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Claude Jutra has written, directed and starred in his most recent feature, *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire* - *For Better and For Worse*. After its first public screening at Stratford and after a showing out of competition at the Canadian Film

An Interview by George Csaba Koller

"I'm always irritated by people who compare. They always need points of reference. And if you're talking about Claude Jutra, the points of reference are *Mon Oncle Antoine* and *Kamouraska*. I don't want to be categorized as a certain kind of filmmaker. I can't go on making *Mon Oncle Antoine* all my life. This is a new one. I really like to change. I wish that people would look at this film as though it were my first film, and judge it on that basis."

Claude Jutra

He seemed tired, gloomy, defensive. He was feeling the pressure in a business where you're only as good as your last film. Regardless of his track record, which goes back thirty years and includes that universally acclaimed gem of Canadian cinema, *Mon Oncle Antoine*, he had tremendous difficulties getting financing for his last picture, and word of mouth within the industry was disappointing. He took it to Cannes earlier this year, and the French and Quebec critics had a field day with the film's shortcomings. Now it was opening in Toronto and Montreal, and Claude Jutra was again facing the press and the public, for better or worse.

Pour le meilleur et pour le pire is a bittersweet look at contemporary, bourgeois marriage, written by, directed, and starring that confirmed bachelor, Jutra. With his co-star, Monique Miller, they take the audience through what seems like a single day in the life of an advertising executive and his more than slightly neurotic wife. But several brilliant touches soon betray that the film is fooling around with time, and that in effect we are witness to the entire course of this marriage, not just twenty-four hours. The

(continued p. 32)

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Claude Jutra
and Monique Miller
doing their musical number in
Pour le meilleur et pour le pire.



Two takes

awards, the film opened simultaneously in Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City in October. In the following two interviews, Jutra speaks of his film, his critics and the film industry.



An Interview by Peter Wronski

*On September 15, Claude Jutra's new film, **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire**, was screened for the first time in Canada at the Stratford International Film Festival. The next morning I was driving with Jutra back to Malton airport. I had a Nagra in the car and I asked him if he'd mind if we taped an interview on the way. I drove while Jutra changed tapes and ran the machine.*

*Was last night the first time **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire** was shown?*

Jutra: To an audience, yes. It was also shown at the film market in Cannes.

What was the reception like in Cannes?

Jutra: It was bad in general. You say Quebec people love their own films but it's not quite true. There are some newspaper people, among others, who are kind of eager to find films to pan, and they are panning this one.

What about the reception last night in Stratford?

Jutra: Last night it was wonderful. I hope all audiences will react as the one did last night. I was very pleased.

Why did you decide to split time in the film?

Jutra: I was just having fun; fooling around with time. It was the little touch of symbolism where one day is supposed to represent a whole married life. There is nothing more to it than that.

Who or what is the mad woman who makes those mysterious appearances in the film?

Jutra: Well, on one hand she is a symbol, on the other she is also a very real person. I had a crazy woman running

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Mother and daughter in a rare moment

(continued from p. 30)

daughter grows from babyhood to young womanhood, the seasons pass outside the window. Love blossoms briefly, then jealousy, insecurity, fear and outright hatred. She idly smokes grass with a bored neighbour, then when he comes home announces that she's frustrated and frigid and attempts to fall from their high-rise window. He has a fit of unfounded jealousy, loses his job and invites a complete stranger to dinner. In the meantime, they both ignore the child. But they are stuck with each other, **For Better and For Worse**. A great departure from that costumed epic, **Kamouraska**, and that loving look at a small Quebec town, **Antoine**, Jutra's latest work is reminiscent of the style of his first feature, **A tout prendre**. He disdains comparisons, however, and staunchly defends his right to make any kind of film he pleases. Acknowledging the clash between **Kamouraska** and **Pour le meilleur**, he sees more similarity between **Antoine** and the latter than most of his critics, and allows that the wit in **A tout prendre** parallels that of this last feature. But that was a personal film, while this is more formal in structure, he adds. And while Jutra's first attempt at feature filmmaking was clearly an autobiographical depiction of a man/woman relationship, **For Better and For Worse** is a film about marriage from a man who knows about it only second hand, somewhat like a lecture on sex from a Catholic priest.

"I have never been married myself," explains the Quebec director, "but I've had a lot of conversations with friends about their marital problems. Most of the time I refrained from judgement, because I was an equal friend to both parties. So the intimate information about these problems kept piling up. It added up to a general view of the problem, which I looked at in a satirical way. Marriage was one of the questions on which I felt well informed and felt like talking, I wanted to make a film about it. But I have never been married."

A woman journalist, after the screening I attended, quipped: "Well, now we should all go and commit suicide." But Jutra denies having a bleak view of marriage. "As a matter of fact in this film I have an unusual view of marriage because they stay together. And because of the pressures from without and because of the rules of the institution itself, they are brought to express their love in perpetual quarrels, and ruses of all kinds. They invent jealousies on both sides, such as when he invites somebody home, whom he thinks is his wife's previous lover, but who is not. She finds a photograph of a pretty young girl and she becomes very jealous and throws it at him, but it turns out to be a photo of herself when they were young lovers. So there's a lot of bickering, but it's just manifestations of love. And the conclusion of the film is that not only will they live unhappily ever after,

but they go back to bed together and willingly, in a relaxed way. There's just this one little remark at the end, 'put your feet away, they're cold,' but nevertheless, they're together. The film isn't just sarcastic about marriage; it condones it in a way."

Jutra's reference to love puzzles me and I tell him so. The only time the word is mentioned in the film, the wife covers her ears and does not want to hear him say, "je t'aime." He in fact uses the words as weapons, jabbing at her while she tries to escape. There are lots of sexual overtones and undertones, but very little love seems to be lost. Jutra explains, "what she is rejecting really, is the kind of romantic love talk that was fashionable some years back. Because of everything that's been said in the film she doesn't want to go back to that. I think that she's a frustrated feminist; she's not one at all but she should be. And she is longing for a frank and explicit relationship. That is what is forbidden to them because of all the mechanisms of the marital institution. But I think she does love him. The proof of that is that after the gunfight and after she says that she never wants to hear that word again, they do make love, right then and there in a very romantic way on the floor, on an impulse."

To me, that scene was a mere culmination of the sexual undertones erupting in a bout of fornication. I didn't think of it as a love scene at all, especially since it was rudely interrupted by the hippie daughter and her fuzzy boyfriend coming out of the bedroom and leaving for good. The daughter's departure is no surprise; she's been ignored all her life. Does Jutra really believe that bourgeois parents neglect their children to such an extent? "No, no, no. In no way should a film be theorizing about anything, and certainly my films do not. It's just that these two parents have a relationship as man and wife which is so strong, which takes so much of their energy, that they both disregard the daughter, as though she was secondary. Their fights are a way of courting each other. And they spend so much time on that, that they have very little attention available for the kid; that's the way I see them. And going back to the scene where they make love on the floor, I think it's really spontaneous, and after having gone through the end of their animosity, of their enmity, they suddenly begin kissing and petting and then fornicating. That again is interrupted, and is just one more of the incidents in daily life that prevent real love-making from happening."

"There are always little elements from the outside. Of course all these elements could be controlled or could be put aside, but their weakness is to let life overcome them and this prevents them from having a loving relationship." The husband, portrayed by the director himself, rarely allows his emotions to show. Once he curls up on the couch and murmurs, "I'm afraid." Another time he puts his stereo earphones on and energetically conducts the imaginary symphony orchestra, while his wife is alone with a man in the bathroom. What kind of character did Jutra create, both in the script and on the screen? "Well, obviously he's weak and she is strong. It's that imbalance between them which is a real prototype, as opposed to the image of the man being stronger than the woman. I think that in personal relationships most of the time the woman is stronger, although from the outside she looks weaker. So when he says, 'I'm afraid, I'm always afraid,' he speaks his mind really for that time, and it opens up a situation where they have a real talk. When he speaks about her crooked little toe and how they met and all that, going back to their being in love."

The off beat aspects of **For Better and For Worse** bring up the question of its chances for popular success. Did Jutra consider the commercial possibilities, as he admittedly did with **Kamouraska**, or did he just make a personal statement on celluloid? "Well, Jean Renoir said: 'I make films for myself and my closest friends,' and I think that's the only way to make a film. That's the way I made it. Un-

less you make it like that, I don't think that the film can have a real impact, a real emotional impact. Now please don't talk to me about what has been written in Cannes, because that's about the worst environment in which films can be screened. It's a place where all that counts is the immediate commercial value and the competition. Not only the competition of films from everywhere on a commercial basis but also according to all sorts of ideologies. Everybody is submitted to an enormous amount of diverse and contradictory influences. I hate Cannes, I don't want to go there ever again. Since then, many of those who have made statements about the film apparently changed their minds. They have seen it since in a totally different way, in its natural context."

"I think that the true qualities of film can only be apparent in their real national, political, social environment. In other words, this is a Quebec film, it should work in Quebec first. Then let's see what happens. **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire** is going back to a smaller budget film in which you can take more risks, as opposed to a big film. There are greater financial responsibilities in a film like **Kamouraska**. On the other hand, I made no concession whatsoever to commerce when I was making **Kamouraska**. I'm as proud of that film as any other. But if you work on a smaller-scale film, it gives you a little more leeway creatively. For one thing you have less production problems, less administrative problems, you're a little more freewheeling." □

(continued from p. 31)

after me when I was an intern. She was one of my patients and she had a fixation on me because I took good care of her (too much, as a matter of fact). Anyhow, years after I left medicine she kept escaping from whichever institution she was in and she would always find my address and come to my home.

She also functions as a symbol. She is a black creature that lives inside of you and which terrifies you, makes you feel guilty and is the source of anguish.

The bit about the husband being scared of his wife's crooked toe intrigued me.

Jutra: The crooked toe is just a little sexual deviation in the man. He's just hooked on that. It's a fixation and an excuse for him to disavow his love for her.

Their daughter is a very strange and unreal character.

Jutra: The child as she is seen on the screen (and this thought came to me after the fact) is described from the parents' point of view. Obviously there is a non-existent relationship between the child and the parents. The little girl won't kiss her mother when she goes to school; she throws a baseball at her. They forget to feed her. When the wife talks to their dinner guest, she says, "You know, we have a little girl ourselves: yechh!" To establish a tense relationship, I put the child in opposition to the couple.

Johnny, their dinner guest seemed unreal also.

Jutra: Since the film is about the couple, people outside of their bounds are like strangers or enemies. All the comical effects with Johnny are due to the fact that they have nothing in common. The couple don't even know each other. They feel obliged for different reasons to deal with Johnny as though they know him. What makes it funny is that it is all artificial, it's a false situation.

How does that 'Ginger Rogers-Fred Astaire' musical number work in the film?

Jutra: It puts a distance between them. They are tired of squabbling so they decide to do it nicely, cutely, like in the old musicals. This gives them a chance to be even harsher and more cruel to each other.

How much of the film is from your own personal life?

Jutra: Nothing really. It's rather the opposite of my real life. But there are probably elements of me in many of the characters in the film; more in the characters which I don't play.

What was the film's budget?

Jutra: It was \$350,000.

Is it easy for Claude Jutra to receive backing?

Jutra: No, not at all. It took one year to finance this film



The couple in **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire**

on a script that was agreed upon by everybody. All the people were delighted with the script: the producers, the CFDC, the financiers. It's just that there is very little money. The CFDC nearly bent over backwards for this film but it was hard to get the private financing, especially when the tax law which had made investment in film interesting was suspended.

What are you telling us about marriage in this film?

Jutra: I don't know. I just made a film. I'm never trying to 'say something'. You know, I hate to analyse my films. I

don't when I write them and I do even less when I direct them.

Then your work is more emotional than intellectual?

Jutra: That's right. Whatever the meaning of my film is, I will wait for other people to tell me.

How does one direct when his artistic drive is emotional rather than intellectual? How do you communicate with your actors?

Jutra: What you really talk about is the situation that you are dealing with. You discuss the feelings of the character in that situation. The essential thing is to communicate with the people.

For example, in **Kamouraska**, Richard Jordan is very intellectual in his acting, so there was this ritual that we had to go through in discussing the character, the situation and all sorts of other things. We had to discuss the psychology of Calvinism because Jordan decided that his character was a Calvinist.

On the other hand, with Genevieve Bujold I always discussed things on more immediate terms. You tell her things like, "In this scene you are scared to death because of all the consequences of what you are doing." Your approach has to be different with each actor.

What is it like to direct and act at the same time? How do you objectively evaluate your own performance?

Jutra: I don't evaluate it. You instinctively know that your performance is either bad or good; you feel it inside of yourself, as if you were a spectator.

I like to act and this was one part where I had myself in mind since the inception. Having an actor stand between me and the other actors would have been one more obstacle to cross. Communication between me and the others is much closer when we act together. You know, directing is not watching actors from behind a camera.

You are not happy with the state of film in Quebec at the moment.

Jutra: At the moment it's awful. Nothing's happening. No films are being made in most of Canada including Quebec. Actually, it's worse in Quebec because of that damn law. The sad thing is that we were the ones who asked for it, were violent about it. We occupied the censor board last year in order to get it. But the situation is going to be worse with the law than without.

The Institute responsible for film in Quebec has a better representation from the commercial and industrial sectors than from the film directors, technicians and actors. As usual, the creative aspect of film is pushed aside by the business people.

You don't advocate a large film 'industry' for Canada. Why?

Jutra: I think the size of the industry should be proportionate to the size of the population. If it becomes too big we could have problems. It's almost the case in Quebec where a lot of films have been made that are never shown. I once said that it's awful not to be able to make a film, but what is worse is having made one and not having it shown.

Have you ever been in that position?

Jutra: I made a film called **Wow** which I thought was an interesting film. It played for three weeks in one cinema in Montreal and that was its total career. But that film involved tax evasion gimmicks. The investors made money by losing it.

The fate of **Mon Oncle Antoine** was to be that too. It was only because of the Canadian Film Awards that it came out into the open. People were paying attention and the press was so loud that the film had to be shown.

Why have Quebec directors been boycotting the Awards for the last two years?

Jutra: We think that it's an absolutely silly institution. It makes me think of kids trying to imitate their parents, of a little girl putting on her mother's make-up. It is all modeled on the Oscars. In our point of view that's an American aspect of filmmaking that we don't want to imitate, adopt, or to share with the Americans. Even the Oscars are ridiculous, and to imitate them is twice as ridiculous. People who organize and go to the Canadian Film Awards don't know what they are doing. They don't realise how silly it is to be there with their little statuettes and their applause. It's encouraging the system that is destroying us.

*Yet these are the same awards that saved **Mon Oncle Antoine**. Couldn't this happen to some other Canadian film?*

Jutra: Yes, it could, but we think we need something else in Quebec. We don't want to take part in that kind of contest. If English Canadians like it, let them do it.

What about non-competitive festivals like Stratford?

Jutra: That's a little better but Stratford is an elitest festival. It's not only for the upper-class, but the culture-orientated upper-class. It's good for spending money, writing articles and taping interviews. My idea of an ideal festival would be a week of Quebec cinema all over Quebec. The films would be shown in small halls and the admission would be free. The thing would be non-competitive and the films would be shown in the poorer areas of the cities and in the small towns.

How great an influence does Jean Renoir exert on your films?

Jutra: He consciously influences me a great deal. Not only do I revere his films as great masterpieces but I also find that his wit and approach is attuned to mine. He has all the things that I like in the French and little of what I detest, which is more than what I like.

What is it in the French that you detest?

Jutra: I find that French film, literature, painting, what have you, is pretentious, over-intellectual, rather than emotional. And sometimes simply boring.

Is Jean Renoir a declined artist?

Jutra: Yes.

Why?

Jutra: Ageing is part of it, I guess. For most people there is a right place and a right time. There are very few filmmakers who have lasted as long as Hitchcock or Bunuel or even Bergman who consistently for more than ten years has made great films. Very few filmmakers last longer than ten years. There is so much in filmmaking that you must deal with and much of it is outside the film. There is a lot of fighting. Besides just creative energy, you must have enormous energy in general.

How are you resisting your own possible decline?

Jutra: Well . . . you know . . . in thirty years of filmmaking I have made five features. That's an average of one every six years.

You are not afraid?

Jutra: I'm terrified! □

*Claude Jutra's career, as well as his film **Kamouraska**, are covered in depth in issue no 7 of **Cinema Canada**, April/May 1973.*