

Robert Boyd's

## The Canadian Conspiracy

Consider this for a moment. Let's say the United States dropped a mega-mega-ton nuclear bomb on Canada, what might the response of the Canadian survivors be? One possibility might be that the Prime Minister would write a letter to the U.S. President explaining that, though such an action was embarrassing to the Canadian government, the Prime Minister did understand why the Americans had to do it. Another possibility might be to give \$800,000 of public money to a Canadian company and have them put together for summer airing on CBC an ironic film in which the nuclear incineration of Canada would be presented as a typically Canadian use of technology to finally give this country weather as warm as Florida's. If you find either of these suggestions funny, you must have liked **The Canadian Conspiracy** which CBC-TV ran June 8.

If you missed **The Canadian Conspiracy**, you missed yet another example of that brand of Canadian 'humour' which, like an animal with its leg caught in a trap, gnaws it off, snickering all the while at its own cleverness. The 90-minute program takes the black hole of Canada's cultural non-policies in film and television and makes it into a paranoid fantasy of a giant Canadian conspiracy to take over U.S. movies and

TV networks from within. And so by corrupting the morals of American youth, turn that country into a nation of media morons - all this as an act of revenge upon the U.S. thought up by William Lyon Mackenzie King because Mary Pickford, and all the original Hollywood Canadians (Jack Warner, Louis B. Mayer etc.) other than brief visits to Trawnah supposedly refused to come home again and make movies here.

*Ressentiment*, or self-hatred inflated into culture, expresses itself most strongly against the past. **The Canadian Conspiracy** is thus a classic example of Canadian *ressentiment* brought to you, once again, at taxpayers' expense via the 'public' network, in which an authentic past, already hopelessly beyond caricature in its absurdity, is made even more grotesque by the glorification of its powerlessness. In **The Canadian Conspiracy**, the formulae of cynicism which some Canadians have so successfully carried into American media - that is, to a country which at least has some values of its own it can be cynical about - is here turned onto Canada. But as Canada has no values other than imitation ones (and weather is not a value), the humour overall just trips over its own flat feet (and as John Candy explains, the difference between Americans and Canadians is that Americans have stylish, elegant feet while Canadian feet are big and have treads).

It was not all humourless, of course. The segment which proves conclusively the relationship between Lorne Greene's success in the U.S. and the U.S. Department of Immigration's (ever increasing numbers of) Green Cards, including Greene's deadpan denial, is hilarious. Funny too are the typical American clichés of Canada as a blank desert of snow, or the voice-over's con-



• Mary Pickford, one of the Canadian Conspiracy's original conspirators

stant reference to a place called Otawah. Or Eugene Levy's self-satisfied quip that "There's an American born every minute."

Eternally funny is Pierre Trudeau's famous disappearing act as he pirouettes off the edge of the **This Hour Has Seven Days** set.

Less funny are all your Hollywood Canadians (Leslie Nielsen, Margot Kidder, Tommy Chong) sitting by their Be-

verly Hills pools or Rollses, saying "Gee, it's hell here." Or, within the film, CBC's self-congratulation at having trained so many Canadian conspirators to better serve American showbiz. Somewhere, there's a Biblical proverb about TV networks in glass-houses...

Despite clever archival footage, much spoofing of NFB documentaries, brilliant editing, and all your contemporary TV computer glitter, **The Canadian**

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Conspiracy just went on and on with overkill. For instance, *three* sequences of Leslie Nielsen trying to remember the names of all those other "talented Canadians" he went to school with up there in Cainada (as the Americans call it).

Ideally this should have been nothing more than a typical 15-minute **Canadian Reflections** film, which is where CBC normally slots its summertime made-in-Canada stuff that nobody watches; *Dallas* isn't on anyway. Instead, the nation got an hour and a-half's worth of primetime leg-gnawing, with such gems as the voice-over's "Canadians will stop at nothing to capture every American box-office dollar." Or, in the same vein, "Politicians will do anything to camouflage their direct responsibility for the Canadian conspiracy."

In fact, as Lorne Greene Himself put it in *The Conspiracy's* one second of truth: "There's never been a Canadian conspiracy. There's no such thing as a Canadian conspiracy."

Maybe it's time there was one. Unfortunately a Canadian-made send-up of an American-style spoof about a conspiracy that never was seems to be the best we can come up with.

Michael Dorland •

**THE CANADIAN CONSPIRACY** d. Robert Boyd p. Bill House co-p. Barbara Tranter sc. Robert Boyd, Mark Achbar, Michael Short narr. Damiir Andrei cast. d. Gail Carr asst. cast. Susannah Conybeare p. sup. John LaRose cons. p. Paul Block d.o.p. Martin Corley light des. Brian Savage key grip Chris Tate p. sd. Dave Schick loc. man. David Baniagan 1st a.d. David Devine 2nd a.d. Jack Hardy sc. sup. Leslie Druker art d. Marlene Graham head ward. Eva Richter asst. ward. Linda Muir make-up Barb Szablowski p. assts. Michael McGarry, Peter Zakrzewski, J.P. Locherer L.A. unit Tom Bull, Brian Crance, Paul Weiss N.Y. unit Michael Lieberman, Tom Nelson, Jim Misner unit pub. Prudence Emery res. Amy Wilson stills Jack Hardy CBC cons. Athan Katsos post.p. Alndon Group Productions post. p. re-rec. Masters Workshop Inc. Terry Gordica, Jim Frank asst. to p. Karen Cowitz p. acct. Michael G. Woods UT ed Dave Goard orig. mus. Marc Jordan, John Capek info. systems Mark Achbar assoc. p. Nathan Neumer l.p. Gratien Gélinas, George Buza, Deborah Cass, Keith Knight, Chris Tate, Alan Wilbee, Mickey Costello, Michael Kohut, Bruce Vavrina, Michael Cope-man, Bernard Behrans, Linda Sorensen, Ian Wallace, Eugene Levy, (with cameos by) John Candy, Tommy Chong, Susan Clark, Monty Hall, Lorne Greene, Doug Henning, Margot Kidder, Rich Little, Howie Mandel, Lorne Michaels, Anne Murray, Leslie Nielsen, Ivan Reitman, Morley Safer William Shatner, Martin Short, Alan Thicke, Dave Thomas p.c. Shtick Productions Ltd. in association with Home Box Office Inc., the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and with the participation of Telefilm Canada.

**SONIA** d. Paule Baillargeon p. Michel Gauthier, Roger Frappier, Suzanne Dussault sc. Paule Baillargeon, Laura Harrington narr. Jocelyn Bérubé, Pierre Curzi, Danièle Proulx, Gilbert Sicotte d.o.p. André-Luc Dupont, Roger Martin asst.-cam. Michel Girard sd. Serge Beauchemin boom Louis Marion film ed. Yves Dion asst. ed. France Dubé orig. mus. Yves Laferrrière prod. d. Lorraine Richard art d. François Laplante orig. paintings Paule Baillargeon 1st a.d. Lise Abastado 2nd a.d. Louis-Philippe Rochon cont. Johanne Prigent unit man. Luc Martineau prod. assts. Claude Laflamme, Marc Beaulieu elec. Normand Viau asst. elec. Manal Hassib stills Jacques Tougas grip Jean Trudeau ward. Lise Bédard make-up Pierre Saindon ward asst. Patrice Bengle, Ian Lavoie trainees Marc Doyon, Marie-Claude Larouche, Louise Pépin sd. ed. France Dubé post p. ed. Gilles Quintal sp. efx. Ken Page c.f.e. asst. sp. efx. Vital Millette mixer Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Coll trans. Johanne Pelletier post sync. Ciné-groupe titles Louise Overy admin. Monique Létourneau asst. admin. Louise Cousineau p. sec. Johanne Pelletier mus. rights Evelyn Régimbald tech. coord. Edouard Davidovici post p.d. Suzanne Dussault l.p. Kim Yaroshevskaya, Paule Baillargeon, Lothaire Bluteau, Paul Buissonneau, Michael Rudder, Raymond Cloutier, Marc Messier, Blanche Baillargeon, Frédérique Collin, Suzanne Gaulin, Louis Marion, Albanie Morin, Louise St-Pierre, Guy Thauvette p.c. l'Office national du film du Canada running time 57 mins colour.

Paule Baillargeon's

## Sonia

Quebec's Paule Baillargeon, best known and respected as an actress and filmmaker (*La Cuisine rouge*), should find glory added to her reputation with *Sonia*, which she co-wrote, directed as well as acted in. *Sonia* premiered in Montreal on June 15 as the major closing-night attraction for *Silence, elles tournent*, the second International Festival of Women's Films and Videos.

*Sonia* is about a woman who, literally at the prime of her artistic and professional life – as a painter who teaches art history at a university and lives an independent, fulfilled and apparently financially worry-free life – discovers she has Alzheimer's disease. Surrounded by loving and supporting people, including her daughter Roxanne, *Sonia's* life could not be more near-perfect – until the advent of the disease.

Dreading the film's potential for maudlin melodrama and sentimental emotionality, *Sonia* caught me off-guard and captivated me. Instead of succumbing to tragedy, Baillargeon creates two warm and admirable female characters, who change the whole focus and dynamic of the film. While it is still about a woman whose life slowly and visibly slips from her, *Sonia* is also about the relationship between a mother and daughter in its most idealized form. Because it is the relationship between *Sonia* and Roxanne that makes this a remarkable film.

To lose oneself in one's own world, where the familiar becomes strange and time has no meaning, must be a journey into the vortex of a terrifying nightmare. That nightmare is Alzheimer's disease. The first indications of *Sonia's* illness come on her birthday. First she forgets it is her birthday – in itself not so peculiar because an active and involved person may honestly lose track of the date. But at a party that evening *Sonia* makes a tender speech of gratitude to her daughter and friends, then several minutes later repeats it word for word, oblivious that she has just said the same thing. Everyone is taken aback but lets it pass. Other minor events occur, but it's not until *Sonia* disappears for several days and cannot explain where she's been that Roxanne realizes something is seriously wrong. Against *Sonia's* wishes, Roxanne takes her to a doctor who so typically explains that it's probably nothing – "the change of life, that's all" – and prescribes something to help her sleep.

*Sonia* herself finally sees another doctor who recognizes the symptoms which, after further tests, are diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease. Through this first third, the film flows, creating a visual world and atmosphere that connotes balance, beauty and security.

*Sonia's* home is an important visual focal point throughout the film. Filled with her paintings (in reality painted by



• Paule Baillargeon, left, as Roxanne and Kim Yaroshevskaya as *Sonia*

Baillargeon), it has a personality that in essence is *Sonia* herself – as *Sonia* loses her vitality, so does her home. Signs are put up indicating which doors lead where, furniture is overturned, toys and knick-knacks left in disarray. *Sonia's* living space is a symbol of her mind – at first orderly, open, modern, then filled with corridors, rooms and doors that can no longer be travelled through with conscious knowledge and safety.

Several beautifully conceived and moving scenes indicate the talent at work on this film. One that I found most memorable and expressive occurs about a third of the way through, after *Sonia* begins to experience prolonged lapses of memory, and time and place become distorted. She packs a suitcase, convinced that she must go away. Not recognizing Roxanne she busily folds and packs while Roxanne empties the suitcase. The camera stays on their hands, frantically struggling, as Roxanne tries desperately to bring her mother's mind back to the present. Their panic and anger is evident in their hands and voices – faces or eyes are unnecessary and, in fact, would probably have been too pathetic.

Another moment that I found one of the darkest of the film, is when *Sonia* seems to be moving further and further back into the past, sometimes a child and sometimes a young woman. Her hair on end and sloppily dressed, she puts on an old furry hat and heavy coat, then wanders around her apartment, lost, apparently unable even to read the signs indicating the way outside. We have no idea where she wants to go, nor does she. The intelligent, sophisticated *Sonia* has gotten lost inside this woman who visually has the same effect as bag-ladies can. Some people in the audience actually laughed, responding only to the comedy of that instant, but losing the context of *Sonia's* increasing dispossession of self.

While *Sonia* is essentially about a woman and Alzheimer's disease, and the manifestations of that disease, the crux of the film for me was the relationship between mother and daughter. Be-

tween *Sonia* and Roxanne there is respect, tenderness and love, of the kind possible only in the absence of a father-figure. Yet there is the nuance of an edge – that edge inevitably existent between mother and daughter. We watch Roxanne as she watches her beautiful, talented, vivacious mother, wondering perhaps about the struggle "to be" that would include Roxanne's own struggle to emerge from the shadow of such a mother. As actress, director and writer, Baillargeon has managed to imply all of the emotions and situations particular to the mother/daughter relationship; the recognition of one's self in the other and the desperate need to break-away and assert one's individuality that coincides with an inexplicable love.

Both actresses, Kim Yaroshevskaya as *Sonia* and Paule Baillargeon as Roxanne bring the relationship alive, and it is much to the credit of their talents that the film is what it is. It is not easy to play someone re-experiencing childhood and not look ridiculous. Yaroshevskaya faced a difficult role and plays it with grace and intelligence. Her anger, her gentle patience and her girlish silliness, all remain in character – *Sonia* as created by Yaroshevskaya.

If I have one problem with *Sonia*, it is with the idealized world it encapsulates. And that is a problem I've had with other recent Québec productions. The worlds created within these films are so beautiful, everyone is so successful, I never forget I'm watching "movies." There is an insistent degree of unreality in them, but understandably, the tragedy in this film would have been too intense if *Sonia* had lived in any less perfect a world. But I couldn't help wondering what kind of a film it would have been if she had – or about those more average people who find themselves victims of Alzheimer's disease.

At 58 minutes, *Sonia* has the look of a made-for-TV movie in its small spaces and tight framing. It is pleasing to see the NFB deploying its talent with a view toward the mass audience.

Jamie Gaetz •