

Claude Gagnon

An Unfamiliar Odyssey

by Brian Lewis

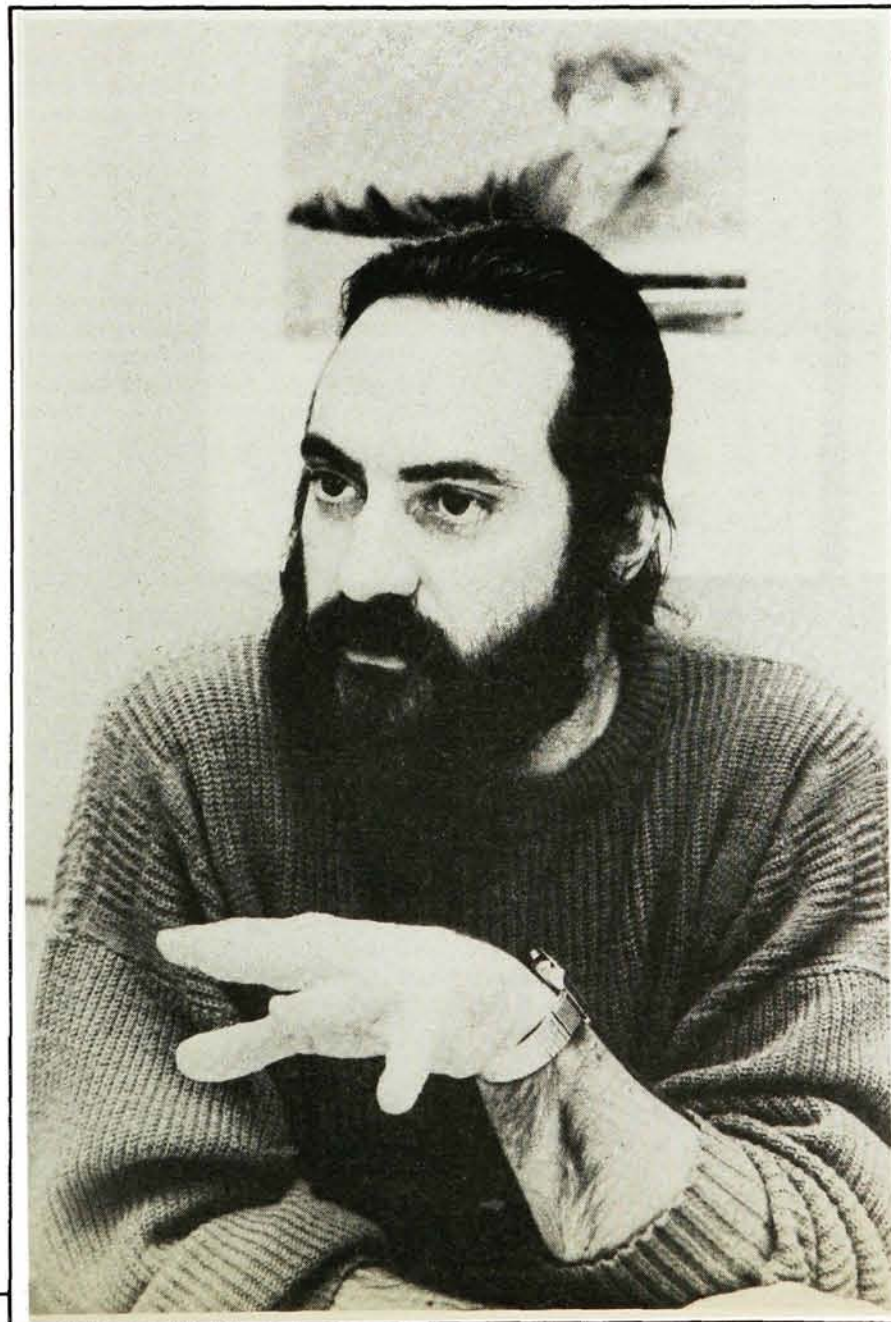
Claude Gagnon got new parking spaces last month.

Gagnon works out of the old Familex Building on Montreal's lower east side. Tucked under the Jacques Cartier Bridge, the dark brown brick warehouse once stored chemicals, drugs, and household products. Now, as Maison Premier Plan, it houses some of Montreal's most exciting media companies. Gagnon, his partners Yuri Yoshimura and Jean Colbert, and their six co-workers, used to have to park in the back, up against an exit ramp of the bridge. Today, freshly painted red-on-white "Aska Film" signs, reserve parking spots right out front.

Brian Lewis is a documentary filmmaker and professor in Communications Department of Concordia University.

The new spaces came with the new, larger offices. These things don't go unnoticed at Maison Premier Plan, and they shouldn't. Gagnon's is a real success story. Years of struggle as an independent feature filmmaker are finally starting to pay off. Aska Film, formerly Yoshimura-Gagnon Inc., is riding the astonishing success of Gagnon's astonishing film, **The Kid Brother**.

Reviewers are having a hard time describing **The Kid Brother**. Bruce Kirkland calls it "one of those unlikely entertainments that defies simple description and offers a 'simple' pleasure." (*Toronto Sun*, Sept. 25, 1987). Will Straw's convoluted attempt to assess the film for *Cinema Canada* (December, 1987) prompts a curious reader to wonder whether in fact he liked the film or not. The film's production values are roughly Hollywood, although Gagnon's experience with, and affinity for, improvisation and a free-flowing camera keeps it loose. The plot line is simple and



dramatic, dealing with not terribly unusual family situations and conflicts. What makes the film out of the ordinary is that the central character is a remarkable little boy with no legs. Kenny Easterday plays himself — a boy who has learned to do with his arms what most others do with their arms and legs. The reality of Kenny — a real boy without legs — essentially playing himself in the fiction of the film, makes for some very complicated reactions. **The Kid Brother** challenges our concept of the handicapped. It breaks down the barriers between documentary and fiction. It confronts directly, as a subject, questions of exploitation, sensationalism and media manipulation, even while avoiding precisely these things in its treatment of Kenny. **The Kid Brother** does not evoke a simple response.

If **The Kid Brother** is a hard film to talk about, its success is now undeniable. After the film won the Grand Prix des Amériques at the World Film Festival, it was quickly released in Montreal in its original English version. Leading up to the Christmas season and its French version release as **Kenny**, **The Kid Brother** was second in box office only to **Fatal Attraction**. **Kenny** has since been setting box office records in Quebec (\$1 million in its first four weeks). It has been sold to 16 countries. It has seen phenomenal success in Japan (\$5.7 million box office in five weeks). It continues to make the rounds of the international film festivals, and will be presented in the Kinderfilmfest

competition of the Berlin Film Festival this month.

U.S. distribution is currently being negotiated. They suffered an initial setback in Toronto, where the English version died quickly after the Festival of Festivals, but they believe they know what went wrong and how to correct it. Generally, Canadian filmmakers have always found it easier to crack the English Canadian markets after a U.S. release. English Canadian audiences tend to look south (rather than east — or west — to Quebec), influenced by American promotional campaigns and critical response. Because of the phenomenal public response in Montreal, because the film received good early critical response in Toronto, and because the Toronto exhibitors were so enthusiastic, they jumped the gun on distribution. "I think we got overexcited," says Gagnon. "We were like five or six excited little boys. The recognition factor wasn't there. There were no trailers, no posters, no advanced publicity or advertising. It's too bad Yuri wasn't with us — she would have stopped it." **The Kid Brother** will be re-launched in English Canada after the U.S. release. "We will be very careful about this on future projects."

It has been a long and particularly winding road for Gagnon and his partner, producer and wife, Yuri Yoshimura. In his *Cinema Canada* review, Straw mentions "the director's acknowledged estrangement from the main currents of Quebec filmmaking over the last several

years." Gagnon's story is certainly not the familiar one of university enthusiasms, Film Board apprenticeships, and subsidized productions.

The impetus for **The Kid Brother** actually came from Japan. Kiyoshi Fujimoto, a Japanese producer interested in the integration of handicapped people into society, acquired the rights to Kenny Easterday's story. Well-known for his earlier work in Japan, Gagnon was approached to write and to direct the film. Normally, Gagnon develops his projects with Yuri Yoshimura, who then produces his films. This was the first time he was simply offered a feature subject to write and to direct. For several weeks he hesitated. The subject itself was so unusual. Finding the appropriate treatment would be difficult if not impossible. This was a film which he feared could possibly finish his career.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt he had to do it — as a challenge to himself, but especially out of admiration for Kenny, for whom he had quickly developed a great deal of respect and love. He wrote a script loosely based on Kenny's life, and incorporated a subplot dealing precisely with the problems of filming such a story: a French documentary film team comes to town, cajoling, manipulating, confusing things, and generally making a hash of Kenny's life. These are mistakes he then never made himself.

There is a very strong documentary element to **The Kid Brother** — the film

documents the physical fact of Kenny himself, how he gets around, how he lives, and it recreates genuine situation and feelings — but at the same time these aspects are woven into a fiction. Critics have earlier talked about documentary aspects of **Larose, Pierrot et La Luce** (1981) and especially of his first feature, **Keiko** (1978), which is a fictionalized, direct-cinema style look at a Japanese Everygirl of the late '70s. But the image of the rushed and largely insensitive documentary film team in **The Kid Brother** seems to reflect Gagnon's worst fears of a purely documentary approach. "What strikes me the most with documentary film is that I have a feeling that I'm violating people's privacy... But if I shoot fiction, I feel completely free. I can do anything I feel like doing, and it's not like raping anybody. We play a game. That's why I felt so free and good working with Kenny and his family. We made a story, and then we asked them, 'Do you like this story, and do you want to play this game?'"

It's not, of course always an easy or simple game. Gagnon insisted on casting Kenny's real brother, Jesse Easterday, Jr., as the older brother in the film, so as to try to bring out and express the power of their largely unexpressed relationship in real life. "In his actual life, all (Jesse) can do is bitch after his brother, because he's his brother. I felt it was very important for him... I felt strongly that he really wanted to express (his love) in the movie." The game of the film became an opportunity for them to

Colbert & Aska

Jean Colbert too has been involved in the cinema, in one form or another, throughout his entire adult life — a little bit, as he calls himself, a "touche à tout." He began in a ciné club as a student. Assistant manager then manager of the Cinema Bonaventure, and the Vendôme cinema, he jumped into French programming at Famous Players. From Famous Players, he moved into non-commercial distribution at Universal. After a short 'sabbatical' in the north, he returned to Films Mutuels in Montreal, where, over 10 years, he gradually rose from assistant programmer to vice-president and director-general, responsible for acquisitions.

He is proud of those years at Films Mutuels. "With all due humility, I have to say that during that period we helped to put Quebec cinema back on the map, bringing out films such as **Cordélia**, **Les bons débarras**, **L'Affaire Coffin**. I think that in a period of two or three years all the really interesting Quebec films were launched by us. The films that we and others began to put out were good

films. They were fun. It was a period when once again the Quebec cinema began to get popular, and this gave a good push to the production sector."

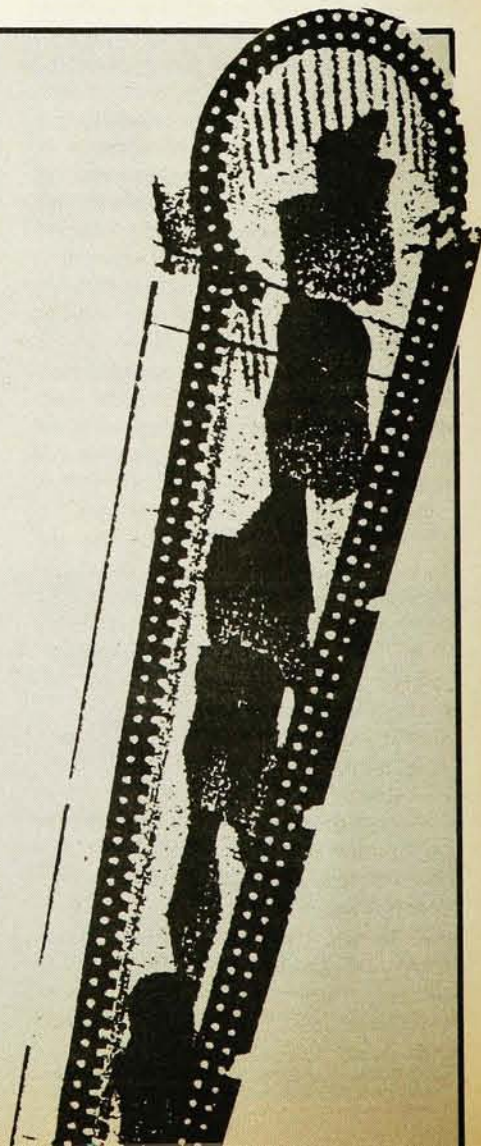
When Films Mutuels closed in 1983, Colbert took over the exploitation, distribution and finally production portfolios at the Institut québécois du cinéma for a year. From the Institut he moved to Astral, where he was in charge of French acquisitions. He ended up in the Bellevue Home Entertainment section.

In the meantime, Colbert had purchased what is now St-Hyacinthe's only cinema. Claude Gagnon of course wanted to premiere his first Quebec feature, **La Rose, Pierrot et La Luce** in his hometown of St-Hyacinthe. This was the first time Gagnon and Colbert would work together. The film was a smashing success in St-Hyacinthe.

Theatre owner, video club owner, and a partner since August in Aska Film Distribution, Jean Colbert is now truly involved in all aspects of film distribution and exploitation. Aska Film Distribution was essentially formed over the last days of the

World Film Festival, as **The Kid Brother** won the major prize, and distribution offers for the film began to escalate. Gagnon and Colbert had toyed with the idea of an association earlier in the year. But now, the timing was right for both of them.

Claude, Jean and Yuri are partners in AFD. While AFD and Aska Film International have largely separate functions (AFD handles Canadian distribution, AFI handles production, international sales, and the promotion of the Quebec cinema in Japan), they share offices, and often share staff as well. There is a real sense of collective responsibility around the offices. Major decisions are largely made after group discussions involving the whole staff. Currently, nine people are working full-time. New productions are in the works, as are plans to expand film distribution activities to incorporate works by other directors. "We're not so interested in becoming a Paramount. We're looking for really interesting films — films we love."



communicate with each other in a way which two brothers usually ignore. Because it's a game, Gagnon could begin to tap some real feelings. And if some of the feelings aren't real, well... it's just a game. "When I met Kenny and his family I felt good and comfortable with them, and I think they felt the same with me. I didn't want to cheat them. And I knew that because I was doing this fiction, there was no real danger."

My impression is that Gagnon really cares for the actors playing his characters. He creates a fundamental complicity. He uses them as characters, without emptying their reality as human beings. Coupled with his attention for details and the realism of a situation, this creates a documentary flavour in all of his films.

The Kid Brother was produced without Telefilm funds. Now they find that although it apparently accumulated the necessary number of points to certify as a Canadian production (the writer, director, editor, and composer are Canadian; all lab and post-production work was done in Canada), unfortunately there are no Canadian actors. "We just didn't think about points... You should never think in terms of points when you start to make a movie, you should never have to worry about it..." Canadian certification would have made the completed film eligible for various distribution and promotional perks, and, as an official 'Canadian content' production, would perhaps have made it even more appealing to Canadian broadcast buyers.

Gagnon says that he was attracted to the working-class atmosphere of the subject. Pittsburgh, a city which has suffered the death of the steel industry, reminded him of his own hometown, St-Hyacinthe, which had suffered the deaths of the textile mills. "Sometimes we forget one thing. In Quebec and as *Québécois* we are very unique, very different. We have a different way of thinking, a different approach to life. But at the same time we are a part of North America... I felt very close to the steel workers, like the textile workers in my town... I felt comfortable shooting in Pittsburgh."

Gagnon nevertheless underlines the irreducible fact of his Quebec identity. "It seems to me that what's really important to your creative work as an adult are those first 20 years of your life. Those first 20 years, I spent them in Quebec. This will always remain my way of thinking, my approach to life... I think in French and *Québécois*. Everything I do is in French and *Québécois*. I don't think I will ever lose this."

"I don't think Americans would have shot the film this way. They would have used different actors and a different approach. I was born here. I grew up here. I saw all the NFB films, felt the direct cinema influences... and this helped to shape my films. It's not because I shoot in the States that I'm an American, or I shoot in Japan that I'm a Japanese or I shoot in France that I'm French. Ber-

tolucci just shot a picture in China. No one's calling Bertolucci Chinese because he shot **The Last Emperor** in China.

Gagnon was born in St-Hyacinthe, in 1949. A working-class family, his father was in fact employed in the textile factories. At age 18, with one thing in mind — he wanted to be a filmmaker — he quit school at the Séminaire de St-Hyacinthe. So began an odyssey which only now seems to be reaching its conclusion. Unable to find film work in Montreal without any experience or training, he hitchhiked to Mexico City, ostensibly to photograph the Olympic Games. His brother's borrowed camera didn't work, and the trip convinced him only that he knew nothing about the world. How can you be a filmmaker and

very good to be young and naive, because you never worry about anything." He claims that during this entire period his objectives were clear in his head — to see the world, to learn photography, to buy film equipment, and to become a filmmaker.

Gagnon would remain in Japan for nine years. He arrived in May, gravitating towards Osaka and Expo. In September, he met Yuri Yoshimura. Yuri was a very unusual young Japanese woman. Her father was a Marxist university professor, her mother a socialist politician and administrator. Yuri herself was a classical ballet dancer. Yuri wanted to continue to study ballet in Paris, and Claude was making his living by giving French lessons. Yuri of course thought Claude was French — she had

Yuri: At the beginning it was just a question of a few thousand dollars, but now it's in the millions — it's more than 'fun' nowadays!

Claude: I don't see much difference.

Moving to Tokyo, then Kyoto, they purchased a simple camera and began to work in 16mm. Out of many started projects, three short films eventually emerged, **Essai filmique sur musique japonaise** (1974), **Geinin** (1976), and **Yui to hi** (1977). Each of their films was self-produced and self-financed. Each meant a certain significant amount of personal indebtedness, which simply had to be dealt with as the next project came into focus. They borrowed or rented equipment as the circumstances required. They worked with Japanese as well as Canadians (André Pelletier worked with them as a director of photography in Japan, and later worked with them in Quebec).

Claude believes that their naïveté was really what kept them going during this period. When they needed talent, composers, lighting directors, they simply went to the person or the studio and asked. As often or not, the person said yes, and as Yuri points out, the budget jumped another \$2,000. Wildly unequal situations arose. **Essai filmique**, a little dreamlike, bamboo flute story, was conceived as a simple story which could easily be filmed in Yuri's ballet studio with a single spot. Before it was over, the flute player was Yokohama Katsua, a Japanese "living monument," the crew was professional, and the filming took place on a Toei sound stage, with crane.

It was at this point that Yuri began to learn the intricacies of bank loans. Otherwise, they supported themselves with dance classes and French lessons. Through his contact with technicians at Toei, Claude also began to get acting jobs in Japanese movies — invariably cast as the bad, bearded gaijin.

"I think this was when I started to really want to work with actors. It was so frustrating, because no matter how hard I tried to be good, I was bad. It was impossible because of the system in place. They didn't care. They were happy with anything. As an actor who sincerely wanted to be good, I started to feel angry at the filmmakers for not helping me be as good as I thought I could be. I started to question the way they were making films in Japan."

In 1978, Gagnon became Quebec's first 'Japanese filmmaker.' **Keiko** is a Japanese language feature about the common, difficult experiences of a young and independent girl in modern Japan. The novelty of **Keiko** was partly a result of everything Gagnon had learned not to do when he was a frustrated actor in Japanese feature films, and partly a function of having grown up under the influences of direct cinema and the National Film Board. The improvisational acting style, the camera work, the everyday story — the Japanese had never seen a Japanese film like it. **Keiko** won the Director's Prize of the Japan Film Directors' Association.



• Aska Films — (seated) Jean Colbert, Yuri Yoshimura, Claude Gagnon, and (standing from l.) France Thibodeau, Alain Gagnon, Marie-Josée Théoret, Joanne Duguay, Camille Gueymard, Luc Vandal

know nothing about the world?

He began to feel that any kind of out-of-the-ordinary life experience could only help his ultimate plans. Returning to Canada, he worked for a few months in the Sudbury nickel mines. He worked there with a childhood friend, Luc Matte, whom he would later use as an actor in **Larose** and **Visage Pâle**. The idea of travelling, seeing the world, became a new means to the end of filmmaking. He aimed for Japan, which he imagined as the most radical possible departure from the life he had known, and he worked a year selling shoes to put the money together.

In 1970, at the age of 21, Claude Gagnon from St-Hyacinthe arrived in Japan on a one-way ticket and with a few hundred dollars. As he says now, "It's

never heard of Quebec or French Canadians. Through Claude, she began to learn the French language, and discovered "the Beatles, jeans, and the word 'hippie.'"

In a way the two were perfectly complementary, for Claude knew very little about Japan. Both however, loved movies. Claude purchased a Super-8 camera and they started to work together. According to Claude, it happened naturally, almost without discussion. Yuri had had experience organizing shows for her ballet students. Now she began to run down the props and lights, find the people and locations, and generally function as producer and production manager for Claude's films.

Yuri: It was fun for me anyways.

Claude: I hope it's still fun.

Essai filmique and the two documentaries which followed had been financed through personal loans, which were eventually paid back through teaching and other incomes. But **Keiko**, a 35mm feature with a budget of about \$200,000, presented an entirely different order of problem. The film was ultimately financed through a mortgage on the house of Yuri's mother. (Claude: "We were still very naive"; Yuri: "She has a very socialist head; whatever she has is yours.") There was at the time absolutely no way to find business financing for an independent feature film in Japan. All features were produced through the studios.

In Japan, the studios are intimately linked to the theatre chains. Thus, once the film was produced, and very much in debt, they were confronted with the equally monumental problem of breaking into a theatre circuit. All efforts to find a major distributor proved fruitless. Finally, as with other new directors, they found an opening at ATG's 260-seat theatre in Ginza.

ATG, the Art Theatre Guild, was an independent company founded with the help of Toho Studios in 1967. During the late '60s and early '70s they were largely responsible for producing and exhibiting independent young directors. By the late '70s their activities had been reduced to distribution and exhibition.

ATG essentially gave them a "4-wall deal" — they could have the theatre for four weeks if they came up with 4,000 advanced ticket sales. For three months they pushed the film, going everywhere imaginable with flyers, posters, and advance-sale tickets. (The Quebec delegation in Japan bought 10.) Friends of friends sold tickets, like scout cookies, raffle tickets and charity chocolates. Yuri's mother even paid for her own ticket.

The Japanese critics were at first reluctant to screen a gaijin film — a film by a foreigner — but eventually, according to Yuri, two or three important critics started to talk about it, and that's when interest began to snowball. The large public response at ATG surprised everyone. Attendance actually increased week after week. And Japanese critics started holding up the film as a model for the type of thing the young Japanese cinema should be doing. *Kinema Jumbo*, Japan's most important film magazine, named **Keiko** the third best film of the year. **Keiko** established Claude Gagnon as one of the major film directors working in Japan.

In 1979, the Gagnons moved back to Quebec. Claude had begun to become the filmmaker he had wanted to become. It was time to challenge the native waters. They established Yoshimura-Gagnon Inc.

I believe three things kept the Gagnons going over the last 10 or so years, as they struggled through the ups and downs of **Larose, Pierrot, et La Luce, Visage Pâle**, and **The Kid Brother**.

The first was their fanatic devotion to film. The second was their confidence in the fact they either were or could become really good filmmakers. The third was their good fortune in attracting to them a few young people, equally in love with film, equally devoted to work, and equally willing to plug away over the years, for virtually nothing. These include Claude's 'kid' brother Alain, who was with them on the shoot of **Keiko**, and Luc Vandal, who, as student, began to work with them in 1981. Both are now working for Aska Film. They seemed (and still seem) to form the kind of team which can hold a dream together, even during the blackest periods.

Profits from **Keiko** were plowed into **Larose, Pierrot et La Luce**. Gagnon

saw **Larose** as a chance to push further the improvisational techniques he had used with **Keiko**. He believes he was unable to get any sort of production support from the Canadian Film Development Corporation or the Institut québécois du cinéma at least partly because there were no dialogue lines written into the script. A Japanese distributor eventually invested \$200,000, and once again they mortgaged everything they had. (The total budget for the film was just over \$600,000.) "Do other Quebec filmmakers put their own money into their films? I don't know. I don't know how they make movies. The reason why we had to finance our movies ourselves is because we had no choice. Nobody would put the money in, so we had to put the money in."

To finance **Visage Pâle**, (budget: \$1,200,000) they had the good sense to work the other way around. This time they went to get the financing in Japan before approaching Telefilm. With a \$400,000 commitment from Japanese producers in hand, they were then able to ask for finishing funds. Telefilm and, after a long fight, the Société générale du cinéma, did back the film.

The films were fairly well received by the critics. "It's funny. These days all the critics are saying 'Oh, poor Gagnon. He had so much trouble. His movies were not well received in the past'... which is simply not true. Our movies were maybe a little more controversial, there were arguments, but the critics were very good with us."

Neither **Visage Pâle** nor **Larose** made much money at the box office. Both were sold to television. Yuri believes that the major problem was that they attempted to distribute the two films themselves. They enjoy the distribution process. They say it helps them as filmmakers. But the learning curve was long, and they were simply too exhausted to do the necessary job, "washed up, finished" after all the struggles to get the films produced.

These experiences led them, after the success of **The Kid Brother** at the World Film Festival, to associate themselves with Jean Colbert, and to form, in partnership, Aska Film Distribution. Aska Film Distribution is now working on the Canadian distribution of the film. Yuri and her assistant, Camille Gueymard, are handling foreign sales through Aska Film International. Yuri is also responsible for the promotion and sales of Quebec films in Japan, having arranged, in 1985 and 1987, "Quebec Cinema Week" in Tokyo.

They expect that through AFI they will soon be producing new projects, and they expect as well to move broadly into distribution through AFD. With Jean Colbert working out of the same offices, questions of distribution and marketing strategy will be considered from the very beginning of any future productions.

Claude Gagnon hasn't followed what they call in Japan "the usual route." He hasn't produced the usual films in the usual ways. While he is becoming known on the international scene, I have the sense that he is still seen as something of a mystery in Quebec — Quebec's most unknown, world-famous, native-son director. For Gagnon, there are no real mysteries. He wanted to make movies, and he simply did what he had to do along the way. He is very clear about his identity as a *Québécois* filmmaker, but has no reservations about making films, in English, for international markets. And he doesn't really think very much about his newfound fame: "I made a film which is very successful, and everybody loves me once again. Until I screw it up, and then nobody knows me anymore. It's all part of the game." He'll just keep making movies.

FILMOGRAPHY

1974 — **Essai filmique sur musique Japonaise**. Experimental, colour, 16mm, 20 min. (Japan).

1976 — **Geinin**. Documentary, colour, 16mm, 50 min. (Japan).

1977 — **Yui To Hi**. Documentary, colour, 16mm, 20 min. (Japan).



• The shooting of **Keiko** — from left, Claude Gagnon, Junko Wakashiba (back), Toshio Hashimoto, André Pelletier (camera) and Alain Gagnon

1978 — **Keiko**. Feature film, colour, 35mm, 119 min. (Japan). Prizes: Special Jury Award, "Honchi" newspaper; 3rd Best Film of the Year, "Kinema Jumbo" magazine; Director's Prize, Japan Film Directors' Association.



• Louise Portal in **Larose, Pierrot et la Luce**

1982 — **Larose, Pierrot, La Luce**. Feature film, colour, 35mm, 105 min. (Canada).



• Alison Odjig and Luc Matte in **Visage Pâle**

1985 — **Visage Pâle**. Feature film, colour, 35mm, 101 min. (Canada). Prizes: International Press Award, 1985 World Film Festival in Montreal; Official Selection, 1986 Berlin Filmfest, Info-Shau section; in nomination for "Meilleur film de la francophonie", 1986 César Awards.



• Tom Reddy and Kenny Easterday in **The Kid Brother**

1986-87 — **The Kid Brother**. Feature film, colour, 35mm, 95 min. (Canada / Japan / U.S.A. co-venture). Prizes: Grand Prix des Amériques, 1987 World Film Festival in Montreal.

photo: Alain Gagnon