

Film Reviews

Bachar Chbib's Clair Obscur

Clair Obscur is a fairy tale for adults. Of course, every fairy tale has its lesson; the lesson of Clair Obscur is, unfortunately, 'never let style override content'.

Director/co-writer Bachar Chbib has drawn from traditional fairy tales, folklore, television commercials and Hollywood cinema (silent and sound) to fashion Clair Obscur. The film contains a bevy of homages to these diverse storytelling forms; thus, it is a film which demands to be 'read' for embodied meanings. Unfortunately, this multi-faceted referencing does not provide the challenging and ultimately rewarding viewing experience it could have.

Clair Obscur is a silent film (albeit with an appropriately sentimental musical score and realistic sound effects) which makes use of an expressionistic dramatic style. The cast appears to struggle within the confines of the silent construct instead of achieving mastery of its defined elements. With their faces covered in cake make-up, the actors are relegated to overt actions and looks that are meant to speak a thousand words. The effect is stifling.

Concisely, this is the story of a rural Quebec family (husband, wife, daughter, and grandfather) whose lives are 'idyllic' (ie. filled with love, laughter, harmony, a sense of peace with their lot and assorted colour co-ordinated farm animals). Indeed, the family appears to be living in a butter commercial (golden light and healthy smiles over breakfast). One day the family is 'invaded' by a mysterious intruder (a beautiful blonde in a white stationwagon). The little girl is attracted to this 'temptress' (the Wicked Witch of the West or the Good Witch of the North?). The mother whisks her daughter away into the safe confines of the house while the father stands frozen with desire. He seems to know the woman from his past.

What ensues is a mystical journey through lost passions, frustrated desires and illusive fantasies. The film unfolds within three physical realms: 1) the farmhouse, within which the sanctity of family life is ultimately shattered by familial hostilities and cruelties, surreal and disturbing dreamscapes which merge with reality, and vengeful violence (Peckinpah style); 2) the bar/hotel/nightclub (Clair Obscur) where magic is supposed to happen and does, where men are allured and women gaze in awe or boil with jealous rage, where the wife finds her husband sleeping on the bed of the temptress, where a simpleton and a buffoon (Laurel and Hardy) wait hand and foot on the temptress (Entertainment); and 3) the 'natural' world of field, stream, junkheap and cemetery, the playground where the simpleton and the temptress exchange stolen kisses and the emotional landscape through which the wife



runs from the horror of her husband's adultery.

At the heart of Clair Obscur lies the tale of the stork that arrives with a 'bundle of joy'. Chbib fills the film with blatant and oblique references to this tale and in turn many other myths surrounding pregnancy. For example, the wife, undesirable to her husband since the arrival of the temptress, virtually goes insane over the loss of her husband's affections. She wanders through the farmyard in a delirious dream state. Dressed in a girlish nightshirt (which serves to contribute to Chbib's low-angle fantasy shot) she climbs a watertower to retrieve the stork's egg from the nest. She sits on the egg hoping to hatch it, fixes up the baby crib with green paint and devours large pickles. The temptress becomes pregnant. Her belly rises spontaneously like a successful soufflé. The wife vicariously feels the pangs of labour. The temptress gives birth at the foot of the farmhouse stairs in the throes of what seems to be ecstasy and she gives the child lovingly to the family.

It is difficult to distinguish between dream and reality in Clair Obscur; of course, the magical quality of film is well-served in this but the impact of the drama is lost to individual moments or scenes. It is difficult to determine the development of characters when it is not clear whose dreams and whose realities are on the screen. As a lyrical piece, Clair Obscur approaches success; impressions are left, images linger, moods are drawn. As a dramatic piece, Clair Obscur approaches failure; characters remain caricatures, emotions are not explored, stereotypes are not broken.

What cannot be overlooked in Clair Obscur is

the production design. Colours are lush (ranging from strong complementary colour combinations in the boudoir of the nightclub to rich autumn shades in and around the farmhouse to garish hues in the sequences in which the wife is most distraught). Props and set-dressing make use of components which are unusual but fitting with the environments in which they appear. For example, a dried leaf sits on the nighttable beside the wife who feigns sleep. The husband sneaks into bed after having been out all night with the temptress. The leaf is a simple, unobtrusive touch which adds to the mood of the scene through the representation of the season, the symbolizing of the 'drying up' of the couple's relationship and a dab from the colour palette used in the farmhouse environment.

Although the musical score in Clair Obscur does become heavyhanded, especially in the 'Peckinpah style' scenes, it does so with obvious intent. For the most part, the music helps scenes lacking in emotional depth.

Clair Obscur's attempt to revise the stork myth only glorifies its clichés. It digs up references without organizing them within the film to help us better understand their meaning.

Toby Zeldin •

CLAIR OBSCUR p. Helen Verrier, Bachar Chbib d. Bachar Chbib sc. Bachar Chbib, Maryse Wilder d.o.p. Stephen Reizes ed. Albert Kish art d. Claire Nadon mus. Francois Giroux cost. Claire Nadon sd. Glen Hodgins l.p. Bobo Vian, Susan Eytton-Jones, Paul Babiak, Jack Spinner, Attila Bertalan, William Kosaras, Barbara Zsigovics, Jean-Claude Labrecque, John Drapery. Produced by Les Productions Chbib with financial participation of Telefilm and SOGIC. 35mm colour 85 minutes.

Frank Cole's A Life

In the seemingly cold world of Frank Cole's A Life, one finds a visual virtuosity and emotional core so seldom attained in our country's film industry, that I do not hesitate to rank this stunning new feature alongside Vigo's L'Atalante, Clement's Forbidden Games and Bunuel's L'Age D'Or as a work of uncompromising, risk-taking and always breathtaking genius. As Cole himself states in his promotional material, A Life charts "a man's life - survival amid death - in a room and a desert."

In the early stages of the film, we are faced with the grainy black and white images of an old man. Off camera, a voice (undoubtedly Cole's) asks, "Are you afraid of dying, Grandpa?" The old man, quivering and moist-eyed, seems somewhat perplexed, perhaps even intimidated by the camera. His reply is in the negative, yet somehow it seems inconclusive. And towards the end of the film, the same grainy black and white assaults us with an old woman, lying on her deathbed, gasping for life while a voice-over pleads, "Live!" These gut-wrenching, disturbing images bookend a journey which is - in spite of the bleak, barren, sometimes horrifying sequences which populate the film - extremely life-affirming.

In the first section of the film, Cole focuses upon the interior environment of the film's central figure (Cole himself). Moving oddly-framed, inanimate objects out of the eye of the camera, the man appears to be ridding the spartan room of what little it has in it. As well, Cole assails us with a variety of strange images; a bare, white wall with a nail driven into it, a phonecall that never really comes and that is never really answered, a woman with a gun stuffed in her panties, and a little girl who runs through plate glass (at first silently, but then followed by the excruciatingly painful sound of the smashing glass). These images are punctuated by recurring shots of the man chiselling, hammering, measuring, and planing. He appears to be building something in this barren interior; a tomb, perhaps? Maybe so, for the man never appears to leave this environment.

But then, he leaves one tomb for another. One of the first exterior shots in the film is a series of head and shoulder freeze frames of Cole, as a variety of backgrounds flicker behind him. It's as if the camera itself is sealing this man in a cold, barren crypt. Yet later on in the film, a voice-over proclaims, "I did this to feel alive." Perhaps the very process of making the film is what keeps the man, (the artist) from pulling the same trigger of the same gun that in an earlier scene is used by a woman who appears - ever-so-briefly - to write about and shoot herself in the eye.



Jean-Yves Dion and Frank Cole in the Sahara.

And survive she does. The man puts himself through the most rigorous paces in the interior shots and then puts himself (the filmmaker) into the middle of the Sahara Desert, where he risks his life to provide a series of stunning exterior images to parallel the equally claustrophobic interior sequences. In the room, for example, we witness a snake slithering helplessly and aimlessly across the hardwood floors, while in the desert, we see Cole himself, crawling helplessly along the grains of endless sand. In the room, we hear the sound of wooden matches being struck and eventually extinguished as the snake slithers over them, while in the desert, we see a jeep being doused with gasoline and set on fire as the camera slowly and gradually pulls away; the jeep a flickering speck on the infinite horizon of the Sahara.

The landscapes of both the interior and exterior environments of the filmmaker are painstakingly etched to create an overwhelming sense of despair. Even the landscape of the filmmaker's body and head is examined by the camera's (or filmmaker's) eye. A less-gifted artist could be charged with mere self-indulgence. Yet Cole's vision is so daring and psychologically complex, that by turning the camera on himself in this unsparring manner, he almost creates a distorted image for (and of) the viewer. Allowing this series of terrifying, lonely and sometimes beautiful images to wash over oneself, is to open up emotionally to a cinematic world which cries for some sense of understanding and passion. This is a sparsely populated world that Cole has created, and since the

camera is aimed directly at himself, *A Life* is filmmaking at its most daring and revealing.

The film's emotional core comes from Cole's sadness and desperation; yet one leaves this experience with a sense of fulfillment, a sense that there is a life beyond the mere survival which Cole painfully explores. This is a film of lasting value and Cole must be commended for the bravery of his vision. As well, it must be mentioned that Jean-Yves Dion's desert photography, Carlos Ferrand's interior photography and Vincent Saulnier's sound design are of a level and quality so far beyond anything seen in recent years, that *A Life* represents some kind of culmination in the world of independent Canadian cinema.

One hesitates to bandy about such words as "masterpiece" in describing anything, but *A Life* comes about as close to it as anything this writer has seen in some time. And time, as always, will declare the final verdict. *A Life* seems destined for some kind of enshrinement in the history of Canadian film.

Greg Klymkiw •

A LIFE p. 14. *Is. led.* Frank Cole d.o.p. (*desert*) Jean-Yves Dion d.o.p. (*room*) Carlos Ferrand sl. *mus.* Vincent Saulnier sd. ed. Lya Moestrup. Jean-Yves Dion sd. ed. Adrian Croll art d. Elie Abdel-Ahad assoc. p. Robert Paegle a.d. Richard Taylor asst. cam. Mark Poirier asst sd. Tamara Smith still photo Paul Abdel-Ahad cont. Léa Deschamps props Anne Milligan cost. des. Jennifer Thibault p. asst. David Balharrie with; Anne Miquet, Heather O'Dwyer, Abderrahmane Ghis, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Howard. Produced with the assistance of the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, NFB and Gary Nichol Associates Ltd.

André Gladu's Liberty Street Blues

"Jazz came up the Mississippi from New Orleans, it didn't come down the Allen expressway from York University"

— Jazz guitarist Peter Leitch

For an art form purported to be the 'Universal Language', music is largely dependent on a sense of place for its identity. Perhaps for this reason, Dixieland or New Orleans jazz never made much sense (to me anyway) in a Canadian context. My experience of Dixieland was of a bunch of middle-aged amateurs creating a cacophony on tunes such as *When the Saints Go Marching In*.

But I have seen the light (*Hallelujah!*), or at least the light passing through André Gladu's new film *Liberty Street Blues*, a documentary about New Orleans jazz which succeeds brilliantly in showing how rooted, socially relevant and swinging this music really is.

As well as being an excellent primer on black music in the crescent city, the film continues the recent Quebec fascination with things marginal in American culture. At the outset, Gladu draws parallels between Montreal and New Orleans; both cities are apart from their surroundings (both physically and culturally), with a unique ethnic mix and (con)fusion of cultures which results in fertile ground for experimentation and the growth of new creative forms.

Stylistically, *Liberty Street Blues* shares little with the films of the NFB's *Americanité* series (of which is it not strictly a part). Absent are the docudrama and collage elements of, for instance, Jacques Godbout's *Alias Will James*. Instead, Gladu offers the film equivalent of the recent "Day in The Life" photojournalism books. The centrepiece of this day in the life of black New Orleans is the annual parade organized by the Young Men's Olympian Aid and Social Pleasure Club, an organization which had its origins in the immediate post-Civil War era. And at the centre of the parade is the music, as played by the Tuxedo Brass Band. Our guide to the proceedings is Dr. Michael White, introduced as a professor at Xavier University and clarinetist with the Tuxedos. (Not in the film, but noteworthy, is Michael White's role as head of a New Orleans board of education program called *Jazz Outreach*, designed to give students an appreciation of their and the city's musical heritage).

We meet Michael White warming up his clarinet on the morning of the parade. At the same time of day, Gladu crosscuts to a variety of scenes; from the market where vegetable and pie vendors hawk their wares with musical cadences, to the street-rapping proprietor of a shoeshine stand, to young girls playing complicated clapping/rhyming games in a schoolyard. The effect is to reinforce what Michael White states in his car on the way to the parade: that this music, New Orleans jazz, grows out of the soil of the delta and that it has a strong social function in addition to being the precursor of the art form that Charlie Parker and others elevated beyond the general comprehen-



Sadie Colar and Michael White in *Liberty Street Blues*