

## Larry Weinstein's Ravel

**M**ore than a decade after Bo Derek'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 *oeuvre*, it's difficult to imagine that his music was ever considered controversial. But the French were unprepared for his use of the jazz idiom in serious music and when he first staged *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, which included a fox-trot between a teapot and a teacup, Parisian audiences booed.

A portrait of any man through his music is a tall order, especially when the man is as enigmatic as Ravel appears to have been. The film is a collage of interviews with friends, excerpts from letters, and performances by some of the most brilliant musicians in the world, including Alicia de Larrocha, Collard Dumay, the Odeon Trio, and Victoria de Los Angeles, not to mention the Orford Quartet and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

Any documentary that revolves around music poses a problem for its makers simply because music is the most abstract art form and, without accompanying images, not filmic. Larry Weinstein avoids the most obvious pitfalls by frequently training the camera on the musicians at work. It is interesting to watch their concentration and sense of humour, their involvement with the music, but there are times

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 *Presto*, 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 *Daphnis and Chloe*, and *La Valse*, superbly choreographed by and featuring nine pairs of elegantly-clad dancers. But my favorite scenes were those from the opera, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, where a grandfather clock, a teacup, and a teapot 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 trinkets when he could afford them. During WWI, 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 Alberta-Quebec Prize for Television for this documentary. As enigmatic as Ravel's private self was, Weinstein has paid a great tribute to this innovative, provocative composer with an elegant, beautiful film.

Naomi Guttman •

**RAVEL** p. Niv Fichman, Larry Weinstein, Julia Sereny d. Larry Weinstein et. Ewa Jaworska, Bruce Lange, Anthony Sloan d.o.p. Leonard Gilday, c.s.c. sl. John Martin int. Charles Dutoit, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Alicia de Larrocha, Victoria de los Angeles, Jean-Philippe Collard, Augustin Dumay, Toronto Dance Theatre, Odette Beaupre. A Rhombus Media production in association with the CBC, the SRC, Bravo Cable Network, Danmarks Radio, Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, Norsk Rikskringkasting, Oy Yleisradio, Sveriges Television, Television Espanola and TVOntario with the participation of Telefilm Canada and the OFCD. 105 minutes, col. 16mm.

## Alain Chartrand's Des Amis Pour La Vie

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

Written by Diane Cailhier 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 widow 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, unblemished, 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. Cailhier 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 communally oriented former long-hairs from the '60s. By offering this suggestion, the filmmakers

The Toronto Dance Theatre in *Ravel*.







PHOTO: BERTRAND CARRIÈRE

Des Amis' four friends for life.

bring us a forum for the viewers to discuss lifestyles of the elderly.

The actors bring a very charming and real aspect to the drama, and Michel Brault's photography enhances the changes in mood throughout the film. These elements, combined with the music of Django Reinhardt and Felix Leclerc, sweep us into a rich autumnal story. Yet, while the film maintains this sensuality and has intelligent intentions, it is plagued by a struggle that weighs its artistic merits down.

Lead trousers. The commercial television framework makes structural demands on drama that can kill intelligent and challenging works. Typically, writer guidelines for television stipulate stock plot-structures, often applying similar rules to tragedy, comedy, action/suspense, or documentary. *Des Amis*... smacks of these limitations. The plot is introduced rapidly in the first couple of minutes and character development is sacrificed completely. What passes as character development is stagey, and is especially obvious in the character of René, with whom we feel uncomfortable 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 mailbox. 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 lead-into-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 la Vie* is that it is a good film for television, but that television is not good for it.

Kirk Finken •

**DES AMIS POUR LA VIE** p. Claude Bonin, (NFB) Monique Létourneau d. Alain Chartrand sc. Diane Cailhier d.o.p. Michel Brault art d. Louise Jobin ed. Yves Chaput orig. mus. Jean Corrivéau p. mgr. Muriel Lizé p. coord. Suzanne Comtois loc. sd. Dominique Chartrand 1st. a.d.

GINETTE GUILLARD cont. MARIE BEAULIEU cam. asst. René Daigle unit. mgr. Bernard Vincent gaffer Yves Charbonneau key grip Michel Périard 2nd. a.d. Nicole Bernier add. cam. Sylvain Brault, René Daigle set dec. Pierre Perreault props Charles Bernier art dept. d. Blanche-Danielle Boileau boom Claude Lahaye cost. Luc Bédard dresser Luc Le Flaguais elec. Marcel Breton grips Jean-Maurice De Ermed, Guy Ferland carp. François Gascon make-up Kathryn Casault hair André Morneau asst. ed. Aube Foglia admin. Ian Boyd p. acct. Hélène Aubin p. a. Catherine Faucher, Sylvain Arseneault, Anne-Marie Gill sec. Nicole Fauteux loc. scouts Guy Bouchard, Mona Medawar cast. Danyèle Patenaude stills Bertrand Carrière. pub. Christianne Ducasse l.p. Françoise Faucher, Paul Hebert, Roger Joubert, Jean Mathieu, Anais Goulet Robitaille, Gisele Schmidt, Olivette Thibault, Jean-Louis Roux, Johanne Fontaine, Carmen Ferland, Véronique Lemay, Kiki Nesbit. A coproduction of Films Vision 4, Producteurs TV-Films Associés, and the NFB. With financial participation from Telefilm, SOGIC and Radio Québec.

### Anne-Claire Poirier's **Salut Victor**

One of a series of 10 television films produced for Radio-Québec, *Salut Victor* is an impressive work. Based on Montreal writer Edward O. Phillip's *Mathew and Chauncy*, 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. That both of these men are gay underlines the absence of screen representations 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 irreverent Victor, the residence's self-confessed *tapette* and title character of the film. Victor, played by popular Québécois actor Jacques Godin, embodies all of those qualities which the repressed Philip (Jean-Louis Roux) outwardly appears to be

opposed to - he's 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 cinema 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 confining, 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 "conscience" of Québécois cinema, has solidified her position as one of the Quebec industry's chief talents in this film, her first, since the disappointing *La Quarantaine* 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 short 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 scenes well by allowing each to fade and "wash" into one another, and the consistently ochre-bronze toned tints 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 Murielle 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 of the production's ways of voicing its concerns for social reform. When Victor is reprimanded 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 by the rules that govern this genre. That is, it remains faithful to its subject, and does not at any point trivialize or demean the lives of its characters.

Jonathan St. George •

**SALUT VICTOR** p. Monique Létourneau d. /sc. coll. Anne-Claire Poirier sc. Marthe Blackburn adapted from Matthew and Chauncy by Edward O. Phillips d.o.p. Michel Brault art d. Denis Boucher ed. Suzanne Allard mus. Joel Vincent Bienvenue p. mgr. Michelle Marcl tech. coord. Edouard Davidovici loc. sd. Richard Besse 1st. a.d. Mireille Goulet cont. Monique Champagne cost. Huguette Gagné make-up Brigitte McCaughy gaffer Pierre Provost key grip Jean-Louis Daoust cam. asst. Nathalie Moliavko-Visotzky unit mgr. André Dupuis set dec. André Chamberland props ext. Mario Hervieux boom Philippe Scully elec. Marc Charlebois grip Robert Auclair sd. ed. (diag.) Diane Boucher sd. ed. (fx) Marie-Claude Gagné sd. fx. Jérôme Décarie fx. rec. Christian Fortin mus. Hans Peter Stobl, Adrian Croll admin. Monique Lavoie p. scv. Johanne Messier p. a. Johanne Boudreau, Guy Ferland stills Bertrand Carrière pub. Christianne Ducasse/Novak and Associates l.p. Jean-Louis Roux, Jacques Godin, Julie Vincent, Murielle Dutil, Jean Besré, Huguette Oligny, Juliette Huot, Terrence La Brosse, Marthe Nadeau, Cédric Noël, Manon Vallee, J.A. Robert Paquette, Robert Favreau. A co-production of the NFB, les Producteurs TV-Films Associés., with financial participation from Telefilm, SOGIC and Radio Québec.

Jean-Louis Roux (Philippe) and Jacques Godin (Victor) toast their friendship.

