

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 rocks of off-shore 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, 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 ripe young Nora (Laure Marsac), whose every move threatens to bust her shirt open, he's the very essence of temptation, "a demon," she says, giggling, before her first attempt at seducing him. To the widowed Maureen (Angèle Coutru) he is not only a help around the house and a source of sexual succor but he gives meaning to time. To the majority of the community, he is a disruptive force.

One of the characteristics of Griffin Creek is that everyone sees everything. In one of the first scenes, Brown's mad brother Perceval (Lothaire Bluteau) is watching Olivia and Nora Atkins bathing while Brown is watching his



• Laure Marsac and Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou are lustbirds in *Les Fous de Bassan*

brother. Olivia and Stevens are first prevented from getting intimate by the abrupt appearance of Olivia's brother. Later, the arrival of Nora constitutes yet another pre-coitus interruptus. Finally, Perceval's spying on Reverend Jones (Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou) and Nora will be the reason for the suicide of Irène (Marie Tifo), the Pastor's wife.

"Anyone can be someone else's demon," says the Pastor in one scene. "We must struggle against our innermost thoughts. We must beware of our stares. It is through them demons enter."

In *Les Fous de Bassan* almost all the main characters are related by blood. Maureen, the widow with whom Stevens is living, is his cousin as are Nora and Olivia. All are thinking about, staring at, and lusting after each other. The Pastor (whose barren wife no longer wants to have intercourse) lusts after Nora who lusts after Stevens who's sleeping with Maureen but whose love for Olivia remains unrequited. Each has indeed become each other's demon.

Simoneau has become a superb director. He not only has an eye for what to film and how to frame each shot, he also knows enough about moving the camera and the editing process to give each scene rhythm and movement. He's no slouch with the sound-tracks either. For example, to show Irène's asexuality, Simoneau begins a scene of her making supper by first showing us the fish she

is about to gut before cutting to her face. The sound that accompanies the wrenching of the entrails is appropriately off-putting. Clichéd or not, this and similar use of other images translate into a shorthand with which maximum meaning is creatively conveyed with a minimum of fuss.

Yet, the talents of Simoneau and those of a uniformly excellent cast and crew are not enough to overcome a turgid script which bogs the film down and for which Simoneau is partly responsible. (He and Marcel Beaulieu co-adapted the novel. Sheldon Chad is guilty of the screenplay.)

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 tumbles like dead-weight from an actor's lips. For *Les Fous*, Chad has lifted some lines di-

rectly 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 its foundation on a marsh. It's a beautiful effort but it can't help but sink.

José Arroyo •

LES FOUS DE BASSAN p. Justine Héroux assoc. p./prod. man. Roger Héroux sc. Sheldon Chad adaptation Marcel Beaulieu, Yves Simoneau music Richard Grégoire art d. Michel Proulx d.o.p. Alain Dostie cost. design Nicole Pelletier chief ed. Joëlle van Effenterre sd. ed. Paul Dion sd. Jean-Charles Ruault 1st a.d. Mireille Goulet cont. Monique Champagne l.p. Steve Banner, Charlotte Valandrey, Laure Marsac, Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou Lothaire Bluteau, Marie Tifo, Paul Hébert, Angèle Coutru, Roland Chenil, Guy Thauvette, Denise Gagnon Pierre Powers, Henry Classé, Jocelyn Bérubé. Jena-Louis Millette. running time 107 min. color 35 mm.