

Lea Pool's

À Corps Perdu/ Straight for the heart

"I love a man, a woman and a cat, but I don't have any photos of them to show you," says globetrotting photo-journalist Pierre Kurwenal on a Nicaraguan bus to a fellow Québécois who has just pulled out his (nuclear) family snapshots. Seconds later, contras ambush the vehicle and massacre two of the passengers. Sexual politics meets geopolitics but Pierre gets only the latter on film.

The outline of a profound alienation, both personal and professional, is already established in the first minutes of Lea Pool's *À Corps Perdu*: not only does the brooding Pierre have nothing in common with his chatty compatriot but he seems also to have nothing to say to the Nicaraguans whose struggle he is recording. The only exchange comes when a frantic woman clutching her slaughtered husband and child screams "Assassino" at him, accusing him and all photographers of complicity in their images.

When Pierre gets home to Montreal, he finds that all that remains of his *ménage à trois* is a few flashbacks of sensuous group showers and tense breakfasts, and the loyal cat, Tristan. The Nicaraguan accusations still ringing in his ears, Pierre instinctively starts documenting the fragments of his identity, his vocation and his relationships as they disintegrate before his eyes.

This is familiar territory for Pool, the leading director of fiction among the young Quebec generation of the eighties: in *La Femme De L'Hôtel* it was a filmmaker and a singer-actress, in *Anne Trister* a painter, and now it's a photographer whose art triggers, not a Romantic reconciliation with the world, but an ever deeper entrenchment in its insoluble crises. For Pool's anguished artist-figures, art interlopes disastrously on living and vice versa. Now however, instead of the feminist heroines of her first cycle of films, a male protagonist embodies her vision. But Pierre is in many ways as alienated by his marginalized sexuality and by his morally tainted profession of observer of the world's agony, as his earlier female counterparts.

One can understand how Pool, after three films of such searing autobiographical probings, barely camouflaged by the devices of fiction and by glacial cinematic control, was eager to try her hand at adaptation, at translating someone else's guts onto the screen for a change. Yet she couldn't resist a novelist of many obvious affinities: for one thing, the filmmaker whose voice more than any other in Quebec films has articulated a certain lesbian sensibility gravitated



Matthias Habich (Pierre) with Johanne-Marie Tremblay (Sarah) and Michel Voïta (David) in happier times. Where's Tristan?

to the work (*Kurwenal*) of France's prize-winning gay novelist *par excellence*, Yves Navarre, a fellow chronicler of the risks of feelings and commitments on the margins of society.

On the surface Pierre's homosexuality is not a big deal: there is no need for him to declare, as Anne Trister did, "J'ai besoin d'aller au bout." Pierre is so at ease in fact that he is able effortlessly to pick up deliriously handsome young men in *straight bars*. Despite her recent professed interest in the external politics of relationships, Pool doesn't project Pierre's sexual nonconformity as political except in matter-of-fact terms of its utter ordinariness. It's hard to believe that this "matter-of-factness" of novel and script was enough, as Pool contends, to panic the original producers, who backed out of the project because of the sensitivity of homoeroticism during the AIDS epidemic (the same producers who apparently had no compunction about backing Arcand's moralistic linking of gay sex with disease in *Decline Of The American Empire*). It's harder still to believe that the ongoing cycle in both Quebec and English Canada of sex-coloured fiction in film is making us notorious abroad, as *The Globe And Mail* recently headlined from the Venice festival after the official presentation of *À Corps Perdu*. As it is, we're barely keeping pace with the Germans and the Spaniards, and even the British are well ahead in kink. In any case, it is current Canadian video that is really breaking the sex barrier, and making the words of Arcand, Rozema, Burroughs et al. look rather cheap, baby, to borrow a line from *Decline*. Producers Denise Robert and Robin Spry of Telescene weren't exactly in danger of frightening the horses by coming to the rescue of the unjustly stranded project, but are to be commended all the same for their decency.

Unfortunately, for all of Pool's sympathy with sexual nonconformity, the retroactive depiction of Pierre's triangle with David and Sarah, and her delineation of the three characters and their

final rupture, come across as the weakest element in the film. For one thing the scriptwriters' compression seems hard-pressed to capture the intricacies of a relationship postmortem, though one Steadicam manoeuvre choreographing the realignments on Pierre's mattress offers a lush melancholy that is worth pages of dialogue. Otherwise, the invention of scenes of post-breakup violence between Pierre and both of his former lovers somehow fails to telescope or add to the pain of separation.

As for the characters themselves, Matthias Habich as Pierre skilfully manages to propel the movie with a zombie intensity that evokes Louise Marleau in *Femme De L'Hôtel*. Sarah (Johanne-Marie Tremblay) and David (Michel Voïta), however, are less successful creations; it's hard to believe this relationship lasted 10 years (20 in the novel!). Parachuting Sarah and David into more cinematic professions (from the novel's advertising designer and teacher to Pool's violist and dolphin-keeper respectively) is simply not enough. Ultimately, as the ending unfolds, measurably more upbeat than Navarre's utter desolation, the arbitrariness of the whole arrangement rises to the surface.

Part of the problem may be Pool's geographical transplantation of the novel from Paris to Montreal, while retaining European actors for two sides of the triangle. In *Anne Trister*, the cross-cultural vibrations arising from Swiss and Québécois actors working together, rendered among other things an imaginable figure of the immigrant experience in Quebec. Here the result, for all Habich's skill, is a whiff of the deadly mid-Atlantic nowhere-ville that is the curse of coproductions, with their non-organic nationality-based casting protocol. Unlike an earlier generation of European immigrants in Quebec cinema, including Lamothe and Dufaux, Pool seems to have resisted immersing herself fully in the specific textures of everyday living in this place. When world-weary Pierre meets Quentin (Jean-François Pichette), the deaf

mute guardian angel of his disintegrating universe, the film really begins to pick up, simply because this bright-eyed Québécois performer is the first character with a sense of belonging in the studiously evoked landscape. As for Québécois actress Tremblay, her mature and magnetic presence can't rescue the first Pool female role that doesn't really come across. Maybe it would have helped to keep Navarre's edge of distrust - Pool omits, for example, Navarre's revelation that Sarah is the one who has the excessively adorable Tristan put to sleep (a detail that the growing silent majority of animal-haters in the Quebec film audience will be sorry to miss).

The theme of photography works much better than this nexus of characters and relationships. Not that the movie genre of photographer as prophet-martyr is not already well populated. (Click... black and white freeze-frame... poignant chord... existential/political/narrative epiphany.) The genre has a decent lineage even among Montreal "city movies", with Jacques Leduc's *Albedo* (1982) its unrecognized masterpiece. Pool brings a baroque sincerity to a genre that is by no means exhausted. All of her films have incorporated moody Montreal urbanscapes that seem to translate the immigrant's discovery of an alienating aesthetic of the new environment, and this one is the most fully developed. Here the setting is the register of Pierre's gradual breakdown, as the globe-trotter tries to make a belated family album of his ex-lovers in their comings and goings, as he tries to make visual sense of the cavernous building hulks and graffitied walls of his home turf. Luc Chessix's photos of an eviscerated Montreal mirroring a world and an identity in ruins are well-chosen, though the political edge to this album of an overdeveloped city cannibalizing its birthright seems occasionally muted in a trendy aestheticism.

These hesitations notwithstanding, Pool's directorial craft certainly continues to be flawless: Pierre Mignot's prizewinning cinematography on *Anne Trister* is splendidly reprised, the director's collaboration with editor Michel Arcand and scriptwriter Marcel Beaulieu continues to mature, and the soundtrack is richly textured thanks to composer Osvaldo Montes and sound designer Marcel Pothier. Critical responses are thus far respectful but fail to echo the sweeping acclaim for *Femme* or answer the impossible expectations that still exist four years after that big breakthrough.

As Quebec filmmakers continue to shift their allegiance away from the documentary realism of their ancestors Flaherty, Renoir and Rossellini and edge towards another kind of classicism, the precise illusionism of Hitchcock, Lubitsch and Ophüls (Simoneau, Arcand, and Mankiewicz, respectively), it is hard not to admire Pool's persistently artful consolidation of a small place for classical modernism (Resnais-Antonioni) in Quebec cinema. At the same time, we should be

thankful that a literary source of Navarre's relevance and cinematic potential has finally been interpreted, and approached with such forthrightness and imagination by a filmmaker who has always recognized the filmic in the artifice of the written and recited word. Only time will tell whether the important step outwards that *À Corps Perdu* represents for Pool's career will mean the same for Quebec cinema.

Thomas Waugh •

A CORPS PERDU/STRAIGHT FOR THE HEART p. Denise Robert, Robin Spry exec. p. Jamie Brown, George Reinhart co-p. (Switzerland) Ruth Waldburger d. Léa Pool sc. & dialogue Léa Pool. Marcel Beaulieu sc. & dialogue cons. Michel Langlois d.o.p. Pierre Mignot art d. Vianney Gauthier cost. des. Louise Jobin sound Luc Yersin photographer Luc Chessex ed. Michel Arcand sound des. Marcel Pothier music comp. Osvaldo Montes p. man. Daniel Louis 1st a.d. Pierre Plante 2nd a.d. Carole Dubuc cont. Josiane Flaux-Morand loc. man. Mario Nadeau asst. p. man. Louis-Philippe Rochon interim pre-prod. man. Muriel Lizé p. coord. Micheline Cadieux (Switzerland) Claudia Sontheim admin. Diane Arcand books Christian Fluet p. sec. Lucianne Rousseau 1st asst. cam. Christiane Guernon 2nd asst. cam. Martin Dubois steadicam & 2nd cam. Steve Campanelli 2nd still ph. Lyne Charlebois d. trainee Jeanne Crépeau set dec. Claudine Charbonneau set props Patrice Bengle ext. props Ian Lavoie, Anne Galea asst. props Mario Racicot set carpenter Gilbert Leblanc wardrobe Josée Boisvert dresser Mario Davignon 2nd dresser Solange Côté makeup Diane Simard hair Bob Pritchett boom op. Barbara Fluckiger 2nd boom op. Jean-Guy Bergeron additional sound Michel Charron gaffer Normand Viau best boys Claude Fortier, Paul Viau genny op. Jean-Paul Auclair key grip Jean-Louis Daoust grips Robert Auclair, Jean-Pierre Lamarche, Jean-Mark Lapointe trainee Raphaël Reyes p. assts. Michel Bolduc, David ODonnell, Richard Châteauevert, Normand Fortin trainees Isabelle Ungaro, Chantal Dagnosneau loc. scouts Louis Bolduc, Guy Bouchard, Mona Medawar, Roseline Laverdière craft service Margoline Arsenault post-prod. man. Suzanne Comtois asst. pic. ed. Patricia Tassinari 2nd asst. Roseanne Cohen ed. during shooting Marie Hamelin sd. efx. eds. Marcel Pothier, Antoine Morin asst. Mathieu Beaudin dialogue eds. Diane Boucher, Carole Gagnon lip synch. Matthieu Roy-Décarie trainee Céline Béland detection Normand Bélanger post-synch & sound efx. rec. Jocelyn Caron re-rec. sound efx. Yvon Benoît sound efx. eng. Jérôme Décarie trainee Monique Vézina sound mixer Michel Descombes asst. mix. Luc Boudrias neg. cutting Jim Campapadal music arrangements Osvaldo Montes music sup. Jimmy Tenaka music ed. Michel Arcand orchestration of theme Mario Parent sound rec. Studio Tempo sound eng. François Deschamps asst. Louis Valois Foreign Crew: p. man. Lise Abastado p. José Villar asst. d. Mayra Segura p. asst. Javier Gonzalez, Luis Gomez, Alejandro Barcelo cam. asst. Julio Simoneau cost. Cardidat Sanchez makeup Carmen Vina props José Amat, Carlos Ramirez sp. efx. René Varona, Ovidio Fuentes, José Galan gaffer Humberto Figueroa best boy Sergio Berútez key grip Orland Perez Vizcaine grip Jimmy Gonzalez l.p. Matthias Habich, Johanne-Marie Tremblay, Michel Voita, Jean-François Pichette, Kim Yaroshevskaya, Jacqueline Bertrand, Pierre Bogeil, France Castel, Victor Désy, Mimi D'Estée, Louise Caron, Marilyn Gardner, Jean Cascon, Andrée Lachapelle, Louise Marleau, Albert Millaire, Peter Pearson, Marthe Turgeon, Gisèle Trépanier, Pierre Germain, Roch LaFortune, Evelyne Régimbald, Carmen Ferland, Michel Maillot, Ylial Page, Dino Fatighenti, François Julien, Michel Beauchemin, Guy Brouillette, Henri Scheppeler, Gérard Soler, Claude Desparois, Michel Daigle, Giorgio Uehlinger, Jean-Michel Léonard, Richard Hoenich, Chantal Rémillard, Stéphane Allard, Alison Eldridge, Monique Laurendeau, Valérie Legge, Hélène Plouffe, Brian Bacon, Suzanne Careau, Peter Purich, Jean Cardinal, Nieves Rivalles, Carlos Adrian-Albas Castello, José Murillo, Norberto Echementia, Oscar Villar. 35mm colour. Produced by Telescene Films, Montreal and Xanadu Film AG, Zurich. Distributed in Canada by Provifilms. Foreign sales by Films Transit.

Allan E. Goldstein's The Outside Chance Of Maximilian Glick

Boy, just what the world needed; another Canadian-ethnic family drama. It'll make you laugh. It'll make you cry.

Just when you thought it was safe to return to the movie theatre, along comes Allan Goldstein's film adaptation of Morley Torgov's novel, *The Outside Chance Of Maximilian Glick*. This is not to suggest that *Glick* is a dreadful film; in fact, it's downright competent. So competent is this effort, that it almost drowns in its own safe, conventional framework.

Glick is sort of what you'd get if the Waltons were Jewish and moved to Beausejour, Manitoba. Everything that was wittily acerbic or genuinely human in Torgov's book becomes, respectively, abrasive and maudlin on film.

On the plus side, what *Glick* definitely has going for it is the presence of Saul Rubinek. Why is it that so many recent mediocre Canadian films (*Ticket To Heaven*, *Obsessed*) have been raised to the level of engaging viewing because someone had the foresight to cast Rubinek in a central role? As the unorthodox Orthodox Rabbi Teitelman in *Glick*, Rubinek's sly, inventive performance seems incongruous with the rest of this ploddingly uninspired effort.

For what it's worth, the plot focuses upon the coming of age of one Maximilian Glick (Noam Zylberman), a freckle-faced 12-year-old who is about to embark on the traditional Jewish rite of passage, the Bar Mitzvah. Max wants only to do what's best, but his middle-class parents have other ideas. Their concern is purity of race. So when Max takes a shine to the pretty, non-Jewish Celia (Fairuza Balk), all hell breaks loose.

What Max can't quite comprehend is how his family - concerned as they are with keeping everything in the faith - are so anonymous in the small Prairie town. This hypocrisy of faith is one of many reasons why Max does not want to be Jewish anymore. To make matters worse, his parents demand that he stop seeing Celia. This complicates things further since Max and Celia are duet-partners for a big piano competition in Winnipeg.

At first, Max tries shunning Celia. This, however, doesn't last too long; basic biology and the common wisdom imparted by Rabbi Teitelman reign supreme.

Add to this stew the fact that Teitelman is basically a closet-comedian. Ah, the plot thickens. Teitelman too, is having some doubts about his faith, since deep down he knows that



Finjan session: Max (Noam Zylberman), Rabbi Teitelman (Saul Rubinek) and Celia (Fairuza Balk) get down to some (Jewish) roots music

he'd be more at home on the stage of a comedy club rather than teaching the Talmud.

Whew! This is getting complicated. However, never fear. Just like the stuff of real life, everybody gets everything they want. Max gains the love and respect of his parents (while teaching them a trick or two about basic human decency). Teitelman leaves the synagogue and finds himself on a talent-show stage. The faith is restored. Everybody's happy. The audience laughs. The audience cries.

It's a wonderful life, ain't it?
Regrettably, the film seems to be missing the kind of nasty twists and turns that can raise an ethnic family drama several notches. Almost all of the characters and events in the film are presented with such a "wholesome" touch, that much of the tension and conflict seems contrived and TV-movie-ish. For example, one scene which works quite splendidly is when Max and Celia hop a bus to Winnipeg to take part in the piano competition. They meet up with Teitelman, who takes the kids to the home of some friends, where they all take part in a glorious musical celebration. Meanwhile, there is some real urgency on the part of both Max's and Celia's parents back in Beausejour; the hours are ticking on and nobody's heard from the kids. Juxtaposing the "fun" stuff in Winnipeg, with the "worry" in Beausejour, works perfectly. The audience can revel in both the wonder of the scene in Winnipeg (where Max, Celia and Teitelman are having a grand time playing music and dancing), plus the apprehension of what horrors will befall all three of them when they return to Beausejour. It's unfortunate, however, that the rest of the film seldom matches this fine moment. Most of the proceedings are simply predictable.

One of the things which makes this sequence work is the presence and performance of Saul Rubinek. As played by Rubinek, Teitelman is not only the most appealing character, but the most believable as well. Rubinek not only adds flesh to an otherwise conventional character type (the authority figure with common sense and a heart of gold), but he knows how to work an audience. He does it so well, that most everything in the film pales miserably when he's not on screen.

Noam Zylberman in the title role, is no slouch either. Kudos are indeed in order for casting a kid who isn't a Disney-moppet type. The only trouble is that Zylberman is a tad one-note; he handles the comedy well, but his range in terms of expression beyond the wisecracking is exceedingly limited. One of the most troublesome points occurs when Zylberman is attempting to tell his grandfather (Jan Rubes) off: it's a serious moment, but the tone in Zylberman's voice suggests Max would much prefer to be zinging off a one-liner. This, of course, may well be a directorial decision, and if so, a very wrongheaded one. Max is funny, but he's also a serious young man with some very serious questions about hypocrisy and prejudice.

Fairuza Balk is charming as Celia, while Jan Rubes lends solid support as Granddaddy Glick. Unfortunately, the writing is at fault with respect to Rubes; he gets by on his shrewd presence alone. The character's transformation at the end of the film (from a shallow, disciplinarian patriarch to a kind, benevolent and understanding granddad) is a bit hard to swallow. The film rushes into tying up the loose ends and everything takes on a *Wonderful World of Disney* glow.