

Yves Simoneau's

## Les Fous de Bassan

Yves Simoneau's *Les Fous de Bassan* (renamed *In the Shadow of the Wind* for the English subtitled version) is a literate, overly literary, well-cast and visually beautiful adaptation of Anne Hébert's prize-winning novel.

The Fou de Bassan is a gannet, akin to a goose, a large bird that breeds in the rocks of off-shore islands and survives by diving into the ocean for fish. Griffin Creek, the small, isolated, English Protestant fishing community in Percé, in Gaspésie, where the film is set (though it was actually shot on Île Bonaventure), is surrounded by these birds. Stevens Brown (Steve Banner), the protagonist, returns to Griffin Creek from Florida after a self-imposed exile of five years for beating up his father. He finds that, like the gannets, the community is still tied to the rock they inhabit by their reliance on fish. The people of Griffin Creek continue fishing and interbreeding, as hypocritical, incestuous and repressed as ever. And as impossible to escape from.

The film opens with an image of Brown, lying unconscious on the shore, being buffeted by the tide like a piece of driftwood. His cousin Olivia (Charlotte Valandrey), out for a full-moon brood, sees him lying there and turns him on his back. He wakes up, sees her and becomes possessed by a sudden surge of energy. As a voice-over tells us that they are both "thrown into the fury of the wind," Brown rapes her. In a few shots Simoneau has thus laid the groundwork for the repressed, Protestant variety of Grand Guignol that is to follow.

*Les Fous de Bassan* is narrated by an old, decrepit Stevens Brown in a room full of paintings of the people who were part of his life. The tale is told as a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards after which we always return to the old Brown (played with great style by Jean-Louis Millette) for a poetic summing up.

In individual scenes, however, the director forgets that we are supposed to be seeing things from Brown's point-of-view and Brown himself becomes subject to the gaze of others'. Thus to the ripe young Nora (Laure Marsac), whose every move threatens to bust her shirt open, he's the very essence of temptation, "a demon," she says, giggling, before her first attempt at seducing him. To the widowed Maureen (Angèle Coutru) he is not only a help around the house and a source of sexual succor but he gives meaning to time. To the majority of the community, he is a disruptive force.

One of the characteristics of Griffin Creek is that everyone sees everything. In one of the first scenes, Brown's mad brother Perceval (Lothaire Bluteau) is watching Olivia and Nora Atkins bathing while Brown is watching his



• Laure Marsac and Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou are lustbirds in *Les Fous de Bassan*

brother. Olivia and Stevens are first prevented from getting intimate by the abrupt appearance of Olivia's brother. Later, the arrival of Nora constitutes yet another pre-coitus interruptus. Finally, Perceval's spying on Reverend Jones (Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou) and Nora will be the reason for the suicide of Irène (Marie Tifo), the Pastor's wife.

"Anyone can be someone else's demon," says the Pastor in one scene. "We must struggle against our innermost thoughts. We must beware of our stares. It is through them demons enter."

In *Les Fous de Bassan* almost all the main characters are related by blood. Maureen, the widow with whom Stevens is living, is his cousin as are Nora and Olivia. All are thinking about, staring at, and lusting after each other. The Pastor (whose barren wife no longer wants to have intercourse) lusts after Nora who lusts after Stevens who's sleeping with Maureen but whose love for Olivia remains unrequited. Each has indeed become each other's demon.

Simoneau has become a superb director. He not only has an eye for what to film and how to frame each shot, he also knows enough about moving the camera and the editing process to give each scene rhythm and movement. He's no slouch with the sound-tracks either. For example, to show Irène's asexuality, Simoneau begins a scene of her making supper by first showing us the fish she

is about to gut before cutting to her face. The sound that accompanies the wrenching of the entrails is appropriately off-putting. Clichéd or not, this and similar use of other images translate into a shorthand with which maximum meaning is creatively conveyed with a minimum of fuss.

Yet, the talents of Simoneau and those of a uniformly excellent cast and crew are not enough to overcome a turgid script which bogs the film down and for which Simoneau is partly responsible. (He and Marcel Beaulieu co-adapted the novel. Sheldon Chad is guilty of the screenplay.)

The old saying that one can make a very good movie from a second-rate book but that one can't make a good movie from a good book seems to me to hold true for *Les Fous*. It's not that the screenwriters were overly faithful to the book — they felt free enough to reshape its structure for the film and to eliminate characters as they felt necessary. I think the problem is that they tried to transpose the literary qualities of *Les Fous* to the screen. The film has 'Art' and 'Important' written all over it and is as unwieldy and over-inflated as an old MGM 'prestige' picture.

Lillian Hellman is but one of many playwrights who have commented on how dialogue which works in a novel or a short story often tumbles like dead-weight from an actor's lips. For *Les Fous*, Chad has lifted some lines di-

rectly from the book. The rest he wrote in a similar vein. Lines like, "My body remembers how cold your hands were the first time you touched me when you brought me into the world. I must say I too love you", "I still feel desire for you," "You'd make a pretty little vixen," and, "Somewhere from inside the storm I heard a cry," are supposed to sound poetic but they just sound silly and slow down the film.

The choice of dialogue points to a basic flaw in the very conceptualization of the adaptation which affects the tone and style of the entire production.

*Les Fous de Bassan* is like using the best materials to build a dream house but laying its foundation on a marsh. It's a beautiful effort but it can't help but sink.

José Arroyo •

**LES FOUS DE BASSAN** p. Justine Héroux assoc. p./prod. man. Roger Héroux sc. Sheldon Chad adaptation Marcel Beaulieu, Yves Simoneau music Richard Grégoire art d. Michel Proulx d.o.p. Alain Dostie cost. design Nicole Pelletier chief ed. Joëlle van Effenterre sd. ed. Paul Dion sd. Jean-Charles Ruault 1st a.d. Mireille Goulet cont. Monique Champagnac l.p. Steve Banner, Charlotte Valandrey, Laure Marsac, Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou Lothaire Bluteau, Marie Tifo, Paul Hébert, Angèle Coutru, Roland Chenil, Guy Thauvette, Denise Gagnon Pierre Powers, Henry Classé, Jocelyn Bérubé. Jena-Louis Millette. running time 107 min. color 35 mm.

Dorothy Todd-Hénault's  
**Firewords**

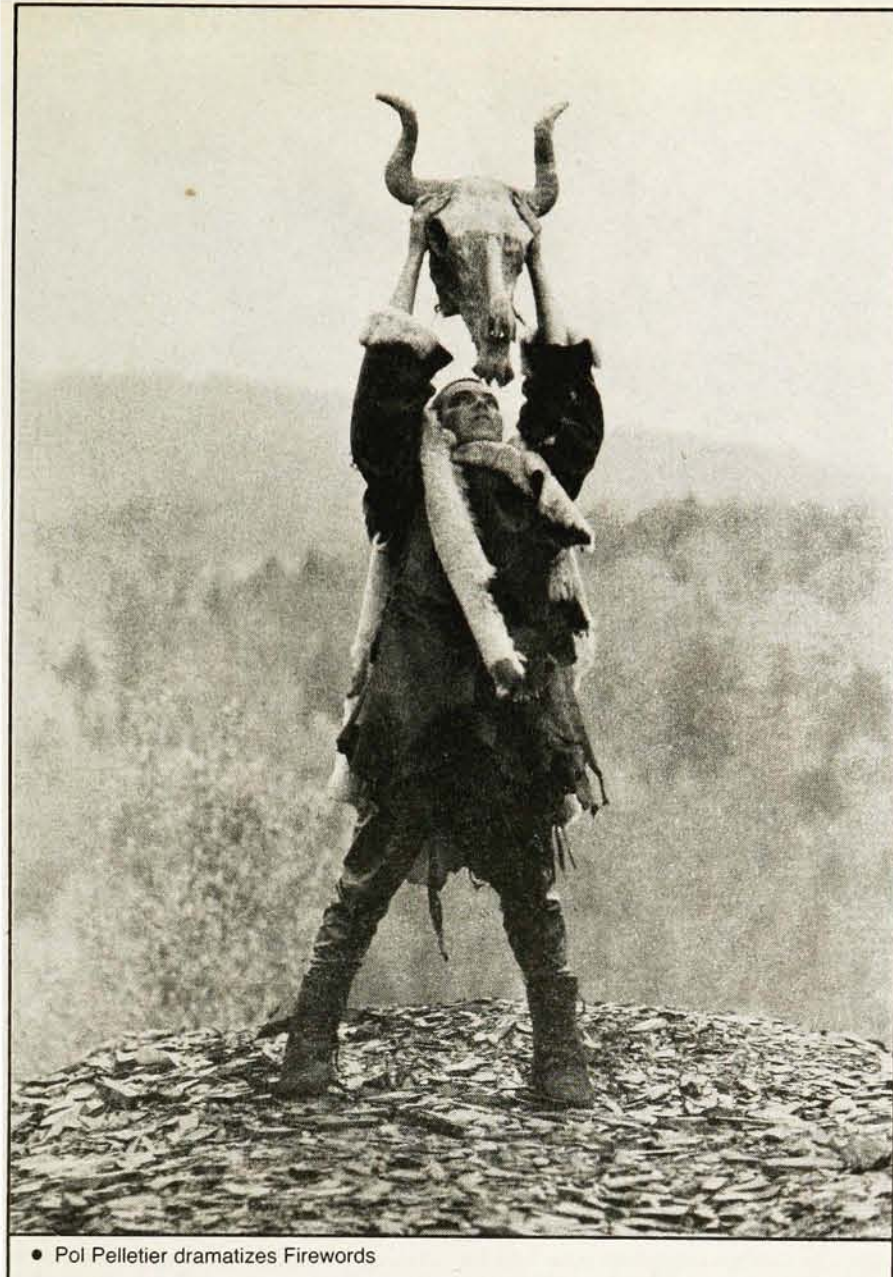
The Euguélonne landed on the planet earth in 1976 and Quebec literature has never been quite the same since. The first images of **Firewords** convey a sense of the shock and excitement which came of this encounter between an extraterrestrial and the very ordinary sexism of our world (and between Louky Bersianik's novel, *The Euguélonne* and its readers). Greeted by the platitudes of male predominance, the wide-eyed Euguélonne can only reply with a great burst of incredulous laughter. We laugh too, so overwhelming still is the disparity between the limpid logic of this outsider and the sophistries of our times.

**L'Euguélonne** was Québec's first feminist novel. In the 10 years since its publication, feminist writing has become one of the most productive branches of Quebec letters. **Firewords** (*Les terribles vivantes* is the title of the French original) is a film portrait directed by Dorothy Todd-Hénault of three of the most important feminist writers: Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard. Over and above its portrayal of these women, the film can be considered to be about feminist writing itself: writing which is self-consciously different and convinced of the need to open up a new cultural space.

Bersianik, Marchessault and Brossard are well-known public figures in Quebec. Nicole Brossard's literary reputation was established long ago and she is a regular figure at international writers' encounters. Bersianik most recently took up a public role in writing a long and vitriolic critique of the male chauvinism in Denys Arcand's **Decline of the American Empire**; her article launched a polemic lasting several weeks in *Le Devoir*. Jovette Marchessault has become known to the public principally through her theatre, whose success has by no means been limited to feminist audiences.

As a film about these writers, **Firewords** had to face a complex challenge. Bersianik and Brossard (and to a lesser extent Marchessault) are essentially theorists and their principal subject is words. How to make a film about words? The film chooses to punctuate interviews with excerpts from the writers' works and to draw on maximum visual resources to build on the impact of the words. For some audiences, this visual effort will seem necessary; for others it will seem superfluous and distracting.

The first third of the film, devoted to Louky Bersianik, is certainly the most dramatically successful. Her words call for no illustration: her speech, like her writing, is imaginative, colourful and given to pithy formulas. What other writer uses etymologies as a basis for characterizations, shows how words are



• Pol Pelletier dramatizes Firewords

photo: Sarah Butterfield

the very incarnation of the histories they represent? Her genius is to come up with seemingly simple but arresting images and expressions which express complex historical and philosophical ideas: the picnic on the Acropolis; the Euguélonne as the parody of the Evangelist; "women are adjectives."

The film shifts into a different mode with Jovette Marchessault. Here there is less emphasis on theory and more on autobiography; in fact Marchessault has an astounding story to tell. She began painting out of a desperate need to create ("I would become an artist or die") and took a job as a cleaning lady to support herself as a painter. Seeing one of her paintings hung beside a Riopelle and a Chagall, on the wall of an office she had come to clean, finally convinced her to give up her double life. The film offers some striking views of Jovette's sculptures, her *femmes telluriques*, placed here and there among the chickens, kittens and shrubbery of her farm.

Besides these images and those of her animals, which are obviously motivated by the material, Jovette's words are abundantly illustrated. A short text on Jovette's relationship with her grandmother is reenacted and the addition of animated figures superimposed on these images seems excessive. The language of the narrative is itself strongly suggestive; the use of actual illustration

only seems to weaken the evocative power of the language. Other kinds of images seem frankly extraneous: very Anglo-Saxon tennis players appear when tennis is mentioned; immigrant women crowd the sidewalks when they come up in the conversation.

The problem of the *function* of images runs right through the film. Images are used in two ways. There are some motifs (like the spiral, or waves) which are used repeatedly and suggestively; but most of the images, like the musical script, seem to be used primarily to illustrate the ideas in the text (for instance Brossard says "explode" and firewords follow). This mimetic use of sound and image tends to distract from the power of the words themselves.

The atmosphere of the city at night is used very effectively in the section on Nicole Brossard. Brossard is very much an urban writer, and the sensual quality of the images here counteracts somewhat the abstraction of Brossard's ideas. (Although the abstraction is perhaps an illusion: Brossard speaks with disarming clarity. And her illustration, chalk in hand, is most useful).

With this third part of the film, we become aware of some recurring themes brought up by the three writers which take on fuller dimensions as they are repeated. All three writers speak of the revelation which at one point changed them from struggling and hesitant

voices into writers convinced that their first audience was primarily female. Brossard says she became "like a fish in water." All three speak of the difficult personal decisions which came of this choice and of their need to adopt a lifestyle consistent with their goals as writers. Remaining at a level of fundamental exposition (a framework which excludes self-critique or a sense of the evolution of their ideas and practice), all three express a non-violent ecological vision of feminism.

The two appearances of Pol Pelletier in the film (her face a marvel of intensity as the Euguélonne, her performance of *My Mother is a Cow* a disconcerting blend of tenderness and violence) are an attraction in itself.

The work of Bersianik, Marchessault and Brossard is intimately tied to the development of feminist thought and practice in Quebec. If the feminist movement has moved through several universes over the last decade and if the tenets of feminist writing are continually challenged and redefined, many of the basic convictions behind them remain intact. Ten years after *L'Euguélonne*, these writers speak with the same passion of a new world of meaning on the verge of being born. **Firewords** (sensitively and most effectively translated into English) is an excellent introduction to their work.

Sherry Simon •

**FIREWORDS** d. Dorothy Todd Hénault d.o.p. Zoe Dirse asst. ca. Nastaran Dibai, Nash Read, Al Morgan, Elise Swerhone add. photography David de Volpi assist. by René Daigle, Nash Read, Simon Leblanc, Michel Paulin Diane Carrière and Norma Denys sd. Claude Hazanavicius, Michel Charron, Marcel Delambre boom Catherine Van Der Donck ed. Pascale Laverrière, Dorothy Todd Hénault ed. asst. Sylvia Poirier debra d'Entremont add. ed Janice Brown animation Michèle Paupé original m. Anne Lauber Songs by Louky Bersianik Music: Richard Séguin, Joel Bienvenu, sung by: Judith Chevalier, Richard Séguin Accordeon m. Francine Lévesque dramatic seq. l.p. "The Euguélonne", Pol Pelletier, "The Grandmother" Marthe Blackburn, "The Young Jovette" Raphaëlle Nadeau, "The Cow," Pol Pelletier, "The Loved One", Liz Hamilton. 1st a.d. René Pothier asst to first a.d. Claudine Meyer, cost. design Ginette Noiseaux, Reflective fabric for the Euguélonne: 3M Co. make-up Gillian Chandler, Louise Mignault gaffers Audrey Beuzet, Michel-Paul Belisle, Marc Hénault grips Philippe Paulu, Richard Bonin, Charles-Henri Duclos fr. sdr. proj Paul Witz, Eric Chamberlain. "Anais dans la queue de la comète," d. Michèle Magny l.p. Andrée Lachapelle, Patricia Nolin, Guy Nador, Jean Louis Roux, Hubert Gagnon still photog. Piroška Mihalka orig. stage creation of night cows Pol Pelletier excerpt of books by Louky Bersianik: "The Euguélonne (Press Porcépic)", "Pique nique sur l'Acropole (vib Editeur)", "Maternative (vib Editeur)", "Axes et eau (vib Editeur)" Jovette Marchessault: "Comme une enfant de la terre (Les Éditions Léméac)", "La Mère des Herbes (Les Éditions Quinze)", "Lesbian Triptych Night Cows" (The Women's Press) Nicole Brossard: "These Our Mothers (Coach House Press)", "Les sens apparent (Flammarion), Editeur", "Picture Theory (Éditions Nouvelle Optique)", "Le Nef des Sorcières - l'Écrivain (Les Éditions Quinze). texts adapt. by Marthe Blackburn, Dorothy Rodd Hénault lit. consult. Gail Scott, Louise Forsyth Trans. Gerry Denis, Alison Hewitt, Donna Murray, Marthe O'Brian, Suzanne de Lotbinière Harwood, Yvonne Klein, Barbara Godard, Linda Gaboriau, Dorothy Todd Hénault subtt. Suzanne de Lotbinière Harwood painted people Francine Gagné p. colour programmese Setsuko Ishii paintings and sculpted women rising-from-the earth: Jovette Marchessault Etchings Francine Gagné Title backgrounds and transitions spirals Elaine Despins visual res. Kathleen McFall excerpt from film "Satellites of the Sun - NFB title design Val Teodoru optical camera Barry Wood animation camera Robin Bain, Pierre Landry narration Anne Skinner m.rec. Louis Hone m. ed. Diane LeFloch ed. Jackie Newell re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel admin. Gisèle Guilbault p. Barbara Jones ex. p. Kathleen Shannon p.c. A National Film Board of Canada film produced by Studio D. colour 16 min running time 84 min. 30 sec.

André Gladu's  
**Pellan**

**P**ellan, the latest documentary by André Gladu, is on the surface a film biography of Alfred Pellan, 80, one of the most important Québécois artists of this century. It is also, judiciously, a meandering journey through the influences that shaped both Pellan the Man and Pellan the Artist, namely: his times, his friends, his loves, and his art. It is this insight into life as total experience: struggle, faith, failure, love, work and success, that raises this film above the sometime dull biographical 'method' of establishing facts, dates, and places, etc. It cinematically 'paints' Pellan the man and the artist, into an enigmatic, multi-faceted, warm, fragile and totally human individual.

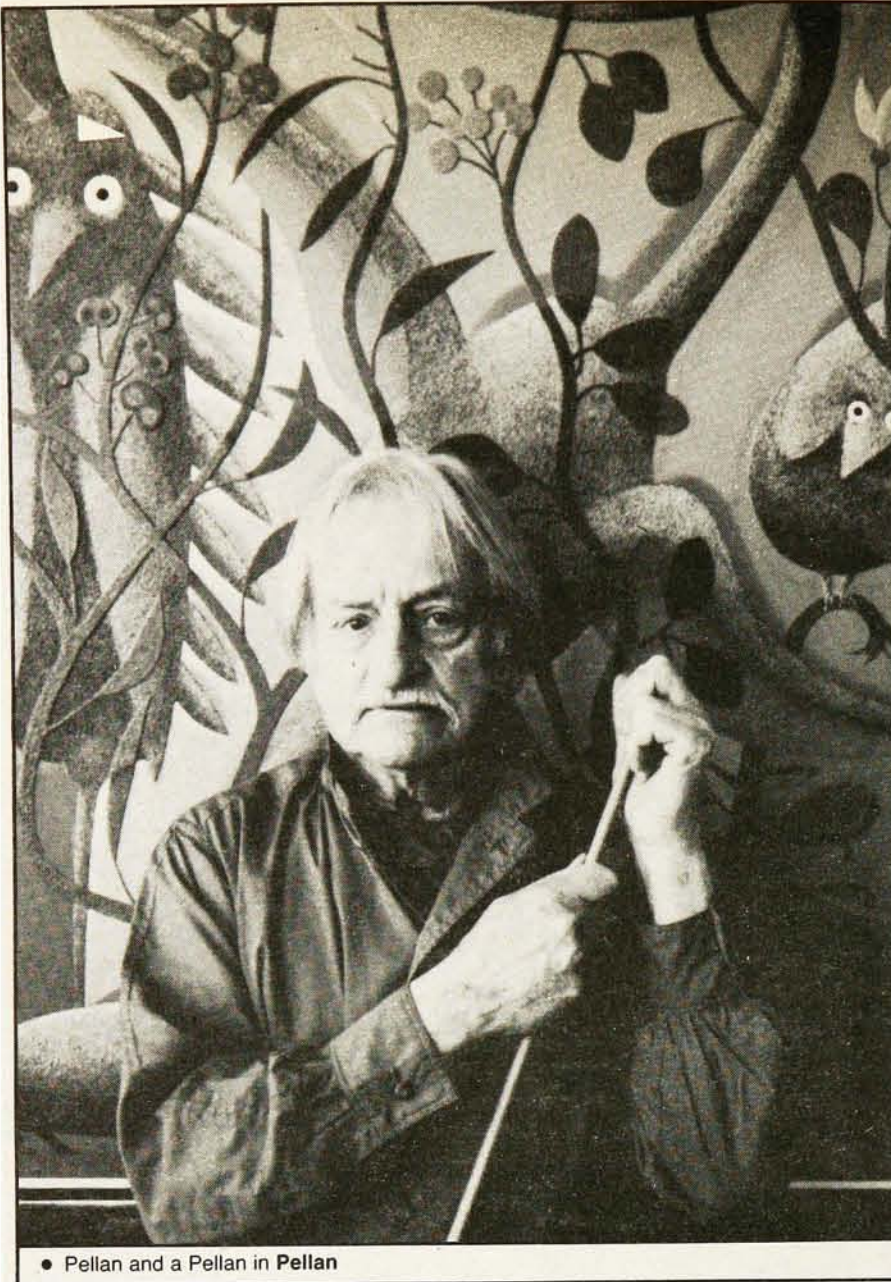
Gladu has wisely stripped his film of any omniscient narration, relying instead on snippets of systematic and well-researched interviews with contemporaries, fellow-travellers, friends, as well as with Alfred Pellan himself. Since there is no 'writing' involved, the various subjects' reminiscences and observations forming the raw material the filmmaker can work with, Gladu instead concentrates on the ordering of sequences and the pacing best suited to carry the story of this extraordinary man living through extraordinary times.

Rich with the bounty of a good story that also happens to be fact, the director then concentrates on adding polish to the 'product' with a judicious selection of archival footage, depictions of Pellan's work, and a staged reenactment of a certain important event in the artist's life — all effective tools in creating a portrait of the artist/man that is clear, fascinating and poignant.

Gladu's most important as well as wisest decision was in the choosing of the subject itself. Alfred Pellan sparkles as a content, unassuming, intelligent, hard-working, witty, rich-memored jewel of an old man — everyone's fantasy of a perfect grandfather-figure. It is this film's *forté* that it creates such an intimacy with the audience that you almost see yourself sitting in his kitchen, perhaps sharing *un gin-chaud* Québécois style, and talking hour upon hour about life, love and happiness — or perhaps about a Pablo Picasso invitation for tea to his East Bank apartment, or about mass intellectual exile during *'La Grande noirceur'* of Quebec's Duplessis period, or even of sitting on his engineer father's knee as a child, driving the locomotive between Quebec and Montreal...

Alfred Pellan was born in the sleepy provincial town that was Quebec City in the early 1900s. He picked up the paintbrush from his father, who worked as a railroad engineer but painted as a hobby. It is Pellan's father who encouraged him in pursuing a career in art after young Pellan had clearly demonstrated his talent, his dedication, and his love for the medium.

Quebec was then (and would remain



• Pellan and a Pellan in *Pellan*

Madeleine Pellan

so for many years still) very conservative and very closed to the outside world. Its art was still representational, standardized and as staid as the Roman Catholic Church that still dominated much of everyday life. Young Pellan's use of bold new colour technique, his brilliance and his taste for experimentation led him to the only possible avenue that could allow him to grow as an artist: exile.

The Europe he arrived to study in, the 1920s Paris of the 'Lost Generation' chronicled by such writers as Ernest Hemingway in his *A Movable Feast*, would mark Pellan's life and work, for it was a city swarming with the cream of the avant-garde: writers, artists, intellectuals, all singing of dadaism, nihilism, cubism, and countless other 'isms' born from personal search for creative truth. It was a city awash with the new ideas and ideals of the postwar: a new order, new ways of seeing, new ways of *thinking*.

While in Europe, Pellan's star rose to the point where his work was hanging in the same major exhibitions with the Picassos, the Mirós and the Braques. Yet, on his return to Canada he was ignored. The old adage that says *On ait jamais prophète dans son pays* (We are never prophets in our own country) proved all too true, for the Quebec society of the mid-'30s was not quite ready for either modern art or for this thoroughly modern and brilliant young man.

The film details these events well, fol-

lowing Pellan back and forth across the ocean (literally and figuratively) between success far away and failure at home. That he should, eventually and deservedly, succeed in his own homeland was perhaps inevitable, but rife with decades of silent struggle and bitter with the taste of lost years.

This ongoing struggle is never better expressed than during the film's two staged 'inserts', if we may call them that. These concern a series of events that occurred in the mid-'40s when Pellan was hired as star teacher at the *École des beaux arts de Montréal*. With the help of actors and written dialogue, the inserts reenact scenes of the fights Pellan and his students had to wage with the narrowmindedness and conservatism of the school's hierarchy (and, by inference, with the Quebec status-quo mentality of the day).

Coming as they did sandwiched between blocks of interviews, unannounced, and lit, written and handled in complete contrast to the rest of the film, the inserts were a bit jarring to the viewer in the beginning. But once warmed to the subject, they brought a different, fresher perspective to the story that was daring and welcome.

Well-known character actor Jean-Louis Millette dominates (as usual) during his brief but crucial scenes as School Director Charles Maillard, but the actors do not fare as well — suffering through some stilted dialogue and odd scene development.

There are other, more flagrant weak-

nesses in the film, especially technical ones. Unfortunately, Gladu could have learned a few lessons from his subject about disciplining his art form and paying attention to detail. Amazingly, the camera sometimes jerked around in amateurish spasms that would have best been left on the cutting room floor. The sound editing was uneven, sometimes plain bad. The interviewer would ask a question off-camera, a question no one save Pellan could comprehend since the interviewer was un-miked. There were other technical incongruities that should raise the hackles of film professionals, and are unexplainable, coming from an experienced documentary filmmaker.

The accompanying music to this film never properly gels with the story. If film music, according to the old rule, is supposed to be the kind you do not outright notice yet feel moved and transported by, then this film's soundtrack is a failure. It has an effect more like gaudy lawn furniture — the kind you have to concentrate hard to ignore — and the mood it creates does not serve either the film or the subject.

The master's work is represented often on the screen, as is understandable for this kind of documentary. In the beginning, they are shown statically, with the full-frame painting filling the screen without any camera movement whatsoever. Later on, as if the cameraman suddenly discovered it was alright, the camera finally starts to move: concentrating on a poignant detail, panning to another highlight, pulling-back in a progressive disclosure of the total work. A welcome addition to the film, though late in coming.

Pellan is almost always lit in natural, very soft light, sitting in a very homey atmosphere, in tight close-up of face, eyes, hands. However, witnesses of Pellan's life, his friends, fellow artists and art-historians, are all interviewed lit harshly from the side, sitting before a black background in upper-body shots, period. As these interviews are constantly being inter-cut between themselves, the effect is one of making Pellan somehow smaller than life, dull, *old*; while the others become artificial, distant, somehow unreal.

Yet for all these weaknesses, this documentary still retains much to remember and to cherish. That Pellan's life has finally been chronicled for posterity, if nothing else, is enough to ensure this film's enduring viability — for Quebec and for the world.

Pellan has spent his life giving us the best of his art. Now Pellan, too, is ours. Old friend, we are enriched.

**André Guy Arseneault •**

**PELLAN** d. André Gladu p. Claude Bonin research and sc. André Gladu, France Pilon ed. France Pilon sd./ed. Jean Charlebois cam. Pierre Migot (documentary), Alain Dostie (doc. and fict.), Philippe Constatini (Hotel Drouot) sd. Serge Beauchemin, Louis Marion, Maurice Ribière sd. ed. Serge Viau sd. mix André-Gilles Gagné original m. Ginette Bellavance violinist Claude Hamel l.p. Hubert Gagnon, Gérard Poirier, Jean-Louis Millette, Patrice Coquereau, Serge Lemonde with doc. footage of Omer Parent, Jean Chauffrey, Robert Devoucoue, Jean Barluet, Bernard Dorival, Maurice Renard, Margaret and Philip Surreytt, Jacques de Tonnancour, François-Marc Gagnon, Mimi Parent, Jean Benoit, Denyse Delrue, Madeleine Polisenio. p.c. Les Films Visions 4 with financial participation of Telefilm Canada, la Société générale de cinéma du Québec and the collaboration of La Société Radio-Canada. colour 16mm running time 72 min.