

HISTORICAL NOTES

"WHISPERING CITY" AT FILMEXPO

by D. John Turner

As Historical Notes will be a regular column, it should be mentioned at the outset that historical research in film is still at a rather primitive stage. With this in mind any information which is doubtful, the accuracy of which has not been adequately established, will be so described. And, needless to say, any additional information or corrections which readers may care to provide will be most welcome.

The 1975 version of Ottawa's Filmexpo was held in the Theatre of the National Arts Centre. On Sunday afternoon August 10, as part of Filmexpo, the National Film Archives presented **Whispering City**. This projection of a Quebec film now almost thirty years old aroused considerable interest — where did it come from, how was it found, are there more like it, how did it come to be made — so it is perhaps appropriate that **Whispering City** serve as the subject of this first column.

During the ten year period from 1944-1953 there was an intensive burst of filmmaking activity in Quebec. Nothing less than an attempt to establish a native feature film industry.

By the end of 1953 when this period was brought to an end by the introduction of television some 18 features had been made (four of them in English) as well as three films made on location by U.S. majors.

D. John Turner was born in England and came to Canada in 1959. He lived in Montreal for ten years before moving to Ottawa to run the National Film Theatre and start the Ottawa International Film Festival (Filmexpo). He has taught film history at Carleton University and published 800 Films For Film Study. He is presently with the National Film Archives of Canada where his special concern is Canadian feature film production.

The first, **Le Père Chopin**, was shot in the summer of 1944 for the late J.-A. De Sève's company Renaissance Films Inc. Two years later Quebec Productions Corporation went into action. The company was formed by Paul L'Anglais, already well known in the world of radio, and René Germain, a financier. Their intention was to produce films in English and French simultaneously and to break into world markets by using internationally known actors.

Studio facilities were established at St-Hyacinthe near Montreal and shooting began Sept. 18, 1946 on **La Forteresse** and **Whispering City**, the French and English versions of the same story.

The practice of shooting two or more language versions simultaneously was prevalent in France and Germany between 1928 and 1933 but subsequently died out as techniques for post-synchronisation (dubbing) rendered the rather cumbersome procedure obsolete. Normally each scene would be shot in one language, then reshot with different actors and sometimes a different director in the other language. The result would be two completely different films. Given the ability of French Canadian actors to express themselves in English as well as French, Quebec Productions were able to effect further economies. Only the actors in the five leading roles were not common to **La Forteresse** and **Whispering City**.

Quebec Productions looked to Hollywood for stars, technicians, a director, and a subject. **Whispering City** was originally a story written by George Zuckerman and Michael Lennox with an eye on the Hollywood market. Rian James and Leonard Lee were hired to write a screenplay and at the same time transpose the action to Quebec City.

For the female lead — a newspaper reporter who unmasks a murderer — Mary Anderson was brought from Hollywood. Besides her stage experience she had already played in **Gone With The Wind** and Alfred Hitchcock's **Lifeboat**. The

murderer was played by Paul Lukas, and the musician who falls in love with the reporter after being blackmailed into attempting her murder was played by Helmut Dantine. In **La Forteresse** these three roles were filled by Nicole Germain, Quebec's best known radio star at the time, Jacques Auger, and Paul Dupuis, who ironically enough was already internationally known for his work in English language films such as **Johnny Frenchman** and was under contract to J. Arthur Rank.

Many of the technicians were Hollywood veterans, in particular the camera crew and the producer, but the most remarkable import of all was the director, Fedor Ozep. Born in Russia in 1895 Ozep had been a leading script writer before the 1917 revolution, became a director in the late 'twenties, and in 1929 went to Berlin to direct a German-Soviet co-production of **The Living Corpse**. He stayed in Germany and made **Die Mörder Dimitri Karamazov** in 1931. Then on to France (**Gibraltar**, 1938, among others), and Hollywood where he made **Three Russian Girls** in 1943. And it was Ozep who had directed **Le Père Chopin** for Renaissance.

Shooting lasted 71 days and was completed December 13, 1946, at the St-Hyacinthe Studios after location shooting in Quebec City and at the nearby Montmorency Falls. Total cost reached \$750,000, 20% of which was attributed to **La Forteresse**, the balance to **Whispering City**.

Post production was done in New York where Jean Boisvert and Richard Jarvis edited the French and English versions respectively. A distribution deal was signed with J. Arthur Rank's Eagle Lion and **Whispering City** had a gala world première November 20, 1947 at the Empire Theatre in Birmingham, Alabama, Mary Anderson's home town. **La Forteresse**, following its avant-première at His Majesty's Theatre in Montreal, April 23, 1947, began a six week run at the Orpheum on May 2, 1947.



Paul Lukas in **Whispering City**

Despite an agreement with the J. Arthur Rank organization that was to have ensured world wide distribution, **Whispering City** met with little success. Indeed, for Québec Productions it was an almost total disaster. Nevertheless they continued to produce features in Quebec for a number of years, but they were much more modestly budgeted and in French only. Some of them were quite successful, recovering their costs in the Quebec market alone.

Rank secured a circuit release for **Whispering City** in London and it is due to this along with the vigilance of the National Film Archive in London that a negative still exists. And it is from this negative that the new print shown in Ottawa was made. No printing materials are known to exist in Canada for either version and in the case of **La Forteresse**, not even a print can be found. □

Whispering City

A film by Fedor Ozep. **Screenplay:** Rian James and Leonard Lee. **Cinematography:** Guy Roe. **Editing:** Richard J. Jarvis. **Performers:** Helmut Dantine, Mary Anderson, Paul Lukas, John Pratt, Joy Lafleur, George Alexander, Arthur Lefebvre, Mimi D'Estée, Henri Poitras. **Executive Producer:** Paul L'Anglais. **Produced in 1946 by** Quebec Productions Corp. Inc. **B & W; 35mm. Running time:** 91 min.

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