



Roger Frappier in Denys Arcand's *Rejeanne Padovani*

Ottawa's **Filmexpo** (1973), a festival of film from October 15 to 27, was not the best place for those who long for the good old days when there was no nostalgia, as half the program was retrospective in content. But this five-part festival was a varied cinematic smorgasbord with fare for every taste, with the best in contemporary film combined with others from days gone by.

Canadian content accounted for approximately half of the festival, including ten recent Canadian features and a CBC retrospective consisting of twenty-four hours of the most memorable of CBC's productions from its inception in September, 1952, to the present. The CBC retrospective was not least valuable for providing an opportunity to see some of the earlier work of people like Allan King and Eric Till who have since gone on to feature length films. The American slice consisted of a retrospective showing of Paramount films from 1921 to 1970 (half of these pre-1935), while the International segment included fifteen recent films from Europe, United States, Israel, Brazil, and India. An exhibition of international film posters rounded out the offerings.

With approximately eight hours of film each day, only the most dedicated viewer with the most resilient retinas would attempt to see all or most of the films. It was with some reluctance that I decided to forego some of the other attractive offerings and concentrate on the ten Canadian films. The following is my impression of these films, although I will say little about **Slipstream** and **Come On, Children**, which have been amply reviewed in previous issues of *Cinema Canada*.

Life is a complicated thing for the Canadian film-maker — how do you make a film which is commercially viable and aesthetically satisfying on a budget that rarely exceeds several hundred thousand dollars? The commercial and the aesthetic are not the most compatible play-mates, and it is to the credit of Canadian film-makers generally that they are willing to shirk the claims of neither. But only in a few instances were these diverse elements integrated in a satisfactory manner.

Of the five English-Canadian films shown, the two that stood far above the rest were **Between Friends** and **The Visitor**. Allan King's **Come On, Children** was an interesting work, but as a document presents different problems. The

sleeper of the festival had to be **The Visitor**, all the way from — now get this, Torontonians — *Alberta!* It may come as a surprise to Easterners that anyone between Etobicoke and Burnaby knows how to hold a movie camera. But this film — a powerful and disturbing work of psychological horror — is ample proof otherwise.

Written and directed by John Wright, **The Visitor** depicts a young female graduate student in history (Pia Shandel), who goes to stay in an old mansion by herself for three weeks. But when she wakes the next morning she is back in the past of seventy years before, sharing the house with a young man (Eric Petersen). The remainder of the film depicts her attempt to reconcile what her senses tell her with what her intellect knows cannot be true. Is the return to the past a fabrication of an insane mind? Perhaps, but we can never be sure.

A good part of the horror of the film comes from the convincing nature of the shift from the present to a past of seventy years before. If the girl becomes uncertain as to what is reality, then so does the viewer. The audience found this tremendously convincing, so that the mingled horror and fascination of the young woman at what is happening to her is shared by all.

Acting performances, especially by Eric Petersen as the young man, and Hetty Clews as the puritannical guardian of turn-of-the-century morality, were excellent. Script by John Wright was also on a high level, a rather welcome change from the mediocre scripts that shackle many Canadian films. And not to be forgotten was the camerawork of Doug MacKay, which displayed a careful composition and selection of appropriate detail which was not present to the same extent in any of the other Canadian films exhibited at this festival.

The Visitor was the final film of the festival. While this was a chance placing, the position of Shebib's **Between Friends** as the opening film certainly wasn't. With its drab winter settings on the Toronto waterfront, Sudbury, and run-down houses, this is a subdued but humorous film about the dreams its characters have. A delicate balance between tragedy and comedy is maintained, so that our laughter is tinged with sadness, and our sadness has a smile. Perhaps our dreams are inevitably futile. As the aging ex-con (Henry Beckman) says,

"I figure you can't lose them all" — but he manages. Yet even though the dreams can never be realized, we are left with the feeling that it is a good thing to have them. They make our lives painful, but pain shows we're alive. And that's good.

The main element of the plot revolves around an attempt to rob the Sudbury nickel mines. Toby (Michael Parks) finds himself a part of the project because of his friendship with his old surfing buddy Chino (Chuck Shamata). Ellie (Bonnie Bedelia), Chino's wife, falls in love with Toby who finds himself in the impossible position of having the loss of his freedom being what Ellie wants so she can free herself from an unwanted marriage. We all have our different dreams, and because they are different, they never quite work out. We need freedom, and yet we need other people. And that, for Shebib, seems to be one of the paradoxes of life.

Not that most viewers will probably see this film as more than a fair to middling cops and robbers effort with a little sex thrown in. This will be unfortunate, because it lacks the extroverted action necessary for a highly successful film of this type. Its strength lies in its highly sensitive exploration of character.

The other two English-Canadian fiction films, **The Hard Part Begins** and **Slipstream** are light-years below these two achievements. The former is a modest, low-budget film about a country and western singer (Donnelly Rhodes) on the downward trail. The actors give it their best, but are unable to lift a dull and unimaginative plot above mediocrity.

David Acomba's **Slipstream** is an ambitious film, but the road to cinematic hell is paved with bad pretensions. It has been adequately reviewed in this and a previous issue of *Cinema Canada*. No sense flogging a moribund horse.

Allan King's documentary **Come On, Children**, a documentary of the associations between ten teenagers in a relatively isolated house, has also been discussed in *Cinema Canada*. There were good moments in this film, but also some unsatisfying aspects. The audience appreciated having Allan King on hand along with John Hamilton, his "star", to answer questions after the showing. Perhaps the most revealing thing John Hamilton said was that no lasting relationships developed from the association of the ten people in the house. With the absence of any lasting commitment, relationships remained on a superficial level. As a friend of mine said, it was disappointing that the kids didn't make more of it.

Leading off the French-Canadian films was **Rejeanne Padovani**, Denys Arcand's second feature length fiction film (he has also made two full-length documentaries). This latest film was apparently an unqualified hit with the critics at Cannes, although unfortunately I cannot share their enthusiasm. The plot is strongly political, showing a party of the fat cats at play on the eve of the opening of a new auto-route. Vincent Padovani is the head of the construction company that has built the road; also present are the major and the Minister of Transport. Their bodyguards, meanwhile, are relegated to the bar downstairs. But intruding into this domestic scene is Rejeanne, Vincent's former wife, who represents the bad conscience of the rich and powerful. She is suppressed once and for all, and the inauguration of the auto-route the next day is a success.

Arcand portrays the political bosses as boring, stupid, and amoral. That's the way he says they are. Very likely he is right, but the problem I found with this film is that in portraying a boring party the film did not avoid being boring itself. Apart from Rejeanne, the characters are flat and uninteresting. All the verisimilitude in the world will not make me enjoy ninety minutes of viewing the activities of boring people. The best part of the film was the final few minutes, in which shots of the houses of the poor being destroyed for the new auto-route were combined with the irony of Margot McKinnon's voice singing operatic arias.

Gilles Carle's seventh feature, **Les Corps Célestes**, is an enjoyable flick, a farce with serious overtones that avoids being pretentious. The location is Borntown, in northern

Ontario, and the time three weeks prior to Christmas, 1938. A pimp (Donald Pilon) descends from the sky with his troop of seven girls, headed by Micheline Lanctôt and Carole Laure. In the house that is set up each is to take care of a specialized type of client — one for the miners, one for the authorities, etc. There is, of course, no question of opening before Christmas and offending the sensibilities of the local people. The voices of war are everywhere, but for the people in the film their own everyday lives are more important. While the film does not lack subtlety, there is more emphasis placed on the highly farcical scenes which make it rate high on the entertainment scale. Carole Laure as the virginal would-be prostitute, and Donald Pilon as the pimp, give excellent performances.

Et du Fils is a modest film from a couple of years ago about the conflict between the generations in rural French Canada. The son wants to develop their property into a hunting lodge, while his father opposes him. There is a good evocation of the primitive danger and beauty of life along the St. Lawrence.

Montréal Blues, directed by Pascal Gélinas, is a joyful, highly imaginative film about what certain youth in Montreal are all about. An especially vivacious performance by Paule Baillargeon, and a general feeling of excitement and hope are the most impressive things about this film. There's plenty of talent for even better things in the future.

Considerably less successful was Jacques Leduc's **Tendresse Ordinaire**, a tiresome film with some inexcusable technical flaws. But at least one aspect of it bears mentioning. This is its exploration of one of the mythic patterns of Canadian life — the movement to the wilderness, whether for work or vacation, and back again to the town. This is a type of subject that is extremely difficult to explore without appearing pretentious, but if film is to come to terms with what it means to be in Canada, this is the type of subject it should explore more often.

And those were the Canadian films. An encouraging festival, not so much for the quality of the individual films, as for the variety of subjects explored. This variety is an indication of the vitality that is necessary for continued growth. The very lack of tradition and a distinctive Canadian style of film can for the genuinely creative artist be a liberating influence.

From a commercial point of view the festival was somewhat less successful. While the 800-seat theatre was almost full for **Between Friends** and **Rejeanne Padovani**, other films did not generally enjoy more than half of that. For some there were less than a hundred in attendance. Sub-titles would have been a distinct help; only Shebib's and Arcand's films had the advantage of these.

If distributed, **The Visitor** should do well. Whether it will or not is another matter. **Between Friends** will undoubtedly have the greatest commercial success of any of the English-Canadian films shown here. There are, unfortunately, no plans for the distribution of **Come On, Children**. Of the French-Canadian films, the most likely to enjoy success with anglophone audiences are **Les Corps Célestes** and, perhaps, **Rejeanne Padovani**.

But all these films should be seen far more often than the very occasional showing at festivals of this nature allows. Even the worst are better than some of the movies they play in the local theatre. Even more important, these are all valuable pieces in assembling the puzzle of Canadian identity. As the contemporary art which has always been the most closely tied to nationality, film must be allowed to play its role in defining for us who we are. Film is a communal art, both in its creation and appreciation. To deny this necessary interaction between the artist and his audience can only result in a situation in which both the filmmaker and the Canadian public are losers.

The Canadian Film Institute is to be highly commended for providing a very stimulating two weeks. It is perhaps through festivals of this nature that a public interested in Canadian films can be built up, so that commercial distribution might become more viable •