

Claude Jutra's By Design

Inevitably one comes to realize that the vacuous nature of Jutra's newest film, *By Design*, must also reflect his emotional and artistic alienation in English Canada. The film exhibits a faint imprint of his earlier work, but his use of the medium clearly indicates that the shift which has occurred in his own mind, and in cinematic terms, is leading to the Waterloo of a creative artist. There are few moments where Jutra succeeds in transforming an otherwise unsuccessful venture into a meaningful, touching film.

If we remember that Jutra once said, in 1973, speaking of his and others' decision to boycott the Canadian Film Awards: "We are intent on asserting there are two cultures. We have not the same goals, styles, techniques or spirit. You cannot put these two under one roof," we can also better understand what keeps Jutra in Toronto and points west (quoted in Martin Knelman, "Claude Jutra in Exile," *Saturday Night*, March 1977). With the scripts and offers that float about in Toronto, Jutra can keep working (something he can't do in Montreal, due to the industry's stagnation in Quebec), and jump into the North American mainstream. Culture, though, goes deeper than language.

Skill and dedication to his work — whether the acclaimed *Ada*, *Dreamspeaker* or the ill-fated *Surfacing* — are, I'm sure, his utmost concern. However, his motivation for working with an issues as mental health (as explored in *Ada* and *Dreamspeaker*) is very different from what, according to Knelman, people like Jutra and Geneviève Bujold were doing a decade ago in *Kamouraska*, "dramatizing things they knew in their bones — the exciting intensity is lost when talented people are forced to

work on subjects more remote from their own lives."

Understandably *Surfacing* did not work out simply because Jutra had little control over the script, and finally the music and editing work were redone by the producer. But the whole question of his work, in English Canada or anywhere, is a gnawing one.

In another interview, he stated he dreams to make one film a year in Quebec. For now, he has work in English Canada — such as *By Design*.

In the film's opening minutes one senses that Jutra's approach is ill-conceived and badly executed. In the lead scene, he awkwardly introduces his main characters in a sequence which is disturbing in its juxtapositioning of sharp, upbeat titles — bright orange, and electric blue — pulsating title song, and waterfront setting. The camera moves, capturing birds on a pier. It follows two women walking through this setting. Then it cuts to a different locale, a static warehouse interior.

As the film evolves it becomes obvious that *By Design* is lacking in vibrance and clarity. It never picks up a stride, and its ambivalence in direction, where Jutra wants it to go, is the film's most serious problem. The film cannot be appreciated as a whole. For instance, the punk titles and raucous soundtrack of the opening do not mix with a later scene in which the camera moves aimlessly in the darkness, finally entering a cabin bathed in golden light, where the two lovers talk about conceiving a baby.

Any attentiveness to character or subject is spare. Rapid shifts in mood, the contrast between soft visuals and hard

— where faces and bodies are set against cold, stark, environments — drain the film of any cohesiveness. Any intelligent development in the storyline is often overrun by an insensitive scene which follows, or the introduction of a character who appears for one brief scene, never to be seen on screen again. It is impossible to discern the filmmaker's intent — as if Jutra himself was unsure of what he wanted to fashion with this film. Nor does he seem to recognize his own uncertainty of vision. He has been interviewed saying that his movie expressed something deep within his soul. But the film's postures and mannerism (with one exception) exhibit a style so devoid of soul that one is left saddened by the empty promise implicit in his remark.

The film focusses on two women — fashion designers, lovers — who choose to have a child. The director has chosen to emphasize none of these issues directly. Rather, one speculates, he has padded the film to reach a larger audience. For example, the essence of femininity is seen as a wall of blown-up photos of breasts, expressed as "a breast, rhythmic — give it a name... TITS TRANSCENDENT." This line drew a chuckle and a snort from the audience. But why resort to such cheap exploitation when, in other sections, the actors seriously suggest that they are on the threshold of pain and pleasure? Could Jutra not have extended the possibilities of one or the other to create a more intensive argument?

Other shots relay chronic, overbearing stiltedness which further cloud the film's vision. As the fashion models appear,

the camera goes 'to the crotch, and closes in from below. The world of high fashion, we are lead to believe, portrays women without feeling. This is reinforced in that even the designers' creations which the models are exhibiting have no flair, no meaning.

The man viewing the fashion parade has a tired expression on his face. The 'look' which is repeated many times over in the film is best termed exhausted. The dialogue is banal. The words, which seem to spring from situation comedy, fall flat.

These tatters — movement and sound — appear strung together. Perhaps Jutra felt that to counterpoise these images would strengthen his central idea, but, ultimately, the movie's images say nothing startling, expressive, or even progressive.

At his best, Jutra is capable of sensitively integrating his characters within their settings and circumstances. But in *By Design* only a single, brief close-up of the two lead actors conveys their sense of love for each other. Instead, the film is saturated with vulgar, inconsequential details, lacks good pacing, and serves more to mock his actors than present them effectively.

If the film was to have been a bold, inventive, humorous and touching tale, it is instead a completely forgettable experience. Lacking a coherent structure and tone, the film only serves up a mish-mash of moral overtones and misgivings.

Philip Szporer ●

● Mixing controversial designs in a controversial movie, Patty Duke Astin sits and listens as Sara Botsford plots the course.



Robert Ménard's Une journée en taxi

Chalk up some points for dramatic irony. Just as the Applebert report set off another round of collective hand-wringing, an honest-to-God case in point for the viability of Canadian culture, *Une journée en taxi* (A Day in a Taxi), tiptoed sideways into Montreal theatres, did lousy at the box office and disappeared — all this within a scant three weeks and despite the warm critical embrace offered the film by the French press. Fairness or lack of it is quite beside the point: the fact is that Robert Ménard delivered the goods, and that hardly anyone here bothered to pick them up. Score zip for the home team.

This delicate, positively luminous little movie belies Ménard's status as a neophyte feature director because it flows with the graceful self-assurance you'd attribute to a seasoned filmmaker. And in a way, that's precisely what he is. Several years as a feature producer and a ten-year wait before his first shot at directing seem to have primed him for a glowing debut. *Une journée en taxi* serves up the special blend of emotional resonance and stylistic clarity that characterizes our best films, and then goes one better: this Franco-Canadian co-production is at once so very Quebecois and so blissfully international that it slides into that special 'movie-movie' category, the kind of film that fills a particular cultural 'context' chock full of universal touchstones. It's open to anyone who wants to take a look.

This is a 'road movie' in a small-scale, very literal way, and it's faithful to the genre. The unlikely fellow-travellers

BY DESIGN d. Claude Jutra p. man. Hugh Spencer-Phillips a.d. Don Granbery (1st), Derek Gardner (2nd), Scott Mathers (3rd) p.a. Catherine Leiterman loc. man. Fitch Cady cont. Monique Champagne p. sec. Anne Mathisen (Vancouver), Yvette Cutrara (Toronto) p. acct. Bernard Ross, Sandra Palmer (asst.) d.o.p. Jean Boffetty cam. op. Peter McLennan asst. cam. Tim Sale (1st), Phil Linzey (2nd) stills Alan Zenuk art d. Reuben Freed, Graeme Murray (asst.), Jim Erickson (asst.) art dept. trainee Lorrie Russell props Wayne McLaughlin set dress. Kimberley Richardson (dept. hd.), Sandy Arthur (best boy), Annamarie Corbett, Sean Kirby, Jennifer Hinde (trainee) painter-trainee Sandra Fox ward. Trish Keating (head), Linda Langdon (asst.), Tiah Monaghan (asst.), Phillip Clarkson (asst.) make-up Phyllis Newman hair Salli Bailey gaffer Don Saari best boy Leonard Wolfe elec. David Grinstead gen. op. Barrett J. Reid, Ray McCurrach key grip Roger Cadieux, Thomas (Paddy) Holleywell (asst.) dolly grip Dave Gordon grip Alan Campbell, Jim Hurford craft service Maureen Young sd. Larry Sutton boom Graham Crowell transp. co-ord. Brian Boyer drivers George Grieve (capt.), David Bowe (co-capt.), Bill McCurrach, Jan Boyer, Peter Lassen, Andrew Neville, Scott Irvine, Danny Johnson construc. man. Barry Brolly scenic artist Floyd Gillis d.o.p. (2nd unit) John Seale cam. op. (2nd unit) Rod Parkhurst cont. (2nd unit) Pattie Robertson gaf. (2nd unit) John Barley p.a. (2nd unit) Tom Braidwood casting Clare Walker/Walker Bowen, Bette Chadwick/The Other Agency Casting Ltd., Lyonne Carrow ed. Toni Myers, Steve Withrow (asst.) pub. Glenda Roy, Les Wedman C.F.D.C. observer Gail Singer l.p. Patty Duke Astin, Sara Botsford, Saul Rubinek, Robert Benson, Clare Coulter, Alan Duruisseau, Jeannine Elias, Jan Filipis, Joseph Flaherty, Jim Hibbard, Mina Mina, Sonia Zimmer p.c. B.D.F. Productions Ltd. exec. p. Douglas Leiterman, Louis Silverstein p. Werner Aellen, Beryl Fox assoc. p. James R. Westwell running time: 93 min., colour, 35min. dist. Astral.

photo: Alan Zenuk

here are a small-time con on a 36-hour leave from prison, and the jaded French cabbie whose services he leases for a day's drive to nowhere in particular. Michel (Jean Yanne) is a softspoken, cultured loner, a man who shut himself off from the world and left accounting for cab-driving eight years ago when his Québec-born wife died of a heart attack. Very little in this world can provoke a reaction or ruffle his feathers, and that's initially a source of great irritation to his almost hyperkinetic passenger. Johnny (Gilles Renaud) is a perpetual loser with the emotional maturity of an overgrown adolescent and a propensity for waving a handgun around like a baseball penant. He's decided to use the occasion of his thirty-fifth birthday and this short-term freedom to pay off some debts, but nothing comes off quite the way he planned - when it comes to the crunch, he can't pull his trigger on the ex-partner who did him dirty, and he can't pull it on himself. His almost childlike despair and his utter loneliness finally win Michel's sympathy, and two polar opposites begin to explore some common ground.

This friendship of circumstance develops and expands and draws you in, even over those little moments when motivation and believability are severely tested. One such case is Michel's almost immediate forgiveness of Johnny after a brutal attack - it's problematic and a little sentimental, but it still squeaks through, maybe because the whole movie is so subtly sentimental from beginning to end. That fact works in its favour, as do the myriad other tones and elements that make up the film. Gilles Renaud has quite a task before him: Johnny is none too bright and rather unappealing, but Renaud still evokes a strange sympathy for the character as he stumbles about in blind desperation. The contrasts between this working-class Québécois and the somewhat erudite Frenchman are beautifully drawn (a wine-tasting lesson in a fancy restaurant is warm and funny), and Jean Yanne's performance is a masterpiece of subtlety - he extracts as much expression from a shrugged shoulder or a raised eyebrow as from the top-flight dialogue (on which he collaborated with Ménard). The chemistry of the two leads propels the movie forward, but Ménard has dropped in a marvellous series of cameos by leading Québec performers as a kind of gentle 'icing on the cake': watch carefully and you'll see Monique Mercure, Marie Tifo, Gilbert Sicotte, Yvon Dufour, Jocelyn Bérubé and even announcer Jacques Fautoux waft in and out of scenes with a delight-

ful, understated grace.

Ménard has the ingredients, and he's turned them over to a first-rate gift-wraper. Montreal absolutely shimmers under the lens of cinematographer Pierre Mignot, radiating a genuine movie presence hitherto uncaptured by any other DOP. *Une journée en taxi* confirms Mignot's status as one of this country's most exciting young cameramen; look no further than his work on Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* and then contrast it with the images in this movie to get an idea of his range and sensibilities. The quality of his light here is clear and yet suggestive, and it imparts a purity of texture to the film that accounts in good part for its special 'movie' flavour. You just capitulate to the pictures.

Une journée en taxi is far from flawless, but the simple elegance of form and spirit here tend to wash away your reservations; you'd love to see it score in a big way. It should be noted that a series of financial mishaps during production nearly axed the movie altogether, and that distribution deals for the rest of Canada remain nebulous as of this writing. This was almost the picture that didn't get made; in particular view of our current cultural angst, it should not become the picture that didn't get seen. That would really be a bit too much.

Anne Reiter ●

UNE JOURNÉE EN TAXI p./d. Robert Ménard sc. Roger Fournier dialog. Fournier, Jean Yanne d.o.p. Pierre Mignot art. d. Vianney Gauthier ed. Marcel Pothier mus. Michel Robidou, Pierre F. Brault cost. Louise Jobin, Suzanne Harel sd. Serge Beauchemin 1st asst. d. Michel Gauthier 2nd a.d. Michele Mercure cont. Thérèse Bérubé 1st asst. cam. Jean Lépine 2nd asst. cam. Nathalie Moliavko-Vitotzki stills Warren Lipton stunt Robert Blais Celine Fournier head gaffer Kevin O'Connell gaffer Daniel Chretien key grip Raymond Lamy grip Philippe Palu props Claude Paré cost. Diane Paquette ward. Sylvie Rochon make-up Micheline Foisy boom Esther Auger asst. ed. Héline Crepeau. Dominique Parent, Paul Dion trans. captain Jacques Arcouette p. assts. Julek Winniki, Pierre Paquette, Christian Gagné, Harold Trépanier, Angele Bourgeault-Cyr, Paul Hotte p. sec. Elaine Roy p. acct. André Charron, Pierre Trémouille unit pub. Les Paradis sd. ed. Marcel Pothier sd. eff. Terry Burke neg. cut. Jim Capabanal mix. David Appleby lp. Jean Yanne, Gilles Renaud, Pierre Bergeron, Jocelyn Bérubé, Joël Le Bigot, Normand Brathwaite, Solange Brodeur, Yvan Ducharme, Yvon Dufour, Murielle Dutil, Sophie Faucher, Jacques Fautoux, Jean Lafontaine, Michel Forget, Pierre Gobeil, Marcel Huard, Pauline Lapointe, Marcel Leboeuf, Jean-Denis Leduc, Monique Mercure, Jean-Pierre Saulnier, Robert Séguin, Gilbert Sicotte, Marie Tifo loc. man. Michel Lemieux unit man. Yolaine Rouleau p. sec. Louise Lépine-Ménard p. man. Suzanne Roy line p. Kristian Girard, Paul Maigret assoc. p. Marcel Pothier, Jean-Pierre Rassam admin. Jacques Dick exec. p. Joseph Beaubien, Claude Berri lab. Bellevue Pathé (Québec) p.c. Les Productions Videofilms Ltée (Canada), Renn Productions S.A.R.L. (France) colour 35mm running time 88 min.



● Another chance meeting, another odd couple: Andrée Pelletier and August Schellenberg

John Juliani's **Latitude 55**

Having heard almost nothing about *Latitude 55* before seeing it, I had few expectations upon entering the theater: the title conjured images of the north, but not the far north; of wilderness, but not complete wilderness. As the film unraveled, I found that the expectations which arose in me spontaneously in response to the developing story were being systematically thwarted, which is as it should be with a well-told story.

But by the end of the film I felt that the filmmakers, director John Juliani and co-scenarist Sharon Riis, had taken this technique too far, had, by presenting scenes ever more mysterious and strange, left themselves no fully credible explanation for it all. If a story is to have maximum effect, it must finally relate to my own experience, to reality as I understand it. It is quite possible that one objective of *Latitude 55* was to lead me from the apparently familiar to the palpably mysterious, even mystical, and thus to a new understanding of my own reality, but as the rug of what appeared to be real was continually pulled out from under me I became merely suspicious, and skeptically curious to see how the filmmakers would explain themselves. The final revelation, that the film's events had not been physically real at all, but had taken place in the heroine Wanda's mind, or in some other immaterial limbo before her body gave up the ghost, was, I felt, too easy an explanation for the inconsistencies of the film.

Latitude 55 opens with Wanda (Andrée Pelletier) trying to start her car in a blizzard. The slow pace of this scene indicates that this is no adventure film; there is plenty of time for Wanda to light a flare, wash a few pills down with whiskey, tune in to several radio stations, and then to fall asleep to the sound of Bach's fifth Brandenburg concerto on a portable tape deck. Some time later, Wanda is rescued by a man who carries her back to his isolated cabin, thaws her out, feeds her, and provides accommodation until when-

ever the blizzard might be over. At first Josef (August Schellenberg) seems just a Polish potato farmer, an apparently simple, earthy World War Two refugee, who has a few strange possessions: a metronome for timing his eggs, a storage room containing an ikon and a jester's costume. Wanda is merely puzzled by him - until the time Joseph lies in the grip of a nightmare, thrashing and yelling in Catholic Latin. When he wakes she angrily, tearfully asks, "Who are you?" - the question which is the film's main-spring.

The remainder of the film takes place inside Josef's cabin, does not include any other characters (which, along with the film primary reliance on language to convey its meaning, suggests that it might have been presented more effectively as a stage play), and consists mainly of questions and answers made by each character to elucidate the other's past. Their motives differ: Wanda tries to solve the puzzle of Josef's true identity, while Josef increasingly assumes the role of mentor or omniscient guru, whose statements are intended to have an enlightening or therapeutic effect. Wanda, we learn, is 30, married to a "man of the cloth," the daughter of an anglophone Albertan and a Québécoise, and works appraising the products of remote Albertan artists to determine which will receive government assistance. Her life, she is made to realize, has been repressive and pretentious. Wanda's and Josef's increased intimacy leads, by way of sex, experimental role-reversal, and cut-aways (to hand-held-camera shots of snowy woods, a native Indian tripod from which dangles some mysterious object, and Josef's face - made up variously as a woman, a Polish officer, and an Indian shaman) to Wanda's final emotional crisis - whether she can reconcile herself with her own life.

Along the way, small, almost technical, details have interfered with the authenticity of the story: the incompletely convincing snowstorm; the nagging indeterminacy of Wanda's accent - West Canadian, edging sometimes into a Quebec twang; the inserts (flashbacks? dream sequences?) of Wanda walking through a picture gallery... Are these ambiguities intended, one wonders, or simply an artefact of in-expertise, of a low budget? By the time they are explained, retroactively, it is

● A curious friendship gels at the end of a long day: Gilles Renaud comforts Jean Yanne

