The Toronto Dance Theatre in Ravel

More than a decade after Bob Dekker’s passion for “The Bolero” hit the big screen, and at a time when Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra have made numerous award-winning recordings of Ravel’s music, it’s difficult to imagine that his music was ever considered controversial. But the French were difficult to imagine that his music was ever serious music and when he first staged Larry Weinstein’s Ravel accompanying images, not filmic. Larry of the most brilliant musicians in the world, Weinstein avoids the most obvious pitfalls by music is the most abstract art form and, without poses a problem for its makers simply because when the director’s attempt to catch everyone in the orchestra, for instance, seems clumsy and distracting. An example of this is de Larrocha’s performance of the Prelude, from Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. Charles Dutoit’s torso floats somewhere over her left shoulder, and Weinstein tries too hard to match the staccato of the piece with choppy editing from one section of the orchestra to another.

The film’s most exciting moments are those which include dance or opera: the softly-lit, athletic-couple dancing to Dépéchés et Oklès, and La Valse, superbly choreographed by and featuring nine pairs of elegantly-dressed dancers. But my favorite scenes were those from the opera, L’Enfant et les sorcières, where a grandfather clock, a teapot, and a teacup come to life to the exquisite horror of a little boy who’s been rude to his mother. Staged specifically for the film, these visual passages provided a well-needed break from the purely “musical” focus of much of Ravel.

For the film cannot, and does not, pretend to be so much a film about Ravel as a film about his music. As one friend gives the interviewer a tour of the composer’s house, she says that he was not one to show his feelings. And another friend muses that “it’s quite possible that artists or musicians have the ability to express themselves in art because they can’t express themselves in life.”

What we do discover about Ravel is this: he never married, and friends claim that he was not known to have had any romantic attachments to women or men. He loved children and liked to go out with friends to watch them dance. He liked to take long night-walks, and to please his mother by buying her clothes and muffets when he could afford them. During WWII, he was rejected by the army and made his contribution by driving cars and trucks.

Ravel’s work only began to earn him international acclaim in 1927, when he took a whirlwind tour of North America. The United States, the land where jazz was born, welcomed him with open arms. This is particularly poignant given that only five years later, after a car accident, Ravel was to lose his ability to compose and spent the next five years waiting for “music or death,” as one friend puts it. Weinstein chooses to end the film with the haunting Adagio Assai, again from Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, as if in respect for those sad, useless years before his death.

Larry Weinstein won a well-deserved Oeuvres et Lois Prize for Television for this documentary. As enigmatic as Ravel’s private life was, Weinstein has paid a great tribute to this innovative, provocative composer with an elegant, beautiful film.

Naomi Cottman

Alain Chartrand’s Des Amis Pour La Vie

Des Amis Pour La Vie’s thought-provoking script, was directed, acted and photographed by a group of skilled and arthritic individuals, but the film is heavily clothed in the lead trousers of commercial television.

Written by Diane Calhier and directed by Alain Chartrand, Des Amis... is a story of six elderly friends who decide to live in a communal fashion so as to ward off the loneliness, bitterness, and indignity that old-age threatens. They quickly become imbued in loving nostalgia for their friendships, and just as quickly, they become the target of an anonymous letter writer who aims to break their pleasant arrangement apart.

After they receive a few letters, unrest sets in as the six friends search in their minds for identity of the person who is sending these enigmatic messages. As the story unfolds, we learn that Françoise, the woman who owns the house where they all live, is, in fact, not a widow. Her husband, Charles, suffered a stroke and being partially paralyzed and unable to talk, he has been living for the past several years in a hospital, wanting his friends to believe he was dead for fear of their pity. Charles is now confronted with the fear of losing his wife to the new living arrangement with those whom he feared, and thus the letters.

All this intrigue remains a secret that Françoise tries to keep, but Alex, one of the six, reveals the secret by following her to the hospital one day. Alex confronts Françoise, and, through their discussion, that which was the impetus for the communal arrangement shines through as the solution to this painful situation. Support and love, which Charles needs and yet has rejected, are the answers. The end of the film has Alex bringing Charles home to live amidst communal affection.

Des Amis... is an admirable film because, in a dramatic context, it discusses very real problems that are faced by our elderly. This subject, in the television and film world of smooth, romanticized, and uneducated heroes and heroines, is refreshing. What the film proposes in terms of lifestyle - communal old-age rather than institutional old-age - is interesting, though it is a product of the author’s imagination. Calhier introduced the film at the Rendez-vous du Cinéma Québécois by admitting that she knew of no such living arrangement amongst the aged, but believed it to be a plausible lifestyle, especially for those personally oriented former long-hairs from the ’60s. By offering this suggestion, the filmmakers...
Des Amis' four friends for life.

Anne-Claire Poirier's Salut Victor

One of a series of 10 television films produced for Radio-Quebec, Salut Victor is an impressive work. Based on Montreal writer Edward O. Philip's Matheus et Camille, the film is an effective document attesting to the collective fears and individual concerns of many of our aged. But more than that, it is a surprisingly moving account of the friendship that two male residents form in a private retirement home. Both of these men are gay, underlining the absence of screen representation of the aged, both gay and straight.

The film chronicles the friendship that evolves between two men living in a home for the aged, presumably in Montreal. Philip, recently arrived, and demonstrating in no uncertain terms that his nature is an inherently reserved one, is introduced to the more outgoing Victor, the residence's self-styled poet and film character of the film. Victor, played by popular Quebecois actor Jacques Godin, embodies all of those qualities which the repressed Philip (Jean-Louis Roux) outwardly appears to be opposed to—brash, candid about his sexuality, and more than just a little revealing in his discussions of other residents. In short, the men are classic examples of the personality contrast necessary to the unfolding of a narrative which is concerned with the progressive moral enlightenment of its central character. Predictably, it is Victor who convinces Philip that life is too short to allow oneself to be dictated to by constraining, oppressive notions of pride and, following their initial, strained introduction, the two men soon become dependent on each other's company.

Filmmaker Anne-Claire Poirier, the "consistency" of Quebecois cinema, has solidified her position as one of the Quebec industry's chief talents in this film, her first, since the disappointing La Quantaine six years ago.

With a mature, sensitive hand not afforded many directors, Poirier has created a significant work of popular Canadian cinema. Responsible for selecting the story from which the film has been adapted, Poirier has been keenly involved with the production since its inception. This is clearly evident in her polished use of form. Several of the many outstanding formal elements to be found in this film include a stylized editing which serves the film's score well by allowing such a fade to "wash" into one another, and the consistently ochre-bronze toned sets that dominate the film's images further complementing its temporal "meshing." But it is perhaps Poirier's direction of the actors, and the accommodating manner in which they are photographed, that remains the film's essential strength.

Realizing the importance of performance to a project such as Salut Victor, Poirier has encouraged nothing less than noble performances from Godin and Roux, as well as supporting actors Marcelle Dutil and Julie Vincent. She is acutely aware, no doubt, that the degree of success or failure of fiction film that examines previously unexplored terrain is determined by the actors' performances. The formidable talents of Godin and Roux, especially in their scenes of interaction, and Poirier's insistence that each be photographed from the other's perspective throughout the film are Salut Victor's primary means of discourse and the most progressive of all the production's ways of voicing its concerns for social reform. When Victor is interviewed for touching one of the male employees of the residence, Godin's delivery as Victor is coolly restrained. But it is also highly communicative, suggesting that his touching of the worker was instinctual and that he could not ever be made to feel ashamed for something that gave him "le sens de la réalité."

While it is true that the film does not question issues of race, class, etc., issues that are pertinent to any discussion of the gay aged, it is difficult to be critical of the film. Poirier and the excellent cast she has assembled have confronted without apology what it means to be gay and aged in a society that does not especially value either group. This counts for a great deal. Unlike many films of the "social realist" tradition that tend to be overly sentimental at moments when points are being made, Salut Victor transcends this tendency simply by playing its roles so as to give life and detail to characters with whom we feel comfortable throughout. We are further insulted by "what's-going-to-happen-next" shots which lead us into a commercial break. (For example, the camera follows René and Alex through a door and then tilts down to the mainist. Is someone going to receive a letter?) This kind of format is acceptable for Bugs Bunny, but not for human interest drama. The story continues, we want more depth, and while the filmmakers are striving to give it to us through their craft, we are struck in the head with another loud-on-a-commercial-shot. The film starts to wear the burden of the medium. One gets the feeling that the filmmakers have tried very hard to deal with these limitations, but that little box is not malleable. The lasting impression of Des Amis pour le Vie is that it is a good film for television, but that television is not good for it.

Kirk Finken

Salut Victor

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