

Equinoxe: Arthur Lamothe's return to fiction

Tangled among seaweed and fisherman's nets, the islands of Sorel are located 45 miles northeast of Montreal, where the Richelieu meets the St. Lawrence. At first glance, these tranquil waters seem an unlikely place for a moment of Québécois film history. But then Arthur Lamothe, shooting *Equinox*, his second dramatic feature since 1967, could well do for these islands what Pierre Perrault, another ex-documentarian, managed with *l'Île aux Coudres* in his legendary *Pour la suite du monde* (1963).

Equinox tells a poetic tale that takes place all in one day among these islands where nature's presence overwhelms. Guillaume (Jacques Godin) is haunted by a lifetime of struggle as he begins a friendship with his 12-year-old granddaughter, Nathalie (Ariane Frédérique). Despite the pastoral surroundings, she insists on wearing her Walkman, and blasts "Duran Duran" into the wilderness populated by ducks and birds. Technology overwhelming nature.

How to preserve what is no longer, an achievement accomplished with such mastery by Lamothe in his ethnographic documentaries, is also the theme of *Equinox*, whose shooting recently took place here for 21 days.

"I like documentary films very

much," explains Lamothe, "but documentary is limited. I want to tell stories. I want to tell them on film. But I want to preserve what I acquired in the documentary in my fiction films. My documentary style is one of risk.

"As in my documentary films, I don't cover everything with close-ups when shooting fiction, nor do I shoot reactions shots. I take the same chances that I do while shooting a documentary. I invent and change scenes constantly. My script lady doesn't like it, but if it's good for the film, I put it in. I shoot a fiction film with the spirit of the documentary."

That presented all kinds of problems for the *Equinox* shoot. "The cows on the sidelines were very bored and came to see what we were doing. They even tried to get on our food barge, but they were camera-shy and would take off when we began to film," Lamothe grins.

Instead of the usual Winnebago, the production rented a house boat as water-taxi, which they took from location-to-location. It served as home base. Although they had guides to lead them through the hundreds of inlets, so that they wouldn't break motor-boat propellers or take ages crossing the river, often a small boat would get lost.

Every shot was a chore while on the water. Cameras and crew were constantly being juggled between boats of all kinds: canoes, motor boats, and barges. The smallest barge was dully nicknamed "Baby Jaws."

Since *Equinox* takes place in one day, continuity was crucial. Light also became a critical factor. "Shooting on water is more complicated. It's difficult to use lights, even though we had a generator. We had to play with the angle of the light," explains Guy Dufaux, director of photography. "We shot in the morning or later in the day, or we had to shoot with clouds. And the angles of shooting were limited, as limited as shooting in a car. We had to shoot

the canoe full-frame. A medium close-up on an actor or a wide angle was most interesting. Just shooting half-a-canoe was too dull."

With the geography of the location, Dufaux explains, "There were no zooms — we shot with a fixed lens, with lots of water travelling shots.

"We shot a great deal with backlight. In this way we could work with the chronology of the story because you can't tell what time of day it is."

The days were long. Since two-three hours were required just for transporting materials and charging boats, the days stretched to 14-15 hours. "It would have been better to shoot this type of film over a longer period with a smaller crew (the crew numbered 30), but it would have been more expensive to pay the actors," Dufaux adds. "And *Equinox* is a low-budget film — \$930,000."

If it was easier for the boats to move from place-to-place when the water was higher, the level of the water changed every day. After the full moon, the water was two inches higher than when the film began. According to river guide Roger Gladu, the water-level would change as much as six inches in one day.

Communication was difficult because the director and the director of photography weren't always on the same rig. Walkie-talkies were mandatory. Even so when you're in the middle of the water and something goes wrong with a camera or motor, Panavision is a world away.

Sound too posed problems. Since sound travels easier on water, you hear everything that anyone says, and you constantly hear motor boats in the background. In addition, the ambient sound changes with the time of day. "Noon will sound different from night time or the morning," explains soundman Yvon Benoit. "Birds sing in the morning, and at noon it's quiet; they

sleep." Many of the sound effects would be added later.

Lamothe was born in 1928 in Saint-Mont (Gers), France. He became a landed immigrant in 1953 and a Canadian citizen in 1960. Since then he has been an extremely active member of the Quebec film community, working on everything from radio programs, to research on various social and political problems in Canada, to teaching film.

For his outstanding dedication to cinema — from his first short, *Les Bûcherons de la Manouane* (NFB, 1962) to the 15-part saga *Les Indiens montagnais de la Côte-Nord* (1974-1980) — he was granted the first Prix Albert Tessier awarded by the Quebec government in 1980.

Just as his films reveal a great sensitivity to ordinary people of all varieties of background, Lamothe's own background reflects a breadth of concerns unusual in a filmmaker. Lamothe has been a farmer, vine-grower, lumberjack, taxi driver, and refrigerator salesman.

Today his biggest concern — besides the subject matter of *Equinox* — is how to seem finance the films he strongly needs to make — films which a conventional producer might not find commercial enough or even feasible for a general audience.

But Lamothe has been able to find a way to make these films he so strongly believes in. With the help of his producer/wife, Nicole, with whom he founded the company in 1972, Les Ateliers Audio-Visuels du Québec, has produced all his films, including *Mémoire battante* (1983) and currently *Equinox*.

After inspiring a generation of social documentarians, Lamothe's return to fiction marks a significant moment in the evolution of Quebec cinema. *Equinox's* theatrical release, tentatively scheduled for February, has all the makings of an event.

Lois Siegel •



• Arthur Lamothe (in sun-glasses) during the shooting of *Equinox*, a film that could make the Sorel Islands as famous as Perrault's Île aux Coudres