

Warming with Spirit

I'm late, again, and lost, so I frantically search for a cab. But there aren't many around, nor is there much traffic for that matter. This is the edge of Pointe St-Charles, the tough working-class section of Montreal where the anglo-Irish and franco-Québécois have been battling for years. My panic mounts; it's now 7:55 and I'm expected on the set by 8 p.m. Finally a cab appears, and I leap onto the street waving my arms madly. Surprisingly, the driver knows exactly where 45 rue des Seigneurs is. No need for me to explain it's an empty warehouse where they're shooting a movie, the same warehouse where *Pouvoir intime* was made.

A young man with a walkie-talkie meets the cab. He asks me who I am through the window while I scramble for money, then speaks into his walkie-talkie. I pay the driver, climb out and take a look around. Barriers block the road that runs beside the large, deserted and partly burned-out warehouse. There's nothing else here to indicate I've arrived at the set of François Labonté's latest film, *Esprit de famille*. A voice over the walkie-talkie says "dix-quatre" (10-4) and the young man indicates that I should follow him.

It's dark. So dark that one has no sense of the encroaching inner city. On my left are a lot of large, looming trees, just looking black against the darkness of a country-like night sky. Through them seems to be a body of water - I suspect it's the Lachine Canal. To my right is the warehouse with its walls burned out and part of the roof caved in. Huge lights have been set up inside the part where only half the walls are left standing, on the far side. Aimed at the sky, they rest on charred and fallen beams, highlighting the eeriness of the place.

About 20 yards down the road I am met by Jocelyne, the film's publicist, who leads me to the coffee before taking me onto the set. It's freezing cold for a mid-September night, and the temperature seems to drop 10 degrees the second we step inside the warehouse. She explains that if it gets too cold we can warm up in the extras' tent, where there is a large heater. The idea has great appeal after just 15 minutes.

The scene being filmed, and the set itself, are somewhat out of context with the description of the film - "a wild, charming and thoroughly delightful tale of the relationship between a cantankerous old man, Gaspard (Jacques Godin) and his uptight, prematurely middle-aged son, Claude (Gaston LePage)." It's



• Life is a garage, old chum - Yves Desgagnés in *Esprit de famille*

a comedy, about Gaspard and Claude's search for a winning lottery ticket that has been lost. The search leads them from Montreal to Venezuela, with many strange stop-overs between.

But the set looks like something from an underground sci-fi movie or a rock video. The scene takes place in an alternative-type nightclub in New York where Gaspard and Claude have gone seeking a woman who is supposed to know something about the lost ticket. There will be a performance, and she is the mother of the performer.

Hanging from the ceiling are tiers of car windows, approximately six or eight in each tier. They are hung in a semi-circle of nine or 10 tiers. Just off to the left is a stage set about 10 feet above ground and around it dangle car doors and bumpers. On that stage is an impressive array of percussion instruments - someone mentioned over 100 different instruments. Pieces of car bodies are strewn about the rest of the set. On tractor trailers the same height as the stage are too-sophisticated, little round tables with tablecloths and lamps.

Two tiers of the windows were painted blue last night. Tonight the performer (Yves Desgagnés) will paint some yellow, then the rest in red. He is dressed in white coveralls and boots, marked only by splashes of paint. The performance consists of his moving about the tiers while paint spurts from a tube that is rigged through his pants leg, down his arm and ends at the tip of his right middle finger. His movements are jerky; spasmodic yet rhythmic responses to the industrial, percussive music.

Two cameras are rolling tonight. In addition to director of photography Michel Caron, Jean-Claude Labrecque, director/cinematographer and Labonté's personal friend, is also recording the action. There are moments when the two cameras, with only the massive lenses peering out from under heavy plastic drapes, look like unearthly creatures brought to watch earthly creatures behave strangely.

Labonté is in control of all this. Like the maestro of some finely functioning orchestra, he lunges, points, jumps, twists and turns, but says very little. When he gives direction, he walks straight to the person concerned and explains personally what he wants done. Warmth comes through his quiet intensity and remoteness. Perhaps that is what brought out such fine performances as those of Jacques Godin and Eric Brisebois in his last film, *Henri*.

Tonight, the performance must be done in one take. Once the windows are painted, there's no re-doing them. Labonté goes through just two or three rehearsals before we hear "silence, on tourne!" It calls for precision, and relies upon the expertise of everyone; the timing between lights, performers, music and effects is split-second. On the sidelines, I get a sense of the thrill a good take must induce.

Many others not required on the set have turned up to watch the scene being shot. Gaston LePage is here, even though he is not in the shot, as are Denis Larochelle, who is doing the original score, screenwriter Monique Proulx and Suzanne Hénaut, coproducer with Claude Bonin.

This is one of the last nights of the Montreal shoot. After this, there is just one more location to be filmed before Labonté goes to Venezuela for another two weeks. Approximately half the crew will go along, but the rest will be Venezuelan.

Several hours remain before the nightclub is finished with, however. At 4:00 a.m. they're shooting a scene where a madman enters the club and smashes all of the brilliantly painted windows. I'd love to stay around and watch *that* performance. But it's midnight, Labrecque has donned his parka and I'm turning blue with the cold. A trip to the extras' tent wasn't enough. And besides, judging from the skill Labonté evidenced in *Henri*, it just may be more fun to see that scene on film.

Jamie Gaetz •

Hollywood Comes to Dawson City

A new Yuletide story will be airing on the CBS network this December. It's called *Christmas Comes to Willow Creek* and is, by all reports, a standard made-for-American-TV production. As such, it promises not to cause much of a stir amongst viewers.

But in the Yukon Territory, almost everyone with cable-TV will be excitedly tuning in.

That's because Yukoners have been waiting to see *Christmas Comes to Willow Creek* edited and complete, ever since Hollywood came to Dawson City last May.

The Bell Productions film stars former "Dukes" of Hazzard John Schneider and Tom Wopat, who play two truckdrivers bringing the ultimate Christmas gift - economic revival - to a single industry Alaskan town on the skids. The Yukon's Dawson City, home of the world's greatest goldrush and the poetic heyday of Robert Service, stands in for the fictitious Willow Creek.

Bell Productions' decision last spring to locate its 'Alaskan' shoot in the Yukon's most historically significant town created quite a sensation in the local arts community and media. Whitehorse headlines read "Movie needs players", "Everyone pitched in to keep shoot on schedule" and "They'll tell Hollywood all about us"; and the accompanying articles oozed awe and excitement.

It wasn't the selection of exquisite turn-of-the-century buildings nor the availability of extras who were already colourful characters, however, that first drew Bell Productions to the Klondike. It was the abundance of snow.

Ironically, production planned for April was held up by a few weeks; and by the time producer Blue Andre, director Richard Lang and the leading cast arrived on the boardwalks of Dawson, most of the snow was gone.

A snow machine digesting blocks of ice from the still-frozen banks of the Yukon River, with the added conditions of potato flakes and firefighters' foam, helped make up for Dawson's melting assets.

And once on location, the Hollywood crew found new advantages to rave about. For instance: a unique and picturesque town with extremely cooperative officials, and good prices on rentals and sites.

As producer Andre explained it to a local news reporter, "We originally came for the snow. Then, creatively, we fell in love with the place."

photo: Bertrand Carrière