Yves Simoneau's Les Fous de Bassan

Yves Simoneau’s Les Fous de Bassan (renamed In the Shadow of the Wind for the English subtitled version) is a literate, overly literary, well-cast and visually beautiful adaptation of Anne Hébert’s prize-winning novel.

The Fou de Bassan is a gannet, akin to a goose, a large bird that breeds in the rookeries of offshore islands and survives by diving into the ocean for fish. Griffin Creek, the small, isolated, English Protestant fishing community in Percé, in Gaspésie, where the film is set (though it was actually shot on Île Bonaventure), is surrounded by these birds. Stevens Brown (Steve Banner), the protagonist and one-time fisherman, returns to Griffin Creek from Florida after a self-imposed exile of five years for beating up his father. He finds that, like the gannets, the community is still tied to the rock they inhabit by their reliance on fish. The people of Griffin Creek continue fishing and interbreeding, as hypocritical, incestuous and repressed as ever. And as impossible to escape from.

The film opens with an image of Brown, lying unconscious on the shore, being buffeted by the tide like a piece of driftwood. His cousin Olivia (Charlotte Valandrey), out for a full-moon brood, sees him lying there and turns him on his back. He wakes up, sees her and becomes possessed by a sudden surge of energy. As a voice-over tells us that they are both “thrown into the fury of the wind.” Brown rapes her. In a few shots Simoneau has thus laid the groundwork for the repressed, Protestant variety of Grand Guignol that is to follow.

Les Fous de Bassan is narrated by an old, decrepit Stevens Brown in a room full of paintings of the people who were part of his life. The tale is told as a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards after which we always return to the old Brown (played with great style by Jean-Louis Millette) for a poetic summing up.

In individual scenes, however, the director forgets that we are supposed to be seeing things from Brown’s point-of-view and Brown himself becomes subject to the gaze of others. Thus to the rape young Nora (Laure Marsac), whose every move threatens to bust her shirt open. He’s the very essence of “a demon,” she says, giggling, before her first attempt at seducing him. The old saying that one can make a very good movie from a second-rate book but that one can’t make a good movie from a good book seems to me to hold true for Les Fous. It’s not that the screenwriters were overly faithful to the book — they felt free enough to reshape its structure for the film and to eliminate characters as they felt necessary. I think the problem is that they tried to transpose the literary qualities of Les Fous to the screen. The film has ‘Art’ and ‘Important’ written all over it and is as unwieldy and over-inflated as an old MGM ‘prestige’ picture.

Lillian Hellman is but one of many playwrights who have commented on how dialogue which works in a novel or a short story often tends to be rewritten from an actor’s lips. For Les Fous, Chad has lifted some lines directly from the book. The rest he wrote in a similar vein. Lines like, “My body remembers how cold your hands were the first time you touched me when you brought me into the world. I must say I too love you.” I still feel desire for you,” “You’d make a pretty little vixen,” and, “Somewhere from inside the storm I heard a cry,” are supposed to sound poetic but they just sound silly and slow down the film.

The choice of dialogue points to a basic flaw in the very conceptualization of the adaptation which affects the tone and style of the entire production. Les Fous de Bassan is like using the best materials to build a dream house but laying it’s foundation on a marsh. It’s a beautiful effort but it can’t help but sink.

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