

They shoot, They score!



photo: Denise D'Amours

• The ACPAV core: front row, from left, Danny Chalifour, Denyse Benoît, Robert Vanherweghem, Bernadette Payeur, René Gueissaz, Florence Moureaux; back row, Hubert-Yves Rose, Marc Daigle, Marina Darveau, François Dupuis, Suzanne Castellino, Denise D'Amours

ACPAV's co-operative road to success

by David Sherman

It isn't so much that, at year's end, they had three features playing simultaneously on Montreal screens. Or that one of them, Paul Tana's *Caffè Italia*, won the L.E. Ouimet Award as the Quebec Critics choice of the best Quebec film for 1985. And it isn't that they are the only co-operative regularly funded by Telefilm, or the only co-op that sells to Radio-Canada.

It may even be curious that they have been producing films since the early '70s, and continued to crank out features and shorts through the pie-in-the-sky days of the tax-shelter when never has so much been produced by so many and seen by so few.

What is most striking about the Association co-opérative de productions audio-visuelles (ACPAV) is that here film is film, not product. Here, the vocabulary is steeped in phrases like 'integrity' and 'creativity' and 'freedom', not deals and financial packages.

"That's the spirit of the co-op — to serve the creative aspects," says director of *Les Bons Débarras* Francis Mankiewicz. "They're totally committed to the movie; to the ideal. It's an attitude that's rare."

Last year it produced six features, each under a million dollars. This year ACPAV will put together three or four more, with budgets estimated for each running between \$1-\$2 million.

The 1985 output and ambitions for '86 makes ACPAV one of the country's most prolific production houses, co-operative or otherwise. Yet few people,

especially outside Quebec, know anything about ACPAV, or who its members are, or what they've done. Nor, for that matter, do too many people in Canada know anything much about Canadian film co-ops.

Ask Ken Rosenberg of Telefilm's Toronto office about co-ops and he'll tell you he thinks they funded one in Newfoundland once. Ask about ACPAV and he says "I never heard of them."

But notoriety is not part of the script for this 15-year-old co-op. Sheltered on the second floor of what appears to be a converted car dealership, just a few hundred yards from the massive tower and blocks of studios of Maison Radio-Canada on windswept Dorchester Blvd. in Montreal's east end, the ACPAV offices are an oasis of tranquility in a industry usually rife with conflict.

Here no one is chewing their fingernails or swigging Maalox. No one is cursing the Americans, the Torontonians, Telefilm, or Garth Drabinsky.

Here the wall-to-wall carpets, the softened bleat of the Vantage phone system, and the quiet controlled conversations make the offices as inauspicious and unfrenzied as your insurance broker's.

Except here only three people earn staff salaries — a secretary, an administrator, and someone who looks after the increasingly complex books. Five producers work as freelancers as do the editors, technicians and directors, many of whom call the offices and editing rooms a second home. To make sure there is a next project, some invest their free time and own money between projects.

Their output may be prodigious but their existence remains obscure to all but the die-hard cinephile, in part be-

cause the *auteur* concept is not big at ACPAV.

"It's not a place for individualists," says administrator Bernadette Payeur, who started with the co-op at its inception, working as a secretary. Today she produces (for eg., *La Femme de l'hôtel*) as well as helps hold the place together with what she describes as "tolerance and respect, patience for the ideas and opinions of others."

This is filmmaking by committee. An administrative council of seven plods through the 100 or so projects offered them a year, rejecting 95 per cent. There are 19 voting members and 39 participating members. It is the council that will decide whether to pursue a specific project or not and their door remains open to all and sundry with a script in hand.

If a proposal overcomes the various hurdles, it then becomes the responsibility of one of the co-op's five producers. It is often a lengthy process.

Says Payeur, "Some found the going too slow and left to set-up their own companies. Those who didn't have the same philosophy, the same goals, didn't stay."

If there is a philosophy behind the co-op's prolific production, few there are willing to define it. Its ambition is obviously to make successful films, but the rhetoric and political fire that fueled their foundation during the stormy days of the not-so-quiet nationalism of the late '60s and early '70s, years before the Parti Québécois took over the reins in Quebec in '76, has given way to a cool reluctance to rock the boat and a keen determination to bring the film in on-time and on-budget.

But in the early years, ACPAV members didn't hesitate to dump heavily on

the NFB, Radio-Canada, the CFDC, distributors and theatre owners alike. In those days Roger Frappier, one of the founders who later went on to a stormy stint at the NFB in Montreal, would complain that after distributors and theatre-owners had shaved their cut from ticket sales, the co-op was left with only the barest of bones.

"For me," he said, "nationalization of the theatres is the only answer... We need co-operative distribution, exhibition, everything. The only answer is if Quebec becomes an independent and socialist state."

Ironically, ACPAV achieved solvency long before an independent Quebec. Today producer Marc Sabourin says many at ACPAV care little for philosophy or politics, although the ideal of film over profit remains.

"The spirit of the '70s continues to dominate with the pragmatism of the '80s," says Sabourin.

Making movies '80s-style means movies with money from Telefilm and the Société générale du cinéma du Québec, the province's Telefilm equivalent. And financing from the agencies means making films for TV.

"TV looks for common denominators," says producer Marc Daigle. "I dream of a television that will take risks; that will go forward in different directions."

But neither, Canadian TV nor theatres can supply the revenues to meet the escalating costs of making movies. And the increasing numbers of U.S. or French shoots using Quebec technicians and taking advantage of the low-rent Canadian dollar have inflated prices for crews and services. The next few years will be critical, says Daigle, as the co-op begins to test the waters of

high-budget productions, forcing it in to the inevitable search for new sources of money.

Ownership of theatres, considered salvation in the '70s, has turned out to be wishful thinking. The co-op tried renting theatres, but revenues were less than ideal.

"Economically, theatres are not viable," says Daigle. "There are very few examples of films that can justifiably be made only for theatres. It's become a privileged way to see a film."

So with Mankiewicz slated to direct two films in '86, each with a budget of close to \$2 million, the co-op is beginning to think in terms of European co-productions, European pre-sales, and even English versions to try and crack the Canadian and U.S. markets, though Payeur admits ACPAV's knowledge of and access to English markets is limited.

The expansion of budgets and outlook marks a third phase in the evolution of ACPAV, says Daigle whom many credit as the mainstay of ACPAV's success.

It all began with kitchen table meetings in an apartment near Parc Lafontaine in the city's east end.

In 1969, when the CFDC granted \$50,000 to Quebec, Ontario and Vancouver filmmakers, the Parc Lafontaine knights of the kitchen table already had members who were experienced in filmmaking.

Many members of the Quebec kitchen sink crowd had become disillusioned with the bureaucracies of the NFB and Radio-Canada. With the CFDC eager to promote regional filmmaking, a proposal for a co-op was presented providing lists of members to reassure the federal government film development Corporation that the coop idea was representative of Quebec's film family.

Telefilm's Carole Langlois recalls: "The people in the west wanted the CFDC to form a jury to select film projects. In Ontario they wanted money to finish films that had run out of funds. In Quebec they wanted to form a co-op."

The CFDC approved the concept and the budget, mostly for equipment and office space - two top floors of an old mansion on St. Urbain and Sherbrooke streets in downtown Montreal, or what one member called "a free city in the middle of Montreal." The co-op bought a tape recorder, a camera and an editing table. But it wasn't until the next year, when the CFDC kicked in another \$50,000 that ACPAV secured a Steenbeck and released a first full-length feature - Mireille Dansereau's *La Vie rêvée*. However, the successful effort - it won two Etrogs (now Genies) at the Canadian Film Awards - was to leave a bitter taste with the more radical elements of the co-op. *La Vie rêvée* played for seven weeks in Montreal and grossed \$20,000, but the co-op itself didn't earn enough to pay either for the film's publicity on promotion expenses.

The next few years went up and down (see box). Lots of shorts and about three features a year (with the exception of '75) until '77, when they fell into what Daigle calls "the dark period."

Coincidentally, Daigle was on sabbatical when the tax-shelter frenzy hit. Cultural reflection took a back seat to banking 'stars' in questionable productions to provide a haven from the tax man for the disposable income of doc-

tors, lawyers and dentists. The co-op had trouble securing financing and in three years managed only three films.

It was time for a change. Says Payeur: "We had to ask ourselves what kind of service we were providing. We were offering a service for producers - not an equipment centre."

So the co-op consolidated its services, trimmed its membership list, emphasizing production and script development over technical assistance. It began to look to television as a way to keep afloat.

"The spirit was of sharing, a democratic decision-making process," says Langlois. "When you went there, you worked for very little money. Sometimes the directors would re-invest their money. They believed in what they were doing."

With the energy redirected into production, story development and using television as an outlet, the co-op rebounded with three features in 1980. Democratic though it was, responsibility fell to each producer to bring in his film on-time, on-budget and ready for market.

"You had no choice but to succeed or you were out in the street," says Sabourin of the freelance producer's lot.

By North American standards, ACPAV's efforts are modest, or, as one Quebec distributor terms them, "marginal." The films are offbeat without being radical or esoteric, yet conventional

enough to earn coveted government assistance and television exposure.

The co-op's open-door policy that draws directors like Paul Tana (*Caffè Italia*), Gilles Carle (*Ô Picasso*) or Francis Mankiewicz means a constant transfusion of new ideas and styles, bringing the co-op a renewable source of inspiration and prestige.

Adds Mankiewicz: "They've developed a great deal of responsibility in the eyes of institutions."

The diversity inherent in drawing new blood, mixed with the stability they've established by keeping people like Daigle and Payeur for most of its 15 years and their ability to bring films in on-budget, has made them a safe bet for middle-of-the-road institutions like Radio-Canada. Says SRC's director of outside production, Andréanne Bournival: "It's the only co-op that works with Radio-Canada. There's no boss so they're each responsible for their own projects."

For the national network of often struggling alternative co-ops, ACPAV is "almost a link between alternative co-ops and legitimate production houses," says the Independent Film and Video Alliance's Sylvia Poirier. "They have credibility."

Freedom from "the bosses" and disillusionment with the institutions, the same sentiments that helped forge the co-op more than a decade-and-a-half ago, has made each ACPAV producer

his/her own boss, forced to bear the weight not only of the film but of the co-op's respectability. More irony because their success now has them working hand-in-hand with the same institutions that spawned the initial disenchantment.

Soft-spoken, modest to the point of infuriating, preppie in dress, the anti-thesis of the movie producer, is Marc Daigle, 38, who many credit as being the calm force of reason through the sometimes painful evolution from revolutionary filmforce to middle-of-the-road co-operative production house.

"For me, Daigle is ACPAV," says Radio-Canada's Bournival. "He's the boss, but he refuses to accept that role."

The producer behind three of the six features produced in '85, Daigle remains the consummate freelancer, working from project to project.

Producer or co-producer in 11 of the 27 features ACPAV has produced, he has the respect, credibility and experience to move outside the co-op umbrella.

Yet, he says he has no desire for independent production, and outside of undefined plans for another escape for "re-generation," Daigle is quite content to stay with ACPAV on Dorchester Blvd.

Sabourin calls him "the principal leader... a determining factor in the health of ACPAV."

And Mankiewicz agrees. "He's very persistent in a low-key way," says Mankiewicz. "He works hard, he respects deadlines. You can count on him."

But Daigle attributes the compliments to simple perseverance.

"I've been here a long time," he says. "I know the files."

If you push a little he'll relent and call himself the lifeguard, someone to lean on when the going gets rough. He's a team player, he says, enjoying the dynamics of group discussion, finding inspiration in the people who come and go, in an industry and province where change is a constant.

"The co-op changed, society changed, the people changed, the public changed," he says.

Daigle's low-key approach has served him well. Politics never having been a motivation, he's adapted easier than most to the changing winds of political thought and government intervention. His motivation was and continues to be making film.

"Many left," he says, "because they could not make the political statements they wanted."

He does not produce to exert control, he says. His role is that of a guarantor rather than a creator, making sure "the production is as interesting as possible, as open as possible, as accessible as possible."

Says Mankiewicz: "He leaves the creative aspects to the director and writer. He lets people do what they want. He cares a lot about the film he's making. Most care about the deal."

Like the co-op, Daigle quietly adapts to the constant change with efficiency and determination, undeterred by distribution inequities, government policy, or changing social climates.

For ACPAV, filmmaking has become a way of life, a sign of maturity in a fledgling industry. As Payeur says, it's a way of life, an occasional obsession, but not the end of the world.

ACPAV Filmography

1972

La Vie rêvée 35mm, col, 90 mins. d. Mireille Dansereau p. Guy Bergeron

Isis au 8 16mm, col, b & w, 65, p.man./d. Alain Chartrand

1973

Tu brûles... tu brûles 16mm, b&w, 90, d. Jean-Guy Noël p. Marc Daigle

Une Nuit en Amérique 35mm, col, 93, d. Jean Chabot p. Guy Bergeron

Noël et Juliette, 35mm, b&w, 90, d. Michel Bouchard, p. Marc Daigle, René Gueissaz

1974

Bulldozer, 35mm, col, 91, d. Pierre Harel p. Bernard Lalonde

L'Infonie inachevée, 35mm, col, 90, stereo, d. Roger Frappier p. Marc Daigle

La Piastra 16mm, col, 90, d. Alain Chartrand p. Bernard Lalonde

1976

Ti-cul Tougas 35mm, col, 83, d. Jean-Guy Noël p. Marc Daigle, René Gueissaz

L'Absence 35mm, col, 90, d. Brigitte Sauriol p. André Forcier, p. Bernard Lalonde

'77-'78-'79

Le Québec est au monde, 16mm, col, 85, d. Hugues Mignault p. Bernard Lalonde

'74/'79

Vie d'ange, 16mm, col, 85, d. Pierre Harel p. Nicole Frechette, Bernard Lalonde, René Gueissaz

1980

Les Grands enfants, 16mm, col, 90 d. Paul Tana p. Marc Daigle

On a été élevé dans l'eau salée, 16mm, col, 67, d. Hugues Tremblay p. Roger Cantin

Voleurs de job, 16mm, col, 67 d. Tahani Rached p. Bernard Payeur

1981

Le Goût du miel (doc) 16mm, col, 55 d. Marcel G. Sabourin p. René Gueissaz

Les Candidats 16mm, col, 60, d. Claude Laflamme p. Roger Cantin, François Dupuis

1983

Lucien Brouillard 16mm, col, 90, d. Bruno Carrière p. René Gueissaz, Marc Daigle

1984

La Femme de l'hôtel, 16mm, col, 90, d. Léa Pool p. Bernardette Payeur, Marc Daigle

1985

Le Dernier havre, 35mm, col, 90, d. Denyse Benoit p. Marc Daigle

Les Limites du ciel, 16mm, col, 90, d. Yvan Dubuc p. Marcel G. Sabourin, Marc Daigle

Les Vidangeurs, 16mm, col, 80 min. d. Camille Coudari, René Gueissaz

1985

Caffè Italia, 16mm, col, 81, d. Paul Tana p. Marc Daigle

O Picasso, 16mm, col, 80, d. Gilles Carle p. François Dupuis, Marc Daigle

Elvis Gratton (Le King des kings), 35mm, col, 90, d. Pierre Falardeau, Julien Poulin p. Bernadette Payeur