



his childhood. Although his memoir-inspired novels appearing between 1978 and 1984 returned to the Plateau and to his earlier pizzazz, I found that his 1981 play, *Les anciennes odeurs*, a melancholy portrait of a gay Cegep professor, felt stiff and contrived. With **Le Coeur découvert**, the professor has reappeared, reincarnated this time as Jean-Marc, a 39-year-old Outremont French teacher, and it is clear that Tremblay has now found a much surer footing in the new neighbourhood. The narrative is an upbeat and sympathetic account of Jean-Marc's encounter, courtship and nestling with Mathieu, a 25-year-old would-be actor. The only hitch in this ideal May-August romance is that our hero must now welcome Mathieu's five-year-old son Sébastien into his life and co-op for the same price.

Director Laforce and a likeable cast have created life-and-blood characterizations to add colour and warmth to Tremblay's scintillating dialogue. The players, composed both of old Tremblay hands, Gilles Renaud and Amulette Garneau, and of newcomers, Michel Poirier and Louise Dussault, recruited from the world of children's television, are uniformly first-rate. Renaud, the butch leather biker Cuirette of *Il Était une fois* and later the gloomy hero of *Anciennes odeurs*, has now considerably filled in the character of Jean-Marc, showing every nuance of a too-settled life being stirred up. It's not easy to steal the show from such a veteran, but the diminutive and charismatic Poirier almost gets away with it as the new lover Mathieu, defensive, tender and charming.

Their primary relationship, the core of the film, is skilfully textured as it evolves, from the currently fashionable courtship through all the ups and downs and insec-

urities to its final domestication. My only reservation was that Laforce apparently let the constraints of television (self-) censorship hold back the physical dimension of their interaction: the two go to bed, not like passionate newlyweds, but like the chaste Hollywood couples of the '50s, complete with dry peck on the cheek on parting. On other counts, however, Laforce doesn't falter: straight critics were terribly nervous about the novel's fine exploration of adult-child relationships and focused on a bathtub scene between Jean-Marc and the little boy. Life imitates art: in *Coeur*, the child has a macho uncle who harasses the new couple with his homophobic terror of touching. Laforce goes one better, giving two adult-child bathtub scenes, not one, and confronting the issue of gay parenting with humour, subtlety and defiance.

The women characters, too often assigned to supportive and decorative roles in the genre of the gay male melodrama, come across in *Coeur* as strong, interesting individuals in their own right: Jean-Marc's hesitant new mother-in-law, played by Garneau with spellbinding technique; his worldly-wise lesbian *co-propriétaire* played by Dussault with just the right twinkle in her eye; his new ex-wife-in-law, played by Louise Rinfret. Not only do we get a sensitive picture of the network of new bonds created by alternative families (Sébastien brags to his classmates about how many fathers he has), but Tremblay is pursuing what has always been his favorite theme, the natural alliance of all the others squeezed out by the patriarchy. This was what brought together within the frame of *Il Était une fois* the waitress dying of her botched illegal abortion and the drag queen suffering her daily humiliation, the sisterhood of oppression. Now, even if Tremblay's co-

alition of the suffering of the balconies and the streets has migrated upscale, the complicity of his gay men with his women is still operative. Even in the co-ops of Outremont, they are still the salt of the earth, and there is only a single minor representative of the law of the Father, Sébastien's macho and uptight new "Monday-to-Friday co-step-father"

Perhaps the reason this migration, Tremblay's gentrification, is artistically so successful, is that the old world of the streets left behind is still present, hovering around the edges of the frame. In one of the film's funniest scenes, Jean-Marc's solicitous lesbian neighbours ask with a note of snobbish prurience whether his St-Denis Street rendezvous with his new flame will be above Sherbrooke Street (chic) or below (sleaze). The audience I saw the film with couldn't contain themselves as the scene cut to a long shot of the lovers slowly descending the slope below Sherbrooke, pausing indecisively to look back towards Chic, and then continuing their downward direction.

The cast is well rounded out, it must be mentioned, by child actor Olivier Chasse, with whom Laforce has shaped a strong understated performance, only occasionally marred by the cuteness that seems endemic in Quebec film these days. The minor characters are also superb miniatures without exception: Tremblay's works always seem to bring out the best in ensemble performances.

The only other criticism I have is of the design which has a little too much of that boutique-y Radio-Canada flavour for my liking, the Outremont setting notwithstanding. Although it may be a bit excessive to go on and on as some of my friends did about how no self-respecting lesbian would go walking in Parc Outremont in a little yellow straw hat, the general look of the cultural milieu in question is slightly off. On the other hand, the location shooting provides an authentic, even romantic backdrop in the milieu: my archivist friend is ecstatic that the oldest gay bar in Montreal, the Café Lincoln, dating from the '30s, has now been documented on film, coloured glass globes and all.

But I digress. It is a fine pleasure to see this warmhearted little gem, not only because of positive representation of gays in this year when everyone's gushing about *Night Zoo*, a violent misogynist derivative film that exults in queer-baiting and queer-smashing, but because one of our finest writers has made another all-too-rare visit to the screen.

Thomas Waugh •

LE COEUR DECOUVERT (THE HEART EXPOSED) d. Jean-Yves Laforce sc. Michel Tremblay a.d. Marie-Josée Boudrias sets Francine Denault orig. m. Michel-Charles Therrien d.o.p. Jean Pierre Lefebvre ed. André Daigneault l.p. Gilles Renaud, Michel Poirier, Olivier Chasse, Louise Dussault, Amulette Garneau, Louise Rinfret, Pierre Houle, Robert Lalonde, Diane Miljours, Mona Cyr, Han Masson. Produced by La Société Radio-Canada. Special Thanks to City of Montreal, City of Outremont, Montreal Harbor Cruises Inc. World Film Festival, MUCTC. colour 16mm running time 107 min.

Jean-Claude Labrecque's

Le Frère André

Le Frère André continues the good news of the last few years: the Canadian cinema is alive and well, showing more signs of maturity and vigour. The fragile, iconoclastic, new-wave days of the '60s are, in so many ways, a thing of the past; the succeeding booms and busts are also long gone, to be replaced by a more professional industry that is fully capable of producing, with modest regularity, what are artistically solid films of popular appeal.

There is something especially gratifying in the fact that one who has experienced it all, first a cameraman in the '60s, and then as his own director, is still very much part of the creative scene. Jean-Claude Labrecque will very soon be 50 years old. For a film director, that is generally not old; and indeed, his very best work may still lie ahead. Interesting projects are in the works. If the Quebec film scene continues in its benign cycle, Labrecque may continue to be a major force for years to come.

Le Frère André continues Labrecque's chronicling of Quebec's cultural history. In all of his features (*Les Smattes* - 1971; *Les Vautours* - 1975; *L'Affaire Coffin* - 1980; *Les Années de rêve* - 1984), Labrecque has chosen particular moments, particular stories, purely fictional or based in actual fact, to communicate his understanding of our recent past. What emerges is sometimes a critique, sometimes poetry, but always seen through one man's experience of the past, his feelings and his visions of his own human condition.

With **Le Frère André**, Jean-Claude Labrecque chose a subject fraught with difficulty. How do you bring to the screen the life of 'a humble little man', a Holy Cross Brother who died in 1938 at the age of 91 - and who was the occasion for a multitude of alleged miraculous cures, for an enormous outpouring of religious devotion reaching out well beyond the regions of Quebec, and for the building of St. Joseph's Oratory, whose towering dome has become Montreal's dominant landmark?

Bringing **Le Frère André** to the screen was indeed walking into areas that angels might prefer to avoid; and the very manner in which Labrecque treats his subject matter might be seen as revelatory of Quebec's culture today and the film director's own evolution. Brother André was a sign of contradiction in his own dominant Roman Catholic culture, and even in his own religious order. The appeal of the man, difficult to explain, and the thaumatergic powers ascribed to him by so many people - but

which he resolutely credited to his beloved St. Joseph – made many of his fellow Holy Cross priests and brothers decidedly uneasy.

He presents a Montreal version, really, of a dialectic ever running through religious experience, pitting prudence/rationalism vs faith/superstition (to set up overly facile polarities). As for today, post-Vatican II and all, major areas, of the North American Church, dedicated to social action, seem far removed from this kind of popular devotion; farther removed than, say, Pope John Paul II himself, or certain Latino or Slavic cultures more given not only to this sort of exuberant public display, but also to a theological understanding that many educated, western, middle-class Christians consider outmoded. There is always a current of distrust of experiences that invite charlatanism of the crudest kind. Faith healers, TV evangelists and the like may have millions of devotees; but they receive scant attention from millions of other types of Christians, alienated by the style and content.

One need but imagine for a moment what treatment this kind of subject would have received in the '60s from a Gilles Carle or a Jean Pierre Lefebvre! But the times, they have changed; and far from resorting to sardonic critique of facile humour, *Le Frère André* emerges as a very intelligent, sympathetic, touching, humorous, well-crafted movie, a tribute to its eponymous hero.

At the same time, however, the film is in no way a ringing affirmation of faith, a polemic taking of positions. While Labrecque treats Brother André with affection and respect, he avoids the time-honored clichés that religious movies of the past have created to signify heroism and holiness. What emerges is something more modern, more representative of the contemporary sensibility.

Feature films, it seems, must tell stories; and that means drama, which in turn demands conflict and 'action'. So *Le Frère André* chooses a moment (1910, the Eucharistic Congress in Montreal): the crowds are flocking to the chapel on the side of Mount Royal, Brother André is at the height of his thaumaturgic activity, there is talk of erecting a huge Oratory in honour of St. Joseph – and many of Brother André's own religious confrères are appalled at what they consider a circus atmosphere that threatens to make a shambles of their main apostolic activity (teaching at Notre-Dame College). There is even talk of exiling Brother André to the New Brunswick boondocks of Memramcook.

Enter, this particular evening, Marie Esther, Brother André's 17-year-old niece from Rhode Island. They talk, there are flashbacks – and that is the film. Except for a double epilogue, as it were, that shows us, first, multitudes of pilgrims winding their way up the mountain to the chapel, symbolizing Brother André's triumph and the eventual build-



• Marc Legault – he's not heavy, he's my brother

ing of St. Joseph's Oratory; and, second, a closing panoramic aerial shot of the Oratory today, in its contemporary setting of urban Montreal.

As a spectator – reassured, no doubt, by historical hindsight – I found myself caring nary a whit as to whether or not the Oratory would be built or whether or not Memramcook would become our hero's fate. What I really cared about was the interplay between the two characters of Brother André and Marie Esther, beautifully rendered by actors Marc Legault and Sylvie Ferlatte (and by director Jean-Claude Labrecque). Here are two glowing, simple, true human beings, of the people, Marie Esther more a vibrant essence, really, of youthful health and vitality. Legault's down-to-earth Quebec lower-class speech patterns are pitted against the refined Radio-Canada-of-old diction of his more educated confrères in a series of debates setting up the issues, giving us the necessary historical background, and manufacturing the necessary dramatic conflict. There is no question in the viewers' minds (nor in Labrecque's, obviously) where all the sympathies lie: spontaneity, freshness, simplicity versus the more rigid, organized, established power culture. And that is where the drama lies, really. By the same token, we are squarely situated in Labrecque's usual world, where central characters are always the lowly, the victims, the outsiders of a society beyond their control. And of other forces, I think.

For, far removed from the fate of Brother André and of a St. Joseph's Oratory-to-be-built, is another kind of reality that situates us in Labrecque's territory. *Le Frère André* is really a series of abstracted scenes and dialogues, a collage of moments strung together according to the dictates of a plot, but in themselves far more powerful, evocative, than that plot.

One might say that Labrecque has made a virtue out of having to shoot cheap. Rather than attempt any elaborate historical reconstruction, he concentrates on somewhat abstract – one might say symbolic – mini-sets. We have a sense of floating nowhere/anywhere, in a world of essences, where the essentials are given in careful, precise dialogue, and where another kind of reality, impossible to designate – perhaps "surreality" comes closest – is communicated. The lighting tends to be obviously 'artificial', often in sharply defined areas, such as a stained glass window. The colors are dark and strong, blacks, purples, deep garish primaries. Labrecque's well-known penchant for wide-angle lenses is in evidence, though in relatively mitigated form; enough, however, slightly to distort space, to give us a slightly off-kilter framing of image.

The rather abstract composition of the scenes has elicited some comparisons with another recent, religious film, *Thérèse*. Last year's French 'César' (Oscar) winner, however, has none of

the off-kilter, off-centre quality that is more or less a constant in Labrecque's fiction films, and that imbues his creations with a strong sense of uneasiness, of not quite being able to come to grips with, or, say, intellectually appropriate, whatever reality is there before us.

And so, *Le Frère André* is filled with vitality, warmth, life, a simple truth shining through Brother André and his niece. But the film universe they inhabit, with its abstract, theatrical sets, peopled with artificially 'dictioned' characters, and breathing an overall mitigated off-kilter 'innocent surrealism', is far from reassuring. Labrecque's poetry of the little man adrift in a universe he doesn't really cope with is well-served once again.

It is difficult to call the film religious, strictly speaking, in spite of its overtly religious subject matter. Labrecque, rather, has given us a strongly distanced experience: he is distanced from total adherence to whatever Brother André represents; and we, the audience, are distanced from his film's subject matter. Certainly, there is no explanation of any religious dimension. And one understands why the socio-religious exploration is simply taken for granted, being merely stated. The plot itself doesn't really matter that much.

The experience is similar, in a way, to that of looking at a book of Labrecque ciné-paintings, a bit abstract, a bit surrealistic, a bit realistic. We are distanced, we wonder...even as we are deeply touched by this 'little man' who is total, who is living his truth. Take it or leave it, accept the miraculous cures or explain them away – Brother André is there. And in his humble way, he is remarkable, even significant.

This, it would seem, is the truth of Labrecque's vision – and in that sense his approach is indeed modern, if by that term we mean open, self-conscious proclaiming that it is 'only' one man's art by being obvious in its use of its 'artistic' means. Quebec's cinematic chronicler poet has indeed been true to himself, to his culture, and to his history.

That is no small achievement, the mark, surely, of a mature artist and of a film industry that is quite capable of producing works of cultural validity.

Marc Gervais •

LE FRÈRE ANDRÉ p. Pierre Valcour assoc. p. Daniel Louis sc. Guy Dufresne, d. Jean-Claude Labrecque 1st a.d. Jacques W. Benoit cont. Thérèse Bérubé, extras casting Bernard Tourville art d. Ronald Fauteux cost. Denis Sperdouklis make-up Kathryn Casault d.o.p. Michel Caron stills Bertrand Morin gaffer Jacques Fortier sd. Michel Charron, ed. André Coriveau asst. ed. Christine Denault sup. sd. ed. Marcel Pothier sec. Madeleine Lavallée l.p. Marc Legault, Sylvie Ferlatte, Jean Coutu, André Cailloux, Jacques Zouvi, Roland Lepage, Gilles Renaud, Guy Thauvette, Michel TrouilletCollet, Guy Provost, René Caron, Roger Garceau, Raymond Cloutier, Jean Lajeunesse, Michel Cailloux, Roger Larue, Linda Sorgini, Jean Doyon with the gracious participation of Guillaume LemayThivierge, Mireille Thibault, Leo Rivet, Danièle Lepage, Kathleen McAuliffe. A Les Productions de la Montagne and Les Films J.-A. Lapointe production with financial assistance from Telefilm Canada, Société générale du cinéma, Super Ecran (Premier Choix: TVE Inc) Shudec Ltee, Auvidex Inc. and St. Joseph's Oratory. colour 35 mm running time 88 min.