

# The Minee-Feechie Experiment

*Birth of a monster, or brave new film world?*

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

## Origins of the creature

It was born amidst the oozing, smoking ruins of "Hollywood North", a strange land, where sportswear manufacturers and government bureaucrats, periodontists and psychiatrists were gripped by a primitive and irresistible impulse to hurl money into the production of excruciatingly empty movies.

Overnight, rivers of dollars dried up. Reeling with horror, the bureaucrats and lawyers, the dentists and psychoanalysts forced themselves to achieve mastery over their urges. And soon, "Hollywood North" crumbled into a murky, desolate landscape, where producers and directors wandered and groped in the rubble, wondering where their next picture would come from.

After many months of meditation and fasting, certain producers and directors had a vision. They saw, spinning toward them just like the cosmic slab in 2001, a 21-inch television set, which was somehow also an 80-foot-wide movie screen. The producers and directors were impressed. So they drew up charts and diagrams; they conferred, experimented, and crossed their fingers. Then one day, out of swirling vapors and fleeting squiggly things, emerged their creature, their brave new beast. It was the Minee-Feechie! — a cross-fertilization of the television mini-series and the theatrical feature film.

During the past seven years, many Minee-Feechies have walked the earth. Their proud creators see the beasts striding toward pinnacles of success amidst the roar of giant crowds — and indeed some have won the applause of both big Screen and TV audiences. However, skeptical observers of the crossbreed argue that it is an awkward klutz — doomed to stumble, lay an egg, and fall on its face.

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Denis Héroux — *The Blood of Others, Louisiana*



Marie-José Raymond — *The Tin Flute, The Mills of Power*



Justine Héroux — *Les Plouffe, Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe*



Pieter Kroonenburg — *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*

## Rewinding

What happens when you rewind the Minee-Feechies and watch them? What has the minee (the TV version) got that the feechie (the feature film) lacks? Does more mean better?



### Les Plouffe

The first of the Minee-Feechies was, by Canadian standards, a mega-media event anticipated in headlines like "Plouffes Live Again," and in stories about the 285 period costumes and 5,000 extras. After all, the original *Plouffe* TV series of the '50s remains the only bicultural, coast-to-coast hit ever produced in this country. (You'll never again see the '50s *Plouffe*. Radio-Canada vaporized them because somebody saw no point in keeping archives.) Many critics praised the feechie. But Jay Scott, the Road Warrior of *The Globe and Mail*, saw it as "epic cute" and "respectable fluff," while acknowledging that it could possibly be "a preview of... a great Canadian TV series."

In Gilles Carle's *Plouffe*, both minee and feechie, there are gracefully shot and cut passages, some brilliant acting, and one of the few truly iconic erotic conjunctions in Canadian film — the tortured and funny relationship between the repressed Ovide Plouffe (Gabriel Arcand) and the teasingly dressed Rita Toulouse (Anne Létourneau). The personal stories are told well, as is the interlocking chronicle of

Quebec in transition during the late '30s and early '40s. Both droll and sentimental, *Plouffe* offers a picture of a society emerging from dreaming innocence into political and moral complexity, from kitchens and cathedrals into jukeboxes, baseball, and war.

The various movie versions (ranging from two to four hours) make Ovide and his relationship with Rita the dramatic nucleus of the story. The feechie is cut faster than the minee, leaves sub-plots dangling, and lurches awkwardly near the end from the resolution of the intimate Ovide-Rita story to a broadly historical finale without any breathing space in between.

The six-hour minee of *Les Plouffe* gives you time to savor the production's cathedrals, back verandas, cavernous monasteries, and lovingly detailed working-class streets. The series also has more of Gilles Carle's comic bite.

The minee dwells on its sub-plots: sister Cecile's (Denise Filiatrault) thwarted relationship with a constipated-looking bus driver (Paul Berval); brother Napoléon's (Pierre Curzi) profound devotion to the consumptive Jeanne Duplessis (Louise Laparé); and family friend Denis Boucher's (Reni Laurent) problems with his mother (Stephane Audran). Unfortunately, these sub-plots bathe in 19th-century dime-novel schmaltz served straight. Jeanne Duplessis recovers miraculously from T. B. through the pristine love of Napoléon Plouffe. Cecile's unhappy love story ends preposterously when her lover dies in a bus crash caused by a bird he once gave her.

Denis Boucher, a French emigré and outsider, is an ebullient guide who brings the traditionalist Quebec world of les Plouffes into focus. But most of the scenes dealing with Denis's private life with his mother (Stephane Audran) are like stilled tableaux from a museum of the French bourgeoisie. Audran, one of the most elegant and intelligent actresses in France, keeps wringing her hands and Denis storms out of rooms like a wind-up Jean-Pierre Léaud.

In the outer limits of the Canadian film industry's collective unconscious, that's how the Minee-Feechie was born. But in the more mundane world of production houses, banks, and government institutions, certain decisions, strategies, and policies brought the new being to life.

Robert Roy, who just left his post as Radio-Canada's TV programming director, recalls a meeting that took place on November 26, 1979, between CBC-Radio-Canada executives and "most of" the independent film producers. One of those executives, Pierre DesRoches, had been working hard to promote the idea of joint productions between the CBC, Radio-Canada, and the filmmakers.

Producer Denis Héroux agrees that DesRoches, now executive director of Telefilm Canada, was "instrumental" in encouraging the CBC to get involved with the indies. Says Héroux, "It was the first time that Radio-Canada was investing so much money with private industry." The purpose of the expansive spending, a purpose discussed at that meeting in 1979, was the creation, says Roy, of experimental "major productions" that would appeal to both French and English audiences, while competing "with the American product." The first three "major productions" were all Minee-Feechies, each to be produced as both a TV mini-series and a feature film: *La Famille Plouffe*, *Maria Chapdelaine*, and *The Tin Flute* (*Bonheur d'Occasion*). The Italians and the Americans had successfully cross-bred the two forms; now Canadians were going to try.

From a broadcaster's point-of-view, the experiment was a success. Co-producing with film producers allowed Radio-Canada to finance elaborate mini-series that attracted viewers for several days or weeks, and cost, as Denis Héroux points out, up to \$1 million an hour — far more than your typical *telemovie*. At the same time, the network benefitted from the hype generated by the feature film releases. When the producers of the recently completed *Les Tisserands du Pouvoir* (*The Mills of Power*) decided to expand a mini-series project into a Minee-Feechie, they asked Radio-Canada, says Robert Roy, "to postpone the exercise of its rights one year." The network agreed, because if *Tisserands* is a hit, the movie will boost Radio-Canada's "prime objective," the series.

The new relationship between Canadian film producers and the TV networks got really hot in 1983 when the government created Telefilm Canada and its Broadcast Program Development Fund. A new policy told moviemakers that to get funding from the government's film agency, they were now obliged to pre-sell their projects to television. Media consultant Honey Drescher recalls that at the '84 Banff Festival, "half the producers were running around waving letters from broadcasters." Overnight, the Fund had become a key source of financing for Canadian movies, but filmmakers had to come up with

ideas that would interest the TV people.

Harry Gulkin, a former producer (*Lies My Father Told Me*, *Jacob Two-Two*, etc.) and now a project director at Quebec's SOGIC (Société générale des industries culturelles), points out that once the broadcast fund was in place, producers who saw the feature film as "the road to recognition and success" needed to find "a formula to loosen up the monies" in the fund. Since broadcasters prefer productions that draw viewers over a period of time to one-shot movies, that formula was the Minee-Feechie. It gave movie producers their feature film, the television executives their series, and helped everybody navigate through the turbulent waters of financing.

### Will the creature survive?

There are 15 known Canadian Minee-Feechies, the majority co-produced with France. Radio-Canada has been heavily involved in spawning them, the CBC and CTV far less so. The National Film Board participated in two: *Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe* and *The Tin Flute*. Creatures like *The Blood of Others* and *Joshua Then and Now* are still kicking up their heels, giving repeat performances on network TV as recently as a month ago.

If you add up the budgets that have financed the big birds, the total, according to the best information available, is \$113 million. Subtract foreign investment in co-pros, and you're left with \$71.5 million from the Canadian participants.

In 1988, several newborns have joined the brood. These include *Bino Fabule* (*Moon Glow*), a just-completed animated fantasy, and *Le Palanquin des larmes* (*Woman of Shanghai*). The film version of *Le Palanquin* will premiere soon, the mini-series in late 1989. *Les Roses de Matmata* (*Desert Chase*), and a sea saga called *L'Île*, two more recent arrivals, are slated to appear on conventional TV next year.

Although 1988 is clearly a big year for the creature, the Minee-Feechie's future is shaky. Critical and audience reaction have not always been flattering, and the financial returns, in the opinion of people in the industry, have been disappointing in view of the relatively high costs. According to a knowledgeable source, Telefilm Canada is one investor that probably "won't get involved" in any more projects of this type because "the returns are not there, and they're just too expensive."

The majority of the Minee-Feechies originate from Quebec, and like 99 per cent of all Québécois productions, they fare less well in English Canada and in foreign markets than they do at home. For example, in 1981-82, the series version of *La Famille Plouffe* netted an average of 1.8 million Quebecers for each of its six episodes on Radio-Canada, while the CBC's broadcast of the English *Plouffes* drew 725,000 viewers nationwide. Three years later, *The Tin Flute* was considered a surprising success when

about 1.5 million Canadians watched the five-hour show.

Naturally, each Minee-Feechie has had its own special fate. According to the source, *The Blood of Others* bombed completely, while *For Those I Loved* had a significant release and success both in Quebec and in Europe. *Le Matou* did well in Quebec cinemas, "so-so" on TV, and badly in Europe. Although *Louisiana* failed at the box-office both in Canada and in France, it has done well, according to its producer, Denis Héroux, on American pay-TV (H. B. O. paid roughly \$2.5 million for the rights) and Australian television (it paid roughly \$400,000).

Héroux produced four of the hybrids (three in 1984), and participated in a fifth project, the TV success *Sword of Gideon*, which was supposed to

be a Minee-Feechie, but never came to life as a feature film. He suggests that the question of financial returns is "a very complex and long process to examine." You have to consider the foreign co-producers' large injections of cash, tax-break advantages, the sales of ancillary rights, and so on. "Bottom-line," says Héroux, a production can be "in profit because it has been profitable somewhere else" than the markets that critics like to focus on. Denis Héroux's bottom-line attitude is philosophical. "For one success," he laughs, "you can fail five times."

Marie-José Raymond, producer of two Minee-Feechies, coolly contemplates reports of the hybrids' poor financial returns and asks, "What Canadian-made films, whether they are linked or not to a mini-series, have had tremendous box-office success elsewhere than

#### For Those I Loved

Based on Martin Gray's autobiography, this is the most visually complex of the Minee-Feechies. The story of Gray's epic battle for survival, *For Those I Loved* takes you from Poland during the Nazi occupation to New York and France in the '50s and '60s.

The 2-1/2 hour movie version bites chunks out of the eight-hour series and focuses on the teenage Gray's terrifying experiences in Warsaw's Jewish ghetto and the Treblinka concentration camp. The other episodes in Gray's life flash by in a few shots or brief scenes, with the help of voice-over narration.

If you look at the film as the story of Gray's adolescence under the Nazi occupation, and forget the pieces that squeeze in the rest of the life, the picture has an impact. Robert Enrico (director of the classic short *Occurrence at Owl*

*Creek Bridge*) engineered detailed, brutally convincing reconstructions of the Warsaw ghetto and Treblinka. Jacques Penot, playing the teenage Martin Gray, gives an extraordinary performance as a cocky, street-smart kid who becomes marked by horror.

Much of the additional material in the TV version completes and deepens the story, although you might wonder why an entire episode of the series shows us in detail how Martin made a fortune in America. We find out a lot about peddling silk scarves, managing a luxury resort, and running an antique porcelain business, but nothing about the woman (Brigitte Fossey) who saves the middle-aged Martin Gray (Michael York) from despair, and then dies tragically. Despite the eight-hour running time, Gray's wife Dina is portrayed as little more than a cute smile.

## Rating the Minee-Feechies

Title	English Audience		Millions of viewers (average per episode)
	Network	Date	
The Tin Flute	CBC	'85	1.32
Les Plouffe	CBC	'82	.723
Joshua Then and Now	CBC	'86	1.27
Maria Chapdelaine	CBC	'85	1.039
Sword of Gideon	CTV		1.823
French Audience			
Les Plouffe	Radio-Canada	'81-82	1.811
Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe	RC	'85-86	1.382
The Tin Flute (Bonheur d'Occasion)	RC	'84-85	1.527
Maria Chapdelaine	RC	'84-85	1.656
Louisiana	RC	'85-86	1.472
Le Matou	RC	'86-87	.981
For Those I Loved	RC	'84-85	1.304
Joshua Then and Now	RC	'87	.425
Blood of Others	RC	'85-86	.456
Vengeance	RC	'86	.319



#### Maria Chapdelaine

In his adaptation of Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Gilles Carle sees turn-of-the-century rural Quebec as both a hard, bristling backwoods and a fairy-tale setting for romantic love. Whether Lac St-Jean is envisioned in images of silvery nocturnal waterfalls or empty fields and lonely farms, it is always intensely dramatic - more dramatic, in fact, than the story's actual heroes.

The length of the mini-series enhances *Maria Chapdelaine's* portrayal of the forests and the changing seasons; the rituals of the settlers and the muddy village they have thrown together in

the middle of nowhere. The TV version also allows for a slower, more teasing build-up toward the first big moments between Maria (Carole Laure) and her dream lover, François Paradis (Nick Mancuso).

The longer build-up, and the more detailed characterizations of Maria and François, charge up the mystical love story, but not enough to give it the sparks it needs. In both the minee and feechie versions, Maria and François are too chic and controlled - more like an '80s couple on a camping trip than the wildhearted incarnations of Lac St-Jean.



The biggie, *Bethune: The Making of a Hero*, currently in production, could make or break the Minee-Feechie species. Above, director Phillip Borsos on set with Helen Shaver and Donald Sutherland in China



**Le Matou**

The TV version of *Le Matou* is richer and more alive than the movie. Yves Beauchemin's original story is a comic fable that needs its gallery of comic characters. In the feechie, many of them appear as quick sketches, or not at all. In the minee, the story's con-men and lechers, drunks and petty tyrants get to strut their stuff in full color. None of these characters are "beige," says director Jean Beaudin, "they are all very crazy and very powerful."

As the story unravels, bizarre creatures parade into the lives of the young heroes Florent and Elise Boissonneault (Serge Dupire and Monique Spaziani) and perform their crackpot arias. Many of them are monomaniacal males like Florent's hyperactive father (Yvan Canuel) or the hack reporter Gladu (Julien Poulin). Gladu takes gleeful delight in his various money-making schemes, including a machine that is part telephone, part cassette player, and

part toilet paper dispenser. In one nutty riff, he argues that it will go over big with people who are serious about shitting in comfort. Unfortunately, in both series and film, the demonic Ratablavasky, a central figure, seems more a concept than an interwoven character.

Apart from the black comedy, the TV version's 300-minute running time allows us to follow *Le Matou's* many plot swings between hope and desolation, good fortune and bad, without the abrupt continuity jumps of the movie. The series has time to linger in alleyways and vacant lots, and to follow the street brat Monsieur Emile (Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge) during his nocturnal prowling. One long, magical sequence set in Florida feeds the story with crucial character development, visual contrasts, and geographical expansion. Not one frame of the sequence is in the theatrical release, and you can feel its absence.



**Joshua Then and Now**

This was supposed to be a Big One – a Minee-Feechie that bathed in God knows what sweet smells of success. *Joshua* had Mordecai Richler, Ted Kotcheff, Robert Lantos, and 20th Century-Fox going for it. Unfortunately, the production suffered cost overruns, the threat of a total shutdown, and a non-sell from 20th. Despite problems, which include the fatal distraction of Gabrielle Lazure's frozen performance as Joshua Shapiro's wife Pauline, the production has wit, scope, and uninhibited performances from much of the cast, especially James Woods (Joshua), Alan Arkin (Joshua's disreputable father), and Kate Trotter (a deliciously rapacious slut).

The film version is flawed by choppy sequences, which, in the series, play smoothly.

For example, the action that portrays Joshua reaching puberty in the teeming Jewish ghetto of Montreal is missing the TV version's ironic cross-cutting to Pauline's childhood in the glistening world of the WASP establishment. Later in the movie, a character's spectacular suicide is cut in so fast, it seems like an afterthought, while in the series, a longer version of the same scene has emotional impact.

The television *Joshua* doesn't always benefit from its additional material. Minor characters, for example Seymour, the pathological skirt-chaser (Chuck Shamata), are the basis of gags that run on too long. Sub-plots like the one about a Westmount cop (Henry Beckman), who blackmails Joshua into helping him edit his tedious memoirs, is laborious sit-comedy.

in Canada?" *Un Zoo la nuit* "did not have a series attached to it, and it unfortunately did not do well in France. *Le Déclin* is an interesting exception which confirms the rule."

The fate of the Minee-Feechie in the Canadian film industry is riding on two ambitious projects, and one of them is currently gestating at Raymond's company, Rose Films. Claude Fournier's *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*, an epic about Québécois and French families that migrated to New England at the turn of the century, is a rare specimen: the first Minee-Feechie-Feechie. Two movies (an original and a sequel, the first to premiere next month) will be followed by a six-hour series in 1989. According to Raymond, distributor René Malo advanced the idea of putting out two features after the international success of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*.

The Minee-Feechie's future also depends on the project that is going to be the biggest and costliest of all of them: Phillip Borsos' *Bethune: the Making of a Hero*. The production, as is well known, met up with certain difficulties during the winter, but producer Pieter Kroonenburg is confident that "the absolute, definitive start date" for filming sequences in Montreal and Spain is September. "We allowed Donald Sutherland to do another film in the meantime," says Kroonenburg, "so we could sort out our problems." He hopes *Bethune* will be ready for Cannes, that the feechie version will be released soon after, and the mini-series a year later.

If *Bethune* and *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* mega-hit at both the box-office and on TV, all sorts of people – from producers to entertainment lawyers – will think affectionately about Minee-Feechie and how nice it would be to own one. But if these specimens wobble, topple, and flop, the species Minee-Feechie will be deader than the dinosaur, another casualty of the Canadian film industry.

**Zooming in on the beast**

Although Harry Gulkin believes that a carefully planned Minee-Feechie project is "worthwhile doing," and "some very good ones will happen," he is one of many observers who question the very existence of the creature.

In Gulkin's opinion, the hybrid productions "don't make sense as a general form. I was always surprised at the fact that this was taking place. I didn't see how it could possibly work out." Gulkin believes that the Minee-Feechie is neither "market-driven" nor the product of "a creative impulse: it arose from the complexity of financing feature films in this country."

When the "motor" that drives a production is the financing, producers, writers, and directors may forget the creative minefields that lurk ahead. One of them, Gulkin points out, is the fundamental structural difference between a movie and a mini-series. A series, with its sub-plots and its numerous secondary characters, has a structure within each episode



**Harold Greenberg, executive producer of *Maria Chapdelaine***

as well as an "element", part of a larger structure, "that carries the audience from one episode to the next. To try and pull your feature film out of that fatted-out thing becomes horrendous."

Jean Beaudin, director of *Le Matou*, experienced the problems of turning a mini-series into a feature film. For Beaudin, "the rhythm of the shooting is the right rhythm, and the rhythm is natural" to the way an actor crosses a room, or delivers a line of dialogue. So you shoot it the way it feels right. But when you knock a six-hour series like *Le Matou* down to a two-hour film because of the contract, "you have to shorten every sequence and every shot. You twist the material too much. It becomes another color; it's not the color that you had when you did the shooting."

**PRODUCERS OF MINEE-FEECHIES BELIEVE THAT THE CREATURES SOMETIMES TAKE A NOSEDIVE BECAUSE OF DESIGN PROBLEMS IN INDIVIDUAL SPECIMENS, NOT A FATAL FLAW IN THE SPECIES.**

Despite his reservations about the film version of *Le Matou*, Beaudin does not entirely shun the Minee-Feechie. He speaks of his excitement with both the series and the theatrical versions of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, which was followed by *Fanny and Alexander*, released as a 300-minute mini-series and a 200-minute picture. Why did *Scenes* and *Fanny* work? Because the theatrical versions, like Gilles Carle's first version of *La Famille Plouffe*, were very long movies. If you plan an expansive feature, says Beaudin, "it's just a question of accelerating the rhythms. You will be able to use most of your important material."

But unfortunately, three-hour-plus movies are a very rare breed. Beaudin adds, "Exhibitors want three shows every night, or five shows a

day, because it's more popcorn, more Coke, more everything." So when he was shooting *Le Matou*, "ninety-nine per cent of the time my worry was the series. I was sort of hoping that the film would come out well."

Phillip Borsos, who is about to resume directing *Bethune*, decided that he was going to make a feature film. "I can't possibly care deeply about both of them," says the director. "Film is delicate and specific and subtle; it has texture and tone and character," while a mini-series is a plot-driven vehicle that "slots in between commercials."

During the shooting of *Joshua Then and Now*, Borsos remarks that the feature film script was on white paper, the mini-series scenario on blue. "That's just havoc; that's chaos! The crew and the actors have to be geared to think in one direction; they can't think in two. It's not possible."

For *Bethune*, Borsos says he is working with one script that includes "a lot of scenes which are, in fact, unnecessary to a feature film, but will work on TV." Borsos has "no doubts" that *Bethune*, the feature, will work out. He hopes the series will too. But like Harry Gulkin and Jean Beaudin, he has serious doubts about the Minee-Feechie's viability as a species: "It's a very bad way to attempt to make a feature film because it causes tremendous stress on the material, and therefore on the people making it, and therefore back again on the material."

According to Borsos, the problem isn't in the shooting of the production; "it's got everything to do with writing and editing." When you're writing, he says, "after a while, you forget your structure for a two-hour film. You say 'Great. We've got the time to tell the whole story.' Then when you're cutting 200 minutes down to 110, you find yourself eliminating material that "normally you would have imbedded deeply into another scene of your feature."

"So now what happens is you have a story with holes in it; you have a story that is weak in depth. Things are no longer properly set up, and things are no longer properly paid off."

For Kevin Tierney, an ex-publicist now working on project development for producer Rock Demers, the Minee-Feechie is a hybrid of "a fatuous mini-series, and an emasculated feature film. It's very difficult to strike the balance between them." Tierney believes that the government's attempts "to move filmmakers and producers in another direction - into making TV product - was a very good idea." But "it fucked up, of course. The Broadcast Fund that created those things created hybrids and not enough actual TV programming."

Tierney "always suspected" that Minee-Feechie were the products of "people who couldn't bring themselves to admit that they were working in the medium of television. And they ended up doing an end run around it, to get feature films. We just keep making those circuitous kind of loops, making neither one

**ALTHOUGH PRODUCERS HERE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO DO A \$50 MILLION WHO FRAMED MARTIN MOOSE?, THEY CAN GET A TISSERANDS DU POUVOIR ON THE BIG SCREEN BY SIMULTANEOUSLY MAKING IT FOR THE SMALL ONE.**

thing nor the other. It's neither a mini-series nor a movie, neither French nor English, it's neither, neither. That's always struck me as being fundamentally Canadian. Are you making a movie? Well, not really. Are you making a mini-series? Well, not really. Are you an American? Well, not really."

**Land of the Minee-Feechie**

Producers of Minee-Feechie believe that the creatures sometimes take a nosedive because of design problems in individual specimens, not a fatal flaw in the species. According to Pieter Kroonenburg, the *Bethune* team has been in the "enviable position" of being able to examine the remains of the Minee-Feechie that crashed "and find out what went wrong." Says the producer, "You have to figure it out first. You have to make absolutely sure there are not going to be unresolved sub-plots or people that disappear, and you can do that on paper."

"Once I knew I had to write four hours of *Bethune*," remembers Ted Allan, "there was no problem. I'd write the four hours first, and then I'd glean my feature-length film." Part of the work was "rewriting transitions that worked in the mini-series, but wouldn't work all that well in the movie" because of scenes that might be as much as halved in the editing. The writer is confident there will be "no loss in major characters," pointing out that the *Bethune* story has an advantage as a Minee-Feechie project: the people *Bethune* knows in Montreal don't appear in the Chinese part of the story.

The audience will see, according to Allan, "less breathtaking landscapes" and "less battle scenes" in the picture, but nothing that is "needed emotionally" will be missing. He argues that as long as you know what the heart of a story is, there is no reason why a Minee-Feechie can't have a healthy and prosperous life. In fact, when a producer commissioned Allan to script a mini-series about Lord Beaverbrook, he proposed, "on the basis of my experience with *Bethune*," that they consider doing the project for both the movies and TV.

Denis Héroux and Marie-José Raymond agree that telling a story in two forms demands especially careful planning and a clear conception of both versions. Héroux says that the theatrical release of his *Louisiana* failed because the project's third director ignored the feature film script, and the movie was hacked together in the editing room. Raymond insists that you can't write a series, "plan little commercial breaks, and then try and patch it up into a feature film." Although careful planning

**The Blood of Others**

This adaptation of Simone de Beauvoir's novel is a perfect specimen of what critic J. Hoberman calls a "dubbed, denatured international co-pro," complete with score by Maurice Jarre.

In *The Blood of Others*, set during the Nazi occupation of France, Jodie Foster is an ambitious Parisian couturier who falls in love with a resistance fighter (Michael Ontkean). Foster has done good work elsewhere, but in *Blood*, she can't help coming across more like an ambitious Avon Lady.

Foster is joined by a strange brew of American, Canadian, and even French actors, who play Parisians, Germans, and Russian Jews. Saying their lines in the dead air of a co-pro, they make statements like "I'm terribly happy and terribly afraid. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about?" You can see the balloons over their heads.

Directed by Claude Chabrol, this is a production that could help destroy the *auteur* theory. Except for a few scenes that display the director's brand of irony, or his ability to handle suspense, *The Blood of Others* could have been made by any competent filmmaker. One of the pluses of the TV version is that you get a little



more *vrai Chabrol*: for example, a joyless bourgeois dinner party that focuses on a roast lamb, a relentlessly ticking clock, and a burping grandmother. In the minee, we also see more archival footage, more lyrical images of Parisian parks and the French countryside, more imitation Brassai shots of girls reflected in tricky mirrors, and more unmemorable minor characters.

Says Gilles Carle about this kind of co-pro: "I think Claude Chabrol is not as happy about it as he is about other films that he did more freely."



**The Tin Flute (Bonheur d'Occasion)**

Set in the Montreal district of St. Henri during the '40s, *Bonheur d'Occasion* tells the story of an impoverished working-class family: Azarius and Rose-Anna Lacasse (Michel Forget, Marilyn Lightstone), and their seemingly innumerable children.

When producer Marie-José Raymond and director Claude Fournier began scripting their Minee-Feechie adaptation of Gabrielle Roy's novel, they decided that the film version would focus on daughter Florentine Lacasse's (Mireille Deyglun) "torn passion" for her lover, Jean Lévesque (Pierre Chagnon). "The heroine of the film is Florentine," adds the producer, but "the hero of the series is St. Henri."

Both minee and feechie offer an evocative portrayal of a poor Montreal neighborhood during World War II - with sorrow, not just dreamy nostalgia in the blue-grey, virtually

monochromatic mise-en-scene. In the TV version, we get more of the streets, the sad little parks, the places where neighborhood types shoot the breeze. Scenes in a local greasy spoon enrich both the portraits of St. Henri and of the father, Azarius Lacasse. In the film, Azarius tilts toward becoming a sad-sack caricature of a helpless loser, while in the series version, we grasp that he has convictions, and he can express his thoughts.

The minee's extra flesh does not always work to its advantage. Jean Lévesque's motives are more explicitly presented, but the extra material waters down his perverse allure. Rose-Anna Lacasse is an over-determined character in the film version. In the minee, overloaded with extreme close-ups of her anguished face and long-shots of her bent figure scuttling along the horizon, the character drowns in her own tears.

**Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe**

Before shooting began on *Le Crime* (a.k.a. *Plouffe II*), Gilles Carle and the producers found a smart solution to the essential problem of the Minee-Feechie. They would not attempt to squeeze a 300-minute story into 120 for the theatrical release. Instead, the last two hours of the series would be self-contained enough to stand as the film version, and these final episodes would have a different director, Denys Arcand.

The two-hour feechie and the last two hours of the minee are almost identical, with the exception of a riverside orgy scene that was rendered less kinky and less nude for sensitive prime-time TV viewers. However, looking at the film is an entirely different experience from watching the full series. While *Crime*, the feechie, is a soap noir about the violent termination of Ovide Plouffe's marriage to Rita Toulouse, the series is a true sequel that continues the Plouffe story and develops the characters as they, along with Quebec society, shed the last vestments of their innocence. For

the producer, Justine Heroux, "*The Plouffe Family* is about childhood," and *Le Crime* is about its end.

In *Le Crime*, hypocrisy is rampant, reputation and careerism are top priorities, and people are hustling everything from coffins to political influence. It's Balzac meets *Peyton Place* in Quebec City, a cartoon tapestry with moments of macabre comedy, including a funeral scene during which a fat corpse is stranded like a beached whale on the steps of a church.

The feechie suffers from its emphasis on a so-so murder plot that drags you into mundane melodramatics, pseudo-existential ironies, and the sheer creepiness of the old-fashioned villain, Pacifique Berthet (Jean Carmet). There's something sickly in the conception and realization of a handicapped *crapule*, who blows himself up with his own crutches. To be fair to poor Pacifique, it should be noted that in the minee, the same character is rounder, more human, less like a ghost from some long forgotten turn-of-the-century stage show.



**Louisiana**

In the production that was meant to be the Canadian *Gone With the Wind*, Virginia Tregan's Great Love for Clarence Dandridge is thwarted by a Great Inconvenience: Clarence's genitalia were sliced off in a duel. Is this *Gone With the Wind* or *Gone With the Balls*?

The TV version of *Louisiana* allows the viewer to wallow in five hours of white trash that includes such nuggets as Virginia (Margot Kidder), who seems more like the captain of a basketball team than a southern belle, bellowing at Clarence (Ian Charleson), "Whaddya want me to do? You want me to be like you? I need a man!" Accompanied by a Muzak rendition of *Dixie*, every possible cliché image of the Deep South wafts onto the screen. Director Philippe

de Broca and cameraman Michel Brault come up with classic corn like the romantic tableaux of Virginia, dressed in billowing gowns, on the mossy grounds of her beloved plantation.

*Louisiana*, the feechie, embodies all the horrors that give people the shakes when they contemplate metamorphosing a mini-series into a theatrical release. This feechie doesn't merely truncate sub-plots and trim footage, it's so chopped up it's all climaxes—like a preview of coming attractions. Virginia's lovers accumulate like bales of cotton, people drop dead like flies, the Civil War ends almost as soon as it begins, and Virginia tells someone that she has three children although we've seen only two. Riverboats churn down the Mississippi faster than hovercrafts.

is the key to winding up a golden Minee-Feechie, Ted Allan, Phillip Borsos, Jean Beaudin and Gilles Carle, who has directed 14 hours of the hybrids, point out that plans you make on paper are sometimes thrown out during the cutting. Scenes designated for the series can suddenly pop into the movie.

The making of a Minee-Feechie inevitably leads to compromises. But as Raymond points out, in this country, filmmakers can't always "choose the means that we want." Raymond, like Denis Héroux, is a producer who believes Canadians should not exclude themselves from filming "stories of a certain magnitude." Although producers here will never be able to do a \$50 million *Who Framed Martin Moose?*, they can get a *Tisserands du Pouvoir* on the big screen by simultaneously making it for the small one. That's how you get, says Pieter Kroonenburg, "the crucial extra \$3 or \$4 million" that finances an epic.

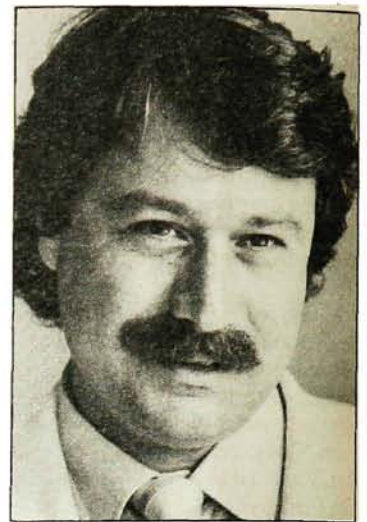
And if you produce an epic, argues Raymond, there is more of a chance Canadians will see your work if it's on television. "Even if you go out of your way to make something interesting for the cinema, it's not true that you're going to get the best opening date for the type of product you're

**WHETHER YOU THINK OF THE MINEE-FEECHIE AS A BOTHERSOME BEAST, OR THE GOOSE THAT MIGHT ONE DAY LAY AN OSCAR, IT HAS GIVEN SOME CANADIAN FILMMAKERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIMENT WITH RELATIVELY BIG BUDGETS, UP-SCALE PRODUCTION VALUES, AND INTERNATIONAL LOCATIONS.**

doing. It's not true that they're going to keep you in those cinemas as you make a decent return. They might kick you out to put in a new parent company film that will make much less money." Raymond also points out that "distributors in this country are in a crippled situation, so what kind of financial input can you have from a distributor if you want to make something that is only for cinemas?"

According to Kroonenburg, Raymond and Héroux, the higher budget for a big project goes mostly into strong production values that both TV viewers and moviegoers will appreciate, not the extra scripting, editing, and occasional shooting needed to come up with two versions. The average additional cost of producing a Minee-Feechie is far from devastating—10 to 20 per cent—and it gives producers and investors various marketing advantages. You've made two products, and you have two products to sell. Some buyers want the TV show, others the movie.

Robert D'Ostie is a Montreal entertainment lawyer who packaged *L'Île*, first planned as a mini-series, but developed into a Minee-Feechie, because "we felt that we could invade some international markets that purchase only feature films, and the sales at MIP-TV in Cannes



**Robert Lantos — Joshua Then and Now**

confirmed that assessment." D'Ostie's primary concern is finding projects that will offer investors maximum revenue for a minimum risk. He believes that the Minee-Feechie, as long as it is able to pull in "revenue guarantees or some other forms of sales that meet your criteria as an investor," can be an attractive package with its own special charms. Denis Héroux sums it up. Six hours of TV gives you much better revenue than two, but "when you only go television, you don't have theatrical; you don't have videocassette; you don't have pay-television. The life of that product is completely different."

In addition to the potential for higher financial returns, the movie half of a Minee-Feechie gives the production an allure and a prestige that feature films still have for many people. Kroonenburg points out that neither Donald Sutherland nor Phillip Borsos would have been interested in a made-only-for-TV *Bethune*. "Television is on and off," says Ted Allan, "whereas a movie keeps living. It goes into the world."

**TV or not TV**

Whether you think of the Minee-Feechie as a bothersome beast, or the goose that might one day lay an Oscar, it has given some Canadian filmmakers the opportunity to experiment with relatively big budgets, up-scale production values, and international locations. For Robert Roy, the experiment showed the world (and potential investors) that Canadians could produce slick, smoothly accomplished work. Roy sees the Minee-Feechie as a vital link in the evolution of film production for television; you can draw a line from *La Famille Plouffe* to the hit mini-series *Lance et Compte* (*He Shoots, He Scores*) to projects now in development.

It was the Minee-Feechie that induced moviemakers to dip their toes into the medium of television, and now, most of the producers of

the hybrids are doing unadulterated TV like *Lance et Compte* (Claude Héroux of the Minee-Feechie, *For Those I Loved*), and *Night Heat* (Robert Lantos, *Joshua Then and Now*). At the same time, new experiments are evolving, for example, a package of 10 made-for-TV feature films that a group of small Montreal production companies is co-producing with the NFB. Canadian filmmakers, says Harry Gulkin, have been steadily learning how to "cut the cloth" for TV.

For many people, these moves toward television are ominous; the tube means doom. Filmmakers who want to explore a wide, provocative range of emotions and situations, don't see themselves fitting into broadcasters' "slots." Quebec cineaste Serge Giguere was told by a TV buyer that his painstakingly made new film, *Oscar Tiffault*, has "a look, a style, but we're into winners. You wouldn't happen to have a mini-series on love?"

Tube critics argue that television doesn't just repress content, it also limits form with its conventionally lit and framed shots, often close-ups of people talking. And even if you're watching real moviemaking, how can you begin to compare a 21-inch TV set flickering in a corner to an 80 foot-wide cinema screen lighting up a darkened theatre? In a recent *New York* magazine article, film critic David Denby insists that "almost everything shown on television becomes television" - at best "muted," at worst tacky and inconsequential.

On the other hand, Gilles Carle says, "I hate that sentence, 'It's only for television.' The television screen grows bigger and bigger the more you put into it." Some of the most ambitious and audacious telefilm productions of the '80s have appeared on England's Channel 4, an obvious alternative to ABC's Movie of the Week, or an NBC mini-series. One of its recent telecasts, *A Very British Coup*, boils over with its disturbing ideas, rapidly changing visual impressions, and intricate sound.

Canadian film production for Canadian TV would expand both media if it were at least partly modelled on seductive and innovative European work like the German series *Heimat*, or Channel 4, which has opened the borders between TV movies and theatrical films, energized the British film industry, and promoted risky talents like Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*), and Dennis Potter (*The Singing Detective*, *Pennies From Heaven*).

Meanwhile, our risky talents have trouble making movies for the big screen, and they certainly can't get on the little one, with the exception of little pockets here and there. Imagine Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing* on prime-time CBC. Imagine the promos: "He loves his grandmother... his father loves porn videos... a beautiful young telephone hooker enters their lives... *Family Viewing* - Best on the Box." ●

## Vital Statistics of the Minee-Feechie

Production	Producers	Coproduction ?	Budget (in millions)	Can. %	Can. \$ (in millions)
Les Plouffe (1981)	Denis Héroux, John Kemeny (exec) Justine Héroux	NO	5.0	100	5.0
For Those I Loved (1983)	Andre Djaoui, Pierre David (exec) Claude Héroux, Jacques-Eric Strauss	YES	8.95	20	1.79
Maria Chapdelaine (1983)	Harold Greenberg (exec) Murray Shostak, Robert Baylis	NO	6.0	100	6.0
The Blood of Others (1984)	Denis Héroux, John Kemeny Gabriel Boustani	YES	9.0	40	3.6
Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe (1984)	Denis Héroux, John Kemeny (exec) Justine Héroux	YES	6.3	80	5.04
The Tin Flute/Bonheur d'Occasion (1984)	Marie-José Raymond, Robert Verrall, (exec)	NO	3.445	100	3.445
Louisiana (1984)	Denis Héroux, John Kemeny	YES	14.8	55	8.146
Le Matou (1985)	Justine Héroux	YES	6.25	75	4.687
Joshua Then & Now (1985)	Robert Lantos, Stephen Roth	NO	11.0	100	11.0
Roses de Matmata (1988)	Mohktar Labidi, Nicole Robert Gerard Vereruyse	YES	2.614	41	1.072
L'île (1988)	Gilles Ste-Marie	YES	9.0	20	1.8
Bino Fabule (just completed)		YES	2.46	60	1.4
Le Palanquin des larmes (just completed)	Pieter Kroonenburg Nicholas Clermont	YES	5.021	20	1.004
Les Tisserands du pouvoir/ The Mills of Power (just completed)	Marie-José Raymond	YES	6.6	73	4.818
Bethune: The Making of a Hero (in production)	Pieter Kroonenburg Nicholas Clermont	YES	16.0	80	12.8
<b>Totals:</b>			<b>\$112,455,892</b>		<b>\$71,681,029</b>

Total Canadian participation in coproductions only: \$46,236,029

Average Canadian participation in coproductions only: \$4,203,275

Average Canadian participation (coproductions & 100% domestic): \$4,778,735

Average budget: \$7,497,059



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