

Melançon rides again with *Bach et Bottine*

The Intertel Studios in Verdun, a suburb of Montreal, are located in a former 1920's movie theatre — one of those oddly-angled buildings that seem a cross between art-deco and hurry-up-and-build'em schools of architecture. A dirt-brown brick facade, hot from a bright April sun, hides a network of hallways, metallic gray walls and matching carpet that lead you around a corner. Suddenly cables appear snaking under a heavy door to the large room beyond.

In this room, topped by a black grid of light-supports through which delicate floral patterns can be seen, a hive of activity is going on around a take-apart set. It is the fake interior of a tool shed: the detailed decoration is an illusion. Large white screens, on which powerful lamps shine, envelop the set like a cocoon, bathing it in cool, subdued light. Three of the interior sides are painstakingly authentic in cob-webbed and grimy realism. Yet where the fourth side should be there is only gaping emptiness, and the high-tech beauty of a camera, waiting priest-like before the altar of illusion.

DOP Guy Dufaux sits as a flesh-and-blood appendage to the camera, its controls known and familiar. He is attentive and ready. In front of him, 11-year-old actress Mahée Paiement is already in place atop the fake work table, her soulful eyes lighting up her thin, delicate features as she banters with the crew. To one side, fellow child-actor Harry Marcianneau is having 'snow' applied to his tuque. He seems uncomfortable in his winter coat this hot April afternoon on the set of *Bach et Bottine*.

When Marcianneau is ready he sets himself up in a spot just off the set, takes a deep breath, then nods to the tall, bearded man standing among the crew.

You can recognize director André Melançon anywhere, simply from his size. At 6'3", 230 lbs., he easily looks over everybody else's heads to the scene before him. His luxuriant beard and hair, both salt and pepper, frame deep-set eyes that look out intensely at the scene about to start.

"Action" he says, in a soft voice that carries.

Marcianneau moves through the door and into the fake set, where Paiement sits quietly stroking a tamed skunk. She is sad and...

As they go about their work, delivering their lines with an ease that belies their youth, one is struck that *these are children*. It is amazing that they can concentrate at all, surrounded by the small crowd of 20 crewmembers, the lights, the mikes, the omnipresent camera.



• Co-stars Harry Marcianneau and Mahée Paiement

• *Bach et Bottine* director Melançon with Paiement

"There are some children for whom acting is natural," says Melançon. "You can practice a scene a dozen times, and you see them honing down their performance."

Indeed, the scene currently underway was practiced at least 20 times, Melançon tirelessly moving to and fro between set and background with the actors, going through every motion, every inflection, every pause. Marcianneau, who has been away from the shoot for three weeks before today, is still 'cold' and Melançon pays special attention to him, taking him aside, walking with him through every movement, whispering, cajoling, showing by example. Throughout the practice and pre-shooting, Melançon will walk around again and again, mindful of detail, tense when it doesn't work.

He does not smile, nor join in the banter. His tone is serious and straightforward, as if he is talking to an individual and not a 'child'.

Melançon first trained as an educator rather than a director. A graduate from the Institut de psychologie de l'Université de Montréal in psycho-education, Melançon worked with delinquents for many years before he became interested in cinema. After two efforts at directing-producing short, self-made films, his first important work landed a best script Genie for *Des Armes et des hommes* in 1971. Later, he would win the Prix de la critique québécoise for his first feature, *Comme les six doigts de la main*.

Choosing the actors for *Bach et Bottine* was a painstaking, time-consuming process that took months, searching through schools looking at thousands of

faces. For the role of the little girl, Fanny, some 1,000 kids were interviewed. Of these, about 80 were invited to audition, and, from the resulting short-list, the role went to Paiement. By coincidence she had already auditioned for the voice-over of Suzy in *The Peanut Butter Solution*. Melançon remembers noticing her then, and inviting her to audition for this film.

Bach et Bottine the third feature in the *Conte pour tous* series produced by Rock Demers, deals with the need for love of both children and adults. It involves an amateur musician and died-in-the-wool bachelor Jean-Claude (played by Raymond Legault) who takes a sabbatical to dedicate his energies to practicing for an all-important Bach organ competition. Recently orphaned and animal-loving Fanny (played by Paiement) is thrust into his care, much to his dismay, and he must deal with her needs for love and understanding as well as those of his own burgeoning love life with a neighbor.

Melançon's last film, *La Guerre des tuques* (*The Dog Who Stopped The War*), enjoyed a large measure of popular as well as critical success. Similar hopes are riding on this current film. Recently, *La Guerre* won a \$100,000 prize given by the Société générale du cinéma du Québec. Melançon immediately invested the money into *Bach et Bottine*, which is also his first feature film with a lead role going to an adult — a change he welcomes. "I don't want to be known just as a children's film director," says Melançon, who plans an all-adult cast for his next film.

Another new experience for Melançon and crew was the use of a full

menagerie of animals for *Bach et Bottine*. These included the tame skunk (who, with Bach, adds his name, Bottine, to the tile), as well as a rooster (who, amazingly, cried out the required call three times right on cue); a pizza-eating crow; an ugly (the script specified this) but sympathetic dog; a cat with kittens; two very large rabbits and their kids; two hamsters, and six birds of various types. "Sometimes the best show was just watching the interaction between these animals," recalls line producer Ann Burke. "It was the closest thing to total chaos that we saw through the whole production."

Also, "we had incredible luck with the weather," she adds. The script called for snowy scenes in the Quebec City locale, but not a speck could be found. The producers were worried about having to change locations — an event that happened on *La Guerre des tuques* and created logistical problems as well as extra costs. But two days before the scheduled start, a snowstorm pounded the city, and everybody cheered up.

"Yes, we were lucky on this shoot. It's all worked well," says Melançon. "We've worked very hard and we're tired. But I'm proud of my crew. There were the best I've ever had."

This crew is now watching attentively as the actors finish their last lines. However the one person's look is all intensity — tense, hold-your-breath, hope-this-one-is-good. Melançon finally closes his eyes.

"Cut," he says, and smiles.

André Guy Arseneault •