

KAMOURASKA:

claude jutra

— interviewed by Kirwan Cox, edited by Baltazar

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre claims that Québec films rarely attack English Canada, *per se*. Yet in "Mon Oncle Antoine" there are several snide references to 'les maudits anglais.' The mining boss is named Joe and doesn't speak French, the miners in the tavern say let's drink the beer before the English drink it, the owner of the mine who condescendingly throws the Christmas candies to the kids, also happens to be 'anglais.'

We have been oppressed by the English. In the region where we filmed *Mon Oncle Antoine* there are eight or nine mines. Not one is owned by Québec. Four are owned by England, and five by the U.S.

Why is it then that Québec films do not attack the English more viciously?

Do you think we should? Well, just wait.

Why did you study to become a doctor?

Family pressures — we are a medical family. All the male members of this family have been doctors for two generations. My mother is the daughter, the wife, the daughter-in-law, the mother, and the mother-in-law of doctors. I have a brother who's a doctor, my brother-in-law's a doctor, my father and both my grandfathers were doctors. So I went through that.

I studied at the Université de Montréal. But as I was doing it I was already involved in films. I got my first Canadian Film Award when I was a medical student in 1949 — the award for best amateur film, and that was just the second year of the Canadian Film Awards.

Did you actually practice medicine?

No, I didn't practice. I practiced as an intern toward the end of the course, but then I dashed away. I went to drama school after that for a couple of years, and then began working professionally at the Film Board. Then I did quite a lot of television — as a writer and actor. I wrote a series on film with Claude Sylvestre, which I hosted as well. At the Film Board I worked as an assistant director and I directed my first film in 1953, called *Jeunesse Musicale*. Then the Board moved here (Montréal) in 1955, and I worked on *Chairy Tale* with McClaren (*Jutra is the young man with the chair in that film.* — ed.), and in 1957 I went to the Venice Film Festival with *Chairy Tale*. I went for a month or so and I stayed there for about three years.

What did you do in Venice for three years?

Venice was an excuse to leave here. When I say I stayed for three years, I mean in Europe and Africa, as a matter of fact. I went to drama school in France, I directed a short film which was produced by François Truffaut, who was just starting then. That was the very beginning of the 'nouvelle vague', the New Wave. It was a lot of fun. Truffaut was producing his first feature. That was the main reason to stay, because here nothing much was happening at that time. And then I went to Africa because I had seen a film by Jean Rouch called *Moi, Un Noir* and I was so taken by it that I decided to go to Africa, and there I met Rouch and we travelled together. We met in French West Africa, and we went through the Côte d'Ivoire, Haute Volta, then through Niger and Ghana. Africa is a fantastic continent and I was very much taken by it. I went back six times and I finally made a film there. But the first trip was with Rouch and it was quite a long trip — he was there as a filmmaker and as an anthropologist and I followed him everywhere and took notes of everything that happened and they were published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. It was a series of three

long articles called *En Courant Derrière Rouch*, running behind Rouch.

I also looked around a lot in Europe. I was learning about Paris and many of its aspects. Just before coming back I did a short film on Felix LeClerc for the Film Board. All I had to spend personally was the round trip there and back. I had a grant from the Canada Council of the Arts for the short film that I was directing. It was a small grant, \$4,000, but it kept me going for quite a while. I came back to do some more Film Board films, and that helped to pay for the trip as well.

Why did you come back? You were in the middle of all that excitement, the New Wave, and running around Africa, what made you leave all that?

I thought that I would like to stay there for a while because it was all so exciting compared to what was happening here, but very soon you discover that you're not home, you're a stranger. It's not all that unpleasant when you just live there, but when you start to create, you realize that you don't have that sense of belonging. I wouldn't say that the French people discriminated — even though the Québec accent is a very strong one — but in my case I taught myself to eliminate it completely. I spoke with a French accent — that was part of the fun of it, because I was also there as a drama student, and I was studying classical roles, so obviously I had to train myself to speak classical French. So that was no problem for me, but what could I have contributed to this tidal wave called "nouvelle vague"? All those people were very nice and most of them



were friends of mine, but they were very close at the time – that was part of their ideology – they were close to the people, to what was going on, and looking at day to day life more closely. And they could do that because they knew it very well, but I was just learning it, you know.

They would focus for example very much on the ‘poésie de Bistro,’ so they had to know all the gestures and habits and all the bistro staff and clientèle, and I was just watching that, my eyes open wide, I had never seen that before. So what could I do? And besides, there was very strong competition, let’s face it. So many rising young talents, and to blend yourself into that, was really trying to make life difficult for yourself in a way.

Also there are and were rules in France, which make it difficult for a stranger to work. You have to have what they call ‘carte de travail,’ and it’s very hard to get that. You have to get that. You have to apply for French citizenship, or you have to get around it somehow – there are all sorts of ways to get around it – but it makes life a little tense, you know.

Don’t you actually mean that to create it’s better to be at home, because the knowledge that you have of your surroundings is greater; but if you’re away from your home culturally speaking, then it is easier just to be – so much new stuff to absorb, that you don’t have time for output . . .

Well, let me put it in simple words: in order to create you have to feel at home where you are – *feel at home* – so that can happen in a foreign country, also. And to a very large extent I did feel at home in France, but not enough. Another important factor was that I came back once in a while and I could see what was happening here, and that was really exciting! Things changed extremely fast, around 1959, 1960. Duplessis died, and the guy who replaced him died shortly thereafter, and the Liberal Party came to power, and that was very exciting; there were all these nationalist movements. They called it ‘la révolution tranquille’ – suddenly there was a kind of ‘crise de conscience’ of the Québec people and their culture. Things were opening up, there was the film festival in Montréal and some private companies were being set up and there was such a ferment of cultural and political activity. It was all very exciting, and I would have been a fool to miss it.

So I came back, and because of all these things – my past experience and what was happening then – I felt in 1961 the urge to make a first feature film. It was an absolute necessity at that specific moment. So I went ahead and made it; and made it without considering any commercial values whatsoever. I thought – ‘Well, if I don’t make a feature film now, I’ll never make it, and since I’m paying for it, I might as well have all the fun I can get out of it and make no concessions to either a producer or the exhibitors or what I think the public wants or anything like that. And the original title of **A Tout Prendre** (Take It All), was *Le Tout pour le Tout*, which means ‘shoot the works.’ Which was exactly what I was doing then.

Were you successful in “A Tout Prendre”?

Yes, I think I was. Ever since I’ve made that film, I’ve had this very good feeling that I’ve accomplished myself and that I’ve said most of what I would ever have to say on film. Hopefully, I’ll make more films and they’ll be valuable. But I could have died then after making that film, I knew that people would know what I had – good or bad. You may either like or dislike the film, but that’s what Jutra was . . .

To my eyes – I don’t know if this is an emotional reaction, but I don’t think so; I think it’s very rational – **A Tout Prendre** will always be my best film. I don’t think that I can do better than that . . .

Why make more films then? I mean once you’ve done it – I’ve never heard of anybody ever saying that they’ve done it – they have done what their life is about, they have reached a peak, or that they’ve accomplished what they wanted to accomplish – it’s sort of fatalistic . . .

Oh, no! I don’t say it in a fatalistic way at all – it’s very positive. I’m glad I’ve made that film. It takes away a lot of

emotional pressure. It’s just the opposite of fatalistic. It takes most of the despair away. Since then I’ve known hard times trying to make other films which I could never make. There were many, you know. I’ve worked for years on a given project and then on another one, and those were never made. And I felt very unhappy then. But that kind of unhappiness is very far from the kind of unhappiness that you have when you say, ‘I’ll never get to make it,’ to do even that one film.

Usually, when you make your first feature, you make it because there are pressures put on you, and you don’t have enough experience, and you make mistakes you say you will never make again. People in general are not totally satisfied with their first major film. And they work on the assumption that they will make a better one next time. That they will get better and better with each one. But I think I can really say now that I know I’ve reached my peak – at least a peak.

If somebody tells me that he dislikes **A Tout Prendre** for such and such a reason, well, I have no excuses. I cannot say that anything was imposed on me by the producer, or that I didn’t have enough money, or that I would have liked to do something differently, but I couldn’t. I made that film like you write a novel – with no pressure put on me by anybody or anything on the creative level. The pain came later, with distribution.

What about “Mon Oncle Antoine?” Surely, you must feel that that’s kind of a peak, as well.

Well, you know, this peak thing . . . I only think about it for **A Tout Prendre**, and the rest, well, life – it goes on.

Don’t you think that “Mon Oncle Antoine” is an example of the rising level of your craftsmanship?

I don’t think so. It’s funny, a lot of people have compared **A Tout Prendre** with **Mon Oncle Antoine**, and they say how different it is; they say it’s more mature, because there is less film acrobatics in it. They say it’s very simple in style, which is true, but only because that’s what the subject requires. I mean you couldn’t fool around with that kind of subject – the thing to do was to be close to life, to look at people intimately, without being smart about it. And that’s what I did.

And pretty well, I think.

You know, it’s no longer a problem of technique, or craftsmanship. I think I’ve got that. And if I’m ever awkward in a film, it will be because of a big mistake, and not because I don’t know how to do it. It might be an error in judgment, at any given time, for a specific film . . .

Since you made “A Tout Prendre” having complete freedom, do you find it any different making a film like “Antoine” through the National Film Board? Did you have the kind of freedom . . .

To come back again to **A Tout Prendre**: it was made with total freedom, and also with teamwork. That film was made under conditions, which I will never know again. It was really quite an experience, because everybody was working on it for free and people would lend me equipment. I remember Michel Brault and Jean-Claude Labrecque both shot about half of the film each. I would call them in the middle of the night and say, “Hey look there’s this thing happening, come quick and shoot it, man.” They would grumble a bit but they would be right there in a few minutes. And everybody was doing that, because they all wanted the film to be made. You know, it was important that a film be made then, that kind of a film, a fiction, feature film, and I was the one who was doing it; they had confidence in me and they just worked for the hell of it. For the sake of making the film and also because we were really have a lot of fun doing it.

And there were no contracts signed, no obligations of anybody towards anybody else, and *that* in itself was something really extraordinary. It very seldom happens, I’m sure. But I don’t have a fixation on the **A Tout Prendre** way of making films. I know it was beautiful, but that’s not the way it works, normally, and I don’t mind having pressures put on me, as

long as I can control them to a certain degree and select them in another way.

I've always been quite satisfied with the way you can work at the Film Board, but the problems come after the film is finished — distribution.

Most of the Canadian theatres are owned by American theatre chains. And they don't give a damn about Canadian films. Such an unheard-of thing as a Canadian film — what the hell is that? Or a Québec film? The American films come with all the publicity included — all the posters, pictures, and press releases. But promoting something weird like a Canadian film? They don't care . . .

I would suggest that Canada adopt legislation like most countries in the world, except the U.S., whereby the incoming traffic of motion pictures is controlled and a quota on national product is set. A system of imposing restrictions on importation, and on the other hand rewarding local creativity. That is clear and simple and very easy to understand. I have been working on memorandums to the government — to Quebec and to Ottawa — for about fifteen years, and they all know about that. Yet nothing is done, not because they don't know, but only because the existing system doesn't care much about the competition, yet.

Since Canada isn't a lucrative market for Canadian films, where do you look for markets? Québec, and then what? The other French-speaking countries?

Well, I've changed camps since *Kamouraska*. This is obviously a commercial venture. I think that on a commercial level, it is going to break new ground, not only in Québec, but in Canada. I'm not sure, however, about staying in that camp.

Could you describe the film?

Kamouraska is a period piece, and it's the kind of production with a star in it — Geneviève Bujold, and a lot of other very well-known actors in Québec for local audiences. But I think the film has universal appeal, even in language. The story takes place about a century ago, and the language spoken then was hypothetically closer to French French than the Québec

Claude Jutra directing "Mon Oncle Antoine"

French — therefore it is a marketable product.

The story is nostalgic, romantic, tragic. It's based on the best-selling novel by the same title, written by Anne Hébert. On the back cover of the book it says it is the story of snow, love, and blood. It's a very classical story about a married woman who brings her lover to kill her husband — already people are comparing it to Tolstói's stories, Balzac's stories. It was filmed in a much more formal style than *Mon Oncle Antoine*.

What excited me very much is the psychological relationship between the characters in the film. I loved the book very much, and I thought that Elizabeth was a fascinating character. She is a black angel — the whole story is based on an actual event that took place a century ago in Quebec — I mean she was so lovely and looked so much like an angel, that although she was obviously the accomplice in the murder — this evil deed — she was not only acquitted, but the trial did not even take place. And the relationship between herself, her husband, and her lover is very, very exciting, while all the background, and all the sociological milieu of the times is quite interesting. The social mores of the times, the problems of morals, plus the film has a lot to do with the problem of a woman wanting to be free, which is a very contemporary theme. Wanting to be herself and not subordinated to all kinds of social dictates. It was quite fascinating. All the characters are quite lovable — evil as she is, Elizabeth is quite lovable. And both of the men in her life are victims in two ways, the murderer is a victim, and the murdered one is also a victim, obviously.

How did you feel about working with Geneviève Bujold?

Well, it's been a long, long time since we have both wanted to work together. Then this property came along, and this production allowed us to do just that.

And Michel Brault, who shot half of my first film and all of *Mon Oncle Antoine*, was again director of photography on *Kamouraska*. We started in films together, and besides, I think he's just about the greatest director of photography in the world. It has reached the point where we don't have to speak



of most things. In the case of *Kamouraska*, being a more formal film, I told him I want this and I want that, but he's much more to me than a cameraman, he's superlative. One of the best.

The cameraman is the only one who sees what's going to be on the screen as he shoots. When you're the director, no matter how close to the camera you're standing, when you look at the scene you're looking at the performance. That's what I do, to see that this character seems to be hiding, or that person seems to be acting in a very strange way, or overdoing it, etc. And Michel gives me a report after every shot, and I retake the shot according to what he said, modify it and so on. But we know each other so well, in *Mon Oncle Antoine* he was second director while I was acting; things like that, which means you really work together.

How do you see the future of filmmaking in Québec or Canada?

It's very hard to say. Filmmaking isn't the kind of thing that you can make predictions about. If you read some of the predictions of last year, you laugh, because they are completely wrong. It's a weird thing. It's an industry, but it's the one industry that you cannot foresee at all. You might in some areas, there was a time when they made *beach* movies, at other times it was *monster* movies, recently it's been *sex* movies, but none of the trends last very long, and the thing is to try to guess. It's guess work. In other fields you can set trends. In films you can't because you never know which film is going to be a hit.

Does that concern you much, I mean, having spent \$750,000 making "Kamouraska", don't you have to worry about whether or not it will go with the public?

I wouldn't get involved in a film that I don't like. And from the moment I like it, I'm sure that the public is going to like it. I may turn out to be wrong, but you have to function that way, otherwise you're lost. If you begin to worry about what the public wants, then it's terrible, you might as well do anything – design plastic containers – there is no fun in making films unless you make the films you want to make. And there is all this danger of a flop hanging at the end of your nose, but you have to live with that. And even if you produce according to formula, you still have the same danger facing you – a flop – because there is no magic formula in filmmaking. The thing that big producers know is that only one film out of seven ever makes money, so you have to produce seven, hoping that one will pay for the other six . . .

Would you care to make a self-evaluation at this point? I mean some filmmakers say that they are artists who happen to be working in the medium of film, others claim to be workers, just like everybody else – a shoemaker, for instance – but the thing that they produce is a bit different from a shoe . . .

Well, I think that in Québec I've been one of the first persons who really loved film and also one of the first ones who could make them. Life is very interesting, because now there are quite a few good filmmakers working in Québec, and I really have a feeling of being part of that community. I'm not only talking about the other filmmakers, but also the audience. Because in the beginning, you know, in 1963 when *A Tout Prendre* came out, there really wasn't an audience – the average Quebecker was not aware that there was such a thing as Québec films. And I know, because I did a television series on films, and the second one was specifically about Canadian films. At one point I went out with a tape recorder and a camera to interview people on the street, I asked them, "Have you heard about Québec Cinéma?" And they would say, "Oh, yeah." And I would say, "What films did you see?" And they would say, "Well, I can't think of a name now, but . . . but I'm sure there is a Québec cinema." When I asked about favorite Québec actors, one guy said Maurice Chevalier . . .

That was in 1960, but if you compile all that's been written about Québec cinema before 1960, in foreign magazines like *Cahiers du Cinéma*, it would be quite a huge stack of paper. But people in Québec didn't know, they didn't read those

magazines, and they hadn't seen the films. We had to go through the 'sex star' stage with films like *Valérie* to get a big audience and to have at least our own movie stars. Now people are aware and there's kind of an anti-sex backlash – lots of people are saying 'we are tired of sex films, they're all the same, and they're very dull, we want *real* movies.' And so it's all very positive. There are all sorts of signs – little theatres are being built to show Canadian films, and so on . . .

You still haven't answered the question about self-evaluation.

Am I allowed to give myself points? That's too abstract, that kind of question: 'what are you?' I don't know how to answer that. The way I answer it is in my films.

Ron Blumer says he wants to write a book about you.

Jesus Christ! That's frightening!

I think there's more stuff written about movies than there are movies made, anyway.

It doesn't make too much difference. That would be a good subject for a comedy, you know. The guy who couldn't even hire people to write a book about him and then he has cases of it and he gives it away when friends come to visit him. Have a Scotch, and here's a book about me . . .

Is that how you would see your life – as a kind of burlesque or comedy?

Oh, I think a sense of humor is very important. I mean, I couldn't live without it. I like comedy, I like to be funny. I like to laugh myself, and also to make people laugh . . . ●



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