

the first wave: 1944-53

by pierre véronneau



Weepy melodramas, highly moralistic with curious sado-masochistic overtones, were an important part of Quebec features of the fifties: the cruel story of the battered child in *La Petite Aurore, l'enfant martyre*, elicited a strong public response

*The following was originally published in French in the book **Les Cinémas canadiens**, edited par Pierre Véronneau and published jointly in 1978 by La Cinémathèque québécoise and Pierre Lherminier, Paris. This English translation is reproduced by permission of the author and publishers.*

Nineteen commercial, feature films were produced in Quebec between 1944 and 1953. This was an unprecedented development: only two commercial features had been produced in the previous 30 years. (There were also **En pays neuf**, 1934-37, by Maurice Proulx and **A la croisée des chemins**, 1943, by Jean-Marie Poitevin. Both were propaganda films in 16mm made by priests.) And at least 10 more years were to pass before the revival of Quebec fiction production in the 1960's. What happened during this time that gave rise to such a level of production?

It is necessary to begin by recalling that, although the Canadian film business is almost completely a fiefdom of Hollywood and that films are usually released in Quebec in English, there were some individuals who tried to break the infernal circle by importing French language films. A key figure in this was J.A. DeSève who, during the thirties, set about establishing theatres which would programme French language films exclusively. Since Hollywood distributors released few of their films in French, DeSève's principal source of supply was France. Though his company, France Film, he systematically imported about 80 percent of the annual production of the French film industry.

The Second World War cut him off from his sources of supply. But since the public still demanded films in French, DeSève had to keep re-releasing the same pre-War films. One might presume that it was this set of circumstances that encouraged DeSève to try his hand at production and collaborate in the establishment of Renaissance Films. This company, whose executive producer was the Frenchman, Charles Philipp, found a script, hired an "international" director, Fedor Ozep, and some American technicians, and began production of **Le Père Chopin** in August 1944. It was an enormous success on its release April 19th 1945: a four-week run in Montreal in a 2,380-seat theatre. For the first time the public (and the critics) watched characters, a countryside and places that were "ours". This convinced them that this film with its story of two brothers, one a millionaire but lonely, the other poor but happy with his family, was a masterpiece of great value to Quebec culture.

Counting on the success of **Le Père Chopin**, DeSève founded Renaissance Films Distribution (R.F.D.) on April 25th 1945. His first aim was to build a studio comparable to those existing elsewhere. He went therefore, to France to gain the support of Catholics and establish contacts with Abbé Vachet, head of the FiatFilm de La Garenne-Colombes studios and producer of, among others, **Notre-Dame de la Mouise** (in which DeSève invested.)

When he returned to Quebec, R.F.D. announced a share issue of \$520,000. In order to persuade investors of the financial benefits, R.F.C. publicly stressed the success of **Père Chopin**. And for ideological persuasion, R.F.D. stressed the necessity of building a Catholic cinema responsive to the spirit of the Papal Encyclical, *Vigilanti Cura*, and capable of fighting worldly evils (understood principally to be atheism and communism). "Our aim," said DeSève on his return from France in the fall of 1946, "is to create great artistic cinema with a healthy philosophy, a cinema which will call good good



"With **Tit-coq**, the Canadian cinema emerges from the caverns," said René Lévêque, commenting on the film written by and starring Gratien Gélinas

and evil evil." He also announced plans to establish an international Catholic film office in Montreal, plans that Abbé Vachet had promised support in achieving.

Events now moved ahead quickly. A studio was being built in Montreal. Shares were being sold throughout Quebec. The Report to Shareholders (October 21, 1946) stated: "As of October 15th, the Company had 500 shareholders. We anticipate even more since the creation of an international centre for the production of films of Christian inspiration will have to propagate all our teaching: familial, pedagogic, professional, social, political, aesthetic and religious. We are well placed among the most privileged nations and, throughout the world, assets are no better protected than in the province of Quebec, thanks to our population whose religious, hard-working and frugal spirit has shown itself absolutely resilient to all subversive ideas. Now is the time for those here among us with available capital to offer timely aid to healthy businesses that are looking for the means to expand." In order to achieve this, nothing matched the galvanic eloquence of Abbé Vachet who both spoke on radio and gave Sunday sermons during which he invited parishioners to buy Renaissance shares in the Vestry after Mass. Needless to say, the Episcopate gave this project its enthusiastic blessing.

While Vachet busied himself with the "spiritual" side of the campaign and recruiting eminent citizens, DeSève was refur-



Drawing together the values of the church, the close-knit family and the love of the land, *Le Père Chopin* was declared "a master piece of great value to Quebec culture"



Produced in both French and English in 1946, *La Forteresse/Whispering City* cost \$750,000



The interior of the Quebec Productions Studio during the production of *Le Curé de village* (1949)

bishing the Montreal studio and even assisting in the modernization of the Fiat sound studio in which R.F.D. had invested. By mid-March 1947, everything was ready; only scripts were lacking. But, instead of dealing directly with the question of production, yet another project to garner prestige was begun. Abbé Vachet participated in the O.C.I.C. (Office Catholique International du Cinéma) Congress in Brussels where there was extensive discussion of international Catholic collaboration in production and distribution. R.F.D. was living, not in reality, but in dreams and projects – even though, in the fall of 1947, some French technicians from Fiat were brought over. The summer of 1948 passed in the same euphoric state. This time, the dream was to produce in English by engaging two American producers to set up a programme of ten co-productions with Monogram. Nothing came of it, of course. By now, the shareholders were becoming impatient: several years had passed since the company was founded and still no films had been produced.

Meanwhile, DeSève again became the President of France Film and was expelled from his functions with R.F.D. The new Board of Directors then incorporated a new company, Les Productions Renaissance, which produced a feature, *Le gros Bill* (1949) directed by the French filmmaker, René Delacroix. Set in rural Quebec, it tells the story of a love rivalry that gets the whole village excited. This earthy melodrama was supposed to be truly *québécois* in order to compete with international films and to be an example of good cinema. However, the attempt was only moderately successful. Delacroix left immediately for Paris where he began shooting a bilingual co-production, *Docteur Louise* (1949). This was a moralizing melodrama about a young woman doctor in a small French village who is opposed to abortion and preaches the virtues of child-birth. Made especially for French Catholics and Québécois (Catholic by definition, in 1950), this film was inspired (as the publicity put it) "by the Encyclical Casti Connubii in order to pose to human conscience the delicate question of love as it is understood by the Church."

After this highly moral programme, Les Productions Renaissance made one last film in February 1950: *Les lumières de ma ville*. But this time they chose not a rural theme, but a romantic love story set in the world of entertainment. The publicity stressed that it was an entirely French-Canadian film both in its music and its production. It was now necessary to remind the public of its patrimony. But the film's release coincided with the successive bankruptcies of Renaissance Films Distribution and Les Productions Renaissance. The "glorious" adventure of the Catholic cinema in Quebec came to an end, collapsing in a bizarre and almost fraudulent manner. Through a complicated series of manoeuvres, the rights to the four Renaissance films ended up with DeSève's France Film. The studios themselves were to be dismantled several years later.

Paralleling the Renaissance venture, is the story of another studio, Québec Productions. This company was founded in July 1946 and the key figure in its development was Paul L'Anglais, a well-known radio producer. For its first film it not only called on Fedor Ozep again and American technicians but also bought the script in Hollywood and decided to produce it in two language versions using both English and French speaking actors. *La Forteresse/Whispering City* cost \$750,000 (including studio overheads) in 1946. It enjoyed considerable success despite its Hollywood B-movie plot about a shady lawyer,

C'est donc le moment de nous aider dans cet immense travail tant attendu.

Il nous faut \$600,000 pour 1949, somme relativement faible en face de l'importance de notre programme.

" Ne faillissons pas à la tâche "

CINQ MILLE CANADIENS-FRANCAIS CATHOLIQUES ont fondé "Renaissance" et bâti les studios. — Beaucoup, sans doute, voudront profiter des avantages de cette nouvelle émission.

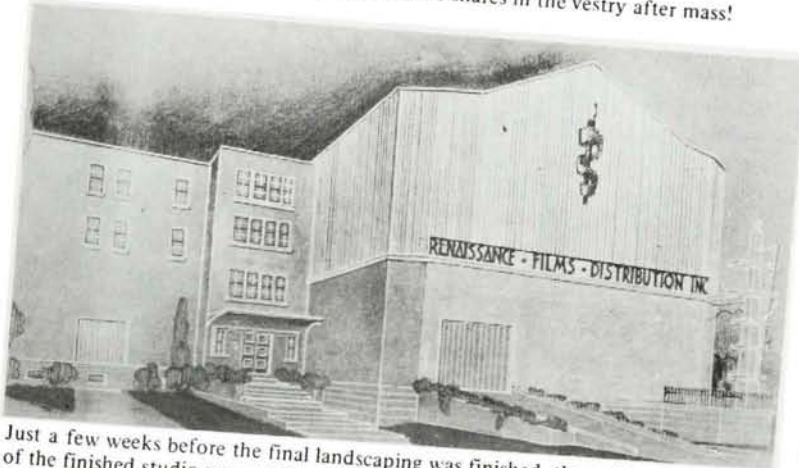
Une collection de scénarios remarquables a été étudiée et approuvée par l'autorité compétente en vue d'une production d'esprit chrétien. Assurés du bienveillant appui des hautes autorités religieuses et civiles, nous nous sommes mis au travail.

COMPAGNIE FRANCE FILM collabore avec nous et distribue tous nos films au Canada.

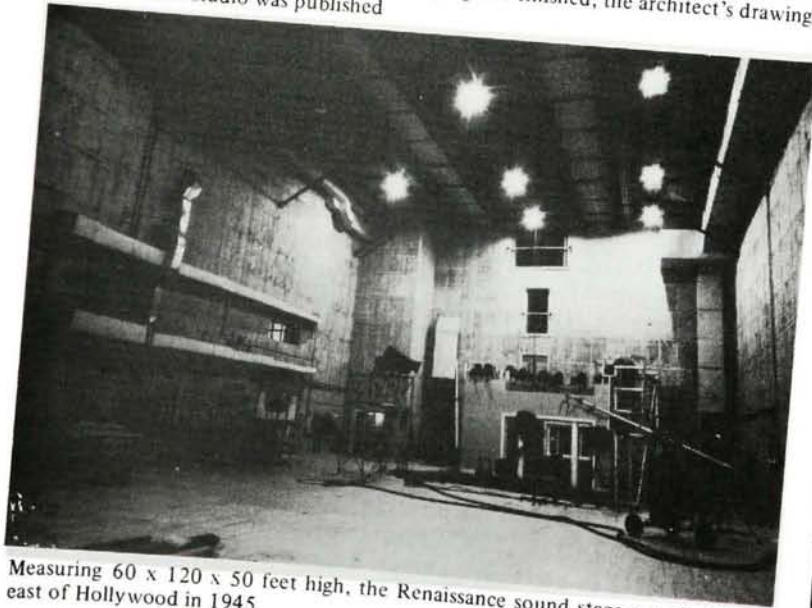
LA CONFEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DU FILM, approuvée par le Saint Siège travaille avec nous à les distribuer dans le monde entier.

**Canadiens-français,
nous faisons appel à vous!
Aidez-nous!
Souscrivez!**

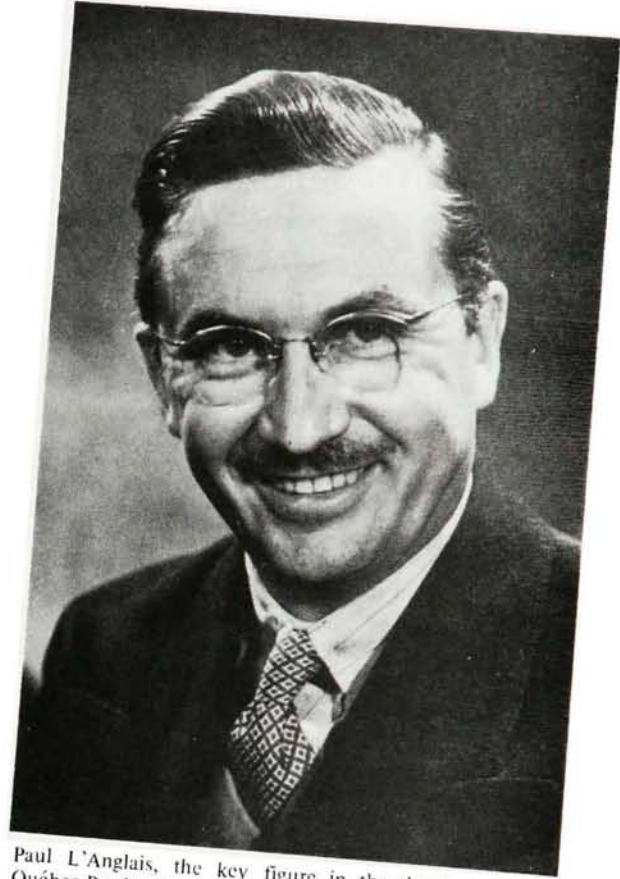
We mustn't fail at our task! Buy Renaissance shares in the vestry after mass!



Just a few weeks before the final landscaping was finished, the architect's drawing of the finished studio was published



Measuring 60 x 120 x 50 feet high, the Renaissance sound stage was the largest east of Hollywood in 1945



Paul L'Anglais, the key figure in the development of Québec Productions



J. A. DeSève, the rock on which was founded a French speaking Catholic Cinema

an intrepid woman reporter and a young musician entangled in a murder-blackmail mystery.

The consecutive success of two films, *Le Père Chopin* and *La forteresse*, and the building of two modern studios impressed some people in France. One magazine asked "Will Québec become the Hollywood of French cinéma?" and ended with this phrase: "Given the length of time we have spoken in France of a Mediterranean Hollywood, it will be strange to see French language film production settle down on the banks of the St. Lawrence and Canada, part of the British Empire for nearly two centuries, become the world centre for French cinema." (*Pour vous*, December 1946).

Québec Productions tried to find other international subjects. But nothing materialized. Even its international distributor, Rank, left it in the lurch when it appeared the government would neither legislate support for Commonwealth film productions nor impose a quota in American films. It was forced to change its strategy and opted to produce stories of more local interest. To do so, it turned to the serialized radio dramas that then had an immense popularity. The weekly adventures of the Quebec heroes of these dramas were assiduously followed by a population whose attachment to "québécois" cultural values was one of the only means to resist the national oppression that they lived. For the first film, Paul L'Anglais chose the most popular of all these radio serials: *Un homme et son péché* (*A Man and His Sin*). This story was set in the 19th century during the period of colonization. The man was called Séraphin and his sin was avarice. This Quebec miser, the mayor of his village, oppresses his wife, the beautiful Donalda who is much younger than he, and tries to exploit everyone around him. Luckily, he has to contend with the curé Labelle, the historical colonizer of the "north" (100km north of Montreal) who is the defender of the oppressed. This saga was planned to result in three films: *Un homme et son péché*, 1948 (the "dictatorship" of Séraphin), *Séraphin*, 1949 (the revenge of the villagers) and *Donalda* – which was never produced. The success of the two films which were produced was unquestionable: the production costs were almost entirely amortized quickly in the Quebec market alone.

Le curé de village, produced after *Un homme et son péché* and before *Séraphin*, drew on the same vein of social "reflection" and national pride. Based also on a popular radio serial, it was again a tableau of village life in which the curé arbitrates conflicts and redresses wrongs, councils lovers, solves everyone's problems and represents goodness, justice and final authority. Given Quebec society at the time, dominated by Catholic ideology and the clergy, it is hardly surprising to discover films in which the priest had something of the appeal of a cowboy in a cassock. It is this same image that appears again in *Le rossignol et les cloches* (1951), another Catholic-village film whose story is a pretext for lyrical inserts by a "golden-voiced" adolescent.

The year before, Québec Productions also extended itself into a France-Canada co-production to be released in both French and English. The aim was to penetrate both the French and Anglo-Saxon markets since the major financial problem for Québec producers was in having to rely on local box office returns to amortize costs. *Son copain*, 1950 (English title: *The Unknown from Montreal*) was directed by the Frenchman Jean Devaivre and featured René Dary, Paul Dupuis and Patricia Roc. The French Centre national de la Cinématographie provided an advance against box-office receipts of two-and-a-half million francs and the film enjoyed a moderately wide

release in France, Canada, and Britain. Nonetheless, although Québec Productions had been more fortunate in their financial affairs than Renaissance, it too had to cease activities. In effect, it was not strong enough to support the production of three features a year which would return enough at the box-office in the short term – and especially not at the point when television was making inroads on movie-going. However, the company did rent out its facilities to other producers, notably to Otto Preminger for the production of *The 13th Letter*.

(The original article at this point has a section on the Canadian Cooperation Project which has been omitted in view of the full article on this topic in this issue.)

With the death of the "big" companies, film production did not automatically come to an end. Small companies were established to produce one or two films. Some of these were in English (*Forbidden Journey*, 1950, and *Butler's Night Off*, 1951) and one was in colour (*Etienne Brûlé: gibier de potence*, 1951). But the genre that aroused the most reaction was the weepy melodrama, highly moralistic with curious sado-masochistic overtones. *Coeur de maman* (1953) is the drama of a mother's trials and tribulations as she is mistreated and humiliated by her eldest son and his wife; only at the end is she rescued by her youngest son. *L'esprit du mal* (1953) is the drama of an avaricious and cruel stepmother who cheats her husband and attempts to marry her step-daughter to the mentally-retarded son of a millionaire. But the girl's lover watches over her and the villains are killed in an accident. Central to the genre is the enormously successful *La Petite Aurore l'enfant martyre* (1951). This is the tale of a cruel stepmother who tortures her ten-year old step-daughter with the complicity of her father who is too weak to protest. Nothing is spared the child: blows, her hair is scorched, her hands are burned on the stove. Only the village priest becomes aware of the situation but too late to prevent the child's death. The mother is hanged.

These three films epitomize the collective morbidity that marked our darkest period, suffocated by Catholic values of penitence, atonement, forbearance and self-sacrifice. These films reflect exactly the sick imagination of our society and are valuable today more for their sociological connotations than for their cinematic qualities. Only one film stands out from this production of the fifties: *Tit-coq* (1953) by Gratien Gélinas. Based on the equally famous and successful play by Gélinas, this film is of value mainly for its script and its acting and less so for its direction which today seems quite pedestrian. Its story of a conscript who loses his girl to another man while he is at war moved René Lévesque (then a critic, now Prime Minister of Québec) to claim: "With *Tit-coq*, the Canadian cinema emerges from the caverns."

Our cinema may have left the caverns but, if so, it was to die in full daylight. The public no longer responded to appeals to pride and recognition. It wanted a quality which was lacking. It no longer felt the need to see the voices it heard on radio serials. Television arrived in 1952 and it played the same role as the films had: from now on the serials found their place on the TV screen. The film companies began to produce series of short films rather than features. Television encouraged a different kind of film industry and at the same time almost entirely absorbed the personnel who had been working in feature production. The Canadian Hollywood wasted ten years. If it gave us no masterpieces, it did provide a series of clear mirrors to reflect our ideological and social history. And if the films make us smile today, it is a wry smile. □