for the preservation of minority cultures as a concern which stems from his own experience as a Québécois. This concern is allied to the recurrent theme of man's relationship to nature and the forces of the universe.

Le Dernier havre (1970) is the story of an old Québécois fisherman who lives in a little fishing village in the Gaspé. Somewhere between 80 and 90 years old, he knows that his days are numbered and resents the indignities of a useless life. In the modern world of mechanized fishing there is no place for his knowledge and skill. The novel has two main symbols, the restrictive society of the village and the limitless freedom of the ocean. For him the modern

ways which have overtaken the fishing industry are chains, traps, servitude.

Belonging to a big fishing company and fishing by the ton in huge trawlers is the lot of his son (a lot which the son seems happy enough to accept, since it has brought prosperity) but it is a fate which the old man despises. He also despises the other old men of the village who have accepted their lot as "old men" and have turned their backs to the sea. Most of his time is spent avoiding the restrictive interest of the village society and especially the watchful eye of his daughter-in-law. For the old man has found a boat, an old fishing barge, abandoned but, like himself, still seaworthy. His struggle to bring this boat back to life and launch it into the sea again, without the knowledge of the village, forms the core of the plot in the novel.

The film is fairly faithful to the events of the novel but somehow misses the essential meaning of the book. Most of Denyse Benoit's previous work has been in the theatre (she has made only one other film) and the main focus of the film is on the personality of the well-known Québécois actor, Paul Hébert, who plays the old fisherman. He has received much praise from the French critics for his wonderfully appealing performance. Indeed he does portray the old fisherman as an appealingly whimsical, cordial old man who has a mystical relationship to the sea.

I suppose it is always a mistake to read the book first but this certainly didn't fit the image I had formed of a cantankerous and wilfully independent old man whose views of the society around him were closer to contempt than to benign amusement. But it is not only the character of the old man which has changed, the whole atmosphere of the story has become much sunnier and more optimistic than that of the book. This is, after all, a book which ends in a suicide. For the old man eventually fixes up the boat, takes it out for one last, glorious sail on the limitless ocean, and then pulls the plug and drowns. In the movie, this last action hardly seems credible. There has been so much sunniness throughout the film that we are unprepared for such a drastic ending.

The daughter-in-law, who in the book would not even let him sit in his favourite chair by the fire, has become round and jolly and sweetly concerned for his welfare. The lovely children and warm family life of his son are well in evidence although we never really see them in the novel. The inhibited ways of the village become the nosy curiosity of funny old men. The sea, with its darkness and its storms, has become picture postcard pretty and so has the rest of the village. I have nothing against the classic beauty of Roger Vanherweghem's cinematography but it is symptomatic of the undercutting of the novel's themes by the resolute optimism of the film.

I do have something against the music. Every time the old man goes back to his abandoned boat, sweet, syrupy orchestral music fills the theatre. Like all the previous elements, the music adds to the sentimentalisation of the character and the story. His relationship to the sea becomes a purely mystical one. This is established from the beginning of the film, where we see him as a young boy entranced by the ocean, and is carried over to the old man by a cut from the young boy looking out at the sea to the same shot with the old man replacing the boy. It is emphasized by the flashbacks which give us his memories of the sea and of the same boy leading his boat through a fog. In the novel the boat is led by a small child who, it seems to me is the Infant Jesus, which changes the import of the scene considerably. In the film, the old man sees visions of the sea while sitting in a bar and there is a young girl, Agathe, after whom he names his boat and who is also somehow symbolic of the depths of the ocean. None of these elements are in the novel. His only motivations for committing suicide in the film become the fact that he is getting old (although Paul Hébert only looks about 65), and his mystical, poetic love of the ocean. Something seems to be missing. There is a strength in the novel, a darkness of vision which is totally absent from the film.

It is true that the old man in the novel loves the ocean but it is not a purely poetic love. It is also a love for an inde-

pendent way of life. One where a man's skill, strength and luck was needed to wrest a living, and to stay alive in his small boat on a not always benign sea. It is an independence which has vanished with the coming of a modern, industrial society. The old man is sickened by this loss of independence, not only for himself, but for the whole community. It seems to me that his suicide is very like the suicide of the Indian chief in *Ashini* — an act of protest, a last wilful act of independence. At the end of *Ashini*, the chief goes to the Happy Hunting Grounds and is in high favour with the great Manitou for the heroic battle he has fought for his people, a battle to give them back their pride and their independence. It is a battle without hope but a courageous one and his last act in this battle is a suicide which, I believe, is very like the suicide of the old fisherman.

It is true that translating a work of literature into a popular medium does tend to change the ideology of the text to a more acceptable fit with the tenets of society. Thériault himself wrote many radio plays and often repeated the themes of his novels in the plays and vice versa. As a matter of fact, since the novel is written as a monologue, it could easily have become a radio play. Possibly this is one of the problems with the film since the old man's point-of-view cannot come across as strongly without the interior monologue. This film does seem to be an example of the theme of a work of literature being changed to suit mass-media taste.

The optimistic tone of the film is interesting in terms of what appears to be a general trend in the Québécois films of the '80s. If in the '70s Québécois films became known for their miserableness, focusing on the alienated and disaffected within Québécois society, the tone of recent films (such as *Le Matou*) have taken a more positive stand towards Quebec's society and the opportunities it offers the individual. I think it is this climate of optimism which *Le Dernier havre* reflects, but it is a climate ill-suited for a faithful rendition of Yves Thériault's vision.

Mary Alemany-Galway •

• Robert Rivard and Paul Hébert as the old men and the sea



LE DERNIER HAVRE d. Denyse Benoit in collaboration w. p. Marc Daigle assoc. p. Danny Chalifou assist d. Carle Delaroche-Vernet sc. and adapt. Denyse Benoit sc. consult. Jean-Pierre Lefebvre d.o.p. Robert Vanherweghem original m. Alain Payette film ed. François Dupuis sd. ed. Jean-Pierre Cereghetti make-up Nicole Lapierre ward. Mary-Jane Wallace p.a. Robert Giroux, Sylvie Cayouette cont. Monique Gervais assist. cam. Claude Brasseur photos Pierre-Jean Gauthier elec. Denis Ménard assist. elec. Conrad Roy grip Jacques Girard art d. Hughes Tremblay asst. art d. Georges Léonard, César Dessi s. Esther Auger, Yves St-Jean asst. s. Marie-Andrée Lamoureux asst eds. Florence Moureaux, Anne-Marie Leduc sds. eff. Andy Malcolm asst. sd. eff. Kathryn Crosthwait voice re-rec. Michel Charron post. sync Hubert Fielden m.rec. and mix Paul Pagé musicians Alain Payette, Marc Bélanger, Bernard Jean, Marcel St. Jacques, Céline Cléroux add. m. Alain Décy, Martine Michaud mixer Michel Descombes, André Gagnon sec. Monette Brown, Suzanne Castellino, Denise d'Amours admin. Marina Darveau lab. Bellevue Pathé sd. lab. Sonolab titres Ciné-titres Opt. Film Docteur du Québec neg. ed. Negbec. lp. Paul Hébert, Louise Dussault, Claude Gauthier, Robert Rivard, Jean-Marc Cereghetti, Jean Richard, Jean-Guy Moreau, Marc Legault, Marcel Huard, Chloé Sainte-Marie, Rolland Bédard, Noël Moisan, Roxanne Babin, Benoît Arsenault, Paul Simier, Camille Desmarais, Bernard Fortin, Eric Gaudry, Walter Massey, Jean-Louise Millette, Jean-Luc Montminy, Denyse Patry, Olivier Thiboutot and the people of Bonaventure, Baie des Chaleurs. p.c. Telefilm Canada, La Société générale du cinéma du Québec and Prima films. colour 35mm running time: 83 min.