

françois barbeau:

anecdotes and insights

by Joan Irving

La Maison de la Sauvegarde, a Montreal gallery, honored François Barbeau during the month of April with an exposition of his work. Art director of films and theatre, costume designer and director of the design section at the National Theatre School, Barbeau's name is associated with some of the most beautiful Canadian films. Joan Irving tells us more.

Barbeau's nightshirts and aprons, hanging up to dry in *Lies My Father Told Me*



Making a film is essentially a team effort involving creative personnel at all levels. However, when we refer to or think back on a film, it is usually associated with one person – the director.

That may be a simplification – but who can read all the credits as they slip by on the screen, much less remember the names of the electrician, make-up supervisor, art director and others?

On set no one questions the importance of these small, big jobs.

For instance, the art director, in concert with the costume supervisor, composes the visual elements of the film, the sets and the costumes, before the director arrives on the scene.

Sometimes the art director's work is closely tied in with the visual conception of the director, but just as often the art director is given the script and a budget and sent off to find locations and to come up with a slate of personal ideas for the production. Ideally, the job combines something of both approaches.

Cinema Canada recently visited François Barbeau in his office at the National Theatre School, where he is director of the design section. He has a drafting table there, but the room gives no other indication that Barbeau is one of Canada's leading costume designers and a two-time winner of an Etrog for art direction at the Canadian Film Awards (**Kamouraska** in 1973 and **Eliza's Horoscope** in 1975).

It's much more rewarding to be invited to his Park Avenue studio. Barbeau, with his silk ascots and fine tweed slacks, seems out of place in the tangle of old shoes, broken straw hats and bits of ostrich feather that overflow the corners of the vast apartment. A person who relishes attic trunks would be in seventh heaven here; the rooms are filled to the ceiling with cardboard boxes neatly marked "children's hats 1920s", "women's high-heeled shoes 1940s", "men's underwear (wool)", "lace scraps", to name a few. Where there are no boxes, the walls are covered with racks of dusty coats and dresses. Crushed together, the garments resemble the pickings at the Sally Ann.

This is a valuable costume collection. "Rags," Barbeau calls them. When he or his partners need a costume for a film or play, they tear up one of the "rags" and redesign it to suit the needs of the production and the size of the person destined to wear it.

Barbeau is a self-trained costume designer. He has worked in theatre in Montreal for half of his 40 years. To give you an idea of his enthusiasm for the metier: Barbeau has designed the costumes for Michel Tremblay's *Les belles soeurs* four times and he says he'd not hesitate to tackle it again.

His relationship to film is more difficult to assess.

In 10 years he has worked on seven films, five of them feature length. The first was **Le festin des morts** (1965) a National Film Board production for which he designed the costumes. A five-minute short for Crawley Films, **The Settlers**, followed in 1967. Then came **Eliza's Horoscope**, **Kamouraska** and **Lies My Father Told Me** in quick succession. Barbeau designed the costumes and assumed responsibility for the art direction on these three films.

He hasn't worked on a feature film since 1973 when he created the costumes for Gilles Carles' **Les corps célestes**.

Cinema Canada: *Have you had any training in film?*

Barbeau: No. I started to work in theatre in Montreal when I was 19. I was costume assistant to Paul Buissonneau at



Elizabeth surrounded by her aunts, clothed by Barbeau, in **Kamouraska**

the Atelier de Quatre Sous (original name) and then with Robert Prévost at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. At the beginning I did everything – cutting and sewing – and when a show came up that Buissonneau didn't want to do, he'd let me design it. There was very little money for theatre then, so I'd often end up doing set work also.

Cinema Canada: *But your work in theatre has been largely as a costume designer?*

Barbeau: That's what I enjoy most, though I have also done a lot of work with sets. I teach all aspects of design at the National Theatre School.

Cinema Canada: *How did you get into film work?*

Barbeau: From one thing to another, I was asked to do the costumes for **Le festin des morts** at the National Film Board. I did them, but after the film was over I swore I'd never do another. It was really difficult; we were working in the bush in the hottest month of the summer; the shooting was disorganized... The film is quite beautiful visually but it's very rarely screened – only sometimes during Holy Week.

Then Michel Brault asked me to do costumes on a short film he was shooting for the Canadian Expo pavilion. We were supposed to make costumes in Montreal for people we hadn't even seen. We travelled to Nova Scotia and Sept-Isles with those costumes and it worked out quite well. Brault was a marvellous man to work for; he's so relaxed.

Having worked as an historical researcher, a community organizer, and a full-time staff reporter, Joan Irving is presently a freelance writer living in Montreal.



Two ladies of the night, showing off their finery in *Les corps célestes*



A kitchen scene in *Lies My Father Told Me*, a film made up of rags and old memories

Cinema Canada: How did it happen that you were art director on *Eliza's Horoscope* when your previous film work was limited to costume design?

Barbeau: When I was hired I was supposed to be the assistant to Piero Gherardi and that's why I accepted to do the film. He's dead now, unfortunately; he was the art director on many of Fellini's films (*La Dolce Vita*, *8½*, *Juliet of the Spirits*).

Cinema Canada: And he was coming to Canada to work?

Barbeau: Do you know Gordon Sheppard? Well, when he decided to do the film he wanted everything to be the best. He went to Rome a couple of times to talk with Gherardi, who was interested but whose health was failing. The negotiations dragged on for months. Finally Gherardi didn't come and he was replaced by a Russian (Eugene Laurier) who had worked with Renoir. He was a great technician. I think he was doing monster films in Hollywood when Sheppard contracted him for six weeks on *Eliza's Horoscope*. When he left, one week into shooting, Sheppard asked me to take over the art direction. I knew the script pretty well because I'd done all the costumes.

Cinema Canada: Usually the art director's work is largely completed when a film starts shooting...

Barbeau: I found it depends with whom you're working. Sheppard would come in every morning and tell us what he had planned for the day. We couldn't prepare ahead because everything was improvised. Sometimes it nearly drove us mad... you know, when you have 55 extras dressed you'd like the director to use them.

Sheppard did his film like a poet would write a book or a musician would compose. It was very stimulating for the art direction and costume crew because we had the impression we were creating something. Not just like a store, where the director wants this or that.

Cinema Canada: Have you seen the finished film?

Barbeau: I saw six or seven versions of it but I haven't seen the final one. And I haven't heard from Sheppard since last year when he phoned to say I won an Etrog for art direction on the film.

Cinema Canada: What were you trying to achieve in *Eliza's Horoscope*?

Barbeau: The thing that interests me in film is to create atmosphere and feeling. A room, a chair or a bucket could mean more than 300 words, but it has to be the right one.

The art director is trying to create the surroundings which bring out the feeling of the action.

I'm not an expert but I think some of the scenes in *Eliza's Horoscope* are right. The same thing for *Kamouraska*.

Cinema Canada: Where did your ideas for *Kamouraska* come from?

Barbeau: I'd read the book several years before I was asked to do the film. The book is so beautiful that it was easy to see things in it and those images came back to me when I started working on the film. We went back to the villages around Kamouraska and when we saw the houses there, we knew we'd found what we needed. I had quite a few people working with me then and we rebuilt the interior of those houses.

When I think about *Kamouraska* now the only things left are the images, not the dramatic movement or the action; of course, I worked on the film – so my perspective is perhaps different. To me the film is like a picture book.

I tried to do the costumes and everything quite simply. Very few things, no detail, flat. Like a Lemieux painting with all that snow.

Cinema Canada: Did Jutra work closely with you on it?

Barbeau: Well, he wrote the script so he knew what he wanted. But once he hired me he let me work pretty much on my own, with corrections from him. There was a question of a white fur coat in one scene. I thought the white fur against the snow would be too much, but he wanted to put blood all over it for the contrast. I think he was right there because it did lend a certain madness to the character and that character was one of the best. The lady who played the mother-in-law was incredibly good too.

Cinema Canada: You seem to remember the actors; is it because they wear your costumes?

Barbeau: A film is like a puzzle. Everything fits together. I remember faces because they bring something to the screen.

In *Kamouraska* there's a marvelous scene when the ladies come to take Elizabeth from prison. They're all dressed in black with veils, the carriage is black, the wall is black... When you see them shrouded like that, you don't forget the faces.

Cinema Canada: Your next film was *Lies My Father Told Me*. Did you feel somehow closer to *Kamouraska* than to *Lies* because of your nationality?



A courtyard scene from **Eliza's Horoscope**; Barbeau was responsible for decor and ambience as well as for costumes

Barbeau: When I work on one film I'm closer to it – but after that, it's finished. It's the same with theatre.

I went to **Lies** right after the shooting of **Kamouraska** was finished. Kadar had seen the rushes of the film and asked me to work with him.

To work with Kadar for me was fantastic, I'd seen **Shop on Main Street** and I thought the man had a lot to say. Also because he knew his business, he knew what it would look like on the screen. I think the film is successful. It has lots of atmosphere and a strong human quality.

Cinema Canada: *What do you mean by atmosphere?*

Barbeau: Perhaps it is a vague word, but I like films that remind me of things. **Lies** is composed of all kinds of images I remember from childhood. The way people dressed, the colors of the walls – beige and drab. All the houses looked the same when I was young. I didn't know then that it was because of the Depression.

One set in particular was easy for me to design; that was the backyard of the grandfather's house. Do you remember it? Well, when I was a kid in Trois-Rivières I used to go and play in the backyard of an old man, the town rag collector. His yard was full of boxes and baskets filled with empty bottles. Everything there was exciting to me and I used to run there whenever I got a chance. It was all the more fascinating because my parents didn't want me to play there! I really enjoyed putting it back together for the film.

Generally sets were easy for **Lies**. We were dealing with old houses which we had to rebuild. I was working with Michel Proulx then and he understood right away what I wanted to produce.

Cinema Canada: *There was a studio set in **Lies**, wasn't there?*

Barbeau: Yes, and I didn't like working in the studio. I feel there is something about working on location, in a house where people have lived, which adds a quality to the film. Technically, there are problems with location shooting, the noise and so on, but I like to see outside when I look out a window.

Cinema Canada: *But it should be possible to create the perfect set in the studio...*

Barbeau: After working in theatre for as long as I have, I don't think 'perfect' exists. No perfect sets, no perfect script, no perfect director. I'm used to taking advantage of the disadvantages.

Cinema Canada: *Are you more interested in working in theatre than in film?*

Barbeau: I love to do films but I really don't need to do them, thank God. It's a question of survival; if you waited for a film to come your way, you'd go hungry pretty fast. I can live from the theatre.

There are certain compensations about films that you never get in theatre, though. I love rushes. I love to go and watch them because you know exactly where you stand all the time.

Cinema Canada: *How do you separate theatre and film in your work?*

Barbeau: I'll never use a costume designed for theatre on the screen. In a film the camera can go and get you an eyelash. On stage you create everything for a broad feeling, for a certain silhouette. It could be wrong for the period but it might still be effective. In film, you don't have that leeway.

Cinema Canada: *The costumes in **Lies** have a distinct flavor. I'm thinking of the grandfather's hat...*

Barbeau: That hat disappeared during the shooting.

Cinema Canada: *Did you design the costumes?*

Barbeau: I did a series of costume sketches for **Lies**. We bought a lot of pieces in shops that specialize in secondhand clothes. At that time there weren't many of those boutiques in Montreal and we picked up a lot of things in Toronto.

Also I had other costumes which we used as a base. They were redesigned at the costume studio on Park Avenue.

The costumes were a problem though, mostly because of the tight budget on that film. We had to keep track of expenses almost to the cost of a safety pin. When you dress people from head to toe in clothes worn 55 years ago you don't find them in Eaton's basement.

I think it shows when you give an actor clothes that were worn and lived through. If you try to recreate that feeling it can cost quite a bit... you have to make the suit then wash it or clean it I don't know how many times to get the right feel.

Cinema Canada: *Do you prefer working with costumes?*

Barbeau: Well, I'm not happy about doing the costumes if the set is bad. That's why it's more interesting to create all the visuals for a film.

Cinema Canada: *Except for **Eliza's Horoscope**, the films you have worked on have been period films. Do you think the reason you haven't been involved in film in the last three years is due to the fact that few period films are being made in Canada?*

Barbeau: I think all films should have an art director, somebody to take the situation in hand on the visual side. It adds quality to the film. The director is working with the camera and actors; he doesn't have time to run and find the right drapes or a piece of paper for the desk on set.

Cinema Canada: *And the films...*

Barbeau: I was supposed to work on one this spring, but the project was postponed. Also, I refused offers to do two thrillers. One seemed quite interesting but the producer wanted me to prepare the costumes in three weeks.

That's one thing they don't know here. They hire you for a film and leave you only 10 days to get it ready. I want to do another film, but one that I have time to prepare.

To me film is such an important thing because it *does* stay. It's not a question of something that is going to play for five months at the Parisien, then disappear. It should be something you'll look at in 20 years. That may sound funny, but for that reason I'm very careful about researching films.

One thing I would love to do is a reconstruction of a period - a film on the Depression or the war years. A document of the period...

Cinema Canada: *Like a painting?*

Barbeau: Well, not exactly. Film has to be more than beautiful pictures. It has to touch people, to involve them in what's happening on the screen. □



Zeyda, decked out for rag picking, in **Lies**
Original sketch by François Barbeau



A prostitute in **Kamouraska**
Original sketch by François Barbeau