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.
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, Andre Forcier and Jean-Guy Noel are now completing new features. First to be released is Mankiewicz's Les bons débarras (Good Riddance).

Winner of two Etrons 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 Quebec 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 aren't you 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

Joan Irving is a free-lance writer, and story editor with the Drama Unit, CBC Montreal.

Manon (Charlotte Laurier), angry with the world in Francis Mankiewicz's Les bons débarras.
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 collabora-
tion 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
deciders 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
perhaps 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 there is what I'm looking for
with those characters. It's a character.
They feel things come from the gut. Often
they don't reach the conscious level.
What drives the characters in Les bons
débarrass 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 drama-
tically things start happening.

There's something of the classical
tragedies in the film, though it's a modern
interpretation. 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
the way films are made and tend to forget
content. To me the fascination with tech­
nique 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 recon-
ciliation 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 alies de la terre, executive producer,
feature 90 min., directed by André Thé­
berge (N.F.B.)
Valentin, director, half-hour television
drama. Co-production Canada/France/
Switzerland.

1974
Proces criminel, director, half-hour educa-
tional drama (O.F.Q.)
Cause civile, director, half-hour educa-
tional drama (O.F.Q.)
Orientation, director, half-hour educa-
tional drama (O.F.Q.)

1975
Les vagues, writer, feature-length fiction
screenplay.

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

Expropriation, director, hour-long tele-
vision 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, education-
al 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 Sala
and Louise Roy) (Les Productions du
Verseau).

1978
Les bons débarras, director, feature 115
min. screenplay by Réjean Ducharme
(Les Productions Prisma).
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, reminded 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 offbeat 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 Françoise 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, 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 is 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, but it is 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 closer to the audience one day as well.

Les bons débarras

commerce vs. culture in a bastard industry
by teri coburn

At the best of times, producing a Quebecois 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 Couéille 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 Quebecois cinema... If we had just read the storyline, or if it had been anyone of a different interpretation — the one he was doing in Les bons débarras — then perhaps we would have been interested in producing it But Francis' interpretation was one he was able to give us verbally, that he was able to draw for us — what was 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 recuperate 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

Tori Coburn is a free-lance writer, and assistant to the editor of Cinema Canada in Montreal.