



Portrait of the radiant and the rugged: here, Kate Nelligan with Mr. Patman himself, James Coburn. photo: Phil Hersee

indicate that he is rapidly losing his tenuous grip on reality.

Thomas Hedley, author of the film's screenplay, is a good writer of scenes. His dialogue, give or take a few clunkers assigned to Kate Nelligan, tends to be excellent. However, like most writers today he has no sense of how to construct an original story. (When did you last see an American film with a truly coherent script? *Manhattan*, perhaps?) Consequently, he Cuisinarts together an assortment of elements from minor O'Casey, bad Snake-Pit-type films and lesser *films noires*. The proof is that he gives his hero a cat — a sure sign of trying to pep up a script by giving the hero a number of interesting character quirks. The proof of Coburn's performance, and those of the supporting

players, is that they can overcome it.

John Guillermin, the director, is one of those faceless technicians who made his reputation doing mindless spectacles for Irwin Allen and Dino DeLaurentiis. His presence is negligible, and while he does nothing to damage the film, nowhere in it does one sense any directorial urgency.

Mr. Patman should be seen for its cast and their performances. And for one other reason. It does not insult the viewer's intelligence: hardly a trivial consideration in a year which has seen such releases as *Bear Island*, *Happy Birthday*, *Gemini*, *Nothing Personal* and *Death Ship*. Simple intelligence is beginning to look like a major virtue.

John G. Harkness

Robin Spry's Suzanne

Suzanne had its premiere screening at the Festival of Festivals in Toronto, and Marc Gervais was there to review it. Since that screening, the production has re-cut the film, and a shorter version is being used in its commercial release. *Cinema Canada* will publish a separate review of this second version of the film.

d. Robin Spry **p.** Robert Lantos, Stephen J. Roth **sc.** Robin Spry, Ronald Sutherland based on "Snowlark" novel by Ronald Sutherland **assoc. p.** Wendy Grean **p. man.** Ted Holliday **d.o.p.** Miklos Lente **art d.** Vianney Gauthier, Claude Paré (asst.) **cost. design.** Louise Jobin **mus. comp.** François Cousineau **ed.** Fima Noveck **a.d.** Lise Abastado (1st), Yvon Arsenault (2nd), Blair Roth (3rd) **assist. cam.** David Douglas (1st), Mathieu Décary (2nd) **sd. mix.** Richard Lightstone **boom** Jim Thompson **unit, loc. man.** Lyse Lafontaine **prop. master** Ronald Fauteux **props buyer** Patrice Bengle **set props** Emmanuel Lépin, Nathalie Moliavko-Visotzky (asst.) **p. account.** Manon Bougie-Boyer **p. sec.** Françoise McNeil **asst. bookkeeper** Ruth Wener **key grip** Johnny Daoust **2nd grip** Pierre Charpentier **gaf.** Donald Sarri **best boy** Charles Hugues **elec.** Gérald Proulx **make-up** Michele Dion, Normande Campeau (asst.) **hair** Pierre David, Tom Booth (asst.) **asst. cost. designer, dresser** Johanne Prigent **asst. dresser** Andrée Jobin **script superv.** Monique Champagne **casting** Daniel Hausmann **pub.** David Novek **unit pub.** Lana Iny **stills** Attila Dory **exec. asst. to p.** Leila Basen **asst. editor** Sidonie Kerr **p.a.** Michel Turcot, Susan Schneur, Gérald Laniel, Michel English **add. cam.** Al Smith, Jean-Charles Tremblay **asst. to cameraman** Claude Simon Langlois **l.p.** Jennifer Dale, Winston Rekert, Gabriel Arcand, Ken Pogue, Michelle Rossignol, Marianne McIsaac, Michael Ironside, Gina Dick, Pierre Curzi, Gordon Thompson **p.c.** RSL Films Ltd. (1979) **col.** 35mm **running time** 105 min. **distrib.** Viva Film Ltd. (Que.), Ambassador Films Ltd. (English Canada).

Like it or not, certain films often find their way onto the public screens burdened with an enormous weight of expectation. Poor *Suzanne* falls into this category. Or perhaps one should say "fell." The moment of its première was ominously propitious. There we were in Toronto, jammed into the Elgin — one of the last of the posh old film houses — on one of its gala nights, right in the middle of the Festival of Festivals, with the Great Film Debate raging a few streets up (cf. the articles on Trade Forum '80, pages 13 to 16 in this issue). All that was asked for, nay, demanded, was that *Suzanne* be the Great Canadian Movie, the reconciling of genuine Canadian Concern with boffo box office.

The film community was intrigued, to put it mildly, by the creative mating between a world-respected director, Robin Spry — who for years has been considered English Canada's most socially involved feature film creator — and RSL, the dynamic young production team of Robert Lantos and Stephen Roth — whose aim has always been to "make it" on the big money market, and who are now "risking it," or "going cultural," or whatever, with a really Canadian Canadian Film. Everything in this production, from Ronald Sutherland's story right through to the actors and craftspeople (except maybe the final editor?) were the Genuine Canadian Article.

Given the magnitude of the expectations, *Suzanne* proved to be the Festival's major disappointment. Predictably, some of the criticism has been vitriolic. One review especially had the ring of almost personal hatred about it — or was the writer merely aspiring to becoming the John Simon of Canada? More importantly, *Suzanne* was used as living justification for one of the Trade Forum theses (or should one say the anti-thesis?), to wit, that the present entrepreneurial system is catastrophic, giving all the control to a group of producers who are simply incapable of making a decent film. "I mean, look at what happened even to Robin Spry..."

What is wrong with *Suzanne* is obvious, and has been underlined by the critics who have seen it. The movie begins brilliantly; and that, too, has been noted by some. Spry actually meets our (legitimate?) Spry expectations, setting up the clash of cultures in a pre-Quiet-Revolution Quebec. The three protagonists, beautifully played by Gabriel Arcand, Winston Rekert and especially Jennifer Dale, fairly explode as screen presences. An early dance sequence permits Spry to scale the heights of bravura lyricism, with a sweeping, lilting, celebratory camera, much more "Russian" in its feel than "Canadian," and certainly something new for a director whose stylistic approach has been typed as predominantly documentary.

Once again, Robin Spry demonstrates a marvelous sensitivity in his use of actors. Once again, too, he feels for the issues. And the locales, the places, are very much *de chez nous*. All of this is no small achievement, something beyond much recent Canadian work.

But the opening promises are not fulfilled. Or rather the initial premises or

concerns become trivialized by heavy, stock type melodramatizing. So much so that by the end of the film we are immersed in a kind of turgid, ungentle Harlequin Romance: will Suzanne marry the pure idealistic French Canadian (True Love) or the orgasmic Irish Canadian lout (Lust Perhaps Redeemable by Love)?

If this sounds like facile, cheap-shot caricaturing on my part, alas, the film itself caricatures its own melodramatic plot. Melodrama is not necessarily bad, however pejoratively the term may be used in the critic's arsenal of invective. Hollywood has a history of splendid melodramas. Think of *Casablanca*, think of Hitchcock's work, think of the many romantic stories featuring the likes of Garbo, Gable, etc., not to mention all the westerns, and thrillers... The point is that bad melodrama restricts itself to simplistic plot values, stock situations and characters, oversimplified themes, and tired, crude, sentimentalizing, "proven" cliché effects, calculated to elicit easy, unreflective, uncritical responses. Good melodramas play with their own conventions and clichés; they are transformed, made meaningful or magical, in any number of ways, by their wit/charm/irony/delicacy/humour, or technical wizardry and wild baroque explosiveness: or by their sense of involvement, vision, probing of mystery, or what have you.

Robin Spry's forte has never been, it seems to me, a lightness of touch, nor that sense of irony or humour. His very considerable strength lies in a passionate understanding of, and concern for people, and what is going on around him. *Prologue, One Man, and Drying Up the Streets* — not to mention the documentary *Action/Reaction* couplet — are among the strongest films yet produced in Canada precisely because the essential thrust — nourished by Spry's power of social analysis, and above all, by his anger and his agonizing and questing spirit — has not been undermined by those plot needs and easy effects that are supposed to attract mass audiences. Paradoxically perhaps, in these films, the counterpart to the tough social concern and story situation is totally convincing and moving. By that, I mean Spry's marvelous capturing of complex, subtle, deeply touching interpersonal relationships — part of which, of course, is what everyone refers to as the love interest, but which, in these good Spry movies, does not smack of manipulative cliché.

Suzanne, then, begins in exciting fashion, and the audience is swept along. But even at the beginning, the seeds of eventual loss of cinematic grace are in evidence. The character metaphors are a bit much: *Maman*, the vivacious French-Canadian whose *joie de vivre* finds expression in a strip-tease joint (!); and *Father*, English-Canadian, and hence dour, Scottish Presbyterian, and similar soul-withering things — so much so, that even so fine an actor as Ken Pogue seems vaguely uncomfortable with the role. Is this writer Sutherland's doing, or is it Spry's? (One mustn't forget that the same, false, self-serving Montreal cliché appeared more subtly in another Spry television film — scripted by Carmel Dumas — *Je me souviens*, where Louise Marleau/Franco/chi chi swingin'/"cultural" *Montreal* is opposed to Len Cariou/Anglo/dull, gray, ugly/soul-less business *Toronto*.)

And Winston Rekert is excellent in his re-creation (of sorts) of James Dean; but in this 1980 view of the fifties' type, a certain mature distancing — call it at least irony or wry awareness — has to be on the silver screen, otherwise the audience will laugh at the wrong moments (as it did at the Toronto Festival launching).

Whose were the final editing and mixing decisions in the making of *Suzanne*? Who souped up the sound track, magnifying — in the name of dramatic intensity? — all sorts of noises, overwhelming the various moments with blatant effect-music? (RSL seems to have recurring sound-recording problems. Another of its features, *Agency*, suffers from a dreadfully false conversational sound/tone.) One could go on, dredging up the obvious use of certain kinds of close-ups (now referred to by some way as the Lantos CU)...

The final conclusion, alas, is that yes, *Suzanne* does fall into melodrama — vulgar melodrama, that is. Far worse — and this is probably why I use the term "vulgar" melodrama — *Suzanne* becomes yet one more example of *Canadian Crude*, possibly the worst disease afflicting our feature film industry right now.

Is it all part of the reaction against our "artistic" films of the sixties, which set no box office records anywhere? Too many of our present films succumb to this dreadful affliction. Even our best contemporary efforts — a growing number are beginning to appear on our screens — tend to show its traces, thereby confirming the fact that our feature



Indian wrestling anyone? Caught in a three-way stretch **Suzanne's** Jennifer Dale, Gabriel Arcand (left) and Winston Rekert

film industry is anything but a class act.

An example, to clarify and exhibit the symptoms. I happened to see one of our better films, **Middle Age Crazy**, the same day I saw Robert Redford's **Ordinary People**. Now, neither movie is a master piece, to be sure; but there is a difference in quality. Quite simply, the first film is laden with Canadian Crude, whereas Redford's first directorial effort is not. At every level — dialogue, acting style, camera work, sound and editing, in almost every artistic choice made by its creators — the Canadian effort comes out as cruder and more blatant. It is as if its creators felt they must do things to the central theme or story, resorting to cheap effects to win the audience. Redford and Co., on the other hand, seem to trust their material, its essential humanity and appeal, and their audience.

RSL is one of our most dynamic production houses. But, like so many of our other production units, it repeatedly succumbs. Where oh where have sensitivity, nuance, wit, a true sense of quality and style, disappeared to? Where are those values that precisely inform the best American work? RSL's **In Praise of Older Women** had so many truly fine things in it: it could have been a brilliant, bitter/sweet essay in the tradition of any number of film creators in, say, France or Czechoslovakia. Instead, it thudded its way into crudeness. And the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about **Suzanne**.

The more I think about it, the more severe I find myself becoming concerning Robin Spry's latest effort. The film community as a whole seems to share this attitude. However, it has to be admitted that a good section of that packaged Toronto gala audience felt much more positively about the movie. It is conceivable, I suppose, that **Suzanne** may find some market out there, that it may have enough going for it — its energy, skills, fine performances, youth identification, even its Canadian Crude quality — to appeal to a jaded, perpetual-adolescent market, or some other naive market. **Suzanne** may even manage to get most of its money back. But what about the general disappointment surrounding it? Is that all there is... Robin?

It would be all too easy, and destructive, to end this piece with a whimper, or worse still, to magnify one's lack of enchantment into an over-all condemnation of the present situation. Rather, let the film serve as one more *irresistible, unavoidable* call to the Canadian feature film establishment to do some serious, far-reaching re-thinking. RSL and the other Canadian producers had better study their own track records. Somehow, the idea has to get across that in the big leagues mass appeal need not be equated with playing down to the audience, and that real professional *quality* is a far more viable product than Canadian Crude. Producers certainly have a creative role to play, but they are not the be-all and end-all, the supreme

arbiters of artistic quality in a film, nor the sole judges of its mass appeal.

None of this contradicts the real contribution of RSL to the Canadian film scene. The energy and dedication of Roth/Lantos & Co. have helped to make things go. And it is RSL who plunged into an all-Canadian film adventure, a risky business indeed in the game as it is now played. Almost all of their undertakings, it must be admitted, have had a touch of adventurousness about them, at one level or another. And with experience and growing expertise, given the initial energy and dedication... tout est possible.

As for Robin Spry, among whose admirers the present writer must be numbered, he is now, for better or for worse, launched in the private sector. Despite its shortcomings, **Suzanne** has revealed some new and exciting aspects of Spry's talent. He is presently at work on a new feature. Besides, wasn't it Aristotle, or some other Greek who said that Canadian film directors cannot hope to be *real* feature filmmakers until after forty? Spry was born in 1939. So, in spite of his already distinguished record, one may venture to say that his best work is still ahead.

Marc Gervais'

Michael Grant's Head On

d./p. Michael Grant p. Alan Simmonds script James Sanderson, Paul Illidge d.o.p. Anthony Richmond, b.s.c. p. design. Antonin Dimitrov mus. Peter Mann ed. Gary Oppenheimer assoc. p. Isabel Beveridge casting Karen Hazzard (Can.), TNI Casting (U.S.) p. man. Sally Dundas p. sec. Oni Freeman p. account. Wayne Arron a.d. Mac Bradden (1st), John Board (1st), David Storey (2nd), Dan McIlravey (3rd) assist. to p. Daphne Grant assist. cam. Robin Miller (1st), Carl Harvey (2nd) loc. man. Randy Tambling cont. Gillian Richardson ward. design. Tam Southam, Paula Munck ward. mistress Gurteen Cohen Ms. Kellerman's dresser Suzanna Ploughright set dec. Enrico Campana, Elinor Galbraith, Sarah Gould (asst.) set dress. assist. Gareth Wilson art d. sec. Judith Keeler art d. driver Benjamin Hayden Winnebago driver Neil Huhta props Linda McClelland, Ed Hanna (asst.), Allyn Terry (driver) make-up Suzanne Benoit hair Bruce Appleby gaf. Jock Brandis best boy Douglas Allen 1st elec. Gary Phipps key grip Carlo Campana assist. grip Dennis Thompson (1st), Greg Pelchat (2nd) sd. rec. Ian Hendry boom Dave Joliat 2nd unit cam. Bob New Stedicam op. Robin Miller stunts Bobby Hanna, Ken Porter, Wayne Thurston sd. efx. Gary Oppenheimer dialog. ed. Catherine Lane efx. rec. Andy Malcolm assist. ed. Elaine Hurwitz, Michele Cook