

Film Reviews

Denys Arcand's **Jésus de Montréal**

As we hurtle toward the 21st century, which André Malraux thought "will be mystical - or it will not be," Denys Arcand has set off reverberations with a movie that yearns for mysteries, miracles, and eternal love. In this lustrous film, Jesus and the disciples are unsuccessful actors who, among other gigs, dub porno movies and model in perfume commercials to put pizza and wine on the table.

Jésus de Montréal lights up the screen because it plays friskily, and also dead seriously, with a multitude of ambiguities. The film is all contrasts, echoes, and double meanings. It is both reverential and mocking; rooted in concrete reality, and up on cloud Nine. As dark as blood, as sparkling as a sip of rosé, *Jésus* smiles down knowingly, letting tragedy co-exist with slapstick comedy, and irony with ecstasy.

Jiving about the picture in a press-kit interview, Arcand envisions the "life we live today" as a super drugmart where "everything is present" from condoms and horoscopes to anthologies of Shakespeare and the Bible. In our world, the director would no doubt argue, pure tragedy played straight is doomed to become a ponderous museum piece - which is why *Jésus de Montréal* opens on a handsome, tormented-looking, young man in 19th-century costume, lamenting the brevity of life and then hanging himself.

Even before the first of the movie's many jolts - "Bravo! Bravo!", we hear a legitimate theatre audience shouting over a shot of the suicide's dangling torso, and realize that the "tragic" scene is part of just another play - you feel like tittering at the actor's heavy performing style and the antique, airless *mise-en-scène*. The kind of *mise-en-scène* that sometimes passes for "taste" and "beauty" in Canadian feature films.

In *Jésus de Montréal*, Arcand's *mise-en-scène* changes fast and furiously; it cuts from milieu to milieu, character to caricature, mood to mood. The audience tags along breathlessly behind him, catching on to some funky gag when he's already rising into a moment of exaltation, or plunging into bitter despair. In a climactic scene near the end of *Jésus*, farce turns to tragedy in one brutal cut.

The opening act of the movie speeds you from a reception packed with babbling media-goons (some of them based on real Montreal hot-shots), to an airy Catholic shrine, a sad soup kitchen, and a dubbing studio in which actor Martin Durocher (Rémy Girard) scampers back and forth between two microphones, trying to post-synch the ecstatic voices of both male heroes in a four-way orgy.



Jesus of Montreal (Lothaire Bluteau) flanked by Johanne-Marie Tremblay and Catherine Wilkening, and centurions Rémy Girard and Robert Lepage.

The beat gets too fast for Martin, who goofs, mixing up his "Burt" and "Johnny" voices. But the dubbing director's voice immediately crackles on the p. a., "Don't worry. Nobody will notice any difference," making one of the film's many barbed comments from the World According to Arcand.

The mock pornography in this scene bounces off an earlier scene's shots of ham actors pontificating about their sins. These "religious" images appear on a video monitor belonging to Father Leclerc (Gilles Pelletier), a lifelong theatre buff who offers an opportunity to *Jésus de Montréal*'s hero, Daniel Coulombe (Lothaire Bluteau), a young actor who needs work.

Father Leclerc wants Daniel to "modernize" *The Stations of the Cross*, a passion play staged on summer nights for gaggles of tourists in tennis shirts and bermuda shorts. The priest's show is based on an outdoor spectacle that actually happens at Montreal's mountainside St. Joseph's Oratory, and was, according to Arcand, the inspiration for his film.

Like Nathaneal West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Daniel is initially amused by the prospect of directing Christ's story and playing the main character. But as he meticulously researches the most up-to-date historical data about the world's most mysterious man, (approaching the project the way ex-documentarian Arcand did), and as an interesting way to tell the story reveals itself to him, Daniel starts feeling inspired.

Eventually, Jesus of Montreal gets more than he bargained for - just like the original.

A new tone comes into the film. A slightly spooky, born-again librarian (Paule Baillargeon) asks Daniel if he's looking for Jesus, and when he says, "Uh, yeah," she replies "It's he who will find you." The moment is typical of Arcand's style all through *Jésus de Montréal*. It's a joke; it isn't.

The urbanelly mocking scenes are now counterpointed by, for example, an eloquent camera move up a stone statue of Jesus in a green, summery garden, or a scene that evokes the end of the world. The silhouettes of Daniel, Martin, and unemployed actress Constance (Johanne-Marie Tremblay) merge with big screen outer space effects while a bottom-heavy voice intones typically science-show musings about man being a furtive shadow that will one day disappear from the universe. Again, a cliché reverberates.

Soon, Daniel is rehearsing his new version of the passion play with a little band of performers that includes Constance, Martin, René (stage actor/director Robert Lepage), and Mireille (French actress Catherine Wilkening). Constance needs to help people more than she needs to act; Martin is fed up, but too laid-back to do anything about it; René is a proud cynic who cracks, "I read every script - that's why I don't get much work"; and Mireille, a successful model, has just been told by her boyfriend,

"Your biggest talent is your ass."

Daniel's actors, who have been kicked around by corrupt people with power, and who share a yearning for something indefinable, begin discovering themselves through Daniel's approach to the play. He asks them for natural, under-stated performances; he makes the story real with disturbing information about Jesus's history and horrible facts about crucifixion; he confronts the spectators face to face with Christ's words. "Where lies your treasure, there lies your heart," Daniel-Jesus says quietly, but firmly, to an affluent viewer who nervously looks the other way.

As the mountain-top passion play takes over the middle of Arcand's movie, he moves the camera close to it. Burnished, nocturnal lighting contrasts with the airy blues and greens of the daytime settings. The sumptuously costumed players look like apparitions from the past. A naked Daniel dies convincingly under the night sky, the lights of Montreal twinkling far below.

His creation a bizarre hit with the media and the public, Daniel's life starts changing. As Jesus overturned the money-lenders' tables and kicked them out of the temple, Daniel smashes video equipment at a beer commercial audition where actresses are expected to "show your tits, or go home." Daniel is arrested, examined by a judge (Arcand) more disengaged than Pontius Pilate himself, and then tempted by the devil in

PHOTO: GROS D'AILLON

the form of a smooth entertainment lawyer (Yves Jacques).

Worst of all, Daniel is betrayed by Father Leclerc, who like a movie producer turning chicken, backs off from his director's original, truthful, and dangerously provocative production ("I have to answer to the board of governors"), and tries to impose his stilted, artificial 35-year-old stilted, artificial script on the actors.

In *Jesus of Montreal's* finale, Daniel falls and rises twice in a chain of ludicrous, ironic, and deeply disturbing episodes. Arcand's movie - beautifully acted, designed, and filmed (by Guy Dufaux and Jacques Leduc) - leaves you at the end with no clear resolution to the mystery of its enigmatic hero, played with an uncanny vulnerability and strength by Lothaire Bluteau.

Is Daniel an actor who crossed over into his role, or has Jesus returned in Daniel's body? It doesn't make any difference when we are haunted by images of him cradling a small child, loving his marginal friends, revolting against the contempt of power creeps, haranguing the living dead in a purgatorial metro station, or shouting at Father Leclerc under an echoing dome, "There must be something more than waiting quietly for death."

Maurie Alioff •

JESUS DE MONTREAL p. Roger Frappier, Pierre Gendron assoc. p. Gérard Mital, Jacques-Eric Strauss, Doris Girard p. mgr Lyse LaFontaine scd. Denys Arcand d. o. p. Guy Dufaux ed. Isabelle Dedieu art d. François Séguin sd. Patrick Rousseau, Marcel Pothier mus. Yves Laferrière, François Dompierre, Jean-Marie Benoit cost. Louise Jobin animation/titles François Aubry images of Montreal Jacques Leduc 1st. a. d. Mireille Goulet 2nd. a. d. Jacques Laberge, Marie-Madeleine Demay 3rd a. d. Guy Bouchard, Benoit Laroche post-prod. sup. Suzanne Dussault deleg. p. Monique Létourneau admin. Bernard Lamy 1st. asst. cam. Nathalie Moliakko Visotsky 2nd asst. cam. Sylvaine Dufaux asst. ed. Claudette Duff cont. Marie La Haye boom Veronique Gabillaud stills photog. Pierre Gros d'Aillons gaffer Normand Viau elec. Claude Fortier, Robert Auclair, Michel Steinmetzer, Marcel Breton, Sylvain Bergevin key grip Serge Grenier grips Grégoire Schmidt, André Tisseur set dec. Frances Calder, Simon La Haye coord. Lise Pharand props Patrice Benge, Ian Lavoie head makeup Micheline Trepanier makeup Cécile Rigault, Natalie Trepanier hair Janick Roda, Réjean Coderre cost. Josée Boisvert, Jacqueline Rousseau, Pierre Perrault cost. assts. Sylvie Chaput, Dominic Girard hd. dresser John Stowe dressers Mariane Carter, Marie McLaughlin, Dominic Girard unit mgr. Estelle Lemieux loc. mgr. Huguette Bergeron assts. Sylvie Vincent, Lucie Bouliane p. a. Jean-Pierre Fautoux, Pierre Lambert sp. fx. Louis Craig asst. sp. fx. Jacques Langlois, Pierre Rivard rear proj. Denis Gillsion c. s. c. sd. fx. ed. Marcel Pothier asst. Antoine Morin, Yves Laferrière, Mathieu Beaudin rec. Claude La Haye post. sync. /diul. ed. Diane Boucher, Annie Jean, Matthieu Roy-Décarie, Normand Bélanger rec. Jocelyn Caron, Laurent Levy, François Lepeuple, Jacques Juliani asst. ed. Catherine Legault mix. Hans-Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll l. p. Lothaire Bluteau, Catherine Wilkening, Johanne-Marie Tremblay, Rémy Girard, Robert Lepage, Gilles Pelletier, Yves Jacques, Cédric Noël, Pauline Martin, Véronique Le Flaguais, Jean-Louis Millette, Monique Miller, Christine-Ann Atallah, Valérie Gagné, Claude Leveillé, Paule Baillargeon, Boris Bergman, Gaston Lepage, Pascal Rollin, Marc Messier, Marcel Sabourin, Roy Dupuis, Claude Blanchard, Andrée Lachapelle, Denis Bouchard, Ron Lea, Anna-Maria Giannotti, Tom Rack, Marie-Christine Barrault, Judith Magre. A Max Films/Productions Gérard Mital production.

Martin Lavut's Palais royale

Mitchell Gabourie's Buying time

Palais Royale and Buying Time are two Toronto movies with strikingly similar story lines, sharing the same American "star", Dean Stockwell (both were shot before his comeback role in *Married to the Mob*), and bedeviled by similar problems of character development and lack of focus in the script. However, neither disguise where they were shot and both were released in Toronto during the same week. As far as this reviewer can remember, this has never happened before.

Palais Royale is the more stylish of the two, but also the weaker. Billed as a 'comedic romance noir', it is neither very funny nor is there a real romance. Set in 'Toronto the Good', circa 1959, Gerald Price (Matt Craven) is a clerk with small-town roots and big-time ambitions. He's a hustler who dreams of running his own ad agency and of the blonde on the billboards for Royal cigarettes. Sooner then you can say Charles Dickens (for plot convenience) he meets the blonde, Odessa Muldoon, (played by Kim Cattrall by way of Marilyn Monroe) on a street corner and immediately makes at pass a her.

Getting nowhere, he nonetheless manages to track her down at the Palais Royale, an art deco dance hall on Lake Ontario, where it seems all the best of the Toronto underworld meet for a bit of R and R.

Before long, there is a senseless killing and Gerald literally finds himself lying on top of his dream, having saved her life. She lures him into her world of cheap thugs and even cheaper hotel rooms. She pouts, she lounges, she gets slapped around by her bullying boyfriend Tony (Kim Coates) who is working for the local mob boss, Michael Dattalico (played by Stockwell). He too is tired of Tony's boorish ways. He wants to run a legitimate carpet business through which he can funnel his hard-earned cash.

Tony screws up once too often and Gerald is given the carpet business. Dattalico figures him to be the perfect front man because he looks like "fresh air and corn flakes." Meanwhile, Tony plots his revenge, and after some not very interesting plot twists, they all end up at the Royale for the final shootout, after Tony has killed Dattalico.

There is humour in *Palais Royale*, if you don't mind Toronto in-jokes ("This whole town is small-time", says Tony, trying to convince Odessa to run away with him. "We're going to Buffalo."), and both Gerald and Tony have it off with Odessa. But the laughs are slight and the sex surprisingly sexless. The audience is expected to go with Gerald's naive enthusiasm and big dreams, but the script doesn't allow us to really know him or care about his dreams. Odessa never rises about the level of a cheap tart

despite Cattrall's limited efforts to give her character some class. Her Monroe mannerisms and sluttish nature deflect any sort of sympathy the audience might have for a small-town girl trying to survive in the big bad city. The rest of the thugs and cops are one-dimensional, except for Stockwell who ignites a few sparks in his role as a distinctly respectable crime lord. Unfortunately, he is only given a couple of key scenes.

Palais Royale was premiered at last year's Festival of Festivals, but was subsequently re-edited and rescored. It remains clumsy and almost completely without suspense. A nicely appointed period piece, full of slinky gowns and big-finned cars, it's all dressed up with no place to go. Martin Lavut's direction is uninspired and only occasionally do his images rise above the ordinary. He ends up dwelling on Cattrall's face, but unlike Monroe, she can't carry the film on the sheer force of her personality. She has none.

The idea of a mob film in Toronto set in the '50s is certainly an appealing idea, but the end result smacks of too many fingers in the creative pie. Hugh Graham is a talented and funny writer whose material used to be heard on a regular basis on CBC Radio's Morningside. Apparently he worked two years on the script, but somewhere along the way the focus got lost. The producers went for an expensive look and the easy clichés, and *Palais Royale* ends up being victim of a lot of wrong choices.

Buying Time shares a lot in common with *Palais Royale*, apart from Dean Stockwell. Both are about young men who get involved with



Kim Cattrall and Matt Craven in *Palais Royale*