Degrassi
Junior High
(Term III)

"Wake up in the morning, feeling kind of lousy; hey, I've got to go to school..." This chirpy, almost inane melody, juxtaposed with a barrage of images of faces in close-up, of papers falling out of lockers, of kids running out of classroom doors, and moving through the crowds of the hallway, "...they, I've got a new friend" - from the entrance, the channel, into the world of Degrassi Junior High.

Created by Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood and now in its third season, Degrassi is the constantly evolving story of a group of kids in a junior high school, of their quests, their loves, and their fears. A strange mixture of soap opera, situation comedy, and drama, the stories are woven together to form a mosaic.

Stories overlap thematically: the nature of love and infatuation, the danger of relying on the horoscope to define the future, and the manipulation of events. In the episode, "Star Crossed", Erica's schemes to manufacture a date, and then substitutes her for her identical twin. Convinced that because it is in her horoscope she will find love, she sets out to find a boyfriend, only to find out she has been used by the boy she wanted. At the end, defeated by her own scheming, Erica sits forlornly on the steps of the school entrance of the school where Lucy's ex-boyfriend comes to persuade the depressed Wheels to join their Junior High class.

The characters themselves have become part of a changing landscape: characters such as Joey, the optimistic and sometimes comically dim-witted Canadian actor, and Spike, the talented girl with a Mohawk haircut who is now a young woman. They are not the stagnant entities of most TV series, but evolving and changing characters.

And despite touching on highly sensitive issues, the solutions are not dealt out in neat packages. Snake must come to an understanding that his athletic older brother who he worships is gay, even though he has ridiculed gays in the past. And although he comes to accept his brother, his parents cannot, and his brother must leave, rejected by his family. When Monica, the anorexic, is offered help she cannot accept it, and yells in the final scene, "I don't need help!" The show rejects easy endings, recognising that some problems run deeper than polite discussion.

Degrassi Junior High is a minor miracle, evolving from an one-shot project done on a shoestring budget into an international success. What emerges through it all is Schuyler and Hood's sensitivity and warmth for their characters, and a sophistication of concerns not often seen on television.

Duncan Waugh (Arthur) and Sluck Saysanasay (Yick) with Phil the dog

Jean Chabot's
La Nuit
avec Hortense

There is something seductive about the title, something that invites us into an intriguing world: night, with all its charm and mystery, all the ghosts and shadows it evokes. The beginning of the film draws us into this world with a long subjective travelling shot. We are driving, slowly, on a dark, deserted country road. The headlights flash on the trees, bearing a passage through the surrounding darkness. Voices hum a peculiar and melancholy chant. The mood is rather disturbing yet fascinating.

After such a promising start, your expectations are high, but unfortunately, they are never fulfilled. There were many problems on the set of La Nuit... even reports of a violent dispute between the director, Jean Chabot and his star, Carole Laure, and the final result certainly shows evidence of the strain. There are many plausable elements in the film but, somehow, they don't hold together to form anything coherent.

From the start, the subject - desire and passion - is not one of the easiest to treat in film because of the intense emotions it inevitably conveys, emotions which can quickly fall into facile melodrama. Unfortunately, it's hard to believe in the passion of André and Hortense's journey because their experience doesn't seem to spring from the characters themselves but rather from some kind of exaggerated plot twist.

André (Lothaire Bluteau) meets Hortense (Carole Laure) just after deciding to leave Montreal in the wake of a psychological breakdown. Instead of following up on his original plan - heading for Chicago - he spends his night with Hortense.

Chabot uses a narrative form that is closer to poetry than to traditional linear story lines. The film is built around a series of disconnected events, linked by symbolic elements that emerge from a recurring dream which is haunting André. The couple will have to confront some of these elements - most representing some aspect of nature - in order to progress along the route of their journey and strengthen their relationship.

One of these elements is water. André and Hortense have to be purified in the turbulent rapids of the river in order to make a fresh start together. Later, a storm will break as if to amplify the couple's turning desire in the first love scene. Chabot is certainly not the first to use forces of nature as symbols for hidden dimensions of passion, and as instruments that bring some characters to face their emotions, but here something is not working.

The main problem with the film is that we
never feel any kind of interaction between the characters and the symbolic nature surrounding them (which is supposed to provoke their union). We perceive André and Hortense as two separate, though parallel entities, that never really mingle with each other. That’s too bad because the technical quality of La Nuit avec Hortense is quite remarkable. Chabot juxtaposes color and black and white film to evoke the two different worlds of reality and of André’s dream, a simple idea — though perhaps over-used — but very effective here. Sometimes, the black and white tones reflect in the colors and vice versa, especially in the water scenes which wash almost everything out to reveal only neutral colors and harsh shadows of night, almost as if the real and unreal were coming together in moments of pure magic.

The beauty that Chabot has given the images, through their grainy texture and appealing contrasts, is certainly one of the interesting aspects of the film. The actors, too, do their share in trying to bring the film to life. Carol Laure finally succeeds in giving a certain weight to a character by playing it simple, thus helping to keep Hortense’s mystery intact. Lothaire Bluteau, unfortunately, didn’t have enough material to sink his teeth into.

But La Nuit avec Hortense has problems in the orchestration of all these artistic and technical elements. They are not organized in any way that brings us to some deeper understanding. Chabot begins beautifully, and his ending is also worthwhile, but the rest of the film just doesn’t work. The lesson learned from La Nuit avec Hortense is that it is decidedly not easy to make a good lyrical film.

Claire Valade  

FRANÇOIS BOUVIER’S AND JEAN BEAUDRY’S 

LES MATINS INFIDÈLES 

(Unfaithful Mornings)

Marc and Jean-Pierre, friends and fellow baby-boomers, are unusually committed to the project they ostensibly share. Marc (Jean Beaudry) is writing a novel based on the photographs taken by Jean-Pierre (Denis Bouchard) of an undistinguished street corner in Montreal. The deal is that Jean-Pierre will provide a daily shot of the corner (taken at exactly 8 a.m.) for a period of one year. However, Jean-Pierre soon begins to cheet, winding back the clock in the window of the café, where it appears in each photograph, whenever he misses the appointed time. Worse yet, he skips weeks at a time and compensates with a series of phony shots which he submits to Marc. To complete the assault on the assumed purity of artistic inspiration, he also takes liberties with the composition of the supposedly candid photo by imposing his own nice-on-scene.

Jean-Pierre’s unfaithfulness to the creative pact is interwoven with his unfaithfulness to his loved ones. He ditches his lover/photographic assistant, Julie (played by Violaire Forest), after meeting another woman while photographing the street corner. She, too, is scoffed off by Jean-Pierre when she becomes pregnant; he even sheds his car, abandoning it on the street when it has outlived its usefulness. And when the landlord threatens Jean-Pierre for lack of payment, he adopts the time-honoured, Montreal tradition of the midnight move, clearing his things out of the apartment in the dead of night and imposing himself on Marc.

As played by the manic Bouchard (Lance of Compte, Jésus Montréal), Jean-Pierre is a sad — a charming sad, but a sad nonetheless. He blows the rent money up his nose and generally behaves without a whiff of sensitivity to those around him. Jean-Pierre’s one redeeming feature is his obvious devotion to his five-year-old boy. (He lets the kid paint on the walls while he smokes coke and watches hockey, the very model of the enlightened, Yuppie parent.)

Betrayal is omnipresent. Marc is already feeling betrayed by his partner, Pauline. (Louis Richer) — she leaves him in spite of their ‘modern’, open arrangement — realizes that Jean-Pierre is being faithful to the street-corner project. The purity of the original idea has been sullied by Jean-Pierre’s lack of commitment and Marc’s work on his novel suffers. He is further betrayed by his colleagues at the university who give up their principled strike, leaving him alone on the picket line. He resists in protest.

The only successful relationship portrayed in the film is one between father and son. But then, the indolgence so central to the relationship points mainly to the self-absorption, the boomer generation brings to everything of aspect. This is, after all, the first generation to use the word “parent” as a verb, and the explosion of books and films on the subject would have us believe the concept has just been invented.

Co-directors and directors Bouvier and Beaudry (their first feature was the acclaimed Jacques de Noverre), in what is perhaps an ironic commentary on their own partnership, paint a portrait of two individuals whose collaboration is doomed by their personalities. Jean-Pierre is a “madly irresponsible,” as Marc tells him, while Marc, the politically correct, guilt-ridden college prof — in a fit of anger after Pauline leaves him, he kicks over a garbage can, only to come back and clean up the spilled contents — is a “hostie hypocrite” in Jean-Pierre’s view.

Ultimately, it’s next to impossible to have any sympathy for Jean-Pierre, and the contrived climax of the film (in which he shreds his life the way he’s abandoned the constituent elements of it) is thus robbed of its potential impact. It’s also hard to understand what drives the friendship between the two men, or between any two characters in the film for that matter (with the exception of the blood bond between father and son).

Les Matins Infidèles banks back to an earlier time in Jean-Pierre’s life when everybody was depressed, alienated, and unable to get any satisfaction. Back then it was due to not having reached maturity (read independence). Now, it’s supposedly a result of the comfort and indifference of the post-referendum era.

(Which, I suppose, amounts to the same thing.)

Technically, Les Matins Infidèles is assured. The acting is uniformly good; the photography and editing are of very high standard, and Michel Rivard’s soundtrack adds greatly to every scene. The film contains some memorable images, but as a psychological expose, it falls somewhat short of its goal. After raising a number of important questions about commitment (and its flipside, betrayal), and offering up some occasionally humorous insights into the creative process, Les Matins Infidèles settles down to the level of mere naval-gazing.

Frank Rackow  

LES MATINS INFIDÈLES (UNFAITHFUL MORNINGS)  