

in a pessimistic mood

The Montreal critics festival kicks off the festival season in Canada, and this year, it kicked up a lot of controversy as well. Below, Peter Rist presents us an overview of the programming and the problems which made the event this year.

by Peter Rist



Bertrand Tavernier directing the leading actors in *Des Enfants Gâtés*

The second annual Festival International du Film de la Critique Québécoise is over, and by all accounts it was a disaster. The word "all" is an exaggeration since only the French language Montreal newspapers — *Le Devoir* and *La Presse* took it seriously. In the English speaking sector one would believe that Martin Malina, as an Anglophone critic with a real interest in Francophone culture, would have covered the event had the *Montreal Star* not been on strike. As for the audience, it never materialised.

Advance publicity was too little and too late. It was confined to a small card listing merely the titles of the films, their country of origin and the names of the directors. It is surprising that, although these schedules were distributed to a number of French language bookstores in the city, they did not appear on the advertising racks of Place des Arts, where the films were to be shown, until less than a week before the opening. No publicity at all appeared in the English media even though two of the films were in English and a number of others had English sub-titles; a fact which was not mentioned anywhere. Only four days prior to the opening of the Festival did the Saturday *La Presse* publish a brief synopsis of each film that was to appear. And yet, neither Jean-Pierre Tadros of *Le Devoir* nor Luc Perrault of *La Presse* considered that such a lack of publicity could account for the low turnout of spectators.

Given that a limited amount of promotional material did exist, even here, two potential aspects of crowd drawing power were not pushed to the full. Firstly, almost all the films were receiving their Canadian première and some, presumably, their world première; e.g., Luce Guilbeault's *D'abord ménagères* and the Canadian/Mexican co-production *Jornaleros* (in its Canadian version); further, most films were being shown for the first time in North America. Secondly, prior reception of an award or presentation at, for example, this year's Cannes Festival was not necessarily clearly disclosed. Nanni Moretti's *Ecce Bombo* was in competition at Cannes and *Les fils de Fierro* by Fernando Ezequiel Solanas had been shown as part of the same event's Quinzaine des Réalisateurs. Of the older films being shown in Canada for the first time Andrei Tarkovski's *Solaris* (1972), Krzysztof Zanussi's *Camouflage* (1976), and Dikongue-Pipa's *Muna Moto* (1974) had all won prizes. None of this was revealed in the press.

Where Perrault and Tadros were right in their newspaper epilogues was in criticising the lack of effort on the part of the organisers in somehow making the "neuf cinéma" of the program more accessible to the public. Plot synopsis does not go far enough, for example, to acquaint us with the novel structure of the films of Jean-Marie Straub. *Moses and Aaron* was shown on the second Saturday evening of the festival, and only cinéphiles acquainted with Straub's previous work were likely to even begin to approach this difficult film. However, it is certainly not the job of a program of films purporting to be "new" in some way, to present conventional or commercial fare to the public and the organisers should surely not be criticised for trying to extend horizons of taste. If, as Perrault and Tadros suggest, the Cinémathèque Québécoise, Conservatory of Cinematographic Art at Concor-

dia University, and Cinéma Parrallèle are sufficient in playing this role, then perhaps no festival is required at all in Montreal.

A big problem is, of course, that the month of August wherein many residents have fled the confines of the city, is unsuitable for one such event, let alone two. In addition, the admission price of \$3.50 to view films projected by in-experts, where sound drums are not cleaned and lenses are improperly focused, was unreasonably high. It should be pointed out here that in New York City, possibly the centre where the highest level of sophistication in audience appreciation of "new cinéma" exists, only two widely supported film festivals occur each year — The New York Film Festival at Lincoln Centre in September/October and the New Directors, New Films Series at the Museum of Modern Art in April. In total, less than 40 new feature length films were presented at the last editions of these festivals, a number that may well be exceeded by Serge Losique's upcoming World Film Festival alone. Thus, when one compares the populations of the two cities, Montreal and New York, and when one considers my previous comments, it is not surprising that only a handful of spectators attended some of the screenings at the second Festival International du Film de la Critique Québécoise. And what of the 27 feature films of the festival?

It may be instructive to play the game of discerning who selected the films, and why. In the official festival program, seven names were listed as the Administration Council, two of which, André Roy and Jean-Pierre Bastien, reappeared as part of the Organising Committee. It is certainly interesting that André Roy, President, in reviewing this year's Cannes extravaganza in *Cinéma Québec* liked only some sixteen or eighteen films of the 54 which he wrote about. All six of the films shown at Place des Arts which were also screened at Cannes, were included in the favourable third. Roy was quoted in *La Presse* as saying that only a twentieth of the two-hundred films that he viewed were retained, i.e. ten. He also claimed that at least two members of the selection committee approved each film chosen. But surely the Cannes selection was decidedly singular?

From André Roy's *Cinéma Québec* article, and from the films themselves, one can detect a strong political concern. Whether or not the films were chosen by one person, though, they were certainly interesting. Only the selection of *Ecce Bombo* faced strong criticism from the press, while Mrinal Sen's *Les Marginaux* provided a welcome addition to the sole example of Indian Cinema, evidenced by the films of Satyajit Ray. Geraldo Sarno's *Coronel Delmiro Gouveia* was a revelation from Brazil, combining his own documentary style with a theme, telling of the rise of a Brazilian entrepreneur out of the example of plantocracy — reminiscent of Leon Hirszman's *Sao Bernardo*, camera movement circling Gouveia after his rescue by the "people" — straight out of Rocha's *Antonio des Mortes*, the extraordinary sound of a squeaking ox cart from *Vidas Secas*, and, flamboyance and Brechtian distancing reminding one of the whole Cinema Nuovo movement.

In short, it is a film firmly situated in a Brazilian cinematic tradition. How refreshing it is to recognize that it is still possible for an industry to build a new style of filmmaking and for the filmmakers to continue to be able to express them-

selves in their medium, even politically, under an allegedly oppressive regime. What an example Brazil provides, where receipts from the box office feed the production of films.

At least five of the six films chosen from Cannes displayed a political bent (the one not previously mentioned being Robert Young's *Alambrista*), while the remaining film, Mark Rappaport's *The Scenic Route*, was decidedly an independent production, costing an amazingly low \$35,000 to make. Without knowing anything about the financial arrangements involved in bringing films to a festival I suggest here that, given André Roy's admirable intentions of ignoring the super-productions from Cannes, cost may have been a consideration in selecting films for the recent Montreal event. The fact that an older Zanussi film, *Camouflage*, was chosen rather than his latest, *Spirale*, also shown at Cannes and liked by Roy, emphasizes this possibility. Further, if it was no more expensive to show certain films over others, why did the organisers lack the foresight to include in the program such obvious crowd attractions as Oshima's *L'empire de la passion* or Marco Ferreri's *Rêve de singe*, both of which André Roy had kind words for in his *Cinéma Québec* review?

One must wonder, here, at what role other members of the two committees played, especially since Luc Perrault, as vice-president of the administration council, was himself highly critical of the film selection in his daily reviews in *La Presse*. In summary, though, I consider that the selection from Cannes, no matter how much a personal one, was extremely interesting and in keeping with the intended thematic of the critics, festival — young and independent cinema, first works, and militant films.

Against this, some doubt may be cast on the validity of including older films in a festival of "new cinema," even though the works concerned were receiving their Canadian première. One would think that the presentation of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, Wajda's *Le bois de bouleaux* (1970), Straub and Huillet's *Moses and Aaron* and Mizoguchi's *The 47 Ronin* should more sensibly have been undertaken by the likes of the Cinémathèque Québécoise, especially when one considers the rather high admission price. However, the Mizoguchi two-part epic was questionably the best (two) film(s) in the festival. In fact, it says much about the paucity of today's cinema that one can be riveted to the drama on the screen for four hours and marvel at the sublimity of the camera movement in this Mizoguchi film, made between 1941 and 1942, a film not considered to be among his greatest works. In none of the other films that I saw at the festival was so much attention paid to every detail of set design, costuming, framing, camera angle, length of shot, etc., not to mention the delivery of dialogue which suspended belief to the very end in the control and discipline of the Samurai order which once existed in Japan.

The African films, if not of the cinematic quality of the Brazilian entry, proved to be as revealing. If there was a certain amount of disappointment at Sembene's *Ceddo* not being shown as originally scheduled, this was made up in no small measure by a departure in style, exhibited in all three films, from the Ousmane Sembene inspired, slow, careful observation of African traditions and their clash with Western culture. While Moussa Bathily's *Circumcision* (Senegal), stayed within the thematic mainstream of his country's cinema, it was graced with a faster editing style, an interesting point of view outer structure of three young boys, and

an occasionally ironic, "colonial" narration in a Western language — French. If the acting of the young boys watching the circumcision ceremony seemed strained at times, this may be validated somewhat by a general stylisation in the film enabling it to be simultaneously educational and entertaining. Souleymane Cisse's *Baara*, from Mali, displayed a greater break from the Senegalese style both thematically, in concentrating on urban, westernised African bourgeoisie, and texturally, combining classic, parallel montage with a neo-realist extension of observation of incidents (rather than a single narrative flow). While the film may have been ultimately floored by a Hollywood TV inspired ending of high melodrama and some implausible characterisation, the editing was tightly controlled and the details of social behaviour well observed. The *Ceddo* replacement, *Muna Moto* by Jean-Pierre Dikongue-Pipa from Cameroun was made a few years ago. Here the melodrama centred on tribal marriage customs, specifically of the Dot or Dowry, and was hilarious rather than serious for many of the audience.

Since the outer flashback structure and slow motion lyricism seemed somewhat dated, the stylised behaviour of the characters could also appear to be unintentional, and a crucial flaw in the film — and yet this exaggeration, reminiscent of de Andrade's *Macunaima* from Brazil, could conceivably work to the film's advantage in adding weight to its critical thrust. Also, in hardly moving out of the jungle, the film stands as having the most visually-compelling, tropical decor since the aforementioned *Macunaima*.

Where the festival fell apart at the seams was in its selection of five films from France and three from Switzerland. While the African choices could well be attributed to André Roy, since they seem to fit the political, critical, and Third World interests shown in the Cannes selections, I doubt that the same person(s) selected these European films. Perhaps Janine Euvrard, on the committee and stationed in Paris, was largely responsible. Although a thread of pessimism as a thematic ran through the entire film festival, nothing could match the alienation and utter aimless and bored approach to life shown in most of the new French and Swiss films. Their similarities were remarkable and suggest a singular and incestuous selection.

David Overby, writing recently in *Sight & Sound*, believes that we are in the midst of a New Wave of French Cinéma. He cited the names of thirteen new filmmakers as those "which come immediately to mind" and which "indicate the burgeoning richness and diversity of new French Cinéma." Among the names were those of Benoit Jacquot, Bertrand Tavernier, Paul Vecchiali and Jean-Claude Biette, who between them directed the five French films shown at the festival. Perhaps only Vecchiali came out with his reputation intact, whereas Jacquot was positively despised by critics and audiences alike. If form should fit content in a work of art then perhaps Benoit Jacquot is an artist. The visual emptiness of his work perfectly matched the lack of any kind of development of narrative or theme. I was incredulous, sitting through *Les Enfants du Placard*, certain that something was surely going to happen, some insight be given into the reasons for the main character's total listlessness and alienation, wondering at the proliferation of the low key lighting in the film and the play on the colors red and blue and waiting for these stylistic elements to be threaded into a meaningful



Randy Danson and Marilyn Jones play two sisters involved in an incestuous triangle with a man in Rappaport's *The Scenic Route*

whole with the drama. But the film ended more vacuous than it began, standing as a testament to the pseudo-intellectuality of a new breed of French (and Swiss) filmmakers who are managing to say nothing either dramatically or purely visually that hasn't already been said much more profoundly by Antonioni, Warhol, Fassbinder, Chantal Ackerman et al.

It is obvious, of course that the festival suffered through its insistence on showing French language films. When one considers that eight of the thirteen new French films shown at Cannes in the "Perspectives" section had already been shown at the Conservatory of Cinematographic Art earlier this year and that new films from France with a commercial potential have been, or shortly will be, snapped up by distributors in Quebec, then the remaining choices must necessarily be limited. The selection of as many as three films from Switzerland is perhaps more deserving of sympathy in the light of the exciting example forged by Alain Tanner, Claude Goretta and Michel Soutter in recent years. As for the incestuousness I suggested earlier — three examples will suffice — Paul Vecchiali (*La Machine*) produced Biette's first film (*Le Théâtre des Matières*) and Patricia Moraz (*Les Indiens Sont Encore Loin*) assisted Francis Reusser (*Le Grand Soir*) on a number of his films. Whereas a stated intention of the critics' festival of promoting new and independent filmmakers can perhaps vindicate all of the above selections, surely no justification can be given for showing in a 27 film exhibit both

of the two first feature films made by one man, in this case Benoit Jacquot.

What a tragedy it is that Quebec films were not available to fill a gap that should have been vacated by some of the overloaded French/Swiss representation. Only one full length Quebec film, *D'abord ménagères* was shown, on the last day of the festival, and this to a near full house, for a documentary no less. In the month of June at New York's Museum of Modern Art a retrospective of Quebec cinéma, post *Mon Oncle Antoine*, was presented. Tom Allen of the *Village Voice* wrote "It is one of the most pleasant and powerful surprises of the year — with its diversity and tensions, individuality and common political awareness, Cinéma Québécois emerges as the most important film movement since the first gleanings of the New German Cinéma." While Quebec's films may have been elevated here above their deserved status, this statement is poignant in making us realise that they have just not received the kind of distribution in their own time that they deserved. Consequently, the "movement" is virtually over, the depleting funds having expired. In an era of exciting change and optimism, Quebec filmmakers are not able to express in their own medium the dynamism which currently exists in the region. Instead they must be dragged deeper into the mire through the pessimism of others in Quebec's cinematic milieu, the critics, transferring this mood onto the screen by way of the films of more fortunate French speaking compatriots who have less to say but at least a little money to say it with. C'est la vie!!!