Jacques Santi's
Flag

In Flag, a Franco-Canadian co-production directed by Jacques Santi, we follow the lachrymose Inspector Simon (Richard Bohringer) through the familiar mise-en-scène of a typical French policier. The drizzling Parisian streets. The unmade beds and sad saxophones. The tough-guy trips, filled with cigarette smoke and flurries of epithets like mec, flic, salope, flumbeur, and the ever-popular con. The key epithet in Flag (argot for catching a criminal in fligantette, with his or her pants down) is not Flag, it’s con (literally vagina; figuratively dumb jock). The c-word appears so often in the picture, every second line of dialogue seems to clang to it. “Petit con!” Inspector Simon snaps at some mec. “Grand con,” another mec snaps at him. “Quel métrier du con,” Simon says ruefully about police work. “Arrête la connerie!” says everybody at one time or another. Eventually, you want to make your way through those drizzling Parisian streets and find the con who wrote the script.

There’s not much in that script, or the film made from it, to sustain the interest of even the dullest mec in the audience. As Flag opens, we discover that for some vague reason, Simon has a deep need to bust the Dijan Brothers, a gang of North African thieves with connections in the government. Because of those connections, Simon’s slick, sneaky superior (Pierre Arditi) orders the inspector to dump the case and take a vacation. The rest of Flag could be called Inspector Simon’s Holiday.

We watch the inspector hanging around African dance clubs, Tunisian cafés, and all manner of illicit Parisian gambling joints. Simon shoots crap, plays cards, and checks out a weird game that is a hybrid of roulette and billiards. When he’s not getting deeper and deeper into gambling, our hero bickers with his girlfriend, and, in one exciting scene, he separates an egg! The gambling milieu of Flag is populated by suitably shady, louche types – the kind of nervous, hawk-beaked, amusingly eccentric hoods who see the policier’s gift to the world. Julien Guiomar (the chef in Jean Beaudin’s Le Matos) almost brings the film to life as one of the head hoods, a tortoise-faced, weak-willed gangster who makes threats with his face stuck in an inhaler. When Inspector Simon is asked why he is hanging around one of Guiomar’s joints, Simon answers, Bogart-like, “The odor – it pleases me. It pleases me too, but unfortunately, the odor in Flag is really just a whiff of the kind of pungent, underworld poetry that Jean-Pierre Melville got on the screen in films like Bob, le flumbeur and Le Doulos. And as Simon wanders into African nightclubs, we get an equally faint taste of the atmosphere and the Hi-Life music that could have charged up the film.

When Flag is not offering a pale reflection of the world according to Jean-Pierre Melville, it serves up a little evil according to Claude Chabrol. All the main capulets, or villains, are seen amidst the details of their banal domestic lives: bourgeois apartments; dining room tables strewn with the remnants of dinner; proper mothers, wives, and daughters. Even the nasty Dijan Brothers appear en famille in a crowded, tastefully decorated little parlor. A TV blares away, sexy posus sprawled on the boys’ knees, big guns appear suddenly, and in the foreground, the family matriarch sits at a table calmly peeling vegetables. The scene, like a few others in the film, has a certain wit, although you might wonder uneasily whether it is supposed to play to the kind of anti-immigrant racism that surfaced during the last French election. Probably not. Flag is the most lackadaisical of policiers, unmarked by the kind of incipic-in-your-eariousness sometimes characteristic of the genre. The Dijan Brothers don’t get around to doing anything significantly nasty until near the end of the film; the car chases are remarkably relaxed; Inspector Simon flags the bad guys without beating anyone up or firing a single shot. In fact, he doesn’t even change his sweater until the picture is almost over.

The laid-back atmosphere of the film has a lot to do with Richard Bohringer’s performance as Simon. Famous for his roles in Jean-Jacques Beineix’s Diva, (as the cool guardian angel who wears a diving mask while butting holywater), and in Jean-Loup Hubert’s hit, Le Grand chemin, Bohringer is rapidly becoming an institution. In Flag, he pushes his patented style of zen detachment to new extremes, meandering through the movie, his big sleepy face seemingly indifferent to everything around him. When his good girlfriend decides to move to Montreal (possibly because she wants to escape a damp autumn in Paris for an early blizzard in Canada), Bohringer barely flickers one of his considerably over-made-up eyebrows. When the Inspector spends the night with his new girlfriend, a minuet called Josie (Anne Létourneau), he looks as if he would rather be buttering a baguette.

Anne Létourneau, who engraves herself on our memories as Rita Toulouse, the sweet tease in the Pluie films, appears currently in Quebec’s daily TV soap, Le Maison Deschenes, and will be seen in the upcoming Les Tisserands du parcour, is one of the Canadian contributions to Flag. There’s not much for this very talented actress to do in it – and even less for Donald Pilon, who knocks off about six lines in a completely expendable role. Quebecois Francois Prote’s cinematography is decently professional.

Flag is not really an offensive movie. Like many other pictures, it is simply unnecessary. The only mystery the film generates is why did anyone – the young French director Jacques Santi (sadly, he died recently), or the French and Canadian co-producers – want to do anything to do with the project? And why would Telefilm invest in it?

It is extraordinary that more than a quarter of a century after Jean-Luc Godard took the policier, turned it inside out, upside-down, and then sent it into a spin, the French are still making films like Flag, and, in this case, Canadian money helped make it possible.

Maurice Aliolf •


Herméneúgilde Chassion’s
Le Grand Jack

A
cadian director Herméneúgilde Chassion has made, in his Le Grand Jack, an incisive and multi-angled rendition of the rather complex Jack ("Ti-Jean") Kerouac: an American son of Québécois expatriates who grew up to become an internationally known writer and the Beat Generation’s most eloquent voice as author of On the Road.

This biographical documentary, out of the “Américanize” series by the National Film Board, utilises several cinematic ‘tools’ in painting its picture of Kerouac, trying to separate the man from the myth, the profoundly gifted artist from the self-destructive, raging drunk.

At the same time, Chassion explores Kerouac’s cultural background as an influence, quoting his “Everything I know I owe to my French-Canadian background.” The term “un grand jack” is a popular expression among French Canadians meaning anything of particular great height, but its use in this title denotes a different kind of stature: part of the pleased astonishment most Québécois must have felt in the early 1960s when they heard him interviewed in French, their particular breed of French, as a best-selling American writer, the man who coined the term ‘Beat’ adopted by the Beat Generation, Beat Poets, Beatniks, and even a British musical group called The Beatles. Born in Lowell, Mass. in 1922 to Léo and Gabrielle Kerouac, who had moved to Lowell as part of the mass emigration to the American textile mills at the turn of the century, he was raised in the totally French-speaking atmosphere of the French ‘ghettos’ and as a youth spoke no English whatsoever – the language which, like Joseph Conrad before him, he would eventually write in.

His formative years are documented abundantly, especially through his writing but
also through the use of interviews with people personally familiar with either Lowell or Kerouac of that era. We get a hint of just what kind of peculiar events marked Kerouac and why he became the extremely complex, somewhat disturbed, mother-fixated, compulsive, brilliant individual who would ascend the pedestal, in spite of himself, as counter-culture's great mythical hero-victim and, according to poet Allen Ginsberg, its "saint." (In his "Is There Any End to Kerouac Highway?", writer Ken (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest) Kesey agreed, writing, "I have to go along with Ginsberg. sweet sad Jack has every right to be, in the most traditional Catholic sense, considered a candidate for canonization. He not only manifested Grace, and Mercy, and Glory, he also in some beautiful way died for our scenes.")

As a child he witnessed an accident where a man died, and when he was five, his older brother Gerard died of rheumatic fever, slowly and at home, so that 'I-Jean' watched his life ebbing away like the colour on his face. (Later his mother would say to him, "You should have died, not Gerard.")

He went to Columbia University on a football scholarship, but left to join the navy. After two months in the service, he was given a psychiatric discharge, and he gravitated to New York City where he met Allan Ginsberg and other penniless writers/intellectuals searching for new truths in the post-war era. He also met Neil Cassidy, the man who would help inspire On the Road, and together they explored America in all its richness: the wide-open spaces, the smoky jazz bars, the Mexican brothels, throwing down the foundations to what would be the new consciousness of the 1960s and beyond.

The film reveals these life-events by a methodological layering of several different resources: archives, eyewitness accounts, old footage of an interview Kerouac did in French, but especially Kerouac's own writing on the subject coupled with directed recreations of these events using actors in period dress and backgrounds. Interviewers between all of these we hear Chasson's voice narrating bits of a prose-poem, a kind of Ode to Jack, that recurs from time to time to offer both a contrast to and a welcome respite from the delivery of information, nuts-and-bolts-style of documentary.

The one method that works best throughout is, of course, Jack's own high-powered writing, bits of his contemplations of youth and of life as road (very well) by actor Guy Nadon. The use of two narrator voices, however, tends to be somewhat confusing: is Chasson reciting his prose-poem here, or is it Nadon "speaking" as Kerouac? The rule of thumb seems to be simply to look through to the quality of writing, for though Chasson is a very competent writer, he cannot here a moment compare with the flow and the power of a Kerouac, even a translated Kerouac.

As for the use of acted recreations of the writer's life-events, they do lift from the page those things which give themselves easily to the necessary visual appendage of film, but we are left with the impression that on the page they were better. For the most part, the work of the actors is competent, but pale in comparison to the imagery evoked when reading Kerouac.

Visually, I was struck by how archival photographs were handled, i.e., an old group-shot of 'transplanted to the U.S.' French-Canadians where the camera slowly pans a close-up of their eyes, evoking the new rootlessness, the inner strength, the diversity, the humanity of kindred souls stuck on foreign soil.

The musical soundtrack, by Robert M. Lepage, also works well, giving us a languid, jazz sound reminiscent of period and place. In some of these recreations, Chasson uses an "I-am-a-camera" technique in trying to dive into his subject's psyche and, literally, his point of view: hands underneath and seemingly part of the camera, which turns as a head would turn to see his old father dying slowly while sitting in a chair, pausing only long enough to curse his son one last time. When paired on audio with Kerouac's own recollections of what he was thinking at the time, the method works - when used in moderation, and it is.

However, Chasson's decision to concentrate so much on the man and his life is a detriment to Kerouac's true and enduring quality, his work. Only On the Road is ever mentioned, and this in passing, despite the fact that he wrote a prodigious 20 or so novels between 1957 and his death, bloated, destitute and alcoholic, at his mother's home in 1969.

Literary legend tells us that Kerouac knocked off the 175,000 words of On the Road in 20 days - feeding a 120-foot roll of teletype paper into his typewriter so that he could write continuously without stopping to even change the page. He could type 180 words a minute, in the age before the word processor, and he developed a personal style reminiscent of how jazz is played - freed from rigid parameters; straight from the bell, yet still coherent and surprisingly concise; flowing with its own energy through the grace of its primal truths.

The very nature of his work forms a huge and inter-resonating Kerouacian drama of incredible scope, something like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga, yet kinder, fairer, less violent, ever searching for meaning in this convoluted world.

Sad ly, it is precisely this most important of all aspects of Kerouac that is missing the most from this film.

André Gys Arsenault  


Jean-Daniel Lafond's  

Le voyage au bout de la route  

The road motif, used as a dynamic vehicle (no pun intended) by the various explorers of national-cultural/ social/self-discovery landscapes in the post-Kerouac era, is the method-of-choice orchestrated by director Jean-Daniel Lafond to explore Quebec's social-cultural-historical-geographical-economic soul in the documentary Le voyage au bout de la route ou La réalité du pays qui a aimé, the fourth film in the 'Américanité' series by the National Film Board.

In it, Lafond and his crew follow aging FrenchCanadian Jacques Douai as he returns to the province after a 30-year absence.allowing the camera to see through his stranger's eyes the many changes that have happened to this province and its people during that period: the Quiet Revolution, a growing sense of nationalism and pride, the Parti Québécois' election victory, the referendum, etc. - events that Douai did not experience firsthand.

Part-tourist, part-troubadour, Douai is a peripatetic choice: a little-known chansonier (especially here in Quebec) who after 30 years, is still singing the same minor 'hits'. He is never sharply defined and remains a kind of vague personage wandering around the province talking to people. His main forte seems to be his profound ignorance of Quebec society, dwelling with Lafond's help on lumberjacks and loggers.

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