

Power trio

René Malo, Marie-José Raymond, Claude Fournier score a timely hit with *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

An industry is created by writers, directors, producers – these are its motors. When an American comes and shoots here, he doesn't employ those people.



Writer/cameraman Claude Fournier with co-producers Marie-José Raymond and René Malo

Our movie industry will "never grow up" as long as moviemakers remain dependent on "the decisions of *fonctionnaires*. Those guys always hold you by the balls. You have to go and kiss their feet, even if two weeks ago, they were the driver on your set."

The mills of power have been working overtime. Last November in the U.S.A., George Bush beamed into the minds of our American cousins by setting his jaw like John Wayne, and drawing promises that under his administration, Americans wouldn't be raped, murdered, or excessively taxed in any way. In this country, the Progressive Conservatives trundled to victory, despite that exhilarating telemoment when John Turner, abruptly metamorphosing from Elmer Fudd into Conan the Canadian, pounded the government's Free Trade agreement with the U.S.A., and goosed the Prime Minister into bellowing forth.

In the weeks that followed, anti free-traders like Margaret Atwood, Maud Barlow and David Orchard flashed a vision of future dystopia in which Canadians squirm helplessly under the boots of hot rod barbarians from the south. However, by voting day, the nervous electorate – prodded by the boys and girls with the really big watts and bucks – got hold of itself and re-elected Mulroney, ensuring passage of the free trade deal. After a brief pause, a six-on-the-Richter-scale earthquake shook the east coast, and the Supreme Court of Canada issued its ruling that Quebec's law banishing English from

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commercial signs violated the constitution.

In rapid succession, Premier Bourassa whipped out the "notwithstanding" clause and looped out of the constitution; Premier Filmon of Manitoba threatened to vaporize the "Meech Lake" agreement; three of Bourassa's four Anglo cabinet ministers resigned; and waves of Quebecois, angry with both the Supreme Court decision and Bourassa's plans to tinker with the sign law, burst into the national media, reminding everyone that they are the inhabitants of a distinct society.

The story of a failure

During all this dizzy turbulence and power-tripping, this period oscillating wildly between the hope of national affirmation and the fear of national annihilation, an amazingly timely hit Quebec movie, made by veteran filmmakers Claude Fournier, Marie-José Raymond, and René Malo, has told French Canadians about a time when they had no power and their worst fears came true.

Director-screenwriter Fournier calls *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* (*The Mills of Power*) "the story of a failure." His picture dramatizes the turn-of-the-century migration of 600,000 mostly poor, hungry Quebecers to the textile mill towns of New England, where, instead of finding salvation, they were worked to the bone and stripped of the complicated tissue that makes up a shared identity. Today, in cities like Woonsocket, Rhode Island, the picture's main setting), people with names like Proulx and Brassard neither speak a word of French nor give a damn about their roots. The descendants of migrants, from places like Sainte-Hyacinthe and Trois-Rivières, look and sound as American as a Big Mac.

Tisserands, continues Fournier, is about "what happens when you have decided to leave your country. The immigrants gained very little and lost their past." In a rising voice, he adds, "And what was the goddamn Canadian government doing? Nothing. But while those Quebec people were moving to the states, the government was

paying for Ukrainians and Germans to colonize western Canada."

The French Canadian migrants were not only ignored by the leaders of what was supposed to be their country. *Les Tisserands* is also, says its co-producer, Fournier's longtime collaborator (*Deux Femmes en or*, *The Tin Flute*) and *compagne*, Marie-José Raymond, "the story of Quebec abandoned by France."

The owners of the mills depicted in the picture were not Americans; they were powerful French industrialists. Raymond explains that when socialism hit northern France, the textile magnates of the Roubaix, ruthless people who intermarried to guard precious manufacturing secrets, felt a pressing need to relocate in New England, "where they had a market available, water to run the mills, and close by, French laborers who could understand them and not be socialist."

Those laborers, according to Raymond, uprooted themselves believing that they were going to work for sympathetic French bosses. "And that," adds Fournier, "is their big disillusionment in the film. They expected the bosses to uphold their culture, and they realized too late that the French didn't implant themselves in Woonsocket to uphold culture. It was to make money. Period."

Ignored by the Canadian government, betrayed and exploited by the French, the migrants were also, according to co-producer René Malo (*Le Déclin de l'empire Américain*, *Les Portes-Tournantes*) "screwed up by their religion." *The Tisserands* script attracted Malo

PHOTO: RON LEVINE

because "I was very sensitive to the subject: the starving French Canadians who went to the states, tried to survive as a community, and were surviving" until, as the film shows us in its stormy climax, the Catholic Church in New England refused to fund French schools and punished the people who openly protested. (The Vatican actually excommunicated some of them.)

Like many Quebecers, René Malo fears, "a real parallel between what happened to those people 50, 60 years ago, and what's happening in Quebec right now. I think that the same thing will happen here," and this time, he says, the culprits will be the political leaders.

Now read the book

Although *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* sounds as though it must be an adaptation of some classic Québécois novel, no filmmaker or writer has ever told the story before. The project was conceived about five years ago during a Montreal dinner party when Marie-José Raymond sat listening to stories told by a woman whose grandfather was a mill-owner in Woonsocket.

"Those people are friends of my family," says Raymond, blue-eyed, fine-boned, and in possession of herself in a way that suggests her upper middle-class background of comfortable homes and elite schools. "When I was a kid, I went to Woonsocket, and I know all of them. The script is based on glimpses of real situations and real characters."

Claude Fournier, who wrote the script with French scénariste Michel Cournot, also had a connection to Woonsocket—an uncle who was a parish priest in the American town. "I have been aware of that story for a long time," says the director, a quick, compact man, who gives you the impression he is as much of a battler as

he is a charmer, and who originates from the kind of family that migrated to New England. One of Fournier's aunts "had 22 children, and four of them died of cold and hunger during the Depression." He continues, "Oddly, José was aware of the rich side of the story, and I was aware of the poor side. Finally, the two came together."

Originally, *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* was planned as a mini-series to be shot in 16mm. But René Malo, after turning the Fournier-Raymond duo into a trio, argued that the project should be made for both television broadcast (in 1990) and theatrical release. *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* is a "Minee-Feechie" (see September's *Cinema Canada* #155), or hybrid of mini-series and feature film—Malo's first and Fournier-Raymond's second since *The Tin Flute*.

A Minee-Feechie-Feechie

In fact, the production is what could be called a Minee-Feechie-Feechie. Malo jokes that he "stole" from French director Claude Berri (*Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*) the idea of presenting the theatrical version as two separately released features: *Tisserands I*, and a couple of months later, *Tisserands II*, or *La Révolte*.

"He must be kidding," some people chortled, forgetting that when Malo was co-producing *Le Déclin de l'empire Américain*, it was his idea to crank up the budget of Denys Arcand's movie, arguing that if *Déclin* had a more expansive *mise-en-scène*, the picture would have a better shot at success.

So far, the gamble on *Tisserands* has also been paying off. Four months after its release, Part I is still in a number of Quebec theatres, and Part II has been running since December. (The English-language version will appear by late

paying off. Parts I and II ran for months in a number of Quebec theatres. (The English-language version will appear by late spring or summer.) Most of the critics liked the films, and audiences responded warmly, although occasionally, one did hear complaints about the soapier, more melodramatic aspects of the production, or cracks like the one overheard at a Montreal cinema: "The worst thing about this is that it's all going to be on television."

The Quebec media played up *Les Tisserands* as a major event, interviewing the picture's many *vedettes*, and even running stories about the actual Franco-American residents of Woonsocket, including an 80-year-old man, who, like one of the principal characters, had his arm torn off in a textile machine.

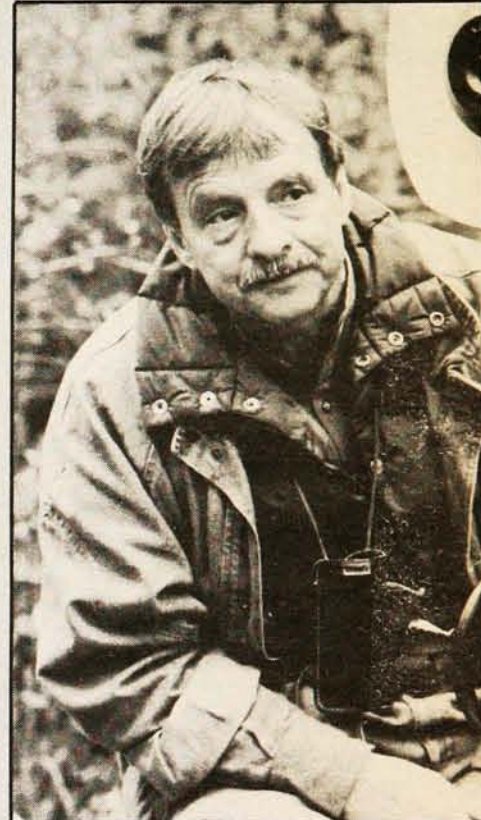
Acting like a man with a mission rather than merely promoting a movie, Fournier appeared on everything from Quebec's numerous TV chit-chat shows to *Musique Plus*, the province's music video channel. Fournier's *Musique Plus* interviewer, a longhaired vee-jay, who loves mugging cutely into wide-angle lenses as if he were a '60s album cover, is typical of many Quebecers who knew little or nothing about the mass migration to the States until the appearance of *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*. (Now, the vee-jay can find out even more in the 560-page novel version of the story Fournier wrote in the months after he finished shooting the movie.)

With 300 speaking parts, 200 locations in Canada and France, period sets and costumes, *Les Tisserands* was a difficult picture to make for \$7 million. Fournier points out that this amount is about one third the budget of an American mini-series like *The Murder of Mary Phagan*, which is set in the same time period as his production. Adds Fournier, "We adopted an Alcoholics Anonymous-type of behavior, trying to see it day by day, one day at a time."

At any moment, the director continues, "The whole house of cards could have come crashing down. We had set problems, and this almost killed us. Even after Part I of the picture opened last October, "we didn't know if we'd have the money to finish because we went so much over budget in the art department."

René Malo agrees that making *Les Tisserands* was a "frightening" experience. Deeply involved in raising the \$7 million (about one third private investment), Malo says with a wince that finding the money took two years and "was really, really tough."

The producer insists, "I would never have done the film with anybody else but Claude and Marie-José. I know only one other director who can work so well and as fast as Fournier and that's Jean-Claude Lord" (TV's *He Shoots, He Scores*, the Rock Demers children's film, *The Tadpole and the Whale* and the upcoming, Allegro Films feature, *Mindfield*). On top of that, the actors are crazy about Claude, and as for Marie-José, she is a very hard worker and very tight on budget."



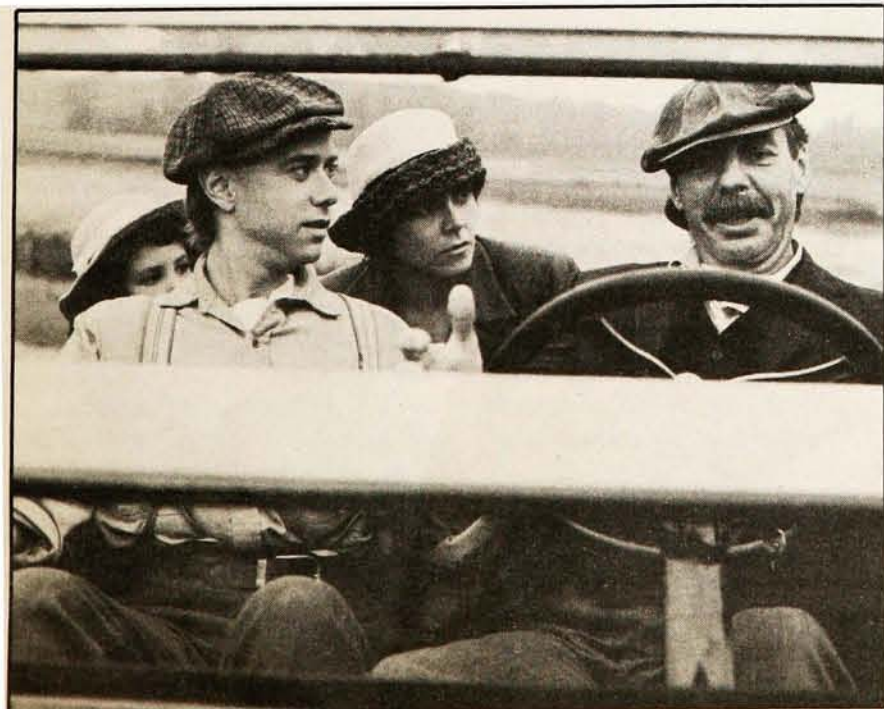
"Directed and filmed by..."

Although many directors keep their eyes glued to the viewfinder of the camera until the last possible moment, very few are their own camera operators. Claude Lelouch is an exception, and so is Claude Fournier. He believes that a director who relinquishes control of the camera is "not there when the real thing happens."

Fournier came to this conclusion while working as a documentary director at the NFB and at New York City's Robert Drew Associates, where *cinéma vérité* filmmakers like D. A. Pennebaker mastered the hand-held 16mm camera. After Fournier made the switch to shooting drama in 35mm, he held onto what he calls "the best seat in the house. It's only from that angle that you can make the proper decisions in an efficient way."

Fournier points out that he "can make very quick decisions even before a shot is over." If, for example, he goofs on a difficult camera movement, he can decide to forget about doing another take "because I want to cut anyway," and also because Fournier, the camera operator doesn't feel he must prove anything to Fournier, the director.

"The day I walk away from the camera," he says, "I'm going to walk away from films."



Denis Bouchard, Andrée Pelletier and Michel Forget

The supermarket connection

Increasingly, Quebec producers are seeking corporate sponsorship for their films. In Mike Rubbo's *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveler*, a kangaroo chews on a well-known packaged munchie, and before *Les Tisserands du pouvoir's* credits start rolling, an executive from Steinberg's, one of the province's leading supermarket chains, introduces the picture and wishes you a "bon cinéma."



It may seem tacky, but the advantages of having a high-profile company involved in a production are numerous. "Steinberg's," explains producer René Malo, "has provided all kinds of help with the release of the picture and TV ad campaigns. On top of that, they promoted *Tisserands* in two million mailers across Quebec, offering a \$1 reduction coupon for people who wanted to see the movie. For the TV series, they bought all the commercials, and they got us - because of their power of negotiation - more for the TV money we were spending."

Malo would like to try this type of sponsorship in English Canada (in fact, Canadian Tire has associated itself with *Bethune*), but the producer doubts it would work. "Here the sponsors will go with a product because they know that Quebecers identify with the characters in the film. When people see *Déclin*, or *Portes Tournantes*, or *Tisserands*, they see people they know. It's them."



Gratien Gélinas, Gérard Paradis and Juliette Huot make a stand for language rights

The mills of the movies

Claude Fournier met Marie-José Raymond, who was an actress and TV personality with a Master's degree in history, when he auditioned her for a half-hour drama during the late '60s. "You hear all the time about directors falling in love with people in front of the camera," says Fournier, one of the few directors of feature films who is his own cameraman. "Well I did fall in love through the lens. It's the business that brought us together and," he jokes, "is keeping us together."

The couple's company, Rose Films, has produced unusually disparate projects. Although known today primarily for their serious-minded *Tin Flute* (1982) and *Les Tisserands du Pouvoir*, Fournier and Raymond's first big money-maker (and the director's first feature) was *Deux Femmes en or* (1972), a sex farce about two housewives (Monique Mercure and Louise Turcot), who, fed up with their negligent husbands, decide to make love to every working man who pops up at their front doors.

"Claude and I have complex personalities," laughs Raymond. "Who says that sexy comedies go against serious matters?" Fournier believes that *Deux Femmes*, almost 20 years after its release, is "a bloody good movie, well made for the money." In fact, the picture is an interesting artifact from the early '70s that lampoons suburban Québécois kitsch, titillates with soft-core porn, and shoots out a few *independentist* darts. In one scene, a nude, doll-like housewife makes love to a rug-shampooer amidst the giant bubbles from his machine; in another, a prissy Toronto insurance

executive talks down to an obsequious Québécois employee.

Despite what a former collaborator calls Raymond's "girlish Cinderella look," the producer, who was grieved against by the Quebec technicians' union during the production of *Tisserands*, has a reputation for tough pragmatism.

Raymond says that she will spend extra dollars to get something that will "really enhance the film," and when re-shooting is necessary, she is "the first one to agree. But," she goes on with a certain ironic edge in her voice, "If a whole scene is to be shot on tripod, no dolly, because that is the nature of the scene, please don't oblige me to have four grips doing nothing. However, if we're doing a complex travelling shot, can I have 10 that day?"

Raymond and Fournier believe strongly that working on American productions has seduced Canadian technical personnel into forgetting the realities of filmmaking in their own country. For instance, throughout the shooting of *Les Tisserands*, Fournier usually had only one type of dolly. "I was told," the director says, "You are crazy. Why don't we carry three all the time? That's what we do on American productions. It's so much handier."

Sure, says Fournier, but he points out that carrying the extra equipment "prevents you from thinking ahead, puts \$15,000 into the pocket of the rental company, and doesn't appear on the screen." The director warns that if technical people don't come back down to earth, Canadian filmmakers will lose "the imagination to create films within the means that

we have here."

The two filmmakers also predict that the "industry" of servicing American productions will - despite obvious benefits - do nothing in the long run for movie-making in this country. In fact, according to Raymond, the day the value of the Canadian dollar rises, or "the day the fashion disappears - it will be like what happened in Spain, where the Americans stopped shooting. An industry is created by writers, directors, producers - these are its motors. When an American comes and shoots here, he doesn't employ those people."

Fournier and Raymond occasionally lock horns during a production, but the director says that his professional relationship with her, perhaps because of the private one, is "much more harmonious" than the "sour, adversarial relationship that always seems to develop with a producer, even in spite of yourself."

According to the pair, they don't play power games with each other. He understands the money pressures a producer faces (he can't escape them when he goes home at night), and, continues Fournier, "Very few producers know the creative, technical part of the business as well as José does." Fournier trusts his wife so completely that he no longer looks at rushes. "She sees them in the morning, and I re-shoot something blindly if she says it's better to. Sometimes, she lets fewer things go by than I do because I'm a bit complacent. I get fed up, and have a tendency to let go and say, 'That's probably as good as we'll ever have it,' but she is not like that."



Rémy Girard, Daniel Brière, Pierre Curzi and Yves Jacques in *Le Déclin de l'empire Américain*

Malo on Malo

René Malo is like Raymond, uninterested in being a desk-bound producer, disconnected from day-to-day creative demands. "I would like my hand in everything," he says, "and in the future, I will do more." Last year, Malo, normally up to his ears with his distribution house and production company, overdid things by putting his nervous, restless energy into so many pictures, "it was difficult to be everywhere at the same time."

In 1988, Malo helped produce six features, including the two *Tisserands* films, the gothic thriller *Pin*, and Quebec auteur Jacques Leduc's *Trois Pommes à côté du sommeil*. "It was completely nuts," he says, his round face splitting into a grin, "Nobody ever did that in Canada."

Malo aims at being omnipresent during the making of a movie so that he can impose a certain "style" on it. For example, to ensure a rich, theatrical *mise-en-scène* for Francis Mankiewicz's *Les Portes tournantes*, he "insisted on the best people for the costumes and the art direction we have in Canada." The producer tends to be attracted to tasty, prestigious, projects like Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine*, and, of course, *Le Déclin*. (He was delighted by that picture's success at Cannes, and reportedly strongly disappointed by its failure to net an Oscar.)

René Malo points out that in Canada, supposedly uncommercial films – even in French – are often easier to finance than presumably commercial ones in English. You can raise part of your budget from the various government bureaucracies that invest in films

they deem culturally valuable.

In fact, Malo points out with some frustration, officials at the government institutions "don't want to help a picture that is what they call commercial" – and will be, from the point-of-view of a producer-distributor – an easier sell. Malo visibly relives the irritation he felt during his battle to get the English-language thriller, *Pin*, accepted at Telefilm. "Miss Linda Beath tried everything she could to stop it. You can put that in your paper."

Pin, about an anatomical dummy that becomes a surrogate sibling for a disturbed

Malo, implying that bureaucrats should relieve themselves of certain genteel concepts about what constitutes "culture" [in December's *Film Comment*, writer David Chute referred to Canada's "dour, stiff... National Film Board image"], goes on to argue that our movie industry will "never grow up" as long as moviemakers remain dependent on "the decisions of *fonctionnaires*. Those guys always hold you by the balls. You have to go and kiss their feet, even if two weeks ago, they were the driver on your set."

Chuckling with amused disbelief, Malo

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young man is, says Malo, "a psychological thriller in the spirit of a Hitchcock picture." "It is not some display of chopped and slashed flesh. "I cannot look at those pictures," says Malo. "I'm afraid of them, so how can I make them?" In fact, "when we screen *Pin*, the exhibitors complain, 'There is not enough blood in it.' They practically say it's too cultural!"

remembers a time when "I had to negotiate with somebody, who a year before was an assistant to the production manager on one of my films. Suddenly, you are faced by that little... person... and now he looks at you, and says, 'Come on!'" Malo rubs his hands together, imitating the *fonctionnaire's* gleeful smirk, pauses, and adds, "Of course, some of them are very valuable people."

The producer concludes, "It's not normal that each time you want to develop another movie, you start from zero. You go to Telefilm, and there is a new guy there. You have been producing pictures for 20 years of your life, and he looks at you the same way he looks at the guy who just came out of Concordia University. You have to fill the same forms, and they ask you to make a marketing plan before you produce the picture. That's the most crazy thing I ever heard in my life."

For René Malo, the worst of all the problems facing the Canadian film industry is the creaking financing system that focuses on one picture at a time. If the government seriously wants to help a real industry develop, it should stop doling out grants and offering tax shelters for individual movies, and offer "tax credits for investment in a film company. Have you ever heard," jokes the producer, "about a government investing in one shoe, rather than a shoe factory?"

According to Malo, in an improved system based more on private investment, "companies that do well would have money to develop and plan, rather than be slaves of government policies. At the same time, Telefilm and the NFB would continue to exist to help the "more difficult films" – pictures made by artists, people who want to make a political statement, or "those who are just learning."

"The way things work now," Malo concludes, "we are making films, but we are not making an industry."



René Malo's recent Genie-nominee, *Les Portes tournantes*, with Monique Spaziani and Jacques Penot.

Fear Trade

If anyone out there believes that the film industry will be boosted in some way by our controversial Free Trade deal with the Americans, René Malo, Marie-José Raymond, and Claude Fournier do not share this point-of-view.

The French Canadian characters of *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* migrate to New England and disappear into the American melting pot. Today, all the people of this country, the three moviemakers believe, are on the verge of a cultural breakdown because of the new, more intimate bonds they are forming with their American cousins.

"The five years of work on *Tisserands*," says Fournier with a touch of prophetic fervor in his voice, "has totally changed my outlook on our situation vis-à-vis American culture." The director is certain the Americans will find ways of interfering "if we really decide to keep feeding Canadian culture, which I don't see as being so strong that it can resist any assault from the outside. I see it much more, like the French language, as the sort of little light that can be blown out quite easily."

Fournier, like Malo and Raymond, (who were both on the federal government's film industry task force), speaks from the experience of eyeballing American movie honchos on the subject of possible changes to our official film policies. Fournier remembers the experience ruefully.

"We have been told by our governments that

we only have to show creativity, dynamism, and vigor, and we are going to conquer the American market. But I had a sour taste in my mouth since I discussed the Quebec film law with the Valentis and the rest.

Everytime the Americans would make one little threat, the Quebecers were all shaking, trying to see how they could dilute the law. Bourassa didn't want to anger, even risk angering the majors, because he was selling electricity to the states, and to him that was much more important than any film law." Explaining the Quebec Premier's apparent fixation with hydro-power, Marie-José Raymond cracks, "Bourassa understands that a great man likes to have an obsession, so he thinks an obsession is going to make him a great man."

Fournier concludes, "If Bourassa shakes because he thinks the majors and Valenti are unhappy, how can we say culture is not in the free trade agreement? It's all interrelated. And we are so mesmerized, so fearful of any American reactions, that it is very hard to believe that the government will suddenly start having balls because we have a free trade agreement."

René Malo recalls the long, discouraging battle to make Americans in the film business see Canada as a country, and allow "Canadian distributors access to the same products as any other distributor in the world." The producer believes that with free trade, the kind of protectionist distribution law the industry needs

will never come, and "on top of that, I'm sure there will be a lot of pressure" to kill the safeguards that do exist.

"It's unfair competition!" Malo imagines the Americans shrieking. And they'll also complain about "books, magazines, and radio stations." Malo continues, heating up, "And then the Americans will tell us, 'Our doors are open to your product.' Come on," he groans, "We know very well it's a joke. They don't need laws to protect themselves, because they don't like anything other than themselves."

For movie-makers, argues Claude Fournier, the word "access" (to the U.S. market) is not only a hollow buzzword, it is preposterous when you remind yourself that of all the pictures shown on American screens, about two per cent originate in a foreign country, while their movies are now playing in almost half the movie theatres in the world. I don't see how our films will be shown there because they don't want ours; nor do they want French, British, or Australian films."

A recent disappointment confirmed Fournier's pessimism. PBS started putting money into *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* and negotiated right up "until two weeks before the shooting." Raymond explains, "When it came to the board of American Playhouse, their answer was 'No way we will do six hours produced, written, and directed by non-Americans' even though the story, set mainly in the U.S., was an "authentic, natural venture" to do

with PBS. She laughs, "They say 'open market,' but when you've lived it, the decision is not to open doors."

Since Canada is a gapingly open door for the American majors, René Malo wants to know why no Canadian government has worked up the nerve to say to them: "You are taking [in film and video sales] \$800 million a year out of this country. You will leave 20 per cent of it here that will go into our industry, the same way it works in Italy, in France, in Germany, and everywhere else."

Malo says mockingly that government after government hands out various consolation prizes to the movie industry by setting up fund after fund. "They take money from the pockets of the people of Canada instead of from the Americans, who are taking money from the pockets of the same people."

Despite all the sardonic anger - so typical of filmmakers and other workers in Canada's "cultural industries" - Marie-José Raymond reminds herself that "American culture is also part of our richness. To be very honest, one of our abilities has been to use it, and to nourish ourselves with it."

And Claude Fournier is content that over the years, in Quebec, he - like René Malo - has reached an audience. Fournier wants to go on making pictures for "these people who have given you a certain success. You can't side-step your own public, and then hope that you will sell in the states. Most of those who have succeeded - Gilles Carle, and Denys Arcand, and myself - although we have not succeeded on the world market, we have succeeded in our own. At least we've succeeded some place." ●



Gabrielle Lazure and Anne Létourneau



Jacques Lemaire confronted by Michel Forget