

Cinema Canada: *So often these talented child actors never do another film.*

Francis Mankiewicz: Yes and it's too bad. It's a reflection of the fact that it's so difficult to get films made. When we started making **Les bons débarras**, there hadn't been a Quebec film made for a long time. There were difficulties financing it and getting it going. When the battles of putting a film together become that enormous, it is hard to develop an ongoing film process that enables you to employ actors on a regular basis. Like many things in our world today, there is much waste. But I'm sure that Charlotte will continue acting. She has special qualities that can't go unnoticed.

Cinema Canada: *You mention the lean years for filmmakers here. There must have been times when you wondered why you were sticking at it. Where is the fun in filmmaking for you?*

Francis Mankiewicz: When I was a child my mother used to say, 'In any job there is ninety-nine percent misery and difficulty, and one percent pleasure and enrichment.' I think that's true in filmmaking. For those few moments on set when the magic occurs, you're ready to go through the miseries of trying again and again to put together a movie, to see one and then another of your projects fall through, so

you can end up on set and do that one take that is miraculous.

Cinema Canada: *Is the existence of the Institut québécois du cinéma going to make a difference for filmmakers here?*

Francis Mankiewicz: It is making a difference. Last year production of films increased. How long that's going to go on for, I don't know. In the twelve years that I've been making films, I've seen periods of heavy production followed by periods where there was nothing. Older filmmakers will perhaps tell me that it's normal, but I hope it doesn't happen too often. It's extremely demoralizing and demobilizing. Filmmakers, artists of any nature, need to work on a fairly regular basis to develop their craft and their maturity as artists. Hopefully we're seeing a new period of filmmaking, but I wouldn't bet on it.

With inflation, filmmaking is getting more expensive. You can't finance a film totally with the Institut. The CFDC is doing its part, too, but it's still not one-hundred percent of the budget. On **Les bons débarras** the producers, Les Productions Prisma, never did find total financing before shooting. So Prisma and various people were obliged to invest in the film. When producers and filmmakers begin risking their livelihood to make a film, all kinds of extraneous elements of stress intervene in the creative process.

The Institut helps. There aren't many institutions trying to protect the cultural reality in Quebec, and the national cinema that is close to the artists of Quebec. Hopefully, that cinema will be close to the audience one day as well.

Les bons débarras

p.c. Les Productions Prisma Inc. p. Claude Godbout. Marcia Couëlle p. account. Louise Deslauriers p. sup. Monique Messier p. man. Francine Forest p. assist. Michelle St-Arnaud. Jacques Garon. André Brault p. sec. Andrée Lachapelle d. Francis Mankiewicz a.d. Lise Abastado. Alain Chartrand. Marie-Andrée Vinet (2nd a.d.) sc. Réjean Ducharme cont. Marie LaHaye art. d. Michel Proulx d.o.p. Michel Brault cam. Guy Dufaux. Jean-Charles Tremblay asst. cam. Louis de Ernsted. Robert Martel. Michel Caron. Pierre Duceppe stunts Marcel Fournier. Yves Fournier. Serge Deniau sd. Henri Blondeau sd. mix Michel Descombes boom Marcel Fraser mus. dir. Bernard Buisson mus. arrange. Jean Corriveau. François Richard. Bernard Buisson ed. André Corriveau ward. Diane Paquet. Suzanne Harel make-up/hair Marie-Angèle Breitner-Protat props Pierre Fournier. Daniel Huysmans (assist.) elec. Jacques Paquet. Daniel Chrétien. Richer Francoeur. Eddy Trempe machine Serge Grenier. Robert Grenier still Yves Ste-Marie l.p. Charlotte Laurier. Marie Tifo. Germain Houde. Louise Marleau. Roger Lebel. Gilbert Sicotte. Serge Thériault. Jean-Pierre Bergeron. Léo Ilial. Madeleine Chartrand. Louise Rinfret. Eric Beauséjour. Jean-Pierre Duplessis. Marcella Fajardo. Marie Laurier. Henri pub. Les Productions Prisma Inc. (1979) col. 35 mm length 116 min. dist. Corporation des Films Mutuels Ltée. (Qué).

commerce vs. culture in a bastard industry

by teri coburn

At the best of times, producing a Québécois film is a risky business; at the worst, it can be suicidal — but it can be done. For a price.

Producers of **Les bons débarras**, Marcia Couëlle and Claude Godbout, of Les Productions Prisma Inc., paid it: \$57,000 out of the corporate pocket. Not to mention the months of stress prior to, during, and now, after the shoot. But with a little help from their friends, and a lot of faith in their film, they can almost sit back; for **Les bons débarras** has been selected to represent Canada in the competition at the Berlin Film Festival. They have also found themselves a distributor in Quebec, and one in Germany. The struggle is by no means over, but the worst of it may be; a qualified consolation, but a consolation nonetheless. What made them do it?

"It was really on the basis of Réjean

Ducharme's script that we got into the film," they explain to **Cinema Canada**. "It was an extraordinary script; one that far surpassed anything we had seen in Québécois cinema... If we had just read the storyline, or if it had been anyone of a number of other directors who had approached us with it, we probably wouldn't have been interested in producing it. But Francis' interpretation — the one he was able to give us verbally, that he was able to draw for us — was what interested us. He came to us because there had been a number of fiction films done here at Prisma; and he already knew what type of films we had made, and with what type of directors."

Unfortunately, Mankiewicz's timing might have been better. "In the fall of '77, when the script came to us, it was about the worst time we had seen in the last

decade of the industry to think about making a feature film in French. The films that we were bringing out then — low-budget films under \$200,000 — were risks; but at least the CFDC (Canadian Film Development Corp.), allowed them to recoup the private investment before the public money. By the time we began making **Les bons débarras** there were none of those 'guarantees', because the CFDC policy had changed."

Prisma consequently tried all of the classical methods of financing, and ended up with seventy-five percent of the \$602,000 budget covered by the CFDC and the Institut québécois du cinéma. "The Institut also came in right away with their additional cultural money. They can

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exceed their maximum by giving bonuses based on the quality of a script."

Prisma was then left to its own devices to finance the final twenty-five percent (\$150,000) of the budget. Private investments from Famous Players, Radio Québec, the director, the writer, the laboratory, and the equipment house covered all of it but \$57,000.

"When Francis speaks about stress, it's very, very true. We were looking for that \$57,000 for about a year-and-a-half. We looked in the direction of tax shelter money, but no brokerage house wants to get involved in a project that is only looking for \$57,000. Because we were trying to keep the budget at a strict minimum, we were looking for the money ourselves and didn't want to get involved with a lot of other processes that cost money. We didn't come out with a prospectus for instance, because that in itself costs anywhere from \$30,000 to \$60,000. We knew what our possibilities for recoupment were for a French language film. So we were sort of caught between the devil and the deep blue sea; we had to *have* the money to *get* the money. It was really crazy!"

Nevertheless, the producers emphasize that, "In this film no technician had to invest any part of his salary. We did, but not the crew. This is one of the principles at Prisma: none of the crew has had to invest in any of our films." Directors of their fiction features have had to invest part of their salaries, however, as did

Francis Mankiewicz for **Les bons débarras**. But it came as no surprise to him.

"You don't produce a French film, with no well-known stars, for a French minority, without fighting the odds. At the outset, Francis himself was realistic enough to know what we were getting into in terms of financing. He obviously wanted to make the film, but he wondered if we, as producers, were going to try and pressure him into putting people with 'names' into the film. Our answer was very clearly, no: we wanted to have the best people for the film in the film. We were not about to put any pressure on him. But he was very conscious that he was taking a risk."

And risk it was. The company had to finance the preparation of the film for six months without knowing if they would be able to shoot it. Finally, Prisma announced publicly that the film was going to go ahead.

In June 1979, the CFDC again revised its policy of recoupment. French language films were once more permitted to recoup their private investment before paying back the CFDC. Couëlle and Godbout's present optimism is due to the fact that the CFDC's new policy has been retroactively accorded to them for **Les bons débarras**.

"Now we feel certain that we will get the money back — but the problem is that it might be a long term investment; and that, obviously, is a handicap for a small production company like ours, which needs to have the cash flow to finance other projects."

With larger projects, distributors often carry part of the financial burden, but how does a small company get distribution for a film like **Les bons débarras**? "During all the time we were shooting and editing the film, we didn't have a distributor. At the beginning of this year we signed a distribution agreement with Les Films Mutuels. But approaching them was not an obvious step a year ago. We only went to Mutuels after their success with **Mourir à tue-tête**, when it became obvious that individuals in the company were willing to work with Québécois film. **Mourir's** success, — which no one could have guaranteed, — was enough for them to release another one: **Cordélia**. Then we went to them with **bons débarras**. If **Mourir** had not been a success, I don't think that anyone at Mutuels would have wanted to see a Québécois film."

Given the odds, one wonders why small companies like Prisma persist in tempting fate. Godbout and Couëlle are the first to admit that, "Just in terms of numbers, films produced in French in North America are going to remain minority films. You have to be a terrible idealist to think otherwise."

But for Prisma, and other companies like it, "It all comes down to a question of values. Do you place more value on cultural recognition, or on commercial recognition? ...The cinema industry is a bastard industry. It's neither all commerce, nor all art. If you don't accept that ambiguity to begin with, you go around with a huge question mark in your head. If you accept that it is a bastard industry, then it becomes a matter of percentages; you have more commerce in one operation, and more culture in another — but the two aspects are never totally separated."

On the commercial side of the coin, Prisma emphasizes that, "One thing we can do to help even the score in terms of recouping — and this is what we're trying to do with **Les bons débarras**, and every film we make — is to market the film correctly. That's one place where we have a lot to learn, and there are a lot of markets which haven't been touched." Part of their new marketing strategy involves "the other reality, which is television. Even for people producing multi-million dollar films, their sales to NBC, ABC or Home Box Office are important to the financing of their projects. ...There are television markets that Québécois films are only beginning to touch. As producers we *must* work on marketing our films."

That said, Couëlle and Godbout accept their limitations. "We're not going to end up on St. Catherine Street to battle the giants to get on the screen in place of **Jaws**! We are going to continue working



Wondering what's on her mother's mind...



Manon sharing her troubles with her best chum, Gaétan (Gilbert Sicotte), the busdriver

on projects that will always need risk money. So, we will always need government money. We're going to try to maintain quality all the way through; working with script writers, directors, actors... developing people within the industry here. We are very much aware of the individuals, and the individual work that goes into any one film."

Most likely, *Les bons débarras'* artistic achievement stems from the intimate collaboration of producers, director, scriptwriter, and crew. "One of the positive aspects of working with Francis, despite the normal day to day tensions and differences of ideas, was that we were basically working towards the interpretation of the script which Francis had in his head... On that basis, we worked together with him through hell and high water to get that image of the film... It was more than just a case of producers trying to organize and finance a production. And it was a fruitful collaboration."

Now, *Les bons débarras* is on its way to Berlin. Prisma feels that in terms of content and style, "It's a film which shouldn't be difficult to sell to European countries... There is a certain type of cinema which comes out of the Scandinavian countries, for example, which has some relationship to a film like this: where people's feelings are more important than the car race, or the big show value. That has to do with what your public is used to as well."

Realistically, they don't see it as a box office buster, nor do they see it as a film which should be confined to small art houses for one-week runs. It is one of

those awkward, in between films that defies categories. But to Godbout and Couëlle, one thing is clear: the few hundred people who have seen it to date, "...came out of the film liking it — glad to have seen it."

And that, after all, is what it's all about. But was it worth it? "At the end, there is always a certain dissatisfaction. You wish you had had more time, and more money to buy time... In any film, regardless of its success, you always wish that such and such could be changed — because we're in the perfection business! Honestly though, we could say that we achieved most of the goals."

Would they do it again? Certainly. But it would be nice to have a little less stress and a little more security. "As producers, we would like to find a way to guarantee the financing for another project of that sort, before hand. We're as satisfied as possible about our collaboration with Francis, and the work of the technicians. But it should be possible for producers and directors to work on films of this sort and still be paid properly. It should also be possible for a distributor or foreign sales agent to make the necessary extra effort to place these films and still make enough sales to recoup. And it is possible."

What makes them think so? "Well, take *Les servantes du Bon Dieu*, for example. In terms of a subject, what could be more hermetic than a feature film on nuns in Sherbrooke, Quebec? And yet the film, because of its quality, was chosen for the Critics' Week at Cannes, has been to festivals on two continents, and came out at the Film Forum Theatre in New York

last week — and Vincent Canby wrote the most marvelous review in the New York Times about it. These are the little things that give us hope, and make us believe that quality can be recognized."

Without tax shelter benefits, multi-million dollar budgets, or casts of superstars, small companies like Prisma, in producing films like *Les bons débarras*, may well be fostering a cultural climate which will survive long after the shelters are no more. Goodluck to them... For, ultimately, the public reaps the benefits of their determination. □

Les Productions Prisma/ Partial Filmography

1973

On n'engraisse pas les cochons à l'eau claire. Director Jean-Pierre Lefebvre (co-production with Cinak).

Les dernières fiançailles. Director Jean-Pierre Lefebvre (co-production with Cinak) (ICFO Ecumenical Prize, Cannes, 1974).

1974

Les ordres (Orders). Director Michel Brault. (Best Director Award — shared with Costa Gavras — and ICFO Ecumenical Prize, Cannes, 1975; Quebec Critics' Award, 1975).

Comme les six doigts de la main (The Backstreet Six). Director André Melançon. (Quebec Critics' Award, 1978; First Prize in its section, 1979 International Festival of Films for Television at Banff.)

1978

Les servantes du Bon Dieu. Director Diane Létourneau. (Screened at the Critics' Week, Cannes, 1979).

Les bons débarras (Good Riddance). Director Francis Mankiewicz. (Representing Canada in the competition at the Berlin Film Festival, 1980).

1979

Corridors and Pris au piège. Co-directors Guy Dufaux and Robert Favreau; and **Thetford au milieu de notre vie.** Co-directors Fernand Dansereau and Iolande Rossignol.

Future projects include a dramatic series of hour-long films for television, several features including Diane Létourneau's new documentary on married and unmarried couples, as well as two series on the history and literature of Quebec.
