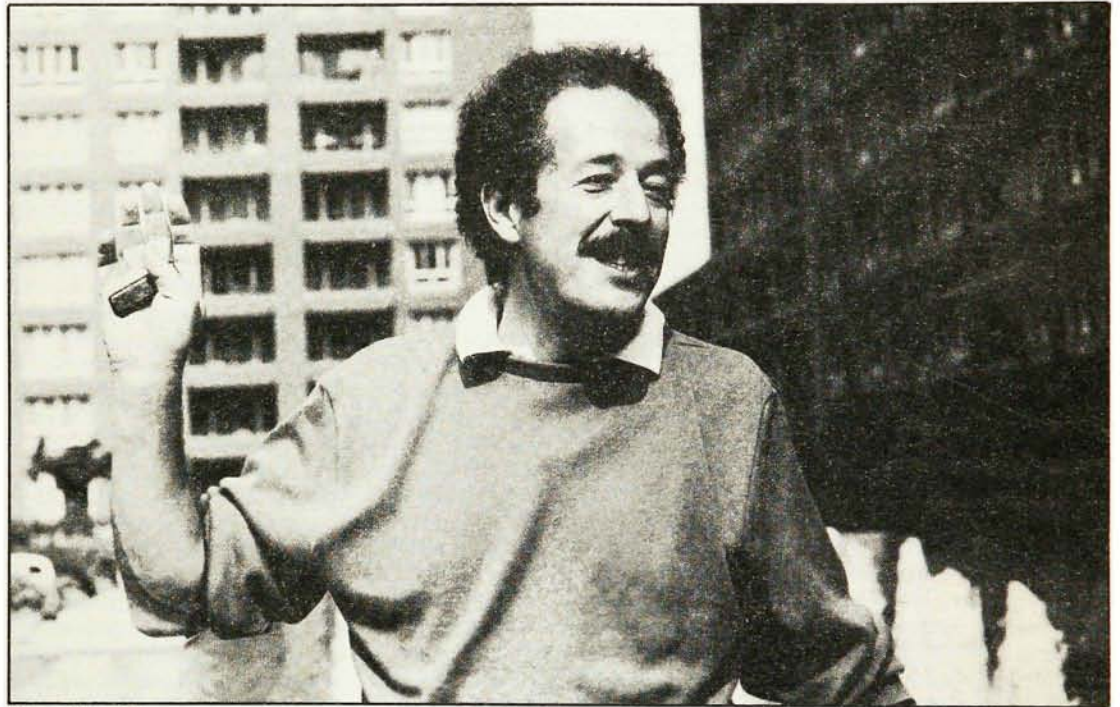


The second coming of Denys Arcand?

Jésus de Montréal in official competition at Cannes

BY JEAN-PIERRE TADROS



Denys Arcand

When Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* was selected for the Official Competition at the Cannes Film Festival, there was relief in the Quebec film community. Everyone had hoped the film would be accepted, of course. But relations between Quebec/Canada and France are not exactly simple, and several people were kept cooling their heels awaiting word of acceptance. It eventually came – a welcome feather in the cap of an industry generally lacking in such international recognition.

Netting an international audience has been the preoccupation of the producers since the early days of the shoot. Only foreign journalists were allowed on set during production, a fact that had local journalists hopping mad. But for the producers it was more important to win over the French and American press.

BORN TO BE MILD

Denys Arcand is wise to such ways, as this film attests. In one scene a judge – played by Arcand himself – sends the protagonist, an actor playing Christ in a Passion play, off for a psychological assessment. He has ended up in court after destroying several hundred thousand dollars

worth of electronic equipment during a violent outburst over the way actors are exploited and degraded. The psychologist asks him if he has any regrets about being born in Quebec. The question takes the actor by surprise, and before he has a chance to answer the psychologist tells him he might have been born in Hollywood or even in Sweden, where he could have rubbed shoulders with Bergman. Either way, his life would have been completely different.

Crudely put, perhaps, but that is the question all Quebec and Canadian artists ask themselves at some point in their careers – as all artists who live on the periphery of a dominant culture must ask themselves. Arcand not only asks the question he also answers it with a note of ironic amusement. His Jesus – the unappreciated and misunderstood actor – doesn't regret his origins. "What if I had been born in Burkina Faso?" the actor asks the psychologist. Yes indeed. One can console oneself by contemplating those whose lives are even more tragic than one's own.

Even though he lives and works on the periphery of the American empire, Arcand has built himself a solid career. Both at home and abroad, his fiction films have met with enthusiastic critical response. Beginning with his 1961 film, *Seul ou avec d'autres*, one of the

earliest Québécois fiction films, followed ten years later by *La Maudite galette* (1971) then, in close succession, *Rejeanne Padovani* (1973) and *Gina* (1974), Arcand forged a reputation as one of the most accomplished and provocative Québécois fiction directors of his generation. One does not respond to Arcand's work with indifference. Nonetheless, these earlier films were not big commercial successes. Then, in 1984, with *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (a dry title if there ever was one), Arcand managed to reach a wide audience without sacrificing his need to analyze and make sense of day-to-day existence, and to point out all its contradictions.

Arcand honed his approach at the National Film Board. A history graduate, he was recruited during the early '60s to work on documentary films. At the NFB he directed a long list of documentaries, including the controversial *On est au Coton*, a film examining the textile industry in Quebec and the United States (which the NFB censored and withdrew from distribution); *Duplessis est encore en vie* and *Le Confort et l'indifférence*, two films deeply rooted in the politics and social reality of Quebec.

After leaving the Film Board, Arcand went through several years of almost complete isolation from the filmmaking world. Then,



Rémy Girard and Robert Lepage

producer Mark Blandford contracted him to write *Duplessis*, the very popular Radio Canada series. *Duplessis* preceded his other TV credit, as director of three episodes of the CBC's *Empire Inc.* As Arcand observes, "We, in this country, have very poor memories. There is always the feeling that one has to start over again from zero. Now I'm in great demand; everyone knows my name, knows who I am, lavishes praise on me. But not that long ago, a journalist at Radio Canada introduced me saying 'I know you're no longer working in film!' That scared me and made me realize that I'd better get back my hand back in."

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

How has his success affected Denys Arcand? "I'm tempted to say that it's been more of a headache than anything else, except that it has allowed me to make films, which isn't all bad. That being said, I lost almost a year of my life because of the success of *Le Déclin*. . . I spent from May, when the film was presented at Cannes in the Quinzaine, until March, when its nomination for an Academy Award was announced, doing nothing but interviews."

He'd have preferred to be playing hockey with his buddies, or on the tennis court. "You go from one interview to another. It gets very boring, and there's a feeling that you're not contributing anything. There's no time during these interviews for real communication to take place. You spend the whole day at it, and the next day you do the same thing all over again. It seems to me we did a promotional stint in every town in the United States and France, and I got

absolutely nothing out of it. Nothing. On the other hand, when someone who sees your film in Buenos Aires comes up to you and says the film was important to him, you feel good about it. However, I can't help thinking that *Le Déclin*. . . was no more genuine than my other films; it was successful, that's all."

Arcand feels that after 25 years of making movies he has changed in only one way: the director has "learned how this system works," and this knowledge has given him a certain detachment. "I think success is less traumatic for me than for someone like Jean-Claude Lauzon [whose first film, *Un Zoo la nuit*, was a major hit]. There is a lot of pressure on him from producers to come up with another hit, but as everyone knows, you can't just order that kind of thing on the phone."

ARCAND PROVOCATEUR

Breasts. A penis. It's hard to forget the poster for *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*. It shocked, so much so that in some places it was actually censored. The poster for *Jésus de Montréal* also surprises, but with its simplicity: a swiftly-sketched heart alone on a white background. A heart that radiates an unknown passion. One lone, red heart.

"*Jésus de Montréal*, says Arcand, "is about the Gospel according to St. Mark, commercials for eau-de-cologne, the Brothers Karamazov, dubbing porno flicks, the Big Bang, the formula for Classic Coke, Hamlet's soliloquy, the misfortune of being born in Burkina Faso, a Roman soldier by the name of Panthera, fascists

who take daily communion, organ transplants, and Paul Newman's salad dressing. In short, it's about everything that is unavoidable."

That pretty much says it all; the film defies any other kind of summing up, as Arcand concedes. "It's a difficult film to describe. On the whole it's very serious, but there are incredible swings of mood. It goes from tragedy to the zaniest comedy. It's a reexamination of Christ's Passion, which makes the film both serious and in tune with current concerns. Of course, it also reflects Quebec's deeply religious past. So when the idea for the film came to me, it started to obsess me."

"When I auditioned actors for *Le Déclin*. . . one of them apologized that he had a beard, saying he was playing Jesus at the St. Joseph's Oratory. The image stuck with me, and opened up something deep in me. I went to see the play at the Oratory and the idea slowly took shape. I'm a filmmaker who's worked 25 years with actors, and I wanted to reconcile some of the contradictions in an actor's life and career."

How did he develop the script? "Through examining myself and reality," Arcand says. "I always approach work the same way. At the outset, something happens that starts me thinking. With *Le Déclin*. . . it was the break-up of a marriage of 20 years. This personal experience was the basis of my questioning; I was going through it, and I needed to examine myself and, from there, the world outside. The script slowly started to come together after that."

Arcand doesn't build a script out of thin air in isolation. "If you're willing to throw yourself

into other people's reality, you get somewhere. The work develops, at first, not out of psychological research but out of passionate contact with people. This contact gives you so much. It helps you see things more clearly; makes you define the characters better. This interplay is really important."

Out of this process, Arcand also created *Jésus de Montréal*, a film he acknowledges will have difficulty finding a large audience. "It is, after all, a film that questions a lot, at many different levels. It touches on emotions, as well as on ideals and the dilemmas that accompany them. My protagonist embodies values that are diametrically opposed to those of society; his tragic fate leads us back to Jesus. So the film brings together and makes us confront many different emotions. You might say that this pool of emotions nourishes the film."

But will the film's emotional richness have the appeal of *Le Déclin*. . . ? The jury is still out, but not for long. *Jésus de Montréal* will be presented to the discerning audiences at the Cannes Film Festival on May 15th and then open the same day in Paris. The verdict on its international career will be swift and merciless. As for Quebec audiences, after much hesitation the distributors decided to open *Jésus*. . . in Montreal and Quebec City to coincide with the screening in Cannes. They no doubt wanted to shelter the film from the rumour mill of Cannes, and give it a chance to make it on its own. For the producers, Max Films, and for Denys Arcand, the risks are enormous. ●

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