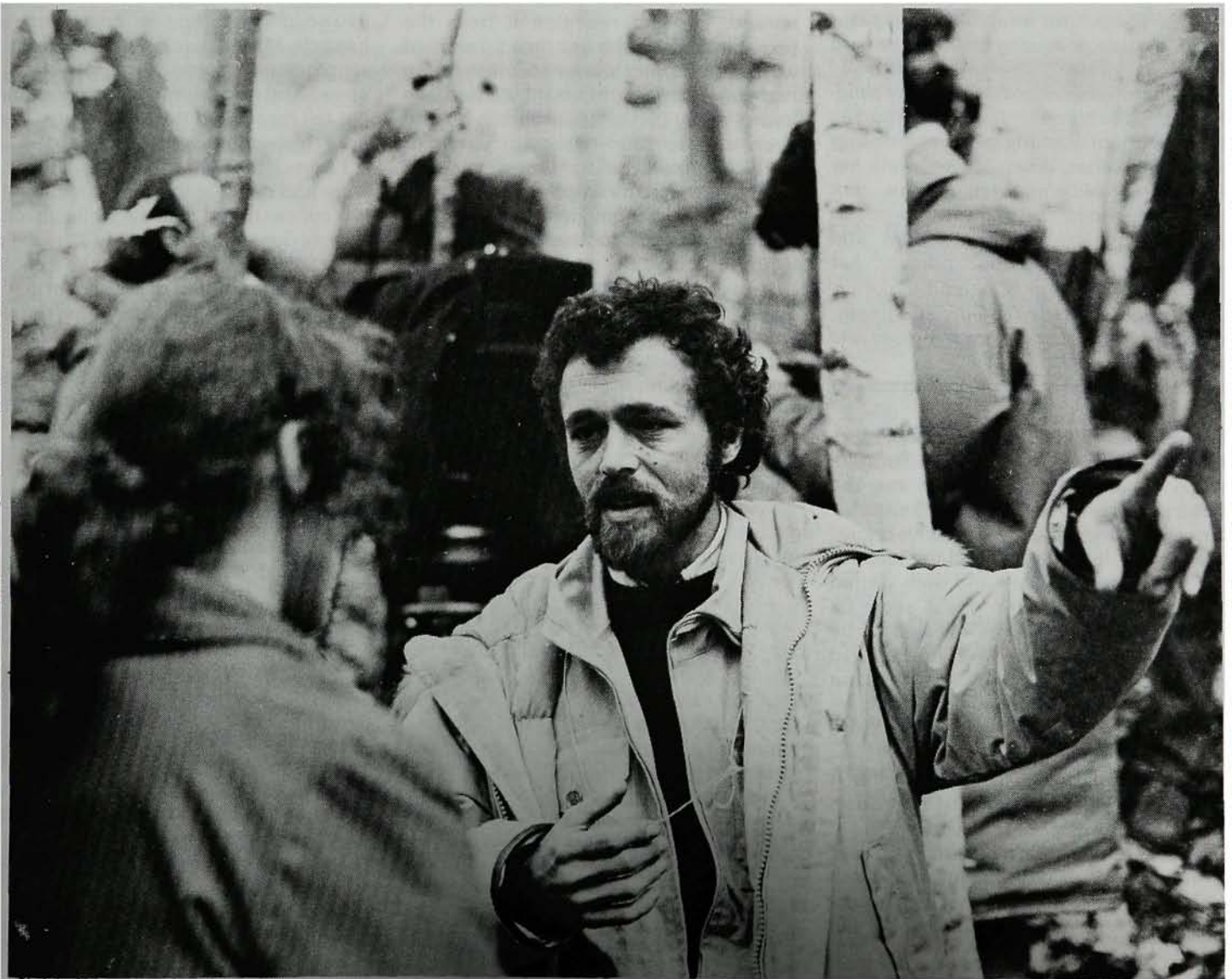


francis mankiewicz to berlin with love

by joan irving

It is a fight to the finish, but the following interviews with director Francis Mankiewicz, and producers Marcia Couëlle and Claude Godbout suggest that they may be winning with their film *Les bons débarras* (*Good Riddance*), selected to represent Canada at the 1980 Berlin Film Festival.



Director of *Les bons débarras*, Francis Mankiewicz with Marie Tifo — pointing the way to Berlin!

The year 1980 marks a revival in Québécois films. Following the slump of the late-seventies — when directors like Claude Jutra, Gilles Carle, Francis Mankiewicz, and others, left Montreal to work in Toronto — several directors, including Carle, Mankiewicz, Jean-Claude Labrecque, André Forcier and Jean-Guy Noël are now completing new features. First to be released is Mankiewicz's *Les bons débarras* (*Good Riddance*).

Winner of two Etrogs and a special Jury prize at the 1972 Canadian Film Awards, *Le temps d'une chasse* was Mankiewicz's first feature. He went on to make two sixty-minute specials for the CBC: *The People Problem* and *A Matter of Choice*. Back in Quebec, he directed a made-for-television feature titled *Une amie d'enfance*, which had a brief theatrical release.

Les bons débarras marks the beginning of a collaboration between Mankiewicz and Réjean Ducharme, a writer whose novels, songs, and adaptations of plays have a wide following in Quebec and France.

Ducharme explores the themes of childhood and the childlike. *Les bons débarras* is the story of a young girl's relationship with her mother. When Michelle tells her twelve-year-old daughter, Manon, that she is pregnant, the child lashes out in jealousy against all that defines and confines her life: school; poverty; her mother's policeman boyfriend, Maurice; her dimwitted uncle, Ti-Guy; and finally, against her mother, whom she loves and wants to protect.

Francis Mankiewicz: I was shooting *A Matter of Choice* for the CBC in Toronto, when Réjean Ducharme sent me the script of *Les bons débarras*. I didn't know him at the time, though I'd read his books. He told me later he had had the idea for the film, written a draft and then started looking for a director. He'd seen *Le temps d'une chasse* and felt that I'd be the right person to make the film. He went through all kinds of people to find out who I was and where I was, and how he could get the script to me.

Cinema Canada: Réjean Ducharme is reputed to be something of a recluse. And he was searching for you?

Francis Mankiewicz: It came as a surprise to me. I think it was Jacques Godbout who phoned to tell me that Ducharme wanted to send me the script. I read it, but

really didn't know what to think of it, so I just set it aside while I finished the other film. But I found that I was continually thinking of *Les bons débarras*. There was something in that script that haunted me.

At the time there were a lot of opportunities to work in Toronto. What brought me back to Québec was Réjean's script.

Cinema Canada: Ducharme has published several novels, but this was his first screenplay. How closely did you collaborate on the final script?

Francis Mankiewicz: When Réjean sends you a script, he sends you a universe — a universe in which there are a number of levels of content and meaning. I really liked the script, but I could see that in order to translate that universe to film, it needed modifications. There were also elements in it that I wanted to see developed, because I felt closer to them.

Through an intermediary, I communicated my suggestions to Réjean. In about a month the script came back totally revised. He had rewritten it from the beginning. It was the first time I'd worked with a scriptwriter whose second version had come so close to what I wanted. We hadn't really talked about it, but he had been able to read me entirely. It was terrifically exciting. After that we met and worked through the script, scene by scene, occasionally changing a line of dialogue. Once we started shooting, he let me take it from there.

It was almost as if he had given me a gift that came with a note saying, 'Here's part

of my universe. You might find something for yourself in it.'

Cinema Canada: It is surprising how much in *Les bons débarras* resembles the world you created in *Le temps d'une chasse*.

Francis Mankiewicz: It would be difficult for me to direct a film in which I didn't find something I could feel close to. The resemblance is partly style, but mostly, I guess, one of subject. I have a great affinity for Réjean's preoccupation with certain forms of naivety and childhood, and his preoccupation with death.

There were also elements in the script that were totally foreign to me, but that excited me simply because they weren't things I would normally write myself. If I were to sit down and write a script, it would all come out one color, my color.

Cinema Canada: Since *Le temps d'une chasse*, your first feature, you haven't directed a screenplay you wrote. Why are you no longer writing your own material?

Francis Mankiewicz: I've written other scripts since. Some were meant to go ahead and had even been programmed, but fell through at the last minute. There are a few scripts in my cupboard.

I found, though, that it was difficult to write and direct at the same time. Writing is a concentrated activity, while directing is more dynamic. For me they were slightly contradictory, so I had to make a choice. Besides, the amount of time spent getting the script written and then going through



Manon (Charlotte Laurier), angry with the world in Francis Mankiewicz's *Les bons débarras*.

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the battles of finding a producer and getting financing, made a cumulative time span on one film of about five years. If I were to make one film every five years, I wouldn't be developing my craft as a director. Or perhaps it's simply a matter of experience. I find that I prefer collaboration at every level of the preparation and shooting of a film. Rather than try to carry the whole film myself, I look for people to work with me.

Réjean is a terrific stimulus to me, in that he presents me with extremely dense characters which I then take and try to bring to life.

Cinema Canada: *The overall feel of Les bons débarras is rather sombre. Ti-Guy commits suicide at the end. Yet the affection in the film, the characters for each other and yours for them, is very moving.*

Francis Mankiewicz: To me it's a film based on love. It's based on this desire we all have to love and to feel passionate about things, the desire in us to live intensely. One of the most important aspects of the film is the intensity. It was in the writing when I first read the script, and it is in the characters. The characters are uncompromising. They go to the limit of that passion, or love, or desire . . . whatever you want to call it.

Cinema Canada: *The film depicts simple people, in terms of their lifestyle and certainly their means, yet the situations are never simple emotionally. What are you trying to get at?*

Francis Mankiewicz: If there were words to describe what underlies passion or love, then that is perhaps what I'm looking for with those characters. It's never simple. Their feelings come from the gut. Often they don't reach the conscious level. What drives the characters in *Les bons débarras* belongs to the irrational.

Though the film looks realistic, the characters often express themselves through a kind of poetry. When you see the film, the language doesn't jump out at you as poetry, but when you read it, you realize people don't exactly speak that way. You don't find lines that say, 'Hello. Goodbye. How are you today.' Réjean's scenes always begin where drama begins, and not where life begins. That, also, adds to the feeling of unrelenting intensity in the characters, since that's where dramatically things start happening.

There's something of the classical tragedies in the film, though it's a modern treatment. There's a feeling of destiny that emerges from the characters but is beyond their control. Manon's drive for something greater than what she is living comes from within her, but it is also

beyond her control. It's the same for Ti-Guy. Fairly early on in the film there is a feeling that it is driving to something inevitable.

Cinema Canada: *Could you elaborate on the concept of tragedy?*

Francis Mankiewicz: I don't mean by tragedy something that necessarily ends in death. We see death — real death — every day on television. The original intent of tragedy wasn't to merely show death, but to show a transposition of life. When we see Cambodia, what is brought home is how miserable life can be, how miserable people can be. Though the endings of the classical tragedies may be sad, there is no devaluation of life. On the contrary, by putting certain aspects of life into relief, it brings on other levels of reflection and understanding.

I don't view film as a depiction of real life. Good drama is a transposition of life rather than a reproduction of it.

Cinema Canada: *I once attended a screening of Le temps d'une chasse for an audience of university film students. Only a couple of the questions during the discussion that followed related to content. Are filmmakers losing the ability to tell good stories?*

Francis Mankiewicz: The first impulse of young filmmakers in film school is to demystify and try to get a hold on what, through their childhood, was the magic of cinema. In school they get excited about the way films are made and tend to forget content. To me the fascination with technique is quite understandable. I also think that with the omnipresence of television and its ongoing stream of programming, the notion of content is, to some extent, getting lost. It's the same idea as a short order cook . . . I sometimes have the feeling that life these days doesn't put much importance on content.

Cinema Canada: *Yet you have made this film?*

Francis Mankiewicz: Well, that's my basic preoccupation. I am not, perhaps, a great film stylist, but I have a fascination for drama. I came to filmmaking through an interest in literature more than in photography as a technique or visual expression. Now I am looking for a reconciliation of those two elements. I want to find a visual way to say things.

Cinema Canada: *This might be a good point to ask you about your work with Michel Brault, who won an Etrog for his cinematography on Le temps d'une chasse*

Francis Mankiewicz/ Filmography

1972

Le temps d'une chasse, writer and director, feature 90 min. 35 mm (N.F.B.) production. 1972 Venice Festival Award. Three prizes Canadian Film Awards 1972.

1973

Les allées de la terre, executive producer, feature 90 min., directed by André Théberge (N.F.B.)

Valentin, director, half-hour television drama. Co-production Canada/France/Switzerland.

1974

Proces criminel, director, half-hour educational drama (O.F.Q.)

Cause civile, director, half-hour educational drama (O.F.Q.)

Orientation, director, half-hour educational drama (O.F.Q.)

1975

Les vagues, writer, feature-length fiction screenplay.

Berthier en bas, writer, feature-length fiction screenplay.

Expropriation, director, hour-long television drama, C.B.C., Toronto.

1976

Freelance producer at National Film Board of Canada on pilot program of dramatic films for television.

Pointe Pelee, director, documentary short on nature (N.F.B.).

1977

I Was Dying Anyway, director, educational documentary on suicide in prisons (International Cinemedia for Canadian Penitentiary Service).

A Matter Of Choice, director, hour-long television drama C.B.C., Toronto.

Une amie d'enfance, director, feature - 90 min. (from the play by Louis Saia and Louise Roy) (Les Productions du Verseau).

1978

Les bons débarras, director, feature 115 min. screenplay by Réjean Ducharme (Les Productions Prisma).



Manon and her mother (Marie Tifo) — a soft touch in a tender scene from **Les bons débarras**

and was Director of Photography on **Les bons débarras**.

Francis Mankiewicz: Michel Brault brought a great deal of visual sensitivity to **Le temps d'une chasse**. And I thought the same kind of thing was needed on this film. I very much like what Michel does. He has a particular way of framing. He doesn't *frame* a scene, he points the camera at what you're supposed to see. He's less concerned with aesthetics and the right proportions than he is with what the audience is supposed to see in that particular scene.

Cinema Canada: *It is a dark film. Why so little sunlight?*

Francis Mankiewicz: The film was shot in autumn, so the darkness was partly seasonal. We didn't want high contrasts. Even when the sun was out, we shot with backlight so as not to get sharp shadows across the face. We wanted a very textured picture, in which you could feel the earth, the leaves, the house and the texture of people's faces.

Cinema Canada: *The opening scene, with the police car dizzily driving through the village and down the highway, reminds me of the opening in **Le temps d'une chasse** when the men are picked up in the early morning to go hunting and everyone is in a good mood. There is a sense of humor behind both scenes. Were the similarities intentional?*

Francis Mankiewicz: A lot of what you do when making a film is unconscious.

You're looking for certain things, but you're not aware of it at the time. Of course you're naturally drawn to things that please you, so these resemblances may arise.

The opening for **Les bons débarras** troubled me for a long time. I couldn't find a way to treat Réjean's establishing scene. Until the day that we were actually filming the shot, I hadn't come up with a solution.

Cinema Canada: *Do you sleep nights when that kind of thing happens?*

Francis Mankiewicz: When you're shooting a film, you're working twenty-four hours a day, even in your sleep. You get into almost a speedy state. You're constantly thinking of the scenes, looking for an approach. You don't just take a scene and film it. You have to know what you want to say with it.

Looking for a place to put the camera for the opening shot of **Les bons débarras**, Alain Chartrand, one of my A.D.'s, and I, met a Hydro Quebec crew working in a cherry picker cutting trees along the road. We asked if they'd give us a ride. We went all over the place, stopping and going up in the crane for a look around. Finally, we came back to the village and decided to shoot the scene there. But it wasn't until the morning we were scheduled to shoot it that I decided to have the car perform with its siren and headlights. It was an off-beat start, which I wanted because, to me, the film wasn't really that conventional.

Cinema Canada: *What emerges in all your dramatic films is the strength of the acting.*

Francis Mankiewicz: I like working with actors. You know, I'm not all that concerned about a correct, realistic way of playing a scene. What interests me is what emerges from it, what the actor is conveying. In Ducharme's script one of the challenges was the dialogue. On paper it was unsayable. Throughout the shooting the actors were coming to me saying, 'People don't talk like that. I can't say this.' I would say to them, 'These are beautiful lines of dialogue. It's up to us to find a way of making them sound natural without losing the rhythm and rhyme.'

Cinema Canada: *Marie Tifo, who plays the mother in the film, was a stage actress who had no film experience before you cast her. Germain Houde was also a stage actor. Is there a reason why you went to the stage for your actors, when there is such a large pool of experienced film actors in Québec?*

Francis Mankiewicz: I looked everywhere for good actors. In some ways, though, the script resembles a play. What counts, is what is beyond it. In a good play, it's not so much what is happening on stage that counts, but what the actors are communicating at another level.

The difficulties in casting were the same as everything else in this movie — and that's where Réjean is an extraordinary challenge to me. Taken at one level, the script is very close to soap opera. You could only do justice to it by developing every nuance.

The mother in the script could have been cold, almost brutal. The danger was that the audience would react as if it was the story of a victimized child. I wanted to stay as far away from that as possible. Michelle had to be a character capable of great tenderness and sensitivity. She had to be capable of controlling her world.

Cinema Canada: *Charlotte Laurier, the girl who plays Manon, is enchanting. What's your secret for finding child actors?*

Francis Mankiewicz: The eyes. It really comes down to that. In fact, casting all the characters I was looking at the eyes. They had to have an interior quality, the sense that within them there is another dimension. The eyes are the basic element with which an actor communicates. They carry the intensity of the drama.

We looked at a lot of children. I had help from many people, including François Berd. But I think Charlotte is one of those rare finds. You look and look and occasionally you're lucky.

Cinema Canada: *So often these talented child actors never do another film.*

Francis Mankiewicz: Yes and it's too bad. It's a reflection of the fact that it's so difficult to get films made. When we started making **Les bons débarras**, there hadn't been a Quebec film made for a long time. There were difficulties financing it and getting it going. When the battles of putting a film together become that enormous, it is hard to develop an ongoing film process that enables you to employ actors on a regular basis. Like many things in our world today, there is much waste. But I'm sure that Charlotte will continue acting. She has special qualities that can't go unnoticed.

Cinema Canada: *You mention the lean years for filmmakers here. There must have been times when you wondered why you were sticking at it. Where is the fun in filmmaking for you?*

Francis Mankiewicz: When I was a child my mother used to say, 'In any job there is ninety-nine percent misery and difficulty, and one percent pleasure and enrichment.' I think that's true in filmmaking. For those few moments on set when the magic occurs, you're ready to go through the miseries of trying again and again to put together a movie, to see one and then another of your projects fall through, so

you can end up on set and do that one take that is miraculous.

Cinema Canada: *Is the existence of the Institut québécois du cinéma going to make a difference for filmmakers here?*

Francis Mankiewicz: It is making a difference. Last year production of films increased. How long that's going to go on for, I don't know. In the twelve years that I've been making films, I've seen periods of heavy production followed by periods where there was nothing. Older filmmakers will perhaps tell me that it's normal, but I hope it doesn't happen too often. It's extremely demoralizing and demobilizing. Filmmakers, artists of any nature, need to work on a fairly regular basis to develop their craft and their maturity as artists. Hopefully we're seeing a new period of filmmaking, but I wouldn't bet on it.

With inflation, filmmaking is getting more expensive. You can't finance a film totally with the Institut. The CFDC is doing its part, too, but it's still not one-hundred percent of the budget. On **Les bons débarras** the producers, Les Productions Prisma, never did find total financing before shooting. So Prisma and various people were obliged to invest in the film. When producers and filmmakers begin risking their livelihood to make a film, all kinds of extraneous elements of stress intervene in the creative process.

The Institut helps. There aren't many institutions trying to protect the cultural reality in Quebec, and the national cinema that is close to the artists of Quebec. Hopefully, that cinema will be close to the audience one day as well.

Les bons débarras

p.c. Les Productions Prisma Inc. p. Claude Godbout. Marcia Couëlle p. account. Louise Deslauriers p. sup. Monique Messier p. man. Francine Forest p. assist. Michelle St-Arnaud. Jacques Garon. André Brault p. sec. Andrée Lachapelle d. Francis Mankiewicz a.d. Lise Abastado. Alain Chartrand. Marie-Andrée Vinet (2nd a.d.) sc. Réjean Ducharme cont. Marie LaHaye art. d. Michel Proulx d.o.p. Michel Brault cam. Guy Dufaux. Jean-Charles Tremblay asst. cam. Louis de Ernsted. Robert Martel. Michel Caron. Pierre Duceppe stunts Marcel Fournier. Yves Fournier. Serge Deniau sd. Henri Blondeau sd. mix Michel Descombes boom Marcel Fraser mus. dir. Bernard Buisson mus. arrange. Jean Corriveau. François Richard. Bernard Buisson ed. André Corriveau ward. Diane Paquet. Suzanne Harel make-up/hair Marie-Angèle Breitner-Protat props Pierre Fournier. Daniel Huysmans (assist.) elec. Jacques Paquet. Daniel Chrétien. Richer Francoeur. Eddy Trempe machine Serge Grenier. Robert Grenier still Yves Ste-Marie l.p. Charlotte Laurier. Marie Tifo. Germain Houde. Louise Marleau. Roger Lebel. Gilbert Sicotte. Serge Thériault. Jean-Pierre Bergeron. Léo Ilial. Madeleine Chartrand. Louise Rinfret. Eric Beauséjour. Jean-Pierre Duplessis. Marcella Fajardo. Marie Laurier. Henri pub. Les Productions Prisma Inc. (1979) col. 35 mm length 116 min. dist. Corporation des Films Mutuels Ltée. (Qué).

commerce vs. culture in a bastard industry

by teri coburn

At the best of times, producing a Québécois film is a risky business; at the worst, it can be suicidal — but it can be done. For a price.

Producers of **Les bons débarras**, Marcia Couëlle and Claude Godbout, of Les Productions Prisma Inc., paid it: \$57,000 out of the corporate pocket. Not to mention the months of stress prior to, during, and now, after the shoot. But with a little help from their friends, and a lot of faith in their film, they can almost sit back; for **Les bons débarras** has been selected to represent Canada in the competition at the Berlin Film Festival. They have also found themselves a distributor in Quebec, and one in Germany. The struggle is by no means over, but the worst of it may be; a qualified consolation, but a consolation nonetheless. What made them do it?

"It was really on the basis of Réjean

Ducharme's script that we got into the film," they explain to **Cinema Canada**. "It was an extraordinary script; one that far surpassed anything we had seen in Québécois cinema... If we had just read the storyline, or if it had been anyone of a number of other directors who had approached us with it, we probably wouldn't have been interested in producing it. But Francis' interpretation — the one he was able to give us verbally, that he was able to draw for us — was what interested us. He came to us because there had been a number of fiction films done here at Prisma; and he already knew what type of films we had made, and with what type of directors."

Unfortunately, Mankiewicz's timing might have been better. "In the fall of '77, when the script came to us, it was about the worst time we had seen in the last

decade of the industry to think about making a feature film in French. The films that we were bringing out then — low-budget films under \$200,000 — were risks; but at least the CFDC (Canadian Film Development Corp.), allowed them to recoup the private investment before the public money. By the time we began making **Les bons débarras** there were none of those 'guarantees', because the CFDC policy had changed."

Prisma consequently tried all of the classical methods of financing, and ended up with seventy-five percent of the \$602,000 budget covered by the CFDC and the Institut québécois du cinéma. "The Institut also came in right away with their additional cultural money. They can

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