

# REVIEWS

Zale Dalen's

## The Hounds of Notre Dame

Canadian filmmakers have often had a weakness for rambunctious, larger-than-life central characters, the kind of people who normally inhabit *Reader's Digest* columns on "My Most Unforgettable Character." From *The Rowdyman* to *Outrageous*, such characters have been the focus of attention, and have lived up to uneventful plots simply by being there. At first glance, *The Hounds of Notre Dame* (produced by Fil Fraser, directed by Zale Dalen) looks as if it falls into the same mold. "Pere" Athol Murray is a priest who chain-smokes, drinks whiskey, swears moderately (never more than a "goddam" or a transliterated "muckers"), reminisces about reading St. Augustine, coaches a hockey team at an impoverished school in Saskatchewan, and says unfashionable things about the C.C.F. The Rowdyman Rides West.

But it's not quite as simple as that. The real subject of *The Hounds of Notre Dame* is not so much the renegade priest but — as the title suggests — the community built up around him. Most of the minor characters regard Pere's blustering eccentricities with humorous indulgence, and quietly go about their business unperturbed. He dominates the community, but it also has an existence apart from him; the climactic events of the plot — one boy's decision to leave, and another's to stay — take place independently of him. The film is emphatically not an exercise in idolatry.

Most of the actors contribute to this feeling with a nice sense of underplaying. Only David Ferry as Fryer, the "new boy" who has to be initiated into the community, is guilty of overstating his reactions, and hamming up his role. At the other extreme, Frances Hyland underplays so much that you scarcely notice she's there — not at all a normal reaction to this actress. The dynamic Lenore Zann is largely wasted in a superfluous and underdeveloped role. Even Genie award-winner Tom Peacocke, in the central showcase role, restrains himself as much as the part allows, and his finest moments are quiet and private rather than public and ranting. The real stars of the film are the motley assortment of boys who make up the "Hounds," a collection of marvelously real and expressive faces.

The major strength of the film lies in Ken Mitchell's tightly structured and intelligently written screenplay. Rather than try to cover all of the historical Murray's checkered career, Mitchell

compresses events into a classic 24-hour span, beginning with a political rally (at which Pere says all the wrong things) and continuing through the next day (the official rebuke from the bishop, played — mainly with his eyebrows — by Barry Morse) to the climactic hockey game and the inevitable blizzard. This compression does at times produce some implausibilities — Fryer passes through successive stages of rebellion, humiliation, acceptance, and leadership all in about 12 hours — but it serves its dramatic purposes admirably. Murray is seen in relation to the historical period (it is 1940, and on the radio Mackenzie King is appealing to the young men to defend Christian civilization), to his political views (the C.C.F. are atheist socialists, but the Nazis burn books), to his educational — ahem — methods (if boys don't like poetry, box their ears and recite Hopkins), and to his foundation in religious faith ("Gang," he says cheerfully in the middle of a Latin mass, "it's a great thing to hold God in your hands").

It would perhaps be expecting too much for a film set in Saskatchewan to do without a blizzard scene, or to restrict itself to less than two outhouse jokes. But the atmosphere of small Western towns is quite splendidly evoked in the hockey game sequence, with its fiercely partisan crowd, its

fumblingly inept but enthusiastic play, and Coach Murray ringing the changes on inspirational dressing-room pep talks.

Zale Dalen's direction is largely unobtrusive and efficient. As in his earlier film, *Skip Tracer*, he keeps the action moving at a clean, crisp pace. If *Hounds* doesn't quite have the same dark overtones as *Skip Tracer*, that may be largely attributed to producer Fil Fraser's desire to appeal to a more family-oriented audience. Which is not to say that *Hounds of Notre Dame* is sentimental pap. Dalen's fast direction, combined with Mitchell's tight script, avoids all the perils of cliché. (Well, most of them.) Much of *Hounds* is indeed predictable, and the ending has no dramatic surprises to pull out of the hat. The new boy does *not* turn out to be a hockey star who saves the team from defeat; and no one gets lost in the blizzard. (The blizzard scene does have some unfortunate voice-over moralizing, punching home the point for those too dumb to get it.) Ron Orioux's photography is elegant and, again, understated: I only remember one grain elevator.

All in all, *The Hounds of Notre Dame* is a very pleasant, well-made, unpretentious, thoroughly likable film. It doesn't make cosmic statements, it isn't trying to be The Great Canadian

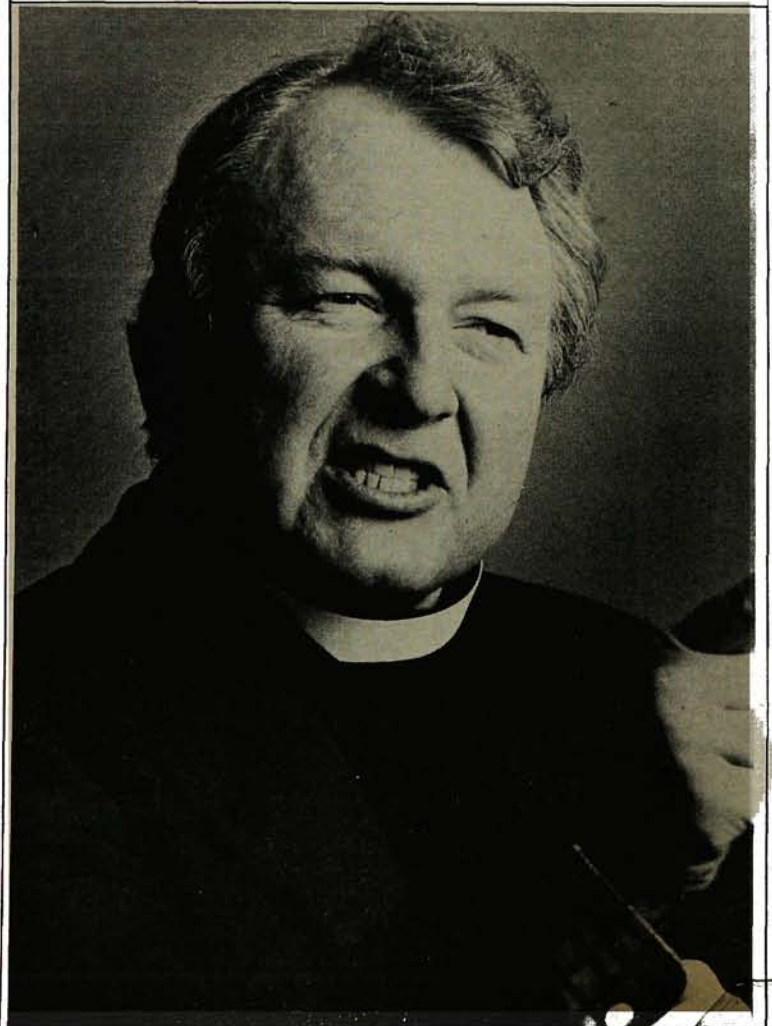
Movie, it's not an earth-shaking contribution to culture. But it is the kind of film that needs to be made, the kind of film on which a genuinely Canadian cinema can model itself more profitably than on the spurious sparkle of "Hollywood North."

Stephen Scobie

## The Hounds of Notre Dame

d. Zale Dalen p. Fil Fraser p. man. Eda Lishman p. acct. Linda Jeffery p. co-ord. Nives Lever unit man. Randy Cheveldave a.d. John Board (1st), Libby Bowden (2nd), Deb LeFaive (3rd) cont. Donna Wong Juliana d.o.p. Ron Orioux asst. cam. Ian Preston (1st), Larry Todd (2nd) gaf. Neil McCauley best boy Cody Emslie 1st elect. Charles Konowal key grip Shelley Degan asst. grip Bill Mills, Ian Reid art d. Richard Hudolin. Jack Hudolin (asst) carp. Dee Embree, Tom Scheitel, David Ackerman, Earl Dean, Barrie Pollock set dec./props. Carmen Milenkovic asst. props. Shirley Inget, Laurie Mang, Colin Gregory, Alan Stutchbury cost. des. Wendy Partridge ward. asst. Bhabara Borycki, Randy Fraser seamstress Vonnie Metz make-up Rita Steinmann, Lynn Copeman ed. Tony Lower mus. Maurice Marshall sd. Larry Sutton, Paul Coombe, Mike Hoogenboom sd. ed. Jim Hopkins boom Brock Stevens 2nd unit cam. Gary Seib craftsers. Cindy Dyck transp. capt. Alfred Borbely drivers Jim Mountstephen, Rod Kempa p. guaran. Rob Iveson cast. Bette Chadwick pub. Jami Drake typist Marg Germann l.p. Thomas Peacocke, Frances Hyland, Barry Morse, Lawrence Reese, Lenore Zann, David Ferry, Phil Ridley, Dale Heibein, Paul Bougie, Rob MacLean, Bill Sorenson, Bill Morton, Matt Keegan, Mike Bova, John Sexsmith, Bill Ashley, Jim Brock, Ginny Bast, Ken Kramer, Herb Lehann, Frank Germann, Ed MacLag, Elizabeth Moulton, Carol Frost, Terry Vogt, Phil Holden, Bill Droeski, Frank O'Malley, Chris Kambeitz, Barry Burns p.c. Pere Film Productions (1980) col. 35mm dist. Pan-Canadian Film Distributors Inc. Running time 100 min.

● No pussy-footing around for *Hounds'* invincible Pere Murray (Thomas Peacocke)



### Key to Credit Abbreviations

p.c. production company p. producer/production d. director d.o.p. director of photography sc. script/screenplay ed. editing/editor mus. music sd. rec./re-rec. sound recording/re-recording a.d. assistant director asst. assistant loc. man. location manager ward. wardrobe cost. des. costume design set dec. set decoration cam. op. camera operator elec. electrician carp. carpenter special ex. special effects acct. accountant compt. comptroller sec. secretary l.p. leading players pub. publicity col. colour dist. distributor.

Marty Gross'

## The Lovers' Exile

Classical Japanese art contests the assumptions of most of Western art. It contests the relationship of illusion to reality, of speech to gesture, of intelligence to emotion, and of art to work. In the early days of cinema, for example, screenings in Japan were conducted in a most unusual way. Rather than enclosing spectators in a darkened room and fixating their attention on a luminous screen, Japanese "cinemas" consisted of a series of tatami mats in front of which was a banshi — a professional narrator who told the story of the film. To one side of the banshi was the screen, to the other were the projectors. The attention of the spectators was thus divided in three: in front of them was the verbal text as animated by the banshi; to one side was the visual text as it existed in the film; and to the other side was the apparatus that made the pictures possible.

Film screenings were thus hierarchical and non-illusionist. It was the banshi that the spectators came to hear, not to see the actors on the screen. In fact, so strong were these banshi that they managed to delay the introduction of talking pictures to Japan for over three years. For the talking picture necessitated the demise of the banshi and of the unique conditions of viewing

● "Chubei" brings an ancient tale to life in *The Lovers' Exile*



films which characterized the early days in Japan.

So an interest in bunraku need not be exotic. It can be theoretical as well. With the Bunraku puppet theatre, the spectators' attention is also divided in three. In front of them are the puppets — all three-foot dolls of a remarkable expressivity. Behind each of the principal puppets are three puppeteers who are fully visible to the audience (and while we can see the face of the chief puppeteer, his two assistants are masked). Finally, to one side of the puppet stage, there are two musicians — again a narrator who is also a singer (this time called a *yoruri*) and a *samisen* player whose strummed punctuation to the drama always seems a little out-of-sync, following the action slightly, as if trying to slow it down.

By showing us all these details, *The Lovers' Exile* by Marty Gross is both a documentary on the Bunraku theatre and a filmed version of a famous bunraku play — "Meido no Hikyaku," which some people will know as the famous film by Mizoguchi, *Chikamatsu Monogatari* (*The Crucified Lovers*, 1954). Furthermore, in his own filmic art, Gross manages to duplicate and intensify the formal properties of the original bunraku drama. Working mostly in medium-shots and with a few long-shots, Gross has developed this division of three. The frozen faces of the puppets contrast with the impassive faces of the *yoruri* to whom Gross, at key moments, cunningly cuts away. For at no point in the film can we see where the *yoruri* are in relation to the puppets or, indeed, where the different sets are in relation to one another. If early Japanese film screenings displaced the spectators from their conventional relationship to the screen, so too in *The Lovers' Exile*, is the relationship of the spectators to the actions they are watching similarly held at bay.

Moreover, in the course of the film, we see three different *yoruri* and three different *samisen* players. But (at least to Western ears), the sound remains the same. Thus the art of Chikamatsu and of the Bunraku theatre is eternal while individual performers might change. Similarly, romantic passion is eternal

while individual victims of it are destroyed or fade away.

Like classical Japanese art, *The Lovers' Exile* is less synthetic than analytic. The different parts that affect us are kept separate in the mind. While we might be viscerally moved by the extraordinary dexterity of the *yoruri*, our attention may be engaged by an appreciation of gesture — of the simulated gesture of a puppet's head bowed over and twitching with grief, or of feet so skillfully manipulated that we are almost unconscious of the fact that they are walking on air. As Roland Barthes has put it:

*Bunraku does not aim to "animate" an inanimate object so as to bring a piece of the body, a shred of man, to life, all the while keeping for its vocation as a "part." It is not the simulation of the body which Bunraku seeks, it is — if this can be said — the body's tangible abstraction.*

If classical Japanese theatre, including the Bunraku theatre, is held in check by the strong presence of verticals and horizontals, so in *The Lovers' Exile* Gross intensifies these restraints by masking all his action by a frame within the frame. This allows him to place his subtitles in the bottom frame beneath the picture, allowing the represented image to retain its full integrity. This leads me to the one, pedantic reservation I have about this uniquely valuable, this formerly delicate, this extraordinary Japanese/Canadian film: if Gross had put a slight tinge of pink or yellow in the titles, the experience of reading them might have caused less pain to the eyes.

Peter Harcourt ●

### The Lovers' Exile

d. Marty Gross d.o.p. Kojo Okazaki, Hideaki Kobayashi sc. Marty Gross adapted from *Meido no Hikyaku* (1711) by Monzaemon Chikamatsu dialog./subtitles Donald Richie, Marty Gross ed. Marty Gross mus. superv. Toru Takemitsu mus. ed. Carl Zittler sd. rec. Hideo Nishizaki p. Marty Gross p.a./translator Toshiko Adilman p.a. in Japan Ryu Yasutake stills Ian Buruma stage settings Kazuo Sugimoto p.c. Marty Gross Film Productions Inc. col. 35mm running time 90 min. dist. New Cinema

Sophie Bissonnette  
Martin Duckworth  
Joyce Rock's

### A Wives' Tale

*A Wives' Tale* is a 73-minute film about the women who supported the 1978 strike of the Sudbury miners against Inco. It is the most ambitious labour film to be made in Canada in recent years, certainly the most ambitious made in English-speaking Canada since the early days of Evelyn and Lawrence Cherry and their agrarian populist films of the '40's in Regina.

A bilingual film, released first in French in Montreal, *A Wives' Tale* is very much in the tradition of militant Quebec cinema — the executive producer was Arthur Lamothe, whose film *Le mépris n'aura qu'un temps* (*Hell No Longer*) remains a landmark of radical documentary. However, unlike most Quebec militant films, and unlike most labour-oriented documentaries made in English in Canada and elsewhere, *A Wives' Tale* is pre-eminently, self-consciously, happily and proudly a feminist film, insisting on the priority of women's experience and women's wide-ranging voices and visions as its perspective on the strike.

The Inco strike made labour history in Canada — it was originally provoked by the company to dispose of a nickel stockpile, on the evident assumption that a few months on picket lines would deplete the union treasury and the energies of the workers, so that they would crawl back to work whenever Inco offered some paltry concessions. This did not happen. The strikers held out for eight and a half months, until they were offered a contract that made the strike worthwhile. The main reason they were able to hold out for so long was the support given by Wives Support the Strike. The Wives raised money for special needs, organized a Christmas party that gave out 10,000 toys, held suppers, sales, ran a thrift shop, developed a clear analysis of the reasons for the strike, and gave financial, emotional and physical support which proved to be invaluable.

The most important accomplishment of the women who organized in Sudbury, as their experience is presented by the film, was the validation of the work women do, the skills women have, and the right of women to speak on their own behalf. The most difficult challenge for the filmmakers, aside from the usual impossible hardships faced by radical artists here and everywhere, was to make this self-validation interesting and accessible on film.

Mines and foundries make wonderful material for film documentarians — the colours and sounds of the molten metal, the awesome machinery, the physical courage of the workers daring the fury of the elements... How then to move from this audio-visual spectacle to the subject matter of *A Wives' Tale* — two or three women arguing around a kitchen table about how far they can press their desire to be kept informed about strike matters and have their say about issues which directly affect their lives?

One solution found by the filmmakers was simply to juxtapose these disparate elements: near the end of the film, when the strike is over, one of the women is shown doing her laundry, "helped" by her toddling child. In a very low-key scene we see her alone in the basement with the child and the washing machine. Cut to the most visually

dramatic sequence of the film, at the mines, ending with a shot of molten metal pouring in a golden stream down a hillside from great vats tipped against the indigo evening sky. A woman's voice, humming, connects this scene of Men and their Machines back to the familial reality which makes the drama possible. Cut to an early morning scene of a miner eating breakfast, a woman talking about her life since the strike ended six months earlier, how she tries to get out some evenings to see other women.

Another way of involving the viewer with the issues of the film is to allow individual wives to speak for themselves, not as "experts" but as witnesses to their own growth. Towards the end of the film a younger wife talks about how her involvement with the strike changed her: "I'm not scared to go out by myself any more." Whereas before, even when entering an elevator she was terrified that someone would talk to her and she would have nothing to say. When she says this, we've already seen her speaking in a crowded auditorium, speaking of being a miner's daughter, and a miner's wife, and a miner's mother.

Cut from the young woman in her rocking chair to a picket line for another strike. The Inco strike is over, but some of the women in Wives Support the Strike have formed support groups that now go out to organize in their community. The picketing women form a circle, as women have formed circles throughout the ages, sewing circles, healing circles, witch's circles. I remember the words of a song by Anne Sylvestre, sung earlier in the film by Pauline Julien at a benefit for the strikers — singing of women who have borne and suffered and buried men throughout time, she pays tribute to "une sorcière comme les autres."

The heart of the film is the growth of these women, these potential witches, picketers, organizers, mothers, wives, movers and shakers. They argue, they yell bitterly at each other. An older Scots woman, paying homage to her husband's "thirrrty years of serrrrvice," announces that she will abide by his decision, whatever it is. And what of her own thirty years of service to him? This is my question, but it is raised, in other ways, by other women in the film.

One woman says firmly, "My husband is the one who works and brings home the paycheque, but I'm the one who balances his bank account." Another who has been very active in the group announces "I'm not for the strike, I'm for my husband... and if my husband decides to go back to work, then fuck the strike!" Other women applaud. Cathy, one of the thirty women on strike (out of 11,700 strikers) retorts, "It's not your strike, it's everybody's... this is history in the making."

A number of feminist documentaries have used historical material (photographs, old footage, oral testimony) to pay tribute to active women of the past (*Great Grand Mother*, *The Lady from Grey County*, *Union Maids*, *Babies and Banners*, *Rosie the Riveter*). *A Wives' Tale* also uses this sort of archival material, to a very different effect, as it serves to validate the work and experience of women as working-class wives and mothers, and it brings their rich and untapped history directly into the present, showing the unbreakable connection between working-class struggle and feminism.

The opening sequence of the film moves from a scene in the mine to an overview of the city of Sudbury. A woman's voiceover offers factual in-