

Dorothy Todd-Hénault's
Firewords

The Euguélonne landed on the planet earth in 1976 and Quebec literature has never been quite the same since. The first images of **Firewords** convey a sense of the shock and excitement which came of this encounter between an extraterrestrial and the very ordinary sexism of our world (and between Louky Bersianik's novel, *The Euguélonne* and its readers). Greeted by the platitudes of male predominance, the wide-eyed Euguélonne can only reply with a great burst of incredulous laughter. We laugh too, so overwhelming still is the disparity between the limpid logic of this outsider and the sophistries of our times.

L'Euguélonne was Québec's first feminist novel. In the 10 years since its publication, feminist writing has become one of the most productive branches of Quebec letters. **Firewords** (*Les terribles vivantes* is the title of the French original) is a film portrait directed by Dorothy Todd-Hénault of three of the most important feminist writers: Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard. Over and above its portrayal of these women, the film can be considered to be about feminist writing itself: writing which is self-consciously different and convinced of the need to open up a new cultural space.

Bersianik, Marchessault and Brossard are well-known public figures in Quebec. Nicole Brossard's literary reputation was established long ago and she is a regular figure at international writers' encounters. Bersianik most recently took up a public role in writing a long and vitriolic critique of the male chauvinism in Denys Arcand's **Decline of the American Empire**; her article launched a polemic lasting several weeks in *Le Devoir*. Jovette Marchessault has become known to the public principally through her theatre, whose success has by no means been limited to feminist audiences.

As a film about these writers, **Firewords** had to face a complex challenge. Bersianik and Brossard (and to a lesser extent Marchessault) are essentially theorists and their principal subject is words. How to make a film about words? The film chooses to punctuate interviews with excerpts from the writers' works and to draw on maximum visual resources to build on the impact of the words. For some audiences, this visual effort will seem necessary; for others it will seem superfluous and distracting.

The first third of the film, devoted to Louky Bersianik, is certainly the most dramatically successful. Her words call for no illustration: her speech, like her writing, is imaginative, colourful and given to pithy formulas. What other writer uses etymologies as a basis for characterizations, shows how words are



• Pol Pelletier dramatizes Firewords

photo: Sarah Butterfield

the very incarnation of the histories they represent? Her genius is to come up with seemingly simple but arresting images and expressions which express complex historical and philosophical ideas: the picnic on the Acropolis; the Euguélonne as the parody of the Evangelist; "women are adjectives."

The film shifts into a different mode with Jovette Marchessault. Here there is less emphasis on theory and more on autobiography; in fact Marchessault has an astounding story to tell. She began painting out of a desperate need to create ("I would become an artist or die") and took a job as a cleaning lady to support herself as a painter. Seeing one of her paintings hung beside a Riopelle and a Chagall, on the wall of an office she had come to clean, finally convinced her to give up her double life. The film offers some striking views of Jovette's sculptures, her *femmes telluriques*, placed here and there among the chickens, kittens and shrubbery of her farm.

Besides these images and those of her animals, which are obviously motivated by the material, Jovette's words are abundantly illustrated. A short text on Jovette's relationship with her grandmother is reenacted and the addition of animated figures superimposed on these images seems excessive. The language of the narrative is itself strongly suggestive; the use of actual illustration

only seems to weaken the evocative power of the language. Other kinds of images seem frankly extraneous: very Anglo-Saxon tennis players appear when tennis is mentioned; immigrant women crowd the sidewalks when they come up in the conversation.

The problem of the *function* of images runs right through the film. Images are used in two ways. There are some motifs (like the spiral, or waves) which are used repeatedly and suggestively; but most of the images, like the musical script, seem to be used primarily to illustrate the ideas in the text (for instance Brossard says "explode" and firewords follow). This mimetic use of sound and image tends to distract from the power of the words themselves.

The atmosphere of the city at night is used very effectively in the section on Nicole Brossard. Brossard is very much an urban writer, and the sensual quality of the images here counteracts somewhat the abstraction of Brossard's ideas. (Although the abstraction is perhaps an illusion: Brossard speaks with disarming clarity. And her illustration, chalk in hand, is most useful).

With this third part of the film, we become aware of some recurring themes brought up by the three writers which take on fuller dimensions as they are repeated. All three writers speak of the revelation which at one point changed them from struggling and hesitant

voices into writers convinced that their first audience was primarily female. Brossard says she became "like a fish in water." All three speak of the difficult personal decisions which came of this choice and of their need to adopt a lifestyle consistent with their goals as writers. Remaining at a level of fundamental exposition (a framework which excludes self-critique or a sense of the evolution of their ideas and practice), all three express a non-violent ecological vision of feminism.

The two appearances of Pol Pelletier in the film (her face a marvel of intensity as the Euguélonne, her performance of *My Mother is a Cow* a disconcerting blend of tenderness and violence) are an attraction in itself.

The work of Bersianik, Marchessault and Brossard is intimately tied to the development of feminist thought and practice in Quebec. If the feminist movement has moved through several universes over the last decade and if the tenets of feminist writing are continually challenged and redefined, many of the basic convictions behind them remain intact. Ten years after *L'Euguélonne*, these writers speak with the same passion of a new world of meaning on the verge of being born. **Firewords** (sensitively and most effectively translated into English) is an excellent introduction to their work.

Sherry Simon •

FIREWORDS d. Dorothy Todd Hénault d.o.p. Zoe Dirse asst. ca. Nastaran Dibai, Nash Read, Al Morgan, Elise Swerhone add. photography David de Volpi assist. by René Daigle, Nash Read, Simon Leblanc, Michel Paulin Diane Carrière and Norma Denys sd. Claude Hazanavicius, Michel Charron, Marcel Delambre boom Catherine Van Der Donck ed. Pascale Laverrière, Dorothy Todd Hénault ed. asst. Sylvia Poirier debra d'Entremont add. ed Janice Brown animation Michèle Paupé original m. Anne Lauber Songs by Louky Bersianik Music: Richard Séguin, Joel Bienvenu, sung by: Judith Chevalier, Richard Séguin Accordeon m. Francine Lévesque dramatic seq. l.p. "The Euguélonne", Pol Pelletier, "The Grandmother" Marthe Blackburn, "The Young Jovette" Raphaëlle Nadeau, "The Cow," Pol Pelletier, "The Loved One", Liz Hamilton. 1st a.d. René Pothier asst to first a.d. Claudine Meyer, cost. design Ginette Noiseaux, Reflective fabric for the Euguélonne: 3M Co. make-up Gillian Chandler, Louise Mignault gaffers Audrey Beuzet, Michel-Paul Belisle, Marc Hénault grips Philippe Paulu, Richard Bonin, Charles-Henri Duclos fr. sdr. proj Paul Witz, Eric Chamberlain. "Anais dans la queue de la comète," d. Michèle Magny l.p. Andrée Lachapelle, Patricia Nolin, Guy Nador, Jean Louis Roux, Hubert Gagnon still photog. Piroška Mihalka orig. stage creation of night cows Pol Pelletier excerpt of books by Louky Bersianik: "The Euguélonne (Press Porcépic)", "Pique nique sur l'Acropole (vib Editeur)", "Maternative (vib Editeur)", "Axes et eau (vib Editeur)" Jovette Marchessault: "Comme un enfant de la terre (Les Éditions Léméac)", "La Mère des Herbes (Les Éditions Quinze)", "Lesbian Triptych Night Cows" (The Women's Press) Nicole Brossard: "These Our Mothers (Coach House Press)", "Les sens apparent (Flammarion), Editeur", "Picture Theory (Éditions Nouvelle Optique)", "Le Nef des Sorcières - l'Écrivain (Les Éditions Quinze). texts adapt. by Marthe Blackburn, Dorothy Rodd Hénault lit. consult. Gail Scott, Louise Forsyth Trans. Gerry Denis, Alison Hewitt, Donna Murray, Marthe O'Brian, Suzanne de Lotbinière Harwood, Yvonne Klein, Barbara Godard, Linda Gaboriau, Dorothy Todd Hénault subtt. Suzanne de Lotbinière Harwood painted people Francine Gagné p. colour programmese Setsuko Ishii paintings and sculpted women rising-from-the earth: Jovette Marchessault Etchings Francine Gagné Title backgrounds and transitions spirals Elaine Despins visual res. Kathleen McFall excerpt from film "Satellites of the Sun - NFB title design Val Teodoru optical camera Barry Wood animation camera Robin Bain, Pierre Landry narration Anne Skinner m.rec. Louis Hone m. ed. Diane LeFloch ed. Jackie Newell re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel admin. Gisèle Guilbault p. Barbara Jones ex. p. Kathleen Shannon p.c. A National Film Board of Canada film produced by Studio D. colour 16 min running time 84 min. 30 sec.