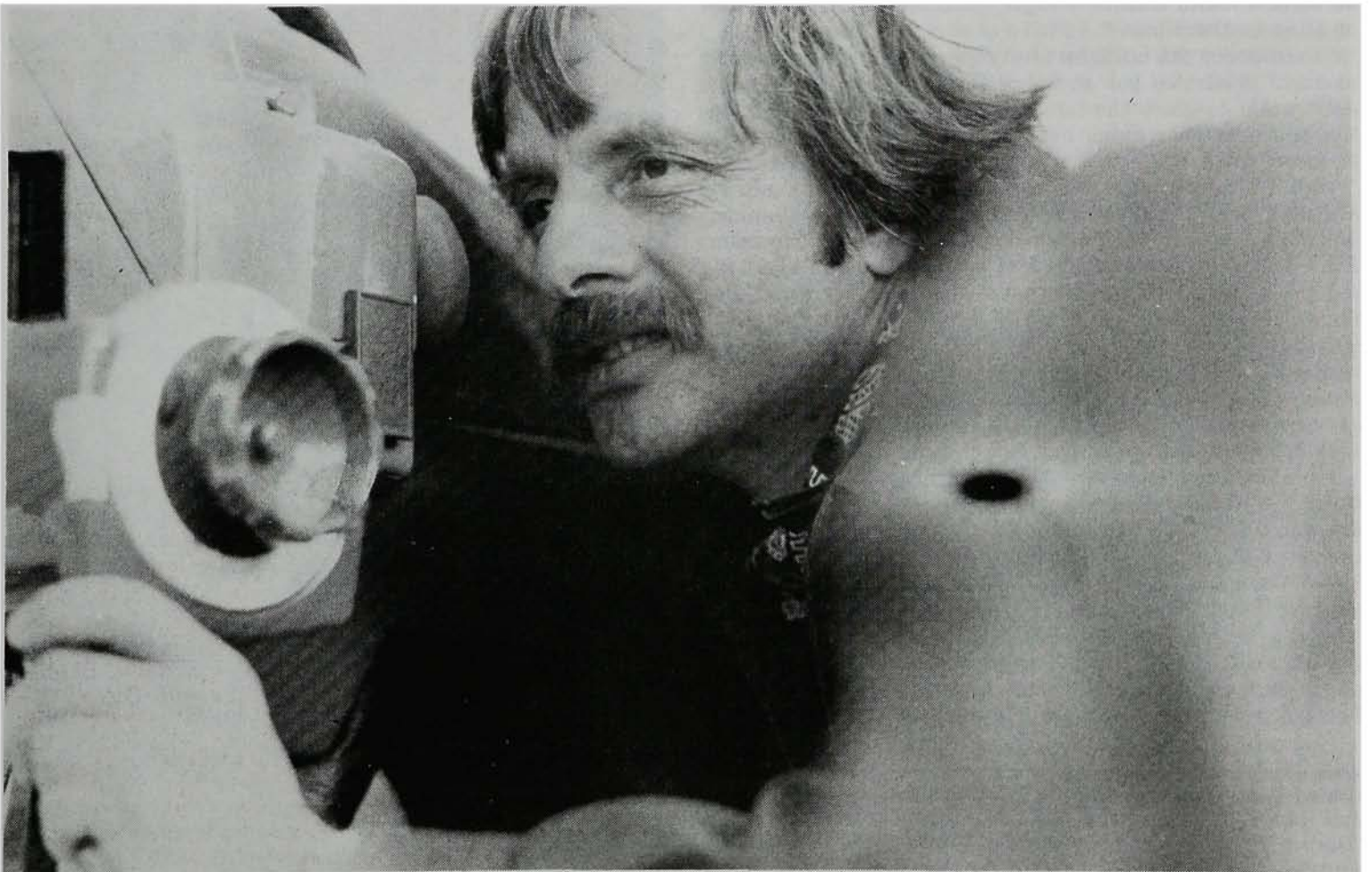


an artisan in show biz:

claude fournier

Past president of the Quebec producers' association, Claude Fournier is one of the more influential voices these days in Quebec's filming circles; he strongly defends the notion of 'commercial' features. Carmel Dumas introduces us to the man and to his experiences.

by Carmel Dumas



Claude Fournier behind the camera a few years ago

The name of Claude Fournier used to elicit images of money, money, money. There was an indecent small-time Hollywood taste to the way he filmed his **Deux femmes en or** frolicking in soap suds out in Montreal suburbia, but this gentle combination of slapstick, humor and sexiness was to become Canada's greatest success at the box office, and the \$250,000 production brought in an unprecedented \$2.5 million in Quebec alone.

That was in 1970. Two years later, Fournier's image was to change with the making of **Alien Thunder**, his first – but what a first! – flop. Then came a little film in the old vein, **La pomme, la queue et les pépins** (1974) which was the only Quebecois film that year to recoup its costs, and now comes **Je suis loin de toi Mignonne**, opening in November in Quebec theatres.

An Artisan at Heart

Fournier learned many lessons from doing **Alien Thunder**, the most important being that filmmakers shouldn't be propelled into different styles. "I was an easterner who suddenly had to operate in the west..." A western film is one thing, a Quebecois film altogether another thing. On the one hand, there's the big-budget, big-name production, and on the other, the under-financed, under-crewed film that the ingenious filmmaker prevents from going under. This is where Claude Fournier has experience.

Quebec's severe film critics usually demand that film directors be committed to Quebec's political and social struggles, but in Fournier's case, they tend to bow to the clown. Although he is often tagged as a commercial filmmaker, he is more often said to be a "filmmaker without pretension."

But after **Alien Thunder**, "my first film in six to lose money", it wasn't easy to convince producers and investors that he hadn't been spoiled by the big time and that he could be satisfied with a small budget in exchange for the chance of doing another film.

"Confidence can build up pretty quickly, but it can die just as fast." Fournier got to learn that for himself. "People don't seem to grasp the fact that when you're a film director, you earn your living by directing films, expensive ones or cheap ones."

And Fournier pretty well earns his by directing features, although he fills in the money gap with a sponsored film here and there, usually for the provincial department of tourism. But there is a frustration in him as he feels himself getting old (he doesn't look it, but that's what he says), tired, but forced to keep doing most of his films by himself because it's the only way to make ends meet. And he's even more restless now, because he is convinced that no matter how many commercials or television films one directs, the only experience that counts in feature filmmaking is the actual making of feature films.

His experience is as an artisan. On most of his early features, he would be co-writer, cameraman, director, editor. He would use little tricks and quick thinking to fill in the budget gaps, and he would talk with affection in some interviews about his "rococo style." Then came **Alien Thunder**, starring Donald Sutherland and a million-dollar budget.

This is where Fournier found out the value of experience, the necessity for a filmmaker to live in a tradition that allows him to survive, and that gives him some assurance. Fournier found out how it feels in reality to be from Quebec

rather than from Hollywood. "If I had had the experience of Hollywood, **Alien Thunder** would have had built-in protection. It's not that they have more genius or more money there, but they have a greater chance not to make mistakes. They have a tradition. Take a guy like Spielberg, when he made **Jaws**. He didn't have the chance to go wrong because around him, although he himself is young, there's the Establishment which has a considerable amount of experience that reflects on him."

So a very naive easterner went west to watch his \$1,100,000 budget climb to \$1,600,000 because of legal fees while investors kept arguing whether they would withdraw or not. Claude Fournier learnt the meaning of the word "entourage".

"I used to laugh at first when I would read 'Mr Sutherland and his entourage' in contracts, but by the end of the film I had stopped laughing." The trailer and the entourage of the big star create a psychological climate which is not at all suited to the artisan.

There are all sorts of costs that are inherent in the big-budget system about which Fournier had no idea. The financial costs are more or less routine, with the smaller star wanting a trailer and an entourage too, just to keep up.

The energy costs are often higher. Fournier, as is his habit with all scripts, thoroughly researched **Alien Thunder** (for two years) before shooting, but on the set he would end up discussing the psychology of an 1890 mountie, in view of the Vietnam War, with Sutherland who had his contract right to script approval and his own political convictions.



Good clean fun in **Deux femmes en or**

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"Already, when you're working with a big star, he's wielding the bigger bat – if you give him script approval, he's wielding the bigger bat *and* pulling all the strings."

Not that Sutherland seemed worse than any other "Establishment" actor, but a forewarned Fournier would have known that even the best of actors can only have a restricted view of a subject, often confined to his own character. A forewarned Fournier would have known that 10 percent of his budget would *inevitably* go into legal fees and that by starting late, lawyers could easily dispose of 20 percent of his budget. A forewarned Fournier wouldn't...

But he did. And from the star's right to approve, to the investor's right to approve (by divine right), the only thing that survives in the director is the desire to get that film out there on the screens. "Of course, at any point, you could just say keep it, kill it, I'm leaving... But after years of pressure, you still want the thing out..."

With **Mignonne** about to come out and another feature project with a writer from Toronto about to take off, the director of **Alien Thunder** is now proud to say that the best thing that came out of that film was the romance between Sutherland and Francine Racette.

Going English

For Fournier, **Je suis loin de toi Mignonne** (\$354,000 budget) brought back the good times of **Deux femmes en or**, with small means and people having fun working hard.

The original idea of two sisters struggling not to become old spinsters while all the men are at war came from Dominique Michel and Denise Filiatrault. Dodo and Denise happen to be the slapstick duo *par excellence* of Quebec television, and when Fournier heard that their script had been turned down by the CFDC, he called producer Pierre David and said "I'll do it, no conditions." He almost regretted the "no conditions" pledge when he saw the work to be done on the script, because the two stars had no writing experience – but he had had "a flash of that whole package", and he just knew it would work.

Still, Fournier is getting tired of all the pressure. Doing the writing, the camera work, the editing, is getting to be too much, but he doesn't really see the way out, except that if Hollywood called him tomorrow he would go. "The only reason I'm still here is because they haven't called me," he jokes.

So although he would love to just write screenplays, to maybe direct one out of two, he goes on directing because that way he can survive in the film business.

"It's like with hockey. As long as there is no reserve, there is no chance to win. And here, in Canada, there's no film reserve. Sometimes I think the CFDC's \$100,000-\$200,000 first-feature budget is just more rope to hang yourself with. In Quebec, there's a market for roughly four or five purely indigenous films. You can then recuperate your money if you manage to grasp a certain reality. You don't make any money to speak of by translating these films. But it's a very restricted market and the Quebec filmmakers are realizing seriously that the market for Quebec films is doomed. People like myself, like Gilles Carle, like Denys Arcand, have no real urge to keep working in French, and soon we will find the CFDC financing English films that will be directed and written by French-Canadians."

"There used to be a semi-bonanza in the tax shelter money, but no investors will put money in French films now. English-Canadians who view the Quebec film industry as an enviable situation are living on the old myth of a boom that happened four years ago and that will not repeat itself. The CFDC is not going to finance films almost 100 percent for an indefinite period, and Odeon and Famous keep

putting in their token contributions only because we twist their arms and it saves them a lot of flack."

"All Quebec directors have work in progress, a project they want to do and can't. So it's no longer a question of denying your market – you have to find people to invest in your films."

That's Show Biz

"There are three kinds of films: the blockbusters, the scrap, and the average films. There's a market for each of them. There's a list of stars that producers circulate. On the top, there are names like Geneviève Bujold and George Segal, names that mean blockbusters, names that equal: "out of your range." But there is a long list of names that equal sure television sales, and if you have a sure television sale you can't get screwed. But if you think in terms of \$250,000, then you're out of the race completely. And I no longer want to be the one who pays the bill."

This is where Claude Fournier is under fire from the less commercially oriented wing of Quebec's film industry – "les politisés", as he says. But Fournier doesn't perceive the role of a filmmaker as in the least political, any more than he perceives the message as the aim of a film.

"There is a side of me that is very old-fashioned. There are few myths and dreams left in the world and I think that show biz is a big myth people don't want destroyed. Here, in Quebec, there is no tradition in the will to entertain. Too many people start off on the premise that nothing is more entertaining than themselves. Well, everybody has ideas and the most absolute art would be to get them across unnoticed, but I believe in the importance of pleasure, pleasure to see stars you think lead a happier life than you, pleasure to dream."

About someone like Jean-Claude Lord (**Bingo, Parlez-nous d'amour**), Fournier says he will soon find out that "it's tough to laugh at those people who make you live."

Fournier wants those people happy. Now, when he's editing, he doesn't look for opinions in the milieu. He invites theatre managers from the different regions and gets them to comment on the entertainment value of his work. "What they don't understand, the majority of your audience won't understand. They see a lot of films and don't discriminate for ideological reasons. And another advantage of screening for these regional theatre managers is that once your film comes around to their theatres, it rings a bell – it's not like another something or other out of nowhere."

"Political in a Film Way"

Claude Fournier is vice-president of the Quebec Film Producers Association, which some filmmakers view more as the big bad commercial world than the film world. Nonetheless, the association encompasses 45 film production companies which do 90 percent of all Quebec film production.

Fournier sees his role in the association as the normal "chipping into collective precaution," and to those who accuse him of not being political, he answers that he is "political in a film way, in the interest of the industry."

He thinks that, just like elsewhere in Quebec, there's "something rotten" in the employer-employee climate in the film world, a sort of "the least for the most" attitude that can only be straightened out by employers giving an example of "conscience professionnelle."

He can't go along with those who throw all the stones at the Americans. "In any case, if Quebec films were money-makers, then the Americans would make them themselves."

"We are six million... well, we are only six million." For his next film, Fournier is not even bothering knocking on



Méo (Gilles Renaud) and Flo (Denise Filiatrault) muddling through in *Je suis loin de toi Mignonne*

doors at CBC or CTV. He's going straight to ABC and NBC to look for that indispensable sure TV sale. But that doesn't prevent him from knowing all too well that if Radio-Canada (CBC) stopped showing only foreign films and made an effort to get the audience used to the local product, the government could help develop a feature industry. "But there's the CFDC, and the CBC feels the government's duty is done. I think the political factions should fight that battle before tackling the Americans."

Dream World

But Hollywood hasn't called and Claude Fournier's audience is in Quebec – he hopes, and *Mignonne* is good reason to hope. The "Establishment" with in-built experience doesn't exist either, so Fournier operates a small company with his producer lady Marie-Josée Raymond, one of Quebec's toughest producers. Rose Films will survive, but maybe not Fournier's energy.

In 22 to 25 years of work, he emerges mainly as a writer. He wrote stage plays and radio plays at a time when writers were closely involved in productions. He knew everyone. But he got bored and "branched out towards film," stopping over at the CBC and the NFB. Now, he finds it difficult to belong to a milieu, to know the actors, to see all he should see, and even more so when getting to direct is such an occasional activity.

His real pleasure is in script writing, working with others, sharing the pressures. But he knows only too well that there are no trained screenwriters in Quebec, except for other directors like Gilles Carle.

But that's dreamworld. Carle is not about to write for Fournier nor the other way around, because that would quickly wrap up Quebec's film industry. Yet, Fournier knows from experience that it takes at least six months to properly develop a film script that has any value. So

it's no way to earn a living, given that "the more ambitious a script the less its chances of being made," added to the fact that nobody is willing (or able) to invest more than \$10,000 in its development. So if you do two in a year and a half, allowing for a short period of incubation, you're living off a very small salary. The only way to make it worthwhile is to also collect the director's cut – and the editor's, and the cameraman's, and the producer's... Partly because of this, Claude Fournier is convinced Quebec's film industry is doomed. He's only grateful for the role he's been privileged to play – that of a skilful artisan with a good sense of humor. □

Selected Filmography Claude Fournier

Shorts

La lutte (1960)
Nehru (1962)
Téléphone Légaré (1957)
Hearts (1968)

Features

Deux femmes en or (1969)
Les chats bottés (1971)
Alien Thunder (1973)
La pomme, la queue et les pépins (1974)
Je suis loin de toi Mignonne (1976)