

Jean-Claude Lauzon's

## Un Zoo, la nuit

A bad case of critical *ejaculatio praecox* seems to have made *Un Zoo la nuit* into that long-sought-for chimera in Canadian film, namely a feature that's totally modern, with-it, contemporary — an authentic slice of the 'here and now'. That the repetition of lies still constitutes the first law of propaganda and that this is an effective technique can be attested to by the film's success, as confirmed by a Tuesday evening screening in a major Montreal theatre before a packed (and paying) house that warmly applauded at projection's end. But if it's all to the good that the folks keep turning out in fair numbers to see Canadian features, is that the only thing that matters? Should critics be satisfied with simply acting as barkers, doing their bit to get the people out, even under false pretenses?

I suppose the answer to that depends largely on the film itself. If *Un Zoo* were indeed an authentic slice of the Québécois here-and-now, then perhaps the film would be its own best defence. But it isn't. Thus it falls upon the critic to point to the deeply derivative nature of *Un Zoo la nuit* and suggest that it is precisely its derivativeness (i.e., complete unoriginality) that is at the source of the film's success. Like a number of recent

Quebec films (e.g., *Pouvoir intime*, *Equinoxe*) *Un Zoo* is an uneasy assemblage of two genres: the first, which could be termed *video noir*, is a rock-video *recyclage* of some of the stylistics of *film noir*: highly professionally-lit urban violence, moody and deviant, while the second is the traditional Canadian pastoral, a vision of reconciliation and harmonization with nature. In *Un Zoo*, neither 'film' is sufficiently developed: the *video noir* gets sidetracked by the Canadian film-within-the film, namely the father-son reconciliation that, at least at the level of Roger LeBel's outstanding performance as the father, is the dominant story. Except that as the dominant story, this slight and sentimental episode is little more than an Atlantis-type half-hour of *Canadiana* set within a pretty confused cops-and-robbers tale of revenge that consists mainly of tough talk, blank visages, empty visuals, heavy synthesizer (though in a splendid sound conception by Marcel Pothier) and lots of gratuitous and meaningless sexual violence.

In its essential confusion, *Un Zoo* becomes a reference list of recent filmwork that the director has liked: Beineix, Wenders, Greenaway, soft-drink and car commercials, Perrault, Carle, Arcand, Paul Tana, etc. In short, the jumble of contradictory influences that does constitute contemporary Quebec modernity, although it might be argued that, at a price-tag of over one million public dollars, it is the artist's (or filmmaker's) job to sort through these influences, not simply throw them *pêle-mêle* onto a screen.

That *Un Zoo la nuit*, Jean-Claude Lauzon's first feature, displays strong imitative abilities is undeniable, as is the fact

that this is potentially promising for his future. In other words, and as in Darwin's vision of the ape climbing down from the tree on his way to becoming a man, Lauzon shows promise in an evolutionary perspective. On the other hand, this is hardly surprising given the determined cultivation of imitativeness that is the basic training of the film student in this country. In this sense, it's not without importance that Quebec directors like Perrault, Carle or Arcand are present among the imitative pantheon. But this does make *Un Zoo* more derivative than creative: instead of being something in itself, it's a (skillful) collage of *déjà vu*. This may be reassuring both to the public and the public agencies of political and cultural control — it must be good because it looks just like everything else in the mediascape — but it's a problem. Marcel (Gilles Maheu), the 'hero' of the film who unfortunately plays the role with the expressiveness of a Glad bag, is your typically totally alienated character who wants out — to anywhere but here (which is, of course, nowhere). His only remaining connection to 'here' (after jail and ex-girlfriend-turned-hooker) is his father. On the level of the imaginary, Marcel daydreams of Australia (a country whose only reality consists in being very far from here) and, of course, "you always have an American friend" (sort of as in Wenders, but played here with earnest blankness by Jerry Snell). Why Marcel is suddenly drawn to his father is by no means made clear but drawn he is and by means of a variety of illusionistic symbolism (the American car, the gun and the film within-the-film within-the-film, though here the content is Canadian nature footage), the two are reconciled and

the father dies in peace, comforted by the illusion, stage-managed by his son, that he is an object of veneration. But once his father is dead, there is nothing to keep Marcel 'here' any longer. He is free to leave, and, you can bet your U.S. dollars, he will.

Perhaps like Lauzon himself, his 'Canadian' feature now under his belt, is free too to go and work elsewhere in the wider universe of filmmaking. He has paid homage to his spiritual fathers; he has been to the critical Mecca of Canadian cinema (Cannes) and there been proclaimed the reel thing. In short, he has, if he so desires, been already, promoted *beyond* Canadian film.

So it's perhaps appropriate, in the jargon of authenticity of the desperate celebration of the modern nowhere, that Telefilm, the NFB, the SGC and Radio-Canada yet again pick up the tab for the vocational training of the Canadian filmmaker whose vocation these days (as always?) still consists in making preparations for escape.

Michael Dorland •

**UN ZOO, LA NUIT** d./sc. Jean-Claude Lauzon d.o.p. Guy Dufaux art d. Jean-Baptiste Tard cost. des. Andrée Morin sets Michèle Forest sd. rec. Yvon Benoit ed. Michel Arcand sd. ed. Marcel Pothier m. Jean Corriveau (ed. Bleu Marine S.A.R.L.) re-rec. Hans-Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll 1st a.d. Alain Lino Chartrand prod. man. René Chénier line p. Suzanne Dusault assoc. p. Louise Gendron p. Roger Frapier, Pierre Gendron produced by Les Productions Oz Inc. in association with The National Film Board of Canada. Financial participation of Telefilm Canada and La Société générale du cinéma du Québec with the collaboration of La Société Radio-Canada. Distributed in Canada by Cinéma Plus/ Ciné Nove l.p. Roger Le Bel, Gilles Maheu, Lorne Brass, Germain Houde, Jerry Snell, Corrado Mastropsqua, Lynne Adams, Amulette Garneau, Anna-Maria Gianotti 35mm c. 1987 running time 115 min.

• Father and son, as portrayed by Gilles Maheu and Roger Le Bel

