

Film Reviews

Denys Arcand's  
**Jésus  
de Montréal**

**A**s we hurtle toward the 21st century, which André Malraux thought "will be mystical - or it will not be," Denys Arcand has set off reverberations with a movie that yearns for mysteries, miracles, and eternal love. In this lustrous film, Jesus and the disciples are unsuccessful actors who, among other gigs, dub porno movies and model in perfume commercials to put pizza and wine on the table.

*Jésus de Montréal* lights up the screen because it plays friskily, and also dead seriously, with a multitude of ambiguities. The film is all contrasts, echoes, and double meanings. It is both reverential and mocking; rooted in concrete reality, and up on cloud Nine. As dark as blood, as sparkling as a sip of rosé, *Jésus* smiles down knowingly, letting tragedy co-exist with slapstick comedy, and irony with ecstasy.

Jiving about the picture in a press-kit interview, Arcand envisions the "life we live today" as a super drugmart where "everything is present" from condoms and horoscopes to anthologies of Shakespeare and the Bible. In our world, the director would no doubt argue, pure tragedy played straight is doomed to become a ponderous museum piece - which is why *Jésus de Montréal* opens on a handsome, tormented-looking, young man in 19th-century costume, lamenting the brevity of life and then hanging himself.

Even before the first of the movie's many jolts - "Bravo! Bravo!", we hear a legitimate theatre audience shouting over a shot of the suicide's dangling torso, and realize that the "tragic" scene is part of just another play - you feel like tittering at the actor's heavy performing style and the antique, airless *mise-en-scène*. The kind of *mise-en-scène* that sometimes passes for "taste" and "beauty" in Canadian feature films.

In *Jésus de Montréal*, Arcand's *mise-en-scène* changes fast and furiously; it cuts from milieu to milieu, character to caricature, mood to mood. The audience tags along breathlessly behind him, catching on to some funky gag when he's already rising into a moment of exaltation, or plunging into bitter despair. In a climactic scene near the end of *Jésus*, farce turns to tragedy in one brutal cut.

The opening act of the movie speeds you from a reception packed with babbling media-goons (some of them based on real Montreal hot-shots), to an airy Catholic shrine, a sad soup kitchen, and a dubbing studio in which actor Martin Durocher (Rémy Girard) scampers back and forth between two microphones, trying to post-synch the ecstatic voices of both male heroes in a four-way orgy.



Jesus of Montreal (Lothaire Bluteau) flanked by Johanne-Marie Tremblay and Catherine Wilkening, and centurions Rémy Girard and Robert Lepage.

The beat gets too fast for Martin, who goofs, mixing up his "Burt" and "Johnny" voices. But the dubbing director's voice immediately crackles on the p. a., "Don't worry. Nobody will notice any difference," making one of the film's many barbed comments from the World According to Arcand.

The mock pornography in this scene bounces off an earlier scene's shots of ham actors pontificating about their sins. These "religious" images appear on a video monitor belonging to Father Leclerc (Gilles Pelletier), a lifelong theatre buff who offers an opportunity to *Jésus de Montréal*'s hero, Daniel Coulombe (Lothaire Bluteau), a young actor who needs work.

Father Leclerc wants Daniel to "modernize" *The Stations of the Cross*, a passion play staged on summer nights for gaggles of tourists in tennis shirts and bermuda shorts. The priest's show is based on an outdoor spectacle that actually happens at Montreal's mountainside St. Joseph's Oratory, and was, according to Arcand, the inspiration for his film.

Like Nathaneal West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Daniel is initially amused by the prospect of directing Christ's story and playing the main character. But as he meticulously researches the most up-to-date historical data about the world's most mysterious man, (approaching the project the way ex-documentarian Arcand did), and as an interesting way to tell the story reveals itself to him, Daniel starts feeling inspired.

Eventually, Jesus of Montreal gets more than he bargained for - just like the original.

A new tone comes into the film. A slightly spooky, born-again librarian (Paule Baillargeon) asks Daniel if he's looking for Jesus, and when he says, "Uh, yeah," she replies "It's he who will find you." The moment is typical of Arcand's style all through *Jésus de Montréal*. It's a joke; it isn't.

The urbanelly mocking scenes are now counterpointed by, for example, an eloquent camera move up a stone statue of Jesus in a green, summery garden, or a scene that evokes the end of the world. The silhouettes of Daniel, Martin, and unemployed actress Constance (Johanne-Marie Tremblay) merge with big screen outer space effects while a bottom-heavy voice intones typically science-show musings about man being a furtive shadow that will one day disappear from the universe. Again, a cliché reverberates.

Soon, Daniel is rehearsing his new version of the passion play with a little band of performers that includes Constance, Martin, René (stage actor/director Robert Lepage), and Mireille (French actress Catherine Wilkening). Constance needs to help people more than she needs to act; Martin is fed up, but too laid-back to do anything about it; René is a proud cynic who cracks, "I read every script - that's why I don't get much work"; and Mireille, a successful model, has just been told by her boyfriend,

"Your biggest talent is your ass."

Daniel's actors, who have been kicked around by corrupt people with power, and who share a yearning for something indefinable, begin discovering themselves through Daniel's approach to the play. He asks them for natural, under-stated performances; he makes the story real with disturbing information about Jesus's history and horrible facts about crucifixion; he confronts the spectators face to face with Christ's words. "Where lies your treasure, there lies your heart," Daniel-Jesus says quietly, but firmly, to an affluent viewer who nervously looks the other way.

As the mountain-top passion play takes over the middle of Arcand's movie, he moves the camera close to it. Burnished, nocturnal lighting contrasts with the airy blues and greens of the daytime settings. The sumptuously costumed players look like apparitions from the past. A naked Daniel dies convincingly under the night sky, the lights of Montreal twinkling far below.

His creation a bizarre hit with the media and the public, Daniel's life starts changing. As Jesus overturned the money-lenders' tables and kicked them out of the temple, Daniel smashes video equipment at a beer commercial audition where actresses are expected to "show your tits, or go home." Daniel is arrested, examined by a judge (Arcand) more disengaged than Pontius Pilate himself, and then tempted by the devil in

PHOTO: GROS D'AILLON

the form of a smooth entertainment lawyer (Yves Jacques).

Worst of all, Daniel is betrayed by Father Leclerc, who like a movie producer turning chicken, backs off from his director's original, truthful, and dangerously provocative production ("I have to answer to the board of governors"), and tries to impose his stilted, artificial 35-year-old stilted, artificial script on the actors.

In *Jesus of Montreal's* finale, Daniel falls and rises twice in a chain of ludicrous, ironic, and deeply disturbing episodes. Arcand's movie - beautifully acted, designed, and filmed (by Guy Dufaux and Jacques Leduc) - leaves you at the end with no clear resolution to the mystery of its enigmatic hero, played with an uncanny vulnerability and strength by Lothaire Bluteau.

Is Daniel an actor who crossed over into his role, or has Jesus returned in Daniel's body? It doesn't make any difference when we are haunted by images of him cradling a small child, loving his marginal friends, revolting against the contempt of power creeps, haranguing the living dead in a purgatorial metro station, or shouting at Father Leclerc under an echoing dome, "There must be something more than waiting quietly for death."

Maurie Alioff •

**JESUS DE MONTREAL** p. Roger Frappier, Pierre Gendron assoc. p. Gérard Mital, Jacques-Eric Strauss, Doris Girard p. mgr Lyse LaFontaine scd. Denys Arcand d. o. p. Guy Dufaux ed. Isabelle Dedieu art d. François Séguin sd. Patrick Rousseau, Marcel Pothier mus. Yves Laferrière, François Dompierre, Jean-Marie Benoit cost. Louise Jobin animation/titles François Aubry images of Montreal Jacques Leduc 1st. a. d. Mireille Goulet 2nd. a. d. Jacques Laberge, Marie-Madeleine Demay 3rd a. d. Guy Bouchard, Benoit Laroche post-prod. sup. Suzanne Dussault deleg. p. Monique Létourneau admin. Bernard Lamy 1st. asst. cam. Nathalie Moliakko Visotsky 2nd asst. cam. Sylvaine Dufaux asst. ed. Claudette Duff cont. Marie La Haye boom Veronique Gabillaud stills photog. Pierre Gros d'Aillons gaffer Normand Viau elec. Claude Fortier, Robert Auclair, Michel Steinmetzer, Marcel Breton, Sylvain Bergevin key grip Serge Grenier grips Grégoire Schmidt, André Tisseur set dec. Frances Calder, Simon La Haye coord. Lise Pharand props Patrice Benge, Ian Lavoie head makeup Micheline Trepanier makeup Cécile Rigault, Natalie Trepanier hair Janick Roda, Réjean Coderre cost. Josée Boisvert, Jacqueline Rousseau, Pierre Perrault cost. assts. Sylvie Chaput, Dominic Girard hd. dresser John Stowe dressers Mariane Carter, Marie McLaughlin, Dominic Girard unit mgr. Estelle Lemieux loc. mgr. Huguette Bergeron assts. Sylvie Vincent, Lucie Bouliane p. a. Jean-Pierre Fautoux, Pierre Lambert sp. fx. Louis Craig asst. sp. fx. Jacques Langlois, Pierre Rivard rear proj. Denis Gillsion c. s. c. sd. fx. ed. Marcel Pothier asst. Antoine Morin, Yves Laferrière, Mathieu Beaudin rec. Claude La Haye post. sync. /diul. ed. Diane Boucher, Annie Jean, Matthieu Roy-Décarie, Normand Bélanger rec. Jocelyn Caron, Laurent Levy, François Lepeuple, Jacques Juliani asst. ed. Catherine Legault mix. Hans-Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll l. p. Lothaire Bluteau, Catherine Wilkening, Johanne-Marie Tremblay, Rémy Girard, Robert Lepage, Gilles Pelletier, Yves Jacques, Cédric Noël, Pauline Martin, Véronique Le Flaguais, Jean-Louis Millette, Monique Miller, Christine-Ann Atallah, Valérie Gagné, Claude Leveillé, Paule Baillargeon, Boris Bergman, Gaston Lepage, Pascal Rollin, Marc Messier, Marcel Sabourin, Roy Dupuis, Claude Blanchard, Andrée Lachapelle, Denis Bouchard, Ron Lea, Anna-Maria Giannotti, Tom Rack, Marie-Christine Barrault, Judith Magre. A Max Films/Productions Gérard Mital production.

## Martin Lavut's Palais royale

## Mitchell Gabourie's Buying time

**P**alais Royale and Buying Time are two Toronto movies with strikingly similar story lines, sharing the same American "star", Dean Stockwell (both were shot before his comeback role in *Married to the Mob*), and bedeviled by similar problems of character development and lack of focus in the script. However, neither disguise where they were shot and both were released in Toronto during the same week. As far as this reviewer can remember, this has never happened before.

*Palais Royale* is the more stylish of the two, but also the weaker. Billed as a 'comedic romance noir', it is neither very funny nor is there a real romance. Set in 'Toronto the Good', circa 1959, Gerald Price (Matt Craven) is a clerk with small-town roots and big-time ambitions. He's a hustler who dreams of running his own ad agency and of the blonde on the billboards for Royal cigarettes. Sooner then you can say Charles Dickens (for plot convenience) he meets the blonde, Odessa Muldoon, (played by Kim Cattrall by way of Marilyn Monroe) on a street corner and immediately makes at pass a her.

Getting nowhere, he nonetheless manages to track her down at the Palais Royale, an art deco dance hall on Lake Ontario, where it seems all the best of the Toronto underworld meet for a bit of R and R.

Before long, there is a senseless killing and Gerald literally finds himself lying on top of his dream, having saved her life. She lures him into her world of cheap thugs and even cheaper hotel rooms. She pouts, she lounges, she gets slapped around by her bullying boyfriend Tony (Kim Coates) who is working for the local mob boss, Michael Dattalico (played by Stockwell). He too is tired of Tony's boorish ways. He wants to run a legitimate carpet business through which he can funnel his hard-earned cash.

Tony screws up once too often and Gerald is given the carpet business. Dattalico figures him to be the perfect front man because he looks like "fresh air and corn flakes." Meanwhile, Tony plots his revenge, and after some not very interesting plot twists, they all end up at the Royale for the final shootout, after Tony has killed Dattalico.

There is humour in *Palais Royale*, if you don't mind Toronto in-jokes ("This whole town is small-time", says Tony, trying to convince Odessa to run away with him. "We're going to Buffalo."), and both Gerald and Tony have it off with Odessa. But the laughs are slight and the sex surprisingly sexless. The audience is expected to go with Gerald's naive enthusiasm and big dreams, but the script doesn't allow us to really know him or care about his dreams. Odessa never rises about the level of a cheap tart

despite Cattrall's limited efforts to give her character some class. Her Monroe mannerisms and sluttish nature deflect any sort of sympathy the audience might have for a small-town girl trying to survive in the big bad city. The rest of the thugs and cops are one-dimensional, except for Stockwell who ignites a few sparks in his role as a distinctly respectable crime lord. Unfortunately, he is only given a couple of key scenes.

*Palais Royale* was premiered at last year's Festival of Festivals, but was subsequently re-edited and rescored. It remains clumsy and almost completely without suspense. A nicely appointed period piece, full of slinky gowns and big-finned cars, it's all dressed up with no place to go. Martin Lavut's direction is uninspired and only occasionally do his images rise above the ordinary. He ends up dwelling on Cattrall's face, but unlike Monroe, she can't carry the film on the sheer force of her personality. She has none.

The idea of a mob film in Toronto set in the '50s is certainly an appealing idea, but the end result smacks of too many fingers in the creative pie. Hugh Graham is a talented and funny writer whose material used to be heard on a regular basis on CBC Radio's Morningside. Apparently he worked two years on the script, but somewhere along the way the focus got lost. The producers went for an expensive look and the easy clichés, and *Palais Royale* ends up being victim of a lot of wrong choices.

*Buying Time* shares a lot in common with *Palais Royale*, apart from Dean Stockwell. Both are about young men who get involved with



Kim Cattrall and Matt Craven in *Palais Royale*

gangsters and chase the elusive blonde plaything who, in reality, is just a country girl yearning for the simple life; both men get the blonde and a lot of trouble from the bad guys; and both films end with the death of the gangsters and the young couple settling down for a bit of clean country living.

However, not to be too unfair to *Buying Time*, it does have more authenticity and action in the first 30 minutes than is to be found in the entirety of *Palais Royale*. The creators of *Palais Royale* try to achieve authenticity with set decorations and big shiney cars. *Buying Time* does it, at least for the first third of the film, with believable characters, a sense of place, tension (something almost completely lacking in *Palais Royale*), and some tight, effective directing.

The film opens in a Toronto car wash with strong visuals and the casual introduction of the two main characters, Jabber (Jeff Schultz) and Reno (Leslie Toth). In quick succession, a third worker is gunned down in Union Station (looking dynamic and very threatening) by a particularly nasty-looking killer during a dope deal, while Jabber and Reno get in trouble with the law trying to shake down a bookie who owes Reno money. The bookie takes exception and tries to kill them both. In steps Detective Novak (Stockwell, in a throw-away role, is probably the weakest part of *Buying Time*, while his character in *Palais Royale* is the only one that stands out), who puts the squeeze on Jabber and Reno to cooperate in the Union Station killing. They protest that they don't know much, but Novak figures they can find out and promptly dispatches them to a rehabilitation home in the country run by the prime suspect in the killings (five other dope dealers have been killed recently by the same gun), a certain local hero, Curtis King (Page Fletcher).

Up until this point the film captures the look of the city in a way that totally eludes *Palais Royale*, and hasn't been seen on the screen since Don Shebib's *Heartaches*. The scenes on Spadina Avenue, in Kensington market, and especially the killing at Union Station, are striking and



Jeff Schultz and Dean Stockwell in *Buying Time*

imaginatively done. Jabber and Reno blend into their milieu effortlessly and *Buying Time* settles into an inner-city action film with plenty of mystery and suspense. Then, suddenly, the whole story switches gears and the sharp focus is lost. The blonde (Laura Cruickshank) appears as if out of a vision (or a commercial for bathroom tissue) on the back of a horse and the "rehabilitation home" has the appearance of an up-scale resort. Jabber is assigned to work in the stables and Reno is essentially dropped from the story. The relationship between Jabber and the blonde wanders back and forth (she is also involved with Curtis) as he discovers Curtis is running illegal races at night, improving the odds by drugging the horses. His assistant is the sinister killer, Cody (played with a nice menace by Michael Rudder).

It turns out that Curtis has been not only

rigging the races but also killing the dope dealers for no other reason than he is a nasty person. None of this makes much sense and the inevitable shootout comes complete with a *pro forma* false ending. Curtis appears to die in a car accident only to return to threaten Jabber and the blonde one more time, just when they think they are free of him.

Director Mitchell Gabourie, son of producer Richard (*Three Card Monte* and *Title Shot*) uses his skills as a director of rock videos to push the action forward at a fast clip, especially during the early stages and the later horse-racing scenes. There is some original work here, but *Buying Time* is such an odd little movie that it makes one wonder why it was made in the first place. What makes it even odder is that it was picked up for distribution by a U.S. major, MGM/UA. For a relatively low-budget Canadian film with no

obvious marketing hooks, this is a rare achievement indeed.

However, it is apparent that *Buying Time* proved too big a marketing problem for MGM/UA and it was dumped in the Toronto market for only a week's run with three prints and zero advertising. The film deserved a better fate. Whereas the eminently forgettable *Palais Royale* benefitted from a televised launch and reviews in all the major Toronto dailies, *Buying Time* was ignored, a minor gem of a film in search of an audience.

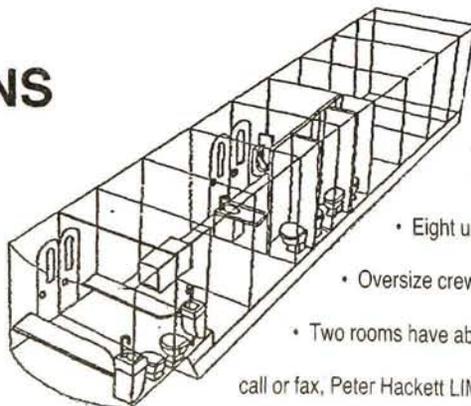
Paul Townend •

**PALAIS ROYALE** exec p. David Daniels, Steven Levitan, Lawrence Zack p. David Daniels, Lawrence Zack assoc. p. Jo Ann McIntyre line p. Duane Howard d. Martin Lavut sc. Hugh Graham d.o.p. Brenton Spencer l.p. Kim Cattrall, Matt Craven, Kim Coates, Brian George, Michael Hogan, Dean Stockwell, Dee McCafferty, Victor Ermanis, Mario Romano, Sean Hewitt, Robin McCulloch, David Fox, Helen Hughes, Sam Malkin, Henry Alessan, Bill Snazel, Lou Pitoscia, Norma Del, Agnese, Andrea Mann, Elizabeth Leslie, Tommy Earls, Elizabeth Walker, Ricardo Giorgi, Mort Spizarsky, Anthony Davis. A Metaphor Inc. production.

**BUYING TIME** p. Richard Gabourie d. Mitchell Gabourie sc. Mitchell and Richard Gabourie mus. David Krystal d.o.p. Manfred Guthe ed. Michael Todd art d. Bill Fleming cast. Armstrong/Clydesdale/Laela Weinzweig line p. Dan Nyberg 1st a.d. Stephen Reynolds cost. des. Ann Tree Newsom p. coord. Sheena Graham sd rec. Steve Joles cam. op. Gordon Langevin unilloc. mgr. Ted McGrath sc. sup. Jean Christopher 1st. asst. cam. Brian Harper 2nd asst. cam. Stewart Aziz trainee Ted Overton 2nd. a.d. Robert Petrovic 3rd. a.d. Delanie Prasek t.a.d. Michael H. Smith asst. a.d. Rick Roberts gaffer Zoltan Pasztor key grip Wayne Collins 2nd unit John Joffin trainee Richard Highgate key props Jake Fry asst. props Caroline George set dec. Brendan Smith asst. set dec. Greg Chown sculptor Ann Clifford coord. Ann Russell word asst. Patricia Venema makeup Carole Davidson hair Sherry Baker best boy David Kellner dolly grip John Scott McDonald boom op. Cory Siddall asst. loc. mgr. Randy Kennedy addnl. dialogue Gordon McDonald, Dean Gabourie dial. ed. Tony Currie a.d.r. ed. Wayne Griffin, Stephen Withrow sd. fx. ed. Jane Tattersall, Marta Nielsen Sternberg asst. fx. ed. John Laing Foley artist Terry Burke Foley asst. Donna Powell revec. mix Paul Coombe, Marvin Berns a.d.r. rec. Peter Kelly sp. fx. Mike Cavenaugh 1st. asst. ed. Jan Nicolichuk asst. ed. Allan Lee stills Susan Shaw stunt coord. Shane Cardwell l.p. Jeff Schultz, Page Fletcher, Laura Cruickshank, Leslie Toth, Dean Stockwell, Wayne Robson, Michael Rudder, Susan Potvin, Martin Louis, Sonny Forbes, Tony de Santis, Michelle Duquet. An Airheads production.

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## David Wellington's The Carpenter

**A**s *The Carpenter* opens, Alice Jarret is suffering a nervous breakdown. Her husband, Martin, a professor, buys a beautiful house in a rural setting, where Alice is to convalesce while Martin screws his students. The house is in need of renovations and that is where Ed, the carpenter, comes in.

Ed and Aline become partners in home improvement. Martin is tight with the purse strings, so, to keep herself busy, Alice starts cleaning, polishing, and painting the house. Ed is a conscientious worker, not like the other guys on the crew renovating the house. Ed works day and night to get the job done. He's a man with a philosophy: "hard work builds the world." Alice, inspired by Ed's determination, finds herself a job in a paint store.

So far it's a pleasant enough story that touches on some serious subjects. Alice, for instance, was committed to a mental hospital after cutting one of Martin's suits into tiny squares. Admittedly, this is not a nice thing to do but it's the only reason for her institutionalization that is seen or mentioned – an interesting comment on power relationships in the realm of mental illness.

And Ed, an "old-fashioned" guy, has a working style in distinct contrast to the young layabouts on the renovation crew and their genial, but inept foreman. Given Ed's subsequent (and prior) history, this may be taken as an ironic comment on the prevailing work ethic.

There's a certain absurdity to all this content because *The Carpenter* is a horror film. Apart from his attitude to work, one of the things that separates Ed from the other renovators is that he's dead, has been for years. He was the original owner and builder of the house, a fact which explains his devotion to it. Ed was a perfectionist, and he wanted to do the job by himself so he would know it had been done right. Eventually, he was sent to the electric chair for letting his temper get out of hand, when the repo men came to collect his tools and materials. Now he is back, not only in the house, but as the house. Scratch the paint, and you scratch Ed.

If you don't know that *The Carpenter* is a horror film, or if that information doesn't immediately limit your expectations, there are other options while you wait for the gore. A feminist analysis of the film is certainly possible, as Alice seems to embody all of the classic characteristics that create a dependent woman. She succeeds in overcoming them, with the help of her independent sister.

Director David Wellington has a background in commercials and rock videos, which is evident during the opening sequences of the film. The film looks good, but it takes a long time to get from Alice's breakdown to the first grisly act. You don't even find out about the "story behind the house"



Lynn Adams and Wings Hauser in *The Carpenter*

until half the film has gone by. In that space, there's a lot of time to notice the music and the camera work, which together give the house a sense of atmosphere. If the audience is expecting to get right into the gore and the morally purifying experience of watching teenagers get murdered for experimenting with sex, they'll be disappointed. The actual "blood and guts", when it comes, isn't entirely out of the blue, and it also isn't gratuitous. Wellington comes up with a few creative answers to the question "how do I use this thing?", something a lot of people ask when they first lay their hands on carpentry tools.

By mid-film, *The Carpenter* is on more familiar territory, murdering sexually promiscuous people. The first victim is a construction worker, part of the crew renovating the Jarrets' house. He is interrupted by Ed as he attempts to rape Alice. A student who is pregnant with Martin's child is disposed of by Ed, as is Martin a little later on. These are all problematic deaths because they set up a situation in which Ed becomes Alice's protector.

Ed and Alice are sympathetic characters for most of the film, in fact, the only characters who are not reprehensible on some level. The ending is a showdown between Ed and Alice. On one side, a traditional guy who is not just identified, but fused with the house; on the other, a woman emerging from a lifetime of being dominated by men and the houses they put her in. Pretty scary, kids!

*The Carpenter* attempts to do more than the average horror flick, which may be responsible for its status as a film few Canadians, (or anyone else), will ever see. A 1987 film from Goldgems Canada, it seems to have been sucked into the

black hole of Canadian distribution difficulties. This failure doesn't rank as a national tragedy, but the film does have a sense of humor about itself and a refreshing freedom from the strictures of the commercial horror genre. It's probably just these qualities that have kept it from general release.

*The Carpenter* has its flaws, particularly the clumsy characterization of the policeman who delivers the story about Ed and the house. But I would recommend this film to anyone who frequents horror films as an eccentric example of the genre.

Janet Neely •

**THE CARPENTER** p. Pierre Grise d. David Wellington sc. Doug Taylor d. o. p. David Franco ed. Roland Pollack mus. Pierre Bundock sd. Juan Gutierrez set des. Sylvain Gendron l. p. Wings Hauser, Lynn Adams, Pierre Lenoir. Produced by Goldgems Canada. col. 35mm. 87 min.

## Micheline Lanctôt's Onzième Spéciale

**E**very now and then, an old story is told in a new way, and it catches our attention. *Onzième Spéciale* is a comedy with style, the latest accomplishment of director Micheline Lanctôt. The film tells the story of Esther Camino, a woman stepping into that stage of life often termed "mid-life crisis." This is the moment we are invited to share, and the experience is surprising.

Why surprising? Is it that we don't expect – rightfully or wrongfully – such a well-orchestrated tragi-comedy from a film labelled "made-for-television"? First impressions are of clever banter, witty and alive. How refreshing it is to be with characters who take their actions and words to the extreme. Call it satire, call it buffoonery, the style is true to the excessive behaviour of a person in crisis. Cathartic, liberating. Exaggeration in writing, acting and *mise-en-scène* tell us from the very first confrontation (and there are many) that we are in for a bumpy ride.

Accompanying this all-Montreal journey is a soundtrack by jazz pianist Lorraine Desmarais. Her music punctuates Esther's search for meaning in a manner reflective of Esther's own style – passionate, improvisational, making new choices at every turn of a phrase – and keeps the mood playful and light.

What happens in *Onzième Spéciale*? Esther, 35-year-old wife and mother, could have become a "recognized" painter if she had concentrated on doing so. Instead, she feels that her life has been a somewhat haphazard chain of romantic events and creative endeavours. At 35, her dream world becomes unglued, and the lack of recognition as a painter brings on her crisis. An invitation to a high school reunion (the "Onzième Spéciale" of the title) serves as the proverbial last straw that starts her on a journey inward, outward, downward, back. For the duration of the film, Esther searches for meaning in her past accomplishments, collecting images and experiences. Together with her, we construct one large portfolio of her life and art.

There are really two themes in *Onzième Spéciale*. Woven into a story of the artist's self-doubt is bright, critical repartee about the institutionalization of the art world, with a special spotlight on bureaucrats and other "impurists" who put obstacles in the path of the true artist. Oddly enough, the character never reconciles this need for approval from those she regards with great disdain. (Whose story is this anyway?)

Lanctôt's direction of actors and camera is skillful and highly stylistic. Leading actress Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin is a former member of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and stage actress. Her Esther is physical and sensual, curiously comfortable – even defiant – in the skin of one in such mental turmoil.

Her screen-mate, Robert Toupin, known especially for his television endeavours, is solid in a role which occasionally demands responses which don't fit the male stereotype we are otherwise encouraged to construct. The remaining cast are reminiscent more of stage than screen players, full of gesture and exaggerated personality.

I suppose we could stay at the level of story, themes and acting, when looking at this "made-for-TV" creation, but *Onzième Spéciale* merits further regard. The subtle artistry of

structure, direction, and image enhance this familiar story and its characters.

If the term "fragmentation" can be used to describe Esther's psychological state, it can also be seen as inherent in the montage and visual style of *Onzième Spéciale*, a collection of images and experiences from Esther's life and art. This is truly an episodic film (ah, television), and the insights are sporadic, for Esther as well as the viewer. Lancôt's subtle images (she worked with cinematographer Pierre Mignot and art director Louise Jobin) capture Esther in her own opacity; we see her in and through other materials: faceted and distorted in mirrors, silhouetted through patterned glass, windows.

Esther is one against the world - her family, the organized art community, her high school alumni - and is often filmed in perspective with the physical space around her. Perhaps most importantly, we see her against a blank canvas, unable to execute a self-portrait. The overall visual approach emerges as a metaphor for Esther's confusion, questioning the notion of images and who creates them. Although unable to "see" herself, Esther paints images of other women, and renders them disrobed, disfigured, non-human. The art work we see is poignant, full of the questions "what is woman?" and "of what is her self-image made?"

A character film. A *mise-en-scène* film. A theme film. An editor's film. Surprising for "made-for-television." Not surprising considering the creative team. A look behind the camera reveals quite a constellation, so much so that it is difficult to say whether *auteurist critique* is appropriate here. *Équipe-ist*?

What are the drawbacks of *Onzième Spéciale*? Lancôt offers no answers for Esther's human drama - only windows. And surely the characters are stereotypical, and the criticism of the art world has been heard before. Yet the

humour, creativity, and freshness with which the story is told merit the re-telling.

Harriet Wichin •

**ONZIÈME SPECIALE** p. Roger Frappier d. Micheline Lanctôt sc. Marie Perreault, Louise Roy d. o. p. Pierre Mignot art d. Louise Jobin ed. Michel Arcand org. mus. Lorraine Desmarais p. mgr. JeanMarie Comeau st. Yvon Benoit 1st. a. d. Jacques LaBerge cont. Thérèse Bérubé 1st. asst. cam. Christianne Guernon unit mgr. Michèle St-Arnaud hd. elect. Daniel Chretien key grip Michel Périard set des. Blanche Boileau props master Pierre Fournier boom Claude Lahaye asst. props Louis Gascon asst. cost. Josée Boisvert makeup Micheline Foisy-Trépanier 2nd cam. asst. Martin Dubois 1st. elect. Manal Hassib grip Jean-Maurice de Ernsted p. a. Maité Sarthou, Pierre Jasmin sd. ed. Paul Dion mix. Shelley Craig acct. Daniel Demers p. coord. Hélène Ross asst. to p. Lyne Lemieux still photo Pierre Drury pub. Christianne Ducas l. p. Sylvie-Catherine Beaudoin, Robert Toupin, Lorraine Pintal, Jean Beaudry, Colin Caroit, Markita Boies, André Melancon, Pierre Collin, Marie-Lou Dion, Ann Caron, Julie Vincent, Lucie Saint-Cyr, Roger Baulu, Johanne Seymour, Andrée Pelletier, Suzanne Champagne, Louise Rinfret, Josée Cusson, Louise Bombardier, Clément Schreiber, Jean-Gabriel Lambert. A co-production of Les Producteurs TV-Films Associés and the NFB, with the financial participation of SOGIC, Téléfilm and Radio Québec.

TOP SECRET

TO: Department of Puerile Entertainment Surveillance (DOPES)  
FROM: Agent 008½

Jon Hess'

Watchers

**D**isguised as a FREAK (Film Reviewer, Exploitation / Actioners / Kitsch) I observed another Canadian attempt to penetrate U.S. drive-in circuits and video-networks camouflaged as a *bona fide* American operation.

If this observer is permitted an opinion, these Canadian undercover activities represent a clear



Corey Haim and a nice doggie foil the nasties in *Watchers*

and present danger to our balance of terror and threaten the cornerstone of U.S. policy in this hemisphere, namely the Marilyn Monroe Doctrine, according to which no other power is allowed to make American movies.

The danger comes from two sources: (a) the similarity of terrain permits the Canadians to substitute fraudulently their Northwest for ours, and (b) their actors, writers and directors have managed, through years of painstaking imitation, to pass for one of U.S.

*Watchers*, were it not a dangerous and near-successful attempt to penetrate our defences, could be dismissed as *Lassie Meets Godzilla*, *Three Days of the Oxcom* or *Grizzly and the War Games*. The hybrid titles are a natural outgrowth of the CIA-operation-gone-wrong-and-danger-stalks-the-land-as-a-consequence plot, another cloning achievement of that all-powerful multinational conglomerate, Industrial Plot and Action.

Specifically, *Watchers* deals with the escape of the "ultimate predator", a.k.a. Outside Experimental Combat Mammal or Oxcom. Oxcom Must Be Stopped, not only because it keeps on killing everything in its way with predictable regularity and not only because it is telepathically linked to a nice doggie, but because the CIA team that created and trained it has a Hidden Agenda, wouldn't you know.

Oxcom's M.O. seems to be mostly ripping out esophagi and defenestration, and he (she? it?) leaves a bloody trail until he Meets Its Match in

the person of a clean-cut teenager and his rather cute Mom.

As indicated at the beginning of this report, *Watchers* is a force to be reckoned with. It is professionally scripted with a 0.9/beat cliché-ratio, with fully computerized scenario and diesel-powered sequencing, featuring a Syd Field-tested structure with turgid-driven dramatics and characterization.

For the most part, the direction and cinematography demonstrate schlock-proof trade-craft. Actors, with the exception of Oxcom, turn in a performance perfectly matching the exigencies of the project. Clean Teen, Spunky Mom and Sneering Villain being possibly more memorable than the script called for, but this could have been caused by an error in wiring. Oxcom's efficacy is difficult to determine; possibly for budgetary reasons, he, she, it, is never fully visible. Not even its status as a mammal can be certified on the basis of visual sighting.

However, we must bite the bullet: the Canadians nearly got away with successfully launching across the border a near-perfect pod, a deceptively well-made and commercially feasible replicate of a U.S. B-'89 Bomb.

Almost, but not quite. Fortunately, *Watchers* has been intercepted by the undersigned before it could become part of American culture. This, thanks to the vigilance of this operative and some minor, but telltale flaws in the film's concept and execution.



Sylvie Catherine Beaudoin as Esther in *Onzième Spéciale*