François Novoguèce

"I love a man, a woman and a cat, but I don't have any photos of them to show you," says globo-trotting photo-journalist Pierre Karwany on a Nicaraguan bus to a fellow Québécois who has just pulled out his (nuclear) family snapshots. Second 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 Nicaraguan whose struggle he is recording. The only exchange comes when a frantic woman during her slaughterhouse and child screen "Assassin" at him, accusing him and all photographers of complicity in their images.

When Pierre gets home to Montreal, he finds that all of the remains of his marriage is a few flashbacks of serious 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 he disintegrates 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 attirings, not a Romantic reconciliation with the world, but an ever deeper entrenchment in its insoluble crises. For Pool, the anguished artist-figures, art interlopers disoriented in the city’s inscrutable rules. For Pool, the anguished artist-figures, art interlopers disoriented in the city’s inscrutable rules.

In any case, it is so easy in fact that he is able effortlessly to pick up deliciously handsome young men in straight bars. Despite her recent professional interest in the external politics of relationships, Pool doesn’t project Pierre’s sexual unconformity as political except in matter-of-fact terms of its utter ordinariness. It’s hard to believe 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 its sensitivity of homoeroticism during the AIDS epidemic (the same producers who apparently had no compunction about backing Arcand’s modalistic 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 the official presentation of A Corps Perdu. As it is, we’re barely keeping pace with the Céramiques and the Spandiers, and even the Brits are well ahead in kind. In any case, it is this 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 Spy of Television were certainly in danger of frightening the horsey 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 intricate of a relationship postmortem, though one Steadicam manoeuvre choreographing the realisations on Pierre’s mattress offers a lush melancholy that is worth pages of dialogue. Otherwise, the invention of scenes of post-break-up violence between Pierre and both of his former lovers somehow fails to telescop 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 Feme 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). Parishen Sarah and David into more cinematic professions from the novel’s advertising designer and teacher to Pool’s violinist and dolphin-keeper respectively is simply not enough. Ultimately, as the ending unloads, 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 both sides of the triangle. In Anne Trister, the cross-cultural variations arising from Swiss and Québécois actors working together, rendered among other things an imaginative figure of the immigrant experience in Quebec. Here the result, for all Habich’s skill, is a whiff of the deadly mid-Atlantic nowhereville that is the curse of co-productions, with their non-organic nationally-based casting protocol. Unlike an earlier generation of European immigrants in Quebec cinema, including Lamothe and Tremblay, her mature and magnetic presence can’t rescue the first Pool female role that doesn’t quite 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 Alerte (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 urbescapes 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 hulls and graffiti walls of his home turf. Luc Chevrot’s photos of an enervated Montreal mirroring a world and an identity in ruins are well-chosen, though the political edge to this album of an overdetermined city canabilizing its birthright seems occasionally muted in a trendy aestheticism.

These hesitations notwithstanding, Pool’s directorial craft certainly continues to be flawless: Pierre Mignolet’s pinegreen cinematography on Anne Trister is splendidly reprised, the director’s collaboration with editor Michel Arcand and scriptwriter Marcel Basset continues to mature, and the soundtrack is richly textured thanks to composer Ondalvo Montes and sound designer Marcel Pothier. Critical responses are thus far respectful but fail to echo the sweeping acclaim for Pierre 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 Painlevé, Resnic and Rossellini and edge towards another kind of classicism, the precise illusionism of Hitchcock, Lubitsch and Ophuls (Simoneau, Arcand, and Markiewicz, 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 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, but it is downright competent. So competent is this effort, that it almost drowning 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 withly 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 that so many recent mediocre Canadian films (Ticket To Heaven, Obsession) have been raised to the level of engaging viewing because someone had the foresight to cast Rubinek in a lead role? As the ardently Orthodox Rabbi Teitelman in Glick, Rubinek’s sly, inventive performance seems congruous 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, 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 (Faunzi Bal), all hell breaks loose.

What Max can’t quite comprehend is how his family - concerned as they are with keeping everything in the faith - is 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 partners for a big piano competition in Winnipeg.

At first, Max tries shunning Celia. This, however, doesn’t last too long; basic biology 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. It’s a wonderful life, isn’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-movieish. 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 in 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. Just as 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 musical celebration) and the terror of the scene in Beausejour (where the kids are missing and nobody’s heard from them). The audience can revel in both the joy of the scene in Winnipeg and the terror of the scene in Beausejour.

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 of everything in the film pales miserably when he’s not on screen.

Noam Zylberman in the title role, is no slouch either. Kazuo is 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 teach 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 on 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.

Faunzi Bal is charming as Celia, while Jan Rubes lends solid support as Grandaddy 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, bellowed understanding grandad) 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.