

FILM REVIEWS

Jean-Claude Lord's

Parlez-nous d'amour

d. Jean-Claude Lord, sc. Michel Tremblay, Jean-Claude Lord, dial. Michel Tremblay, ph. François Brault. ed. Jean-Claude Lord, Lise Thouin, sd. Henri Blondeau. sd. ed. Marcel Pothier, cost. Denis Spourdouklis, l.p. Jacques Boulanger, Benoit Girard, Claude Michaud, Monique Mercure, Manda Parent, Jean-Marie Lemieux, Roger Lebel, Bertrand Gagnon, Paul Gauthier, Denise Dubreuil, André Montmorency, Denis Drouin, Roger Garand, Lise Thouin, Danièle Roy, Pascal Desgranges, Guy L'Ecuyer, p. Pierre David, p.c. Les Productions Mutuelles Ltée., 1976, col. 35 mm., running time 127 minutes.



Jacques Boulanger as Jeannot with Véronique Béliveau in *Parlez-nous d'amour*.

The question is, can a well-made film that sincerely denounces one of the seediest aspects of contemporary culture turn against itself, and become, to some extent, an extension of what it denounces?

If that sounds a bit convoluted, blame *Parlez-nous d'amour*, Jean-Claude Lord's latest feature, currently enjoying box office success and causing quite a *scandale* throughout Quebec.

I find myself taking a tough stance vis-à-vis this film, and it seems a bit unfair, really. Especially when you compare Lord's movie with the exploitative, seventies versions of "quota quickies" being churned out in English-speaking Canada (or pseudo-Hollywood Canada) — things such as *East-End Hustle*, *Breaking Point*, *Shadow of the Hawk*, and *Death Weekend*. That, however, is another story.

But to get back to Lord's film. It is well-made, intelligently scripted by Quebec's leading dramaturge, Michel Tremblay, and strongly acted, especially by Jacques Boulanger, a Montreal TV idol.

Jean-Claude Lord knows how to make a movie. There is a smoothness, a flow, a point of view, and, above all, energy. Working with a small budget (\$410,000), Lord nonetheless is able to fill his screen with people and with life. But not at the cost of the central characters, who

still emerge and have their dramatic, or touching, moments. Drama, pathos, laughter, heart — surely these represent the kind of achievement one cannot dismiss.

And above all there is the *content*, that about which Lord, Tremblay, the critics, and everyone else are talking — the scathing denunciation, the two-fisted exposé of certain aspects of Quebec showbiz.

What few English-Canadians realize is that Quebecois show business is a phenomenon of spectacular proportions, without anything close to an equivalent on the English side. The fan magazines are all over the place, except that they are usually in cheap tabloid weekly format, and sleazier and dirtier than the old Hollywood fan mags used to be. Immensely successful, they create the myths; *i.e.* the film, TV, pop *stars*. As often as not, they are on the fringes of pornography, and some of them are downright pornographic, no holds barred.

Hand in hand with this cretinous industry goes an almost equally cretinous pop record business, and great areas of TV programming (Radio-Canada — CBC — included, believe it or not). *Their* pornography is more at the level of "respectable" sentimentality, the exploitation of the fan-

tasies of lonely or frustrated women, most of them on the far side of forty.

Behind the scene, of course, are the pay-offs, the incipient violence, the vapid "stars", the hucksters, the producers — the whole seedy lot with their casting couches and so on. Money and sex — and, boy, does this film show us how corrupt and cynical these people are, and how exploited, ugly, and stupid are the poor women (and the odd male) who keep the whole thing viable financially!

Actually, Jean-Pierre and Michel Tremblay are going after something terribly destructive, nothing less than the Skidoo-ization of Quebec culture. Never mind the Big City with its "specialized" areas, go to any little village in Quebec. See, if there's a moviehouse, what movie is showing. Porno, of course. Listen to the concentrated insipidity of the juke boxes. Try to find a newspaper or magazine in the cesspool of pornography on the stands in the general stores. At this level, Quebec is more degraded than any other "civilized" country in the world.

In other words, Quebec has its esteemed writers, its marvelous chansonniers, its theatre, its ambitious cinema of the last 10 or 12 years — all of which are to its glory, national-

ly and internationally. But *huge* areas of the mainstream are polluted by precisely what is represented and attacked in **Parlez-nous d'amour**.

So far so good. The film has that social ethical concern. And it moves. At another level, the focus on Jacques Boulanger, the central character, is such that he begins to acquire almost tragic dimensions: he's a kind of "Alfie" or a Marcello Mastroianni, such as we saw in **La Dolce Vita** and *8½* or in some of Antonioni's films; or, closer still, he is related to those roles played by Jack Nicholson a few years back.

Somehow, though, one begins to have serious reservations: Lord's movie falls short. Symptomatic characteristics point out the big flaws, the big, gaping, missing something.

For one thing, the film — and its creators, in their interviews — demands to be taken almost literally as a documentary exposé. As a matter of fact, one is constantly tossed back and forth between the make-believe roles played on the screen, and the "real" actors playing them, since many of these same actors have public *personae* terribly close to what they are portraying.

But is it "reality"? Everything is too neat, too theatrically meticulous. And the gigantic figure of Michel Tremblay looms in the background: these are *his* creations, his *situations*. That gallery of grotesque, pitiable women is straight out of his theatre world. And the phallus obsession as well. The rhythm, too, and the tonality are his: coarseness, absurdity, vulgarity — then tenderness, softness, a pathetic human glimpse. We are smack back in the Tremblay fringe world, all right, where everyone is a helpless loser, or worse.

Except that Tremblay's strange, troubling poetry is absent. Jean-Claude Lord seems incapable of achieving any kind of artistic *cinematic* correlative for the peculiar power of Tremblay's plays at their best. He is adequate, he is in control, he is intelligent, he is slick, and he handles actors beautifully. But his cinema has no mystery, no surprises, no way of breaking through into that magic we call art. It does not sing, it has no nuances, it leaves nothing to the imagination — nor to the intelligence of the viewer. Lord communicates coarseness with coarseness, obscenity with obscenity, lack of sensitivity with lack of sensitivity, vulgar decor with vulgar decor, in a sort of

uninspired one-to-one ratio of literalness.

And perhaps this is what leads to the conclusion that **Parlez-nous d'amour** is patently packaged as an "objet de consommation". In a way it comes close to having the same contempt for its audience that is exhibited in the very things it attacks. Predictable, pedestrian, with well-calculated moments appealing to the lowest common denominator (sensibility-wise and intelligence-wise), is it not ultimately a vulgar, exploitative object itself?

So the dilemma, the critic's difficult position. On the one hand, in the bad times, financially and artistically, that Canadian films are going through right now, one hates to be severe about a reasonably well-made film that has the courage to expose and excoriate one of the cancers of our culture.

On the other hand, **Parlez-nous d'amour** reinforces a way of making films, a way of manipulating film language, that confirms, strengthens, and exploits patterns which are the very basis for what it purports to be attacking. It smacks just a little too much of the old game of "épater les bourgeois".

As such, it represents a falling-off from the best work seen in Quebec in the not too distant past — in the films, say, of Michel Brault, Pierre Perrault, and, at times, of Claude Jutra, Marcel Carrière, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, and even Gilles Carle.

I do not see in it any kind of resolution for the problems plaguing the Quebec film scene these last few years.

Marc Gervais

Gerald Mayer's

The Man Inside

d. Gerald Mayer, sc. Tony Sheer, ph. Ken Gregg, ed. Martin Pepler, set dec. John Roberts, m. composed & conducted by Don Gillis, cost. Shirley Mann, l.p. James Franciscus, Jacques Godin, Stefanie Powers, Donald Davis, Allan Royale, Len Birman, John Horton, exec. p. John T. Ross, p. Wilton Schiller, p. manager Marilyn Stonehouse, p.c. CBC (Canada)

and International Film Distributors / NTA Canada, 1976, color, 16 mm., running time 95 min., dist. NTA.

The Man Inside is an efficient film, competently directed by Gerald Mayer; but it is basically uninteresting. Between the gun-slinging opening and closing scenes the film drags through a few tame and time-worn clichés. The CBC's first feature comes off as a tepid thriller.

With the mounties as subject we might have hoped for a new angle on the detective story or at least a fresh treatment of the cops. This film doesn't even try. The mounties would be hard to distinguish from L.A.'s finest.

Early in the film there is a cutaway to a picture-postcard mountie in red jacket. The meaning is clear — that viewers should identify the film's plain-clothes detectives with the old Hollywood-style mountie — but it's an awkward device that smacks of producer overcaution.

The Man Inside was made through a co-production agreement between the CBC and the American company International Film Distributors. The latter supplied, according to a CBC press release, over 40 per cent of the direct production cost, quoted at something over \$200,000, in return for international distribution rights and the choice of up to three of the leads.

James Franciscus plays Rush, the RCMP undercover agent who infiltrates a Toronto narcotics ring. Franciscus is a seasoned television actor, he performs well in the film, but I wonder if the familiarity of his face serves this role and the Canadian setting of the story?

Jacques Godin, here acting in his second English-language feature (remember **The Pyx**?) is Cross, the gang member who befriends Rush and is later betrayed by him. Godin has one compelling scene on the roof of a cement factory tower when, finally realizing who Rush is, his face screws from disbelief into rage. On the whole, though, one senses an intensity about him that has yet to be tapped by a director.

Expectancy shrouds this film. We sit through two (television) hours waiting for some lick of humor or perhaps a clever gimmick. Only the final scene of this screenplay by Tony Sheer injects a modicum of intrigue into the "thriller" plot.

FILM REVIEWS



Aiming at the bad guys (or were they the good guys?) in *The Man Inside*

Often in films that disappoint at other levels I can at least enjoy the scenery. I suspect, though I don't know the city well, that Toronto could have provided a more lively and personal backdrop to the events of the movie.

Surely the kind of urban anonymity that this film projects, though possibly intended to increase its foreign sales potential, works against the film.

(A late arrival at Cannes this year, the film reportedly sold poorly.)

The Man Inside was screened na-

tionally on CBC-TV September 25th. The film is a crystalline example of one direction in television programming the CBC could pursue... a direction thoroughly mapped out by the powerful American networks.

That *The Man Inside* was made at all indicates the CBC Drama Department, under its head John Hirsch, is grappling with the awesome task of competing with big-budget American TV and particularly with the flood of old and new American feature films. Though in one sense this CBC feature is not a particularly ambitious beginning, it is a realistic one.

The need for some relief to the regular Saturday evening Canadian content sing-song programming is not the least of reasons why the CBC should try again.

Joan Irving

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