

# JACQUES GODBOUT

## george csaba koller

*IXE-13* written and directed by Jacques Godbout; musical score by François Dompierre; Director of Photography – Tamás Vámos; Art Director – Claude Lafortune; Editor – Werner Nold; Sound – Claude Hazanavicius and Michel Descombes; Producer – Pierre Gauvreau NFB; with Les Cyniques, Louise Forestier, Luce Guilbeault, Diane Arcand, Carole Laure, Louise Dussault, Jean-Guy Moreau, Suzanna Kay, Marcel Gauthier, and Jean-Jacques Girard. 35mm color feature musical.

"*IXE-13* is the absence of being, the model of the French-Canadian dream of the 50's."

"I am (and I am not alone in this) the bastard son of Papa Hollywood and of Our Holy Mother the Church; to recognize our parents, to acknowledge them, is a critical undertaking."

"To be an intellectual in Quebec in 1972 is to participate in a collective effort in cultural and economic decolonization: where do you see yourself in all this?"

"The most curious thing, in fact, is that the majority of filmmakers do not yet have a political conscience and never did. In spite of the fact that their work exposes them to many social milieu, their perception of society remains at the emotional level. Summarily, their social conscience is rarely transformed into a political conscience. They are – we are – a showbusiness people – documentary and/or fiction."

– Jacques Godbout,  
*Cinéastes du Québec, No. 9.*

Jacques Godbout is a québécois intellectual. He writes novels and poems, and also makes films. His books are on the required reading list in universities and high schools throughout Québec. Being extremely conscious of Québec's social development, he is an outspoken separatist.

"At least five civilizations are already taking shape on Canadian soil," wrote Godbout in the Toronto Star recently. "Of these Québec is the most in evidence, Ontario the most advanced, the Maritimes the most desperate, the Far North of the greatest concern, and the West the newest."

"Ten years from now each one of these civilizations will have acquired an autonomy that will be essential to it in a situation of even greater interdependence than that which exists today. These civilizations are already beyond

the competence of Ottawa, which was created during the agricultural age."

He prefaced this prophesy with an idealistic rhetorical question: "What if Canada were a country in the plural? A country where each ethnic group and every culture could have autonomy to dream its own dreams?"

Godbout strikes one as an intellectual dreamer, seasoned with a touch of cynicism brought about by the clash of the bitter frustrations of experience, and the sweetness and light of a poetic mind. His most recent feature film, *IXE-13*, is a musical comedy possessing similar traits.

The story concerns the "Ace of Canadian Spies," Agent IXE-13, who was the popular hero of a series of cheap paperbacks in the Québec of the fifties. The film adds a very strong anti-clerical sequence (a farcical administering of Holy Communion, no less), which is also characteristic of Godbout. His first novel had to be printed in France (no Québec publisher would touch it), since it featured a Monsignor's visit to a brothel.

"(The anti-church sentiments were) not in *IXE-13*, the book," said Godbout during an interview with Cinema Canada, "that was an adaptation in the cultural field. At the very same time as the Church was holding its grip on Québec, while everyone was sheepishly going to church, the people were making jokes about sacred objects in the church. They made them in private, but they made them. There were a hell of a lot of very sadistic jokes about the Church, while the Church was still there."

"There are less now, because the Church is not there any more. As far as the title sequence with the communions is concerned, every actor was offered a chance to take the holy communion the way he wanted. Every assistant cameraman, everyone who was able to use the camera was offered a chance to shoot one of those and create one of the titles. So it was really a group approach. I thought it expressed a group attitude, and that it should be shot by the group."

"There were a few official reactions from the Church, but given the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Québec today, the archbishop could stand in the nude right in the centre of Montréal and start hollering and nothing would happen. Or you'd probably see it on page 26 of *La Presse*, whereas 5 or 6

## IXE-13

years ago had he sneezed while going to bed, you would have seen that on the front page."

Before joining the National Film Board fourteen years ago, Godbout taught literature. He was booted out of the Québec school system, however, for "not professing Catholicism in any way." He also spent some time in advertising, which afforded him limited training in radio, television, "and a bit of film-making."

Because of his literary background (he was already a published poet in 1958) the NFB asked him to adapt English films into French. In most cases this meant rewriting the commentary in French, and sometimes even re-editing the film.

"I had the impression after a few months," recalls Godbout, "that I was making even better films in French out of the English films, because I had this chance of seeing the film completely finished and was able to either add something to it or subtract something from it and re-do the commentary. I suppose in any job you tend to think what you're doing is better than what the other guy is doing because I had the impression I was correcting everyone."

The first film he directed himself was a half-hour, *cinéma vérité* documentary on the students at the Montreal School of Fine Arts. He's made a dozen films since then, including three features. The first of these, entitled *YUL 871*, was a 'mistake', according to Godbout.

"The tendency at that time (1965) was to 'go international.' So I made sort of a 'wishy-washy' feature film, starring a French actor in a script I wrote myself, which could have been written by Alain Resnais' little boy, probably. Very intellectual, symbolic and all that."

"It was production-wise a mistake, because I think you have to start by writing films for the people around you. Then slowly build the capacity to tell stories, and if those stories are good for the people around you, they'll be good for the world. I started by saying 'I'm aiming for the world,' and fell between two chairs."

"The film wasn't *that bad*. It even got the first prize in the Chicago Film Festival. I'm probably putting it down more than it deserves, but it was still a mistake."

"So it took another two to three years to recover from that mistake. Then

I shot another feature, which was called **Kid Sentiment**, telling the story of four young kids – two boys and two girls, about fifteen years old – who spend an evening together, and then the night. It was more of a comedy. I shot it in 16mm and it was blown up for the theatres and it went pretty damn well. I was surprised because I was thinking of television, but it did well in the theatres.”

Subsequently, Godbout was asked to take over the direction of French production at the Film Board.

“I asked Jean-Pierre Lefebvre and Marcel Gauthier if they would agree to have a go at it with me, and we did it for a year and a half. But after that I got sick and tired of administration and resigned and went back to filmmaking. Which means I wrote the script for **IXE-13** and shot it. It was finished last January in Montréal. Meanwhile I had been, and still am, writing novels.”

Two of his four published novels are available in English: **Hail Galarneau**, and **The Knife on the Table**. In addition, he is a regular contributor to *Cinéma/Québec* magazine, as well as having published four volumes of poetry. His films have won awards for excellence in Venice, Chicago, Toronto and Paris.

**IXE-13** was shown sandwiched-in between many other features at last year's Canadian Film Awards. Every other film had some sort of Canadian

expanse or horizon, with loose-flowing exterior visuals. Seen smack in the middle of the Newfoundland coast and the Québec countryside, **IXE-13** as a film appeared to be a two-dimensional comic book. It was like staring at a brick wall for two hours, with all the painted backdrops closing in on the spectator from the screen. Perhaps it was the wrong place to see the film?

“Well, not necessarily. The idea of creating this sort of concentration camp was very logical. In 1950 there was only one thing that was true and real in Québec and that was the Church. So the only real outside shots are of the church. The rest was false, all our light was false, and even the deserts were painted sets. In other words, it's sort of a counterpart to **Mon Oncle Antoine**, which film tends to make you believe that French Canada in those years existed, that it was alive. I don't believe it.”

**IXE-13** is a movie about movies. It's also a film about clichés, up to a certain point: about the clichés of the musical comedy and the clichés of the espionage film.

“I was trying to put as much un-authentic culture into that film as I could. In the fifties, we were not even singing our own songs. We were borrowing from the Italian opera, which accounts for the opera in the wrestling scene. We were subjected to American

musical comedies or songs to which we danced. We were subjected to all the singers from France. All the music and songs we had were borrowed. So we illustrated that absence of culture, that borrowing of culture, by doing each song in the film from a different style of music that we knew at the time.

“The original budget of **IXE-13** was \$250,000 and we went up to three something, mainly because of the music. We never thought the musicians would cost as much as they finally did. It was a great surprise to me. They have a very strong union – so much per session and that's it – and there's a hell of a lot of music in the film, so finally we went overboard on that. Well, let's say it's a \$300,000 film finally; the same film made in England or Hollywood would have cost at least three times, four times that amount. But in this case everything was done with a lot of ingenuity on the part of the art director and the guys who did the sets.

“I chose an art director (Claude Lafortune) who usually does children's programs on television, and also makes books for children. And he took that children's approach to everything. The sets were built by guys who had just left the School of Fine Arts and for whom it was the first chance to do something they wanted, plus a chance to do something with colours. And anything was





Espionage in the sports supply store

okay, as long as we agreed on it, as wild as they wanted. So they worked like blazes because we had 25 days of shooting and 25 sets. This meant that we had to build a set overnight, we shot in it the next day, then it had to be destroyed, and another one had to be built again."

Sometimes the sets wouldn't be completed until four o'clock in the afternoon, and scheduled to be struck at six. Godbout regrets the resulting loss of variation of shots within the same sequence, but it was a fact the crew had to live with. So was the limited budget for such an elaborate undertaking.

"I knew I was unable to get a very big amount of money to make *IXE-13*, and that if we had to build everything, we'd never be able to make it on budget. So I went through all the props — the old props and sets at the Film Board,



Wrestling match in "*IXE-13*"

that had been used for the last twenty years — I made a complete list of them and wrote most of the sequences saying, 'Okay, I know I have this chair, this table, that part of a wall, and this thing. What can I do with it?'

"So I wrote the script partly for the props, partly for the culture, partly for this, partly for that — trying to use as much as possible of what I had in my hands and not trying to invent a film that I would have enjoyed making, but that I would not have been able to produce anyway."

According to Godbout, the film was fairly successful at the box-office in major population centres throughout Québec, but as soon as it hit the more rural areas, ticket sales went down. He attributes this to the more urban outlook of *IXE-13*, and to the influence the Church still has in these outlying regions. He is split between having the picture subtitled or dubbed into English, but doesn't quite know what kind of reception it would get in the rest of Canada, anyway.

"It might finally more or less pay for itself. But, you see, for every dollar you put into a film you have to make at least three dollars at the box-office to get that dollar back. One dollar goes to the distributor, another one goes to the exhibitor, meaning that a \$300,000 film has to gross around a million dollars to pay for itself. And that's a hell of a lot of money — that's 500,000 people at the box-office at an average ticket of two dollars. Now, since *IXE-13* seems to be very appealing to kids of 9, 10, 11, and 12, and since they account for one-third of the public, and paying only half-price at the theatre, you need a hell of a lot of kids to pay for it! It's a crazy enterprise.

"The last time I saw it advertised, it was playing in drive-ins. I was happy! I think it was one of the first Canadian film in drive-ins, where you could eat popcorn and pizza and watch a Canadian film. A friend of mine went to see it at a drive-in. He said it was great because he was in a convertible with his family watching *IXE-13* and at one point the characters in the film sing around a taxi and go up on top of the taxi. And he just raised his head and there was a beautiful moon right there over the screen in the drive-in, which became almost like a set on top of the set on the screen."

Wouldn't one need a strong background in Québec culture in order to really appreciate this film?

"Well, you can appreciate it on many levels, I'm sure. Of course if you happen to be a Montrealer, if you were 18 or 20 in the 1950's, if you read "*IXE-13*," if you fought the Church, if you knew about the "bad communists," and about buying Chinese babies through the missionary programs, if you went through all those phenomena, of course you enjoy the film 100 per cent. And if you didn't go through that, you enjoy part of the film, other things. But that's true of any film, up to a certain point. Some films you can easily connect with — some you sort of see with your head, others with your heart. It all depends. Yes, the more you know about such things in Québec, the better you can enjoy it."

"I'm no expert on English Canada. I've travelled in it, I know some English Canadians. But I don't know what reactions to expect from English Canada the same way English Canadians who speak French never know what to expect from Québec. The film was made mainly for Québec — not 'mainly,' *exclusively*. I never thought it would go out of our 'frontière.'

Even though Godbout has spent many years translating works from one culture into the language of the other — not only films, but books as well — he's skeptical about 'coming together.'

"I don't believe in bringing cultures



Scene from Jacques Godbout's film

nearer together. I don't think that is done. You know, cultures are not two human beings you can put into a bed. I believe in having as strong a French culture and as strong an English Canadian culture as we can. Then, once in a while, if you can well-adapt or well-translate some expressions of that culture, it's great because then there's an exchange. But I don't think that brings the two cultures closer together.

"The notion of 'coming together,' is, for me, impossible as far as cultures are concerned. If they were really that close, one of them would disappear, period. But an exchange is possible, if you can find the right people to do the adapting."

"I was talking last night with Peter Carter, who made a film in Newfoundland — *The Rowdyman* — and he was telling me that his film was situated in a lower-middle-class milieu with a very important play on accents of people over there, and he was asking me how you adapt that into French. What you do if you want French-Canadians to see it and not feel 'out of it.' And if you wanted to send it to France also. Well, you have a problem, because you have to find the right way to adapt it to Québécois, which will be understood both in France and in Québec, and which will not be downgrading to the film at the same time.

You know, a good translation or a good adaptation is good treachery, in the final analysis. You have to be a good traitor. You need people who have the same wavelength, the same antennas — not the normal, professional translator — because all the nuances disappear otherwise. It's a very, very important job, and it's not done well, usually, so cultures have very few exchanges.

"And subtitles are not always the answer. For the cinema buffs, yes, but if you think of the majority of the people, they are not the answer. First of all, most people are slow readers: by the time they finish reading the sentence on the screen, they've missed seeing the screen, they haven't seen any of the emotion or action."

Godbout's next feature film promises to be full of action. Its story concerns an anecdote about the killing of the chief of Murder Incorporated in the States twenty years ago. He is collaborating with a young Québec novelist on the script of *La Débarqué*, the film's tentative

title, having a dual meaning: getting off a boat or out of a car, as well as a downward step in life. Far from being a regular gangster film, it will be Godbout's vehicle for exploring the middle class, with all its hangups.

"I'm sick and tired of films trying to show lower class people suffering. I'd like to show what a middle class Mafia man in Québec is: he's just like the general manager of the local branch of a bigger business. He's just a counterpart of the man at General Electric. It just so happens he made a mistake at one point, he robbed a bank or violated a girl, and he went that way instead of getting into politics. The murder in the anecdote was done by a French-Canadian guy, who of course did not escape. This sort of middle class man within the Mafia, this interests me. I want to concentrate on the man as a representative of the middle class. Right now the idea is very far from being worked out, but it's beginning to be fascinating."

The director hopes to make this next feature through the NFB as well.

"The difference between the Film Board and private industry is that the Board is the only place in Canada where the public owns the means of production and distribution. I have little respect for the private industry."

"I have a lot of respect for the freelance filmmakers who usually find themselves in the sort of situation most whores find themselves in on the street. They have to sell their talent here and there. And once they start being less good and productive, they're just dropped and forgotten. I have no respect whatsoever for the capitalist approach private industry represents. I'd rather have my films made at the Board, strictly on an ideological basis.

How does Jacques Godbout answer the criticism that people like Jean-Pierre Lefebvre have against the National Film Board?

"Jean-Pierre is not in the private industry. Jean-Pierre is in what I call 'independent industry,' which is a hell of a different approach. He has a small production company, which he started with personal money. He could have bought himself a house, he bought himself a few films instead. He worked like blazes. He started making films as cheaply as they could be made, with a ferociously independent mind all the way through. And for that type of approach, I think his is probably the best one. If all private industry was like that, then forget the Film Board. But human nature and money being what they are, there aren't many Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's as producers."

The thinker in Godbout isn't all that optimistic about the current Canadian feature film boom.

"There's a pattern, an incredible pattern, which is much clearer in Québec,

but it's probably as clear here in Toronto. Ten years ago, we were making features which we could hardly put in the theatres downtown. Maybe because they had no appeal for the people, maybe because the distributors didn't want them, maybe because the public was used to something else, so they were just astonished by our films, or not interested.

"But finally one, and then another, and another was made, and through associations like l'Association de Cinéastes or some groups here like the Directors Guild, we managed to push a bit and got money to make films. In Québec we started with the Film Board, before the CFDC was created. We started having a small, and slowly a bigger success in theatres, and this was done on a national basis. The films told stories about ourselves.

"Everything went well, until, through government assistance, the private industry started making too many films, mainly to evade taxes. Because the tax evasion thing is one reason why so many films are made. The CFDC is another. If you start making *that* many films, you should at least start making that many children. The population, you know, is not that big.

"So right now we have not enough babies, and too many films. That amount of films is for the same public, and so there is less public for each one of the films. The tendency then among private producers, is to say, 'I can't get as much money from the public here as I used to get. I'll get it on an international basis.' And then you opt for an 'international' kind of filmmaking. What does that mean? It means borrowing money here, borrowing an artist there, an actor here, and making an 'international' film.

"So you make one international film, two international films. Budgets go up: you start making films at one million dollars, two million dollars, and then *nobody* wants to see your films because they have no flavour — they're not

québécois, they're not English-Canadian, they're not Italian, they're fuck-all! So finally your entire film industry falls flat on its ass and then for four or five years nothing happens and you start building all over again. You have a cycle, there's a pattern. It happened in Sweden, it happened in Czechoslovakia — everywhere. Now it's our turn.

"As long as these countries were making national films, it was what people wanted to see. But now in French Canada and in English Canada, we tend to think that probably we could make films with 'international' flavour. And when you go to an airport and you're offered an 'international' dish, or an 'international sandwich,' you'd better have a beer and a hamburger, I mean it's going to be tasteless. So I think we're destroying ourselves right now, probably.

"I'd be the happiest man in the world if for once at least the pattern would not be followed, or the pattern would not destroy us. That would be great! But why would only in Canada the pattern not destroy us? Are we that pure?"

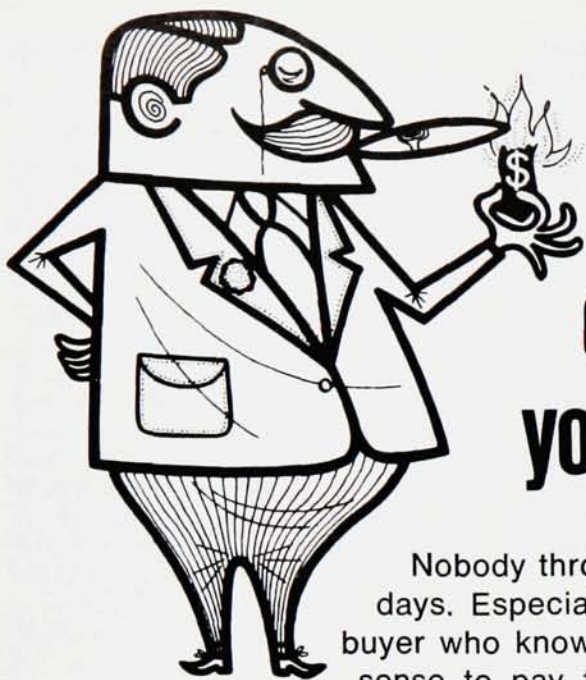
Jacques Godbout, the novelist, has other ideas about the future.

"I still believe that any book written and published in Québec now is just one more chapter in the great big goddamn telephone book that we're all writing together, whether we like it or not; that my books are just chapters of the French-Canadian book, up to a certain point. It's a huge book about ourselves, about our roots, about where we're going, where we come from, and who the hell we are.

"It gets tiresome, because you get the impression that you just can't write a simple, normal book, when everytime you sit down and you say, 'okay, I'm going to write a love story,' and three pages later you're into myth-making. So as far as writers are concerned, that might be one more reason for the independence of Québec! Let's get it over with! Then we'll do something else."

— with editorial assistance by Laurinda Hart





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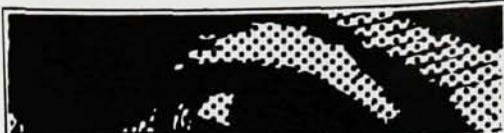
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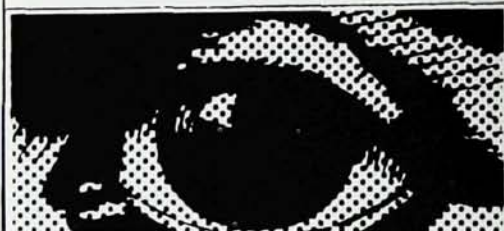
Color, 80 minutes, French with English sub-titles.



**JOB'S GARDEN** Produced by Jean-Pierre Fournier. Directed by Boyce Richardson.

Job Bearskin and other Cree trappers from the Fort George area of northern Québec talk about the great river people and the land they call their garden. The government of Québec plans to flood six thousand square miles around James Bay, displacing 6,000 Cree and Inuit from the garden they have lived in for centuries.

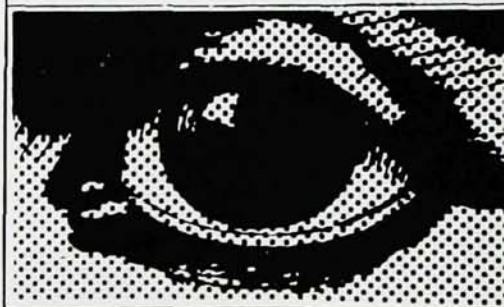
Color, 60 minutes, three versions, Cree, English and French (voice over).



**ISIS AU 8** Produced by the Association coopérative des productions audiovisuelles. Directed by Alain Chartrand.

Jean-Pierre Cantin left city life two years ago to settle in the country with his wife. They chose Ste. Mélanie, a beautiful area north east of Montréal. When his wife dies Jean-Pierre's world cannot be the same, but alone he decides to continue his existence as before, in an environment that reminds him of her.

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