

## Mount Royal

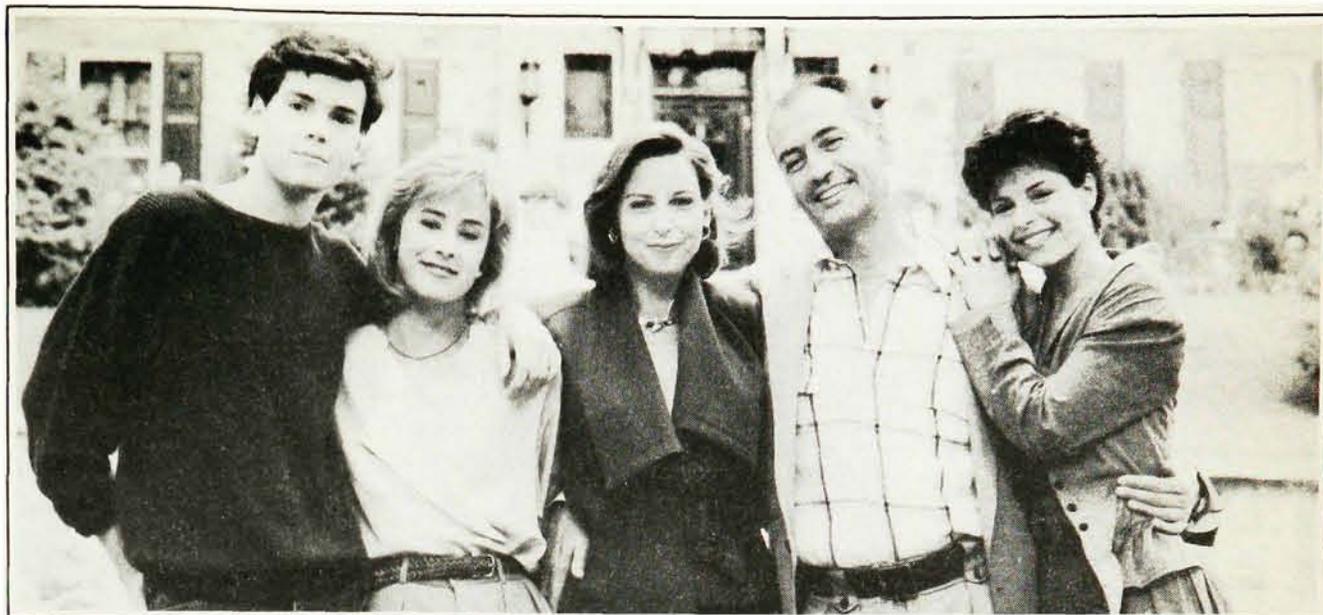
**M**on dieu! The Valeur family of Westmount, Quebec, has been having a rough time since that cold January night it sprang to life on the CTV television network. Life should be kinder to them. After all, the family business is not some *schmotta* factory, it is a multinational corporation that grants the Valeurs all the joys of unlimited wealth and power.

The family consists of Father André (Patrick Bauchau), Mother Katherine (Domini Blythe) and their grown-up offspring, Daniëlle (Catherine Colvey), Stephanie (Guylaine St. Onge), and Rob (Jonathan Crombie). The Valeurs live high on a hill in a charming mansion that appears in establishing shots accompanied by the chirping of birds. Inside the big house, our eyes are dazzled by vast and spotless spaces, gleaming furniture, and an indoor swimming pool (where M. and Mme. Valeur occasionally slither into each other's arms, reviving youthful passions).

Even more important than the house, the pool, and the white-gloved butler, (who looks like a bewildered refugee from a '50s MGM musical), is the free, soaring spirit that only corporation ownership can bring to the soul. The various Valeurs do whatever the hell they feel like doing - from pursuing a career as a Brilliant TV Reporter to taking off for Paris at the drop of a sub-plot. (Since *Mount Royal* is a Canada-France coproduction, the Tour Eiffel, Place de la Concorde, the Champs Elysée, etc., click onto your screen with the insistent regularity of a slide show.)

Unfortunately, despite all the perks that come with being the main characters in a \$17 million mini-series, the Valeurs have not been invulnerable to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. As *Mount Royal's* theme song reminds us every week, "Beyond the power and the glory/That's where the heart is/It's still the same old story."

Not long into the premiere episode, André Valeur's brother, Gilbert, is struck down by a heart attack at the very moment André is being named "Montrealer of the Year." Various other disasters follow, including the problematic relationships these people get into: Stephanie and her father's best friend, an insipid French politician who she finds "fascinating" because he puts on a leather jacket and takes her to a cute Parisian cafe; Daniëlle and a psychotic artist, whose idea of wedding gift is a painting of two screaming ghouls; Stephanie again and an animal rights activist, who breaks into veal



Virtueless Valeurs - Jonathan Crombie, Catherine Colvey, Domini Blythe, Patrick Bauchau and Guylaine St. Onge

factories and wants to pretend to kidnap her; Brother Rob and a girl who turns out to be more than just a pretty face and a whining voice.

Over cafe cremes in the Cafe Deux Magots, Stephanie tries to warn her brother about his lover.

"Isabelle's a terrorist!"

"Stephanie, I love her," Rob protests.

"She plants bombs!" announces Stephanie, wide-eyed and open mouthed in a manner signalling distress, and sounding as if she were talking about peculiar personal habits. When you think about those relationships, you begin to wonder why André isn't urgently shopping around for a good therapist.

The Valeurs suffer from yet another problem: a strange vagueness of character. For example, at the beginning of the series, André is sort of a ruthless entrepreneur, but an hour later, he sort of wants, as he put it, to "change things." Meanwhile, Katherine is sort of a matriarch, Rob is sort of a playboy, Daniëlle is sort of an idealist, and Stephanie is sort of stupid.

Perhaps most confusing is the fact that André is sort of French-Canadian while his brother Gilbert is most definitely Québécois. In fact, whenever the immediate family is together, one notices that Daniëlle and Rob speak unaccented English while Stephanie sort of sounds French. Is there some allegorical intention here? Are we discovering something about ourselves? As the theme song asserts, "There's got to be more somehow/A deeper shade of meaning."

In most mini-series and TV movies, the characters - and the actors who portray them - tend toward simplification and stereotypes. You don't expect all kinds of subtle shading unless you're watching something like the TV version of Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*. However, you do expect a semblance of humanity: people who seem lived-in, and, as a result, vividly alive on the screen. Although *He Shoots He Scores* is as formulaic as *Mount Royal*, this mini-series feels more rooted, more focused, so the audience becomes addicted to its shticks. The Plouffes, even at their most cartoonish, had screen life, as do many of the characters in Francis Mankiewicz's recent TV movie, *And Then You Die*

(co-scripted by one of the two head writers on *Mount Royal*).

Sometimes, *Mount Royal* looks like a commercial for a Sherbrooke Street boutique. You see a lot of power-posing, strutting, and traipsing. The over-wrought clothes ("I'm chic!" they shriek) seem to wear the characters, rather than accent their personalities. The relentlessly high-key lighting sterilizes everything, banishing shadows, allowing no shifts in visual mood. At the same time, story set-ups (for example, a character's breakdown; Rob's disco and his apparent involvement with a Mafia family) either don't go anywhere, or don't pay off in an exciting way.

In one plot development that could be seen as *Return to In Praise of Older Woman*, Mother Katherine must gently ward off the advances of a Sensitive and Brilliant Young Piano Student from Budapest. "I listen to what you say," says the S. B. Y. P. S. B., "and I look into your eyes. And they speak more better than your words." The acting is such on *Mount Royal* that whatever it is he sees in her face, we don't. We do see a lot of great-looking lips and limbs, breasts and behinds, but the flesh is neutralized by the bland expressions and synthetic emotions.

Patrick Bauchau was compelling as a burnt-out movie director in Wim Wenders's movie, *The State of Things*, and amusingly sinister in Alan Rudolph's *Choose Me*, but he's wasted here. And given the deep pool of acting talent in Quebec, it is understandable why Québécois film people and journalists were outraged by the choice of a Belgian actor to play a French-Canadian in a production shot in English. Of the other leads, Guylaine St. Onge, a real fashion model playing a fictional one, is lithe and exciting whenever we see her modelling.

Robert Lantos and Alliance Entertainment have taken risks and created work with this expensive mini-series. But of all the problems the Valeur family has been valorously facing, none are as wrenching as the show's early low ratings (680,000 viewers for episode 2, according to BBM) and some of the nastier critical reactions. There are people who argue that *Mount Royal* is not only trash, it is trash-passé, a

Canadian attempt to do *Dynasty* in the era of new kinds of shows like *Moonlighting*, *The Singing Detective*, and *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. After all, isn't Canada the country that produced the funniest and most daring North American TV series of the decade: SCTV? Why, we can even follow Barbara Frum's interviews and respond to David Suzuki's enthusiasm for plankton.

In truth, we can also enjoy *Mount Royal*, (which could also be called *The Rich Do Good*), because it does yield its peculiar pleasures and magic moments.

In one scene, André Valeur comes home toting a white paper bag containing two baguettes and a lobster. The uncovered shellfish sprawls against the bread and hangs out of the bag - green, unboiled, but motionless. Has it been strangled? Or is it merely frozen with fear? Is this the way French-Canadian billionaires, who live in Westmount, transport their lobsters into their mansions?

As André chats with Stephanie, Katherine strides into the room. "What have you got there?" she calls to her husband, unable to see the bag because his back is turned, but knowing he's holding it because she has read the script. Then again, Katherine is an unusual woman. One romantic night at a lookout point over the twinkling city, André tells his wife that power is a muscle that he likes to flex. "Imagination is another muscle," says Katherine, "use it!"

"How come you're so smart?" André grins affectionately.

"Porridge," replies Katherine. "Every day of my life."

André Valeur laughs and laughs, his wife's keen wit distracting him momentarily from the problems he endures on *Mount Royal*.

Maurice Alioff •

**MOUNT ROYAL** An official Canada-France co-production produced by Alliance Entertainment Corporation in association with CTV, la Société Radio-Canada and SFP (France) and with the participation of Telefilm Canada and Rogers Cablesystems Inc. concept. Robert Lantos exec. p. Robert Lantos, Denis Héroux p. Lawrence S. Mirkin sc. Wayne Grigsby, Guy Fournier l. p. Emile Genest, Patrick Bauchau, Domini Blythe, Catherine Colvey, Jonathan Crombie, Guylaine St-Onge, Monique Mercure, Pierre Paquette, Marcel Sabourin.