

Film Reviews

Yves Simoneau's **Dans le ventre du dragon**

Why did thou leave the trodden paths of men
Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty
heart

Dare the unspastured Dragon in his den?
— Percy Bysshe Shelley

Dans le ventre du dragon (*In the Belly of the Dragon*) takes a chimeric stab into the modern day dragon that is unbridled, souless high-technology – in this case the world of humans used as paid guinea pigs in drug/behaviour research. Our symbolic St-George here is the 'individual' within that world.

The latest quirky and visually luxuriant film by Québécois director Yves Simoneau (*Pouvoir Intime, Les Fous de Bassans*) tells the story of a young man, Lou, played by newcomer David LaHaye, a deliverer of door-to-door ad circulars just barely surviving on the fringes of society, who answers an ad by a large pharmaceutical conglomerate promising big money to willing subjects of drug research. He eventually falls victim to a brilliant but obsessed scientist, Dr. Lucas, played by Marie Tifo, who makes him undergo a particularly dangerous mind-drug experiment without regard for his well-being. It is left to Lou's co-worker buddies, Steve and Bozo, to find and rescue him from the fortress-like and futuristic research facility where he is held.

Now a funny thing happens on the way to that point in the story: actually a great many. For the laughs we can thank a brilliant comedic performance by Rémy Girard (*Le Déclin de l'empire américain*) as Steve and the even more incredible Michel Côté as Bozo (Côté is a newcomer to film, following his 10 year run in the hit stage comedy, *Brew*).

Together they form a Laurel & Hardy-esque pair of blue-collar (or should I say grungey-collar) comedians – with a dash of philosophers-in-cheap-sneakers thrown in for seasoning. What is most astounding is that they are so funny without benefit of zippy one-liners or other comedy-crutches – only through brilliant characterization and impeccable timing. There are more giggles induced by one of Michel Côté's raised eye-brows than a dozen L. A. comedy writers under the influence of psychoactive drugs. The team's sense of timing, as well as of physical comedy, is incredible, and they bounce off each other to great effect. To a large extent, they're worth the price of admission by themselves.

Actors who work with Simoneau say publicly and privately that he is a director blessed with a natural instinct for handling actors, a so-called



Rémy Girard, director Simoneau and Michel Côté

"actors'-director". Indeed this film (and others by Simoneau) is peppered here and there with moments when one senses the pure enjoyment of acting.

In one all-too-brief scene early on, actors Robert Gravel, Angèle Coutu, Suzanne Champagne, Sylvie Potvin, and singer-poet-and-sometime-actor Lucien Francoeur turn a short walk-on bit (that could be entitled "Neighbors Getting Into a Screaming Argument Across Facing Balconies") into a quick moving, semi-ad-libbed, high-energy romp of face-twisting, vein-popping, insult swapping, and garbage hurling. It left the audience weak with laughter, as it must have the actors after they had finished shooting it.

Another performance worth remembering is Pierre Curzi's "Le Boss," a compendium of sideburned, city-hick and would-be big-wheel of high industry. ("The whole Capitalist system depends on our delivering our circulars!" he intones earnestly.) Curzi brings just the right quality of oiliness and self-aggrandisement to a clearly outlined and believable character.

The screenplay, a collaboration between Simoneau, Marcel Beaulieu and Pierre Revelin, contains some inspired dialogue as well as a generally coherent control of story and character development. Unfortunately, the script is uneven, with an ending so contrived that it seems to have been written as an afterthought (another Simoneau trait: forced endings wrapped in pretty ribbons of grand symbolism). The film also generally suffers from a difficult

marriage between the comedy and the drama. The segment of the film occurring in the research facility is so dark in intent, so preoccupied with form, that it takes itself much too seriously. Likewise, our two outrageous heroes are so comical in their every on-screen moment that never do we feel the action-adventure-drama of their precarious situation within the dark confines of the "dragon." Any presumption of danger seems hollow, and any effort to create suspense falls flat.

Also problematic is the continuing difficulty Simoneau seems to have in his creation and treatment of female characters. They seem always flatter and more narrowly defined than their male counterparts. At worst they seem cartoonishly grotesque, at best merely uni-dimensional. However despite being saddled with just such a role, Monique Mercure does manage to stand out, if only through a great screen presence and a certain stiff-necked, vulture-like quality that her character seems to exude.

It is not in the dialogue or the story but visually that *Dragon* fills the senses with that particular force of imagery that Simoneau is well known for. We see once again a variety of camera technique and lighting to suit the moment and the intent of scene, in a style that is consistent with effect and flow. There is a long hand-held-camera sequence, during which our two unlikely heroes break into the high-security facility, that brings us right into the action. When an old female patient, Madame Côté, lies

strapped down in a holding chair, rambling almost out of her mind, we observe her in a rarely seen overhead close-up shot: she seems even more fragile and crazy that way.

Part of the credit for the visual appeal of the film should go to art director Normand Sarrazin. The netherworld he so richly creates, especially the futuristic interior of the research facility, teems with high aesthetic detail, chiaroscuro vision, and techno-chintziness.

Even the picture's running-gag is visual. Despite all the very best of state-of-the-art equipment and facilities, the research lab has a constant problem with leaky piping. In many wide-angle shots or as background to other scenes, we keep espying the same repair crew doggedly attempting to repair yet another burst pipe with little or no success. The sight and sound of dripping water, of the walls oozing their own fashion of dragon slime, aptly reinforces a feeling of oppressiveness and inhumanity.

This feeling of oppressiveness, as well as that of sensorial surrealism, is well served by Richard Grégoire's musical score: synthetic instruments, auditory effects occurring within musical ones, computer-generated sounds that suit the corresponding imagery.

Dans le ventre du dragon should be classed in a new rating category I have just invented: the P rating, with P standing for Phobias. Anyone having the following phobias should avoid this film or, at least, avert their eyes at the crucial moments. These include fear of spiders, snakes,

PHOTO: CLAUDEL HUOT

lizards, darts, corny latin music, doctor's needles, and the future.

Dragon has moments of great beauty and memorable comedy, but its efforts to deal dramatically with very serious subjects (human guinea pigs as research fodder, the power of Big Business to do as it pleases, etc.) fall terribly flat, as do all efforts to create suspense. Perhaps one day Simoneau the filmmaker will retire Simoneau the screenwriter; then he can tackle even greater dragons and so become a great filmmaker, rather than merely a good one.

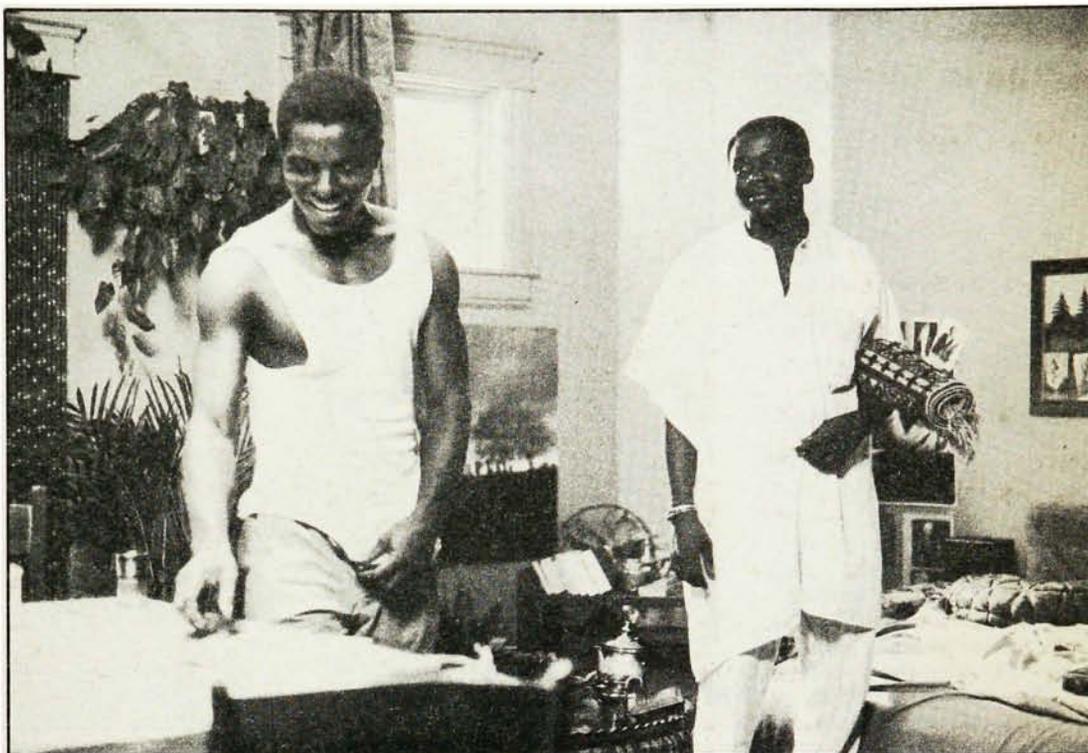
André Guy Arseneault •

DANS LE VENTRE DU DRAGON *exc. p.* Monique Messier, Lorraine Richard *p.* Michel Gauthier *assoc. p.* André Viau *d.* Yves Simoneau *sc.* Yves Simoneau, Pierre Revelin, Marcel Beaulieu *art d.* Normand Sarrazin *ed.* André Corriveau *sd.* Michel Charron, Paul Dion *cost.* Michèle Hamel *d.o.p.* Alain Dostie *orig. mus.* Richard Gregoire *p. mgr.* Muriel Lize *apprentice p. mgr.* Louise Richard *p. coord.* Suzanne Comtois *p. acct.* Helen Aubin *unit mgr.* Mario Nadeau *loc. mgr.* Roger Dufresne *p.a.* Robert Packwood, Richard Chateauvert, Catherine Faucher *app. d.* Pierre Dalpé *1st a.d.* Louis-Philippe Rochon *2nd a.d.* Marie-Christine Lavoie *cont.* Johanne Boisvert *1st. asst. cam.* Paul Gravel *2nd asst. cam.* Sylvie Rosenthal *still photog.* Claudel Huot *boom* Louis Marion *hd. elec.* Daniel Chretien *elec.* Manal Hassib, André Sheridan *key grip* Emmanuel Lepine *grip* Pierre Charpentier, Mario Roussy *asst. art d.* Réal Proulx *set dec.* Nick Jolicoeur, Michele Nolet *ext. props* Claude Poirier, Claude Rainville *set const.* Stephane Connolly *set props* Pierre Fournier *asst. set props* Louis Gascon *sp. fx.* Jean-Marc Cyr *makeup* Pierre Saindon *hair* Réjean Goderre *dresser* Marianne Carter *sd. ed.* Paul Dion. Produced by Les Productions Québec-Amérique Inc. and Les Films Lenox Inc. with the participation of Telefilm Canada, SOGIC, and SRC. 102 min. 35mm, col. Dolby Stereo.

Jacques W. Benoit's Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer

Seductive title aside, this controversial Canada-France coproduction is not a visual manual for love-making. Nor is it primarily about sex. It is a buddy film, presenting the friendship - soul love - between two immigrants in photogenic Montreal. Unconventional in content and style, the film is unique in Canadian cinema: the first to portray a tight, complementary relationship between two Black (heterosexual) males.

In this semi-autobiographical comedy, the central character, Man (Isaac de Bankolé), succeeds with humour and with an airy, free sense of himself in fulfilling his obsession. He completes a novel, a chronicle of his validating sexual encounters (of which we are treated to two). Man, the epitome of cool, even when confronted by



Isaac de Bankolé as "Man," with Maka Kotto (Bouba)

racist threats and accusations, shows deep emotion - fear - only once, when it appears that his contemplative, philosophical Muslim roommate, Bouba (Maka Kotto), has perished in a fire set by a trio of racist drug pushers led by Julien Poulin (Elvis Gratton).

The two friends are saintly, even while cruising, and so are their various acquaintances. No one tries to do the other in, and each has needs that are mutually met through camaraderie. Love and respect permeate the film, at least as far as the male characters are concerned.

In *Comment faire l'amour*... Black women are invisible, and white women play various (stereo)types in the sub-plots. Miz Literature (Roberta Bizeau) is a McGill postgraduate student rebelling against the values of her wealthy Westmount parents. (After her affair with Man, we learn that she moves on to the anti-Apartheid cause). Miz Suicide (Miriam Cyr), a drug addict, is mesmerized by the profound utterances of Bouba. The acting of both the principals and the secondary characters is, by and large, believable and commendable.

Comment faire l'amour... succeeds precisely for the reasons that John Smith's *Sitting in Limbo* (the first fictionalized portrayal of Black life in Montreal) failed. Black music is successfully integrated by the editing; script and shoot had significant and informed Black input (author Dany Laferrière). The film features human and humanist images of Black males; experienced actors (why has the Canadian film industry not yet allowed Black actors and actresses to become

experienced?); and, finally, a comic story whose central characters persevere to triumph amidst all the human frailties in a pre-AIDS, lovable Montreal.

Comment faire l'amour's sound track contributes strongly to making the film enjoyable and authentic. The background rhythms of Cameroun-born, Paris-based Manu Dibango (*Soul Makossa*), are the key to the editing, serving effectively as a transitional device linking shots and sequences even when visual elements are weak or missing. The track can only enhance the reputation of this talented musician (composer, lyricist and instrumentalist), who over the years has mastered funk, reggae, soul, gospel, jazz, salsa, blues, et al. Charlie Parker's innovative jazz, Bouba's passion, supplements Dibango's as foreground music from an on-camera record player.

Complementing the superb music, at least in the original French-language version, are the human voices: dialogue and on-camera narration. The distinctive Francophone-West African speech of the two principal male actors - with their dignified, philosophical, and occasionally humorous textures, physiognomies, stances and gestures - adds authenticity to their alienation. The occasional straining of French-speaking Quebecers to understand clearly their enunciation reinforces their foreign origins and also serves as a reminder of the linguistic diversity within the international Francophone community.

The film's real *auteur* is Dany Laferrière. Haitian-born, humorous, provocative and

irreverent, this journalist-turned novelist and co-scripter (dialogue), worked closely with rookie director Jacques W. Benoit and producer/co-scripter (structure) Richard Sadler, to make a pleasing, although imperfect film. Laferrière has demonstrated a capability to be a future force in the film industry, if given the opportunity.

Filmgoers desiring an evening of entertainment, solid music, good acting, pleasing shots of Montreal, and a story revolving around obsession and friendship, could do worse than see *Comment faire l'amour*... Parental warning: some sex, no violence, and little profanity. This is a clean production, almost to the point of being sanitized. Hal Weaver •

COMMENT FAIRE L'AMOUR AVEC UN NEGRE SANS SE FATIGUER *p.* Richard Sadler, Ann Burke, Henry Lange *d.* Jacques W. Benoit *sc.* Dany Laferrière, Richard Sadler, based on the novel by Dany Laferrière *cam.* John Berrie *sd.* Serge Beauchemin *art d.* Gaudeline Sauriol *of.* Dominique Roy (France) *sd. des.* Claude Langlois *mix.* Jean-Paul Loublier *orig. mus.* Manu Dibango *theme song* "On vit de femmes" by Claude Dubois, Manu Dibango (music); Claude Dubois, Dany Laferrière (words), performed by Claude Dubois. *cast.* Lise Abastado, Anne Singer *l.p.* Isaac de Bankolé, Maka Kotto, Antoine Durand, Roberta Bizeau, Miriam Cyr, Marie-Josée Gauthier, Julien Poulin, Roy Dupuis, Denys Trudel, Susan Almgren, Alexandra Innes, Nathalie Coupal, Jacques Legras, Mark Bromilow, Isabelle L'Ecuyer, Patricia Tulasne, Tracy Ray, Dominique James, Nathalie Talbot. Produced by Stock International (Montreal) and Dédalus in association with Molécule (Paris). With the financial participation of Telefilm, SOGIC, TQS, and the Ministry of Culture (Paris). Canadian distribution and foreign sales: Aska Film International.