

Arousing PASSION

The téléromans and their hold over Quebec



•Three different types of téléromans: clockwise from left, *La Bonne aventure*, *Le Temps d'une paix* and *Le Parc des braves*

by Louise Cousineau

The Gémeaux Awards being held February 15 will, for the first time ever, be honouring French Canadian television. Like their Gemini counterparts, the programs in nomination will include dramas, music, childrens' shows, news, and variety. It will also celebrate a phenomenon that is essentially a Quebec feature: the *téléroman**. The word was invented here (it is slowly gaining ground in France where it was spotted recently in the TV pages of *Le Monde*), to describe the genre that is beloved in Quebec.

*Téléroman - literally a tele-novel - covers two types of dramatic series production. The first is the extended story running over months and years, using a developing cast of characters, as in *Le Temps d'une paix* or *Dallas*. The second is much like the American sitcom, having a stable set of characters and distinct episodes which are complete, each by itself, and need not be seen consecutively to be understood, as in *Sel et poivre* or *The Cosby Show*. Ed.

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Only two shows received six nominations each: *RSVP*, a variety show produced by Télé-Métropole starring Quebec's child-star-turned-handsome-young-singer-dancer-entertainer René Simard. And *Le Temps d'une paix*, Quebec's historical *téléroman* which has drawn an extraordinary audience: the final episode broadcast last December attracted close to 3 million viewers. That's half the population of French Canada.

Le Temps d'une paix is set in Charlevoix county, around La Malbaie, just after World War 1. The story is centered around a strong widow farmer, Rose-Anna St-Cyr (Nicole Leblanc) and her grown up children. Typically, Rose-Anna's household included her dead husband's mother, Mémère Bouchard, a retarded boy living there as a foster child, Ticoune, and a hired hand.

Le Temps d'une paix was not an instant success story. It took two seasons before it hit the magical 2 million viewers. It started with a couple of strikes against it. Radio-Canada launched it on

a Wednesday night, after the baseball season was over, in mid-autumn, when most TV habits are already formed. Also, Wednesday nights are not the best on Quebec TV: Mondays and Tuesdays are.

That did not stop the *téléroman* from becoming a huge success, due to several factors: the writing, by Pierre Gauvreau (who used to be a TV director at Radio-Canada when TV first started), is superb. The directing, by Yvon Trudel, a Radio-Canada employee who had worked for many years on another great *téléroman*, *Les Belles histoires des pays d'en haut*, is done with a love for detail and a passion for the great scenery of Charlevoix.

Quebecers fell in love with Rose-Anna. Although the show is set in the '20s, she has a modern aura of autonomy about her: she's a single mother taking care of her brood. But she is not impervious to love: throughout the series, she was loved by Joseph-Arthur Lavoie, also a widower, the village political organizer (liberal) who has a finger in every pie.

The story is set around La Malbaie, where the rich have traditionally spent their summer holidays. One of Rose-Anna's daughters becomes a maid in the house of a rich notary who's vacationing from Quebec city. She falls in love with the son of the house, marries him, and thus Rose-Anna's family extends to Quebec city, where industry was beginning to be an accepted occupation for the rich.

What viewers saw, on *Le Temps d'une paix*, was a page of their own history through the life of that family. They saw the first car chugging into Charlevoix (Joseph-Arthur's, of course), the Great Depression which sent the unemployed into the countryside, the bootlegging era, the advent of electricity. But what they noticed mainly was the strength of the family ties, through all the changes. The story was told with great good humour and included lovely dialogue.

The Charlevoix region, which had been frequented mostly by tourists from Quebec city, suddenly was in-

vaded by Montrealers. Good and not so good restaurants sprung up, **Le Temps d'une paix** tourism circuits were organized: the farm where Rose-Anna's house is located became a must in the pilgrimage. The farmer charged \$1.00 to tourists for a peek. It is reported that 250,000 tourists a year paid for the privilege.

Le Temps d'une paix was nearly taken off the air three years ago, when the actor playing Joseph-Arthur Lavoie died suddenly of a heart attack at the beginning of the season. Radio-Canada toyed with the idea of killing **Le Temps d'une paix**, but not for long. From all over came cries of anguish: "Don't do that to us!" The director was inundated with letters and phone calls (he even got some from university professors) suggesting a replacement for the late Pierre Dufresne. A pop newspaper organized a contest on the subject. Reporters were after the scoop of the century. Finally, Jean Besré was chosen to play Joseph-Arthur Lavoie and to everyone's relief, after a year's absence, the *téléroman* came back on the air. Besré was different physically from Pierre Dufresne. The latter was a big and strong man, his replacement rather small (but taller than Rose-Anna, noted the vigilant press), and the *téléroman* continued with its huge following.

From the first days of television, *téléromans*, have been huge successes in Quebec television. Week after week, you will find six or seven local *téléromans* in the top ten of the ratings lists, accompanied by a hockey game, an episode of **Dallas** or **Dynasty** or a big variety special.

The first *téléroman* ever produced for Quebec TV was **La Famille Plouffe**. It was a hit, even when translated into English. Later on, it became a feature film, **Les Plouffe**, which had a sequel **Le Crime d'Olive Plouffe**. Both of these films were also featured on TV as mini-series.

The faithfulness of the Quebec public for a fictitious family is not new. People who are 50 years old remember when their parents listened on their radio (Radio-Canada) to **Un Homme et son péché**. When TV arrived, it did not take long before **Un Homme et son péché**, which had been a novel by Claude-Henri Grignon, set in the Laurentians before the turn of the century, became **Les Belles histoires des pays d'en haut**, first in black and white, then in color. That other historical *téléroman* is now part of the Quebec fibre: a Donalda is a woman suffering from a heartless husband. A Séraphin, in Quebec, is not a little angel like it says in the dictionary, but a horrible miser like the hero of **Les Belles histoires**. Séraphin was the subject of two feature films. As recently as last fall, Radio-Canada re-released the color episodes of **Les Belles histoires des pays d'en haut**. Programmed at lunch time, they got an audience of more than half a million viewers!

The popularity of *téléromans* has



•Poivre et sel

never been fully understood: after all, even the bad ones pull in large audiences. Many theories have been put forward.

The most credible one is that Quebecers, like all other people, and maybe more than other people, like to hear about themselves, like to see themselves. Isolated in North America with a language, a culture, and a way of life all their own, they have had to rely upon themselves to explain themselves to themselves and to the world. Quebecers don't read much (a successful book rarely sells more than 10,000 copies), the theatre attracts only a segment of the population, and feature films, until recently, were never considered by Quebecers to be a true representation of themselves.

Téléromans have always been an acceptable mirror. And *téléromans* became the literature that all Quebecers share. On Tuesday mornings nowadays, the conversation in offices is about **Des Dames de coeur**, the new *téléroman* by Lise Payette (she used to be a minister in René Lévesque's cabinet). Her long-suffering heroines at once attract and repel the audience, keeping it enthralled. It started in December and already it has more than 1.5 million viewers.

Mme Payette's first *téléroman* (written after she got out of politics) was **La Bonne aventure**, which is nominated, along with **Le Temps d'une paix** and **Le Parc des Braves**, in the best drama series category.

Like **Le Temps d'une paix**, **La Bonne aventure** was not an instant success. But, as Lise Payette herself explained afterwards, "I had the chance to learn writing a *téléroman* as I went." "Eventually, **La Bonne aventure** became one of those *téléromans* that people, women mostly, like to talk about. The four heroines were young women in their 30's, each in a different sphere of activity, but bound by an old friendship. At first, the men in the story were very insubstantial. But, as Lise Payette learned her trade, they became more present and more important. But never to the detriment of the girls, around whom the stories were built.

Lise Payette's *téléroman* was set in our times and it expressed new values: the women were working outside the



•Peau de banane

home. One of them even took over the public relations company from her boyfriend. All four represented a different aspect of modern women in Quebec.

The other nominee for best drama series is **Le Parc des Braves**. It is written, oddly enough, by a defector from the cinema: Fernand Dansereau, winner of the Grierson Award at the Canadian Film Awards, 1977. Dansereau has admitted that he has never put as much passion in his work as in his first *téléroman*. Most Quebecers would not know about his films. More than a million of them now watch his work each Monday on Radio-Canada.

Le Parc des Braves is another historical *téléroman*, this one set during the war in Quebec city. The heroine Marie (Marie Tifo) was widowed at the first episode, left with little money and great despair since she loved her husband. The series has been following the war efforts of the family (we get news of the war throughout the story) and the effects war has on their lives. We see life as it was in the Hauteville of Quebec, near the park that lends its title to the series. The writing is quite deep, with some comic relief provided by Marie's brother (Ghislain Tremblay, nominated for best supporting role). But it is mostly a serious affair, Marie being enclosed by the prejudices of the time. She falls in love with a much younger man, who is later killed in the war.

One important feature about **Le Parc des Braves** is that it shows French-Canadians at war, and not escaping from it like in the CBC series **Empire**. It is again one page of history being told to a public that has been badly deprived of history courses at school, where, for many years after the school reform, history became an optional subject.

So Quebecers learn about themselves through *téléromans*. They obviously relish what they see: the ratings prove it each week. They watch their *téléromans* to escape, like all viewers, but they also watch to recognize themselves. Television is the big storybook read by a big portion of the population. The characters become part of the Quebec family. When Pierre Dufresne (Joseph-Arthur of **Le Temps d'une paix**) died, it was front page news in

the French newspapers.

But Quebecers also love to laugh: *téléromans* that are comedies can also be big successes. **Peau de banane**, a Télé-Métropole production, is a huge success, nearly always number one on the rating lists.

Peau de banane is another family story, with a twist. The heroine is the owner of a publicity agency, a prim and proper woman, who gave shelter one night to one of her male neighbors who had just been thrown out by his wife. The guy is a slob, who used to be a high school teacher and big cheese in his union, and has now become a morning man on a radio station.

The relationship between those two characters used to be a platonic one: they just lived together. But after a couple of seasons, they fell in love and they married. His two children live with them. Occasionally, the ex-wife reappears. Everybody is very friendly towards one another.

That sitcom was first written by Guy Fournier (now the vice-president of struggling Télévision Quatre Saisons), who was succeeded by his son Christian. The comedy is about the fact the *he* is an easy-going person, a slob, and that *she* likes order in the house and at wars. She is quite successful, he is so-so. The two children, his mother, her workmates are all part of the extended family.

On Radio-Canada, the entry for best comedy series is **Poivre et sel**. Written by an old hand at comedy, Gilles Richer who signed the immortal **Moi et l'autre** 20 years ago, **Poivre et sel** is about a couple of old folks very much in love, and it is not, repeat not, a platonic love affair. They live together, without being married, in a house they share with his daughter who is married to a funeral director. The younger couple is straightlaced and always fighting, the older one is full of imagination, always getting into trouble, and very definitely in love. Each week finds them having the most proposterous adventures. One of their friends is overtly gay. The whole plot is nonsensical, but quite zany. Marie-Rose and Hector are two old people most people would like to become.

Quebecers love their *téléromans*, even though most of them are done on the cheap, compared to the budgets of American series. All *téléromans* are written by one person, which is a big job, but the writer is the recognized father or mother of the work. The director is not so important. Ask anyone in Quebec about **La Bonne aventure**, they will name the author Lise Payette, but will not know the name of the director (Lucile Leduc). It is a unique situation for a writer.

Most *téléromans* are set inside a house, which saves shooting outside which is always more expensive. Most of them impose a limit of, on average, 6 or 8 actors per episode. A half-hour of an ordinary *téléroman* done inside costs about \$70,000. **Le Temps d'une**

paix costs a lot more, but for the last seasons it has been shot in 60-minute episodes, and the exterior scenes were filmed on location in Charlevoix county.

Quebecers will watch dubbed American soaps: *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, in French, have a big following. But these series do not arouse the deep attachment some of the local stories will gather. Very few French series from France have attracted deep feelings. Some of them are watched with great interest, but rarely with the passion provoked by a good Quebec *téléroman*.

Next year, the nominees for the Géméaux Awards will undoubtedly include *Lance et compte*, the *téléroman* about hockey that really shook Quebec out of its collective socks last fall. In English, *He Shoots, He Scores* was not successful. But in Quebec, it was the talk of the town.

The two great passions of Quebecers, hockey and *téléroman*, had been magically joined in a story of ambition, love (some scenes were judged too graphic by Radio-Canada and censored) and greed. Although not an ordinary *téléroman* (it was a series of 13 one-hour episodes), *Lance et compte* was a blockbuster in Quebec. Overnight, Carl



●Overnight, Carl Marotte became a star in *Lance et compte* (*He Shoots, He Scores*)

Marotte, an unknown actor, became a star. His character, Pierre Lambert, was a winner at all costs, and Quebecers just loved him because they identified strongly with him. The series is fast-

paced and shot with lots of money. It really spoils the viewers who are not used to such lavishness. *Lance et compte* has been co-produced by TF1, in France, where it will be dubbed in

French French and renamed *Cogne et gagne*.

Lance et compte attracted more than love: it was passion. When a petition deploring the crude language, the love scenes and the bad examples for the kids arrived at Radio-Canada, it created a strong current in the population against censorship. Other petitions were then signed demanding that the series be shown in its entirety – an unheard of move in all our television history.

When they examine the TV preferences of their English-speaking compatriots, French Canadians are always surprised: the list of the most popular shows in English Canada follows closely the American hit-parade. Programs like *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, and *Cheers* are top-rated in both countries week after week. Toronto and Los Angeles are dreaming the same way. The escape is into another world and not into oneself.

One of the recommendations of the *Caplan Sauvageau Report* on Broadcasting is that Canada officially recognizes that French and English broadcasting in this country are different phenomena. That's not a revolutionary idea. Indeed, the difference is immense.

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