

# FILM REVIEWS

## Francis Mankiewicz's Les bons débarras

p.c. Les Productions Prisma Inc. p. Claude Godbout, Marcia Couëlle p.account. Louise Delauriers, 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 La Haye art.d. Michel Proulx d.o.p. Michel Brault cam. Guy Dufaux, Jean-Charles Tremblay assist.cam. Louis de Ernsted, Robert Martel, Michel Caron, Pierre Duceppe stunts Marcel Fournier, Yves Fournier, Serge Deniau sd. Henri Blondeau sd. 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, Riches 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 Iliail, Madeleine Chartrand, Louise Rinfret, Eric Beauséjour, Jean-Pierre Duplessis, Marcella Fajardo, Marie Laurier, Henri pub. Les Productions Prisma Inc. (1979) col. 35mm length 116 min. dist. Corporation des Films Mutuels Ltée. (Qué)

Emily Brontë's **Wuthering Heights** is a tale of passion and jealousy, twisted family ties, and an eternal, all-encompassing love. The novel's gothic wonderland provides a fantasy retreat for the little girl who dominates **Les bons débarras**, and its juxtaposition against the events and emotions in the film also cast it as a kind of literary chorus. There is something classically tragic about the movie, a profound sensation of individuals caught up in a situation they neither control nor completely understand. And in its passions, the film is structured on a very grand scale indeed.

Manon (Charlotte Laurier) lives with her mother Michelle (Marie Tifo), and uncle Ti-Guy (Germain Houde), outside a small town in rural Quebec. The family survives by chopping firewood and selling it to customers in the area, and their measly income is reflected in their living conditions. Michelle has accepted her lot without any hint of defeatism: alone, raising a daughter and tending for a somewhat retarded brother, she seems blessed with an unparalleled ability to cope. Discovering that she is pregnant by her policeman boyfriend, her reaction is one of muted joy, and she confides the



Silence speaks louder than words for Manon (Charlotte Laurier), and her mother Michelle (Marie Tifo).

news to her daughter in an effort to draw her closer.

It has the opposite effect. Manon is fiercely possessive of her mother, desperate to prove herself capable of providing for Michelle in every possible way. "I'm going to take care of you," she tells her during a strained telephone conversation. "I'm going to steal you and keep you in my heart." The girl offers herself as child/lover/protector with an intensity that confounds her mother. With extraordinary skill, Manon eventually succeeds in cutting Michelle's emotional bonds with the outside world, like a tiny schemer whose only wish is to be loved.

It is the marvel of the movie that one never doubts she already has that love. Manon is no deprived victim: Michelle skillfully distributes her affection among the people who crave it so badly. Director Francis Mankiewicz has drawn from his actors performances of amazing subtlety and terrific range; thus, there are no villains; the characters are victims of fate rather than one another. From the outset, Germain Houde's monosyllabic man/child seems to exist in some kind of beery twilight, and his response to the wealthy "Madame" whom they provide with firewood rouses him to an awareness he has never experienced before. But **Les bons débarras** has none of the romantic optimism of **The Beauty and the Beast**:

here, social standing and emotional handicaps are not transcended by love. He is ultimately destroyed by feelings he barely understands.

Marie Tifo demonstrates an extraordinary combination of strength and vulnerability, and her position as the love object of five people (including, in his fashion, Manon's pal Gaétan, the mechanic) forces her into a delicate balancing act. She never quite realizes just how badly Manon wishes to eliminate the other claimants to her affection, and the telephone conversation between mother and daughter after the revelation of the pregnancy is touched with a strange intensity.

It is the baby-Madonna face of Charlotte Laurier which dominates the film — her wide-eyed fragility belying a cool, almost adult capacity for reasoning. The genes have been passed on: Manon, like her mother, is a survivor. She wants what she wants, whether a fancy dog collar for her pet, some cheap makeup in a department store, or Michelle's undivided love: "What I can't earn," she warns at one point, "I'll steal." Laurier's shifts from childishness to precocity are flawlessly executed, and she has not a badly-timed moment in the film.

In league with director of photography Michel Brault, Mankiewicz has created images of a powerfully dark beauty, visions that meld with, rather than subordinate the lean, eloquent script. Arresting

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close-ups of Manon's face against monotone backgrounds, the Pietà of Michelle cradling her half-clad brother as he dozes in a drunken slumber, and the images of the earth, the water, the colours of the leaves: this is an austere, evolved, visual language exercised with complete control. That sense of control, in fact, extends to every aspect of the film, its passions and its scope rendering it universally accessible. But there is another, equally profound reflection here. That sense of self that

Quebecers watching the film will experience is a very particular thing; that amazing right to say: "This is where I live, these are the people and the elements and the seasons that I live with," fills one with a heady kind of elation. It is an essential part of what motion pictures are all about, something rare enough in any part of the Canadian experience.

Barbara Samuels

### Micheline Lanctôt's *L'homme à tout faire*

p.c. Corporation Image Ltee. (1979) p. René Malo exec.p. Jean-Claude Lord assoc.p. Ted Kotcheff s.d./sc./dial. Micheline Lanctôt a.d. Pierre Gendron 2nd. a.d. Michèle Mercure cont. Thérèse Bérubé p. assist. Francyne Morin p.sec. Suzanne Comtois p. account. Bérangère (Catou) Maltais d.o.p. André Gagnon focus François Gill 1st assist. cam. Robert Guertin 2nd assist. cam. Daniel Vincelette ed. Annick de Bellefeuille, Diane Boucher (assist.) sd. Marcel Fraser boom Yvon Benoit sd. ed. Pierre Leroux, Jean-Pierre Cereghetti (assist), Louis Dupire (assist.) m. François Lanctôt or. songs Gilles Vigneault mus. mix Louis Hone art.d. Normand Sarrazin art. assist. Daniel Champagne, Céline Mayrand props Pierre Fournier makeup Mickie Hamilton, Chantale Ethier hair Constant Natale cost. Henri Huet ward. Dominique L'Abbé p.sup. Jacques Normand, Jean Gauthier (assist) messenger Louis Gascon chief machinist Jean-Maurice de Ernsted machinist Denis Ménard chief electrician Claude Charron elect. Claude Brasseur stills Jean-Pierre Pelicano, Lise Labelle film titles Productions Ciné-Titres Enrg. op. eff. Les Films Transfocal Inc. l.p. Jocelyn Bérubé, Paul Dion, Andrée Pelletier, Gilles Renaud, Marcel Sabourin, Janette Bertrand, Danielle Schneider, Camille Bélanger, Roger Turcotte, Guy Thauvette, Louise Lambert, Martine Pratte, Pauline Lapointe, Martin Labrecque, Francis Labrecque, Madeleine Guérin, Louis Thompson, André Miron, Christiane Tessier, Véronique Vilbert, Denis Yukon Ménard col. 35mm run. time 99 min. pub. Thérèse David Publicité distrib. Les Films René Malo Inc.

Micheline Lanctôt, who began her film career as an animator and turned to acting (*La vraie nature de Bernadette*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and, more recently, *Blood and Guts*) has written and directed a feature film.

*L'homme à tout faire* (The Handyman) is not a movie that takes critics and audiences by storm, but it is the kind of satisfying film fare that makes you want to see another film by Micheline Lanctôt.

When she was acting, Lanctôt had a natural buoyancy about her. (No director could contain it, though in at least one

film, *Ti-cul tougas*, it alone was not enough to sustain faltering comedy.) *L'homme à tout faire*, also has that quality of buoyant wit, but here it is more than a glimmer of personality. Lanctôt is, we discover, a well-nurtured writer and director of comedy.

The film is a simple retelling of the tale of a hopeful country boy's journey to the metropolis. A difficult subject because it has already been done (in Canadian film, *Goin' Down the Road* is considered a classic), Lanctôt is never self-conscious about that. In fact, the film succeeds at several points in distilling its small truths into that jolting first shot.

Armand Dorion (Jocelyn Bérubé) is the type of man condemned to unhappiness as long as he is without a woman. When his wife and kids, by her former marriage, leave the unemployed carpenter, he decides to move to the city to look for

work and another lover. In Montreal he falls for the first woman whose eye lingers over his country garb — a young girl who is ultimately uninterested in Armand's design of the way things should be. His next find is older and married: Thérèse (Andrée Pelletier) hires him to finish the basement of her suburban home. After what seems an interminable period of stepping around and over each other, they realize they are in love.

A comedy of manners in the vein of *Cousin Cousine*, Lanctôt's film is not as refined or enlivened with foibles as the former, which became a North American hit. *L'homme à tout faire* won't go that far, though it is a pleasant relief from the befuddled comedy of cynicism that has so firmly rooted itself in our contemporary culture.

Lanctôt has said the film is about marginals, but it isn't really. For all their disappointments, her characters haven't dropped out of Quebec society and don't intend to. Thérèse is mainstream middle class. She falters, but she only really wants to get back to her husband through the hapless Armand. We suspect this during the scene when Thérèse's mother, played with much good grace and fun by Québec's "star" TV writer Janette Bertrand, discovers that her daughter is having an affair with the carpenter. There is a lengthy moment of silence before she breaks into peeling laughter, soon joined by her daughter. Armand, meanwhile, is



Their eyes tell it all, as Manon (Danielle Schneider) puts the make on a receptive Armand (Jocelyn Bérubé) in *L'homme à tout faire*