Robert Favreau's
Portion d'éternité

I went to see Portion d'éternité at its premiere at the 13th Montreal World Film Festival, and just managed to slip into the last seat. Even Lise Bacon, Québec’s Minister of Culture, was there to see the only Canadian feature selected for the official competition. I expected to be disappointed. A movie about artificial insemination did not seem exciting. But, on the whole, I was pleasantly surprised. After all those “Old World” films, I felt like I was back in the 20th century. The audience must have liked the film as well, for it won the Stellas Artois Award as most popular Canadian film.

Still, I don’t know if the audience and I liked the same things about this film. After all, Danielle Proulx won the Best Actress Award, while I preferred Patricia Noilin who played Hélène. But then, I preferred that part of the movie to the passages in which Danielle Proulx plays Marie. For in fact, Portion d'éternité is an almost two films – a hybrid genre comprised of a social melodrama and a science-fiction horror movie with a documentary base. I’ve always preferred horror movies to social dramas, so I admit that I was biased. The sight of ordinary people wrestling with their not so ordinary problems makes me want to get up and go for a walk. This section of the film has all the earmarks of a made-for-TV movie; it’s shot in a television style, all seamless realism and lots of close-ups.

Marie and her husband, Pierre (Marc Messier), want a child (at least, Marie wants one desperately, Pierre seems cooler to the idea), but they can’t conceive. Off they go to a fertility clinic for numerous tests to see which one is infertile. There is much emotional upset about this, particularly on Pierre’s side when he finds out that he is going to have to accept his wife’s infertile. There is much emotional upset about this, and so we are not sure whether Antoine is a villain or not. This remains a mystery until the end of the film and helps to make this part quite interesting.

The clinic itself is also quite fascinating, with its cold, technological environment and its dabbling in the mysteries of the universe. For, after all, an infertility clinic deals with the mysterious process of creation. This fact is brought home to the audience with beautiful, huge close-ups of embryos and foetuses seen through a microscope. It did remind me a bit of Godard’s Vivre SA vie here, but only a little bit. Actually, this part is more like Dr. Frankenstein minus his monster. (Unless the monster is what gets created inside Marie’s womb.) There is a terrific scene in which the happy couple are looking at a video-screen of her finally fertile womb and they discover that they have twins. “Oh, great, twins!” says Marie, “they’ll never be lonely.” Then the doctor moves the scanner and sees three, oh no, four babies. The worst is that two will have to be eliminated, and that Marie cannot face.

But Antoine is a truly dedicated researcher and he has even worse monsters up his sleeve. Out of one embryo, he can make 64 identical twins. This means that a cancer patient could have himself reproduced with his own organs – that one could live almost forever. He promises that they will be able to create human beings outside of a woman’s body and program them according to our desires. Dr. Frankenstein played God but created a monster. Our own fear of the ever increasing power of science, both as a creative and a destructive force, is bound up with the fear of the punishment that humans may suffer for this kind of hubris. This hubris of the rational mind trying to manipulate the forces of life is also the subject of films by another Canadian – David Cronenberg. But, whereas Cronenberg’s scientists are truly villainous, there is a priest-like aspect to Antoine that evokes the idea of science as religion.

However, the true parallel drawn in this film is between the scientist and the artist. Pierre is a modern-day artist; he works with photography and collage and creates ads. His father is an ordinary man – a sculptor – who works in stone, carving gravestones. However, once upon a time, he sculpted wood (living matter), and studied with Boudier and Ruppeek. Much to his dismay, he had to give up this to support his wife and family.

And so, as in most Quebecois films, the snake in the garden ends up being money, and the real villain is the businesswoman who has become Antoine’s boss and who works for Technogene. (I wonder if a film made in Toronto would posit money as the ultimate evil?) Technogene ends up selling human embryos on the New York stock market and no one bats an eyelash. But by this time Antoine has quit the company. It is this ethical side to his character that makes Antoine likeable. It helps too that Hélène, the most intelligent and sympathetic female character in the film (played by Patricia Noilin with understated grace) falls in love with Antoine while investigating the case for the government.

Nor is Antoine entirely blameless either. He acknowledges using a fertility drug that could give a woman cervical cancer. But, as an artist / magician playing with the forces of life, he is quite fascinating. And the final image of him walking like a trapeze artist on a narrow steel bar that overhangs a raging torrent, is a fitting end to the movie.

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Film Reviews

PORTION D'ÉTERNITÉ

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Patricia Noilin and Paul Saviole in Portion d'éternité