

# Foray into French film digs up dirt amidst wild range of quality

By ALEX PATTERSON

Harbourfront, having recently played host to a festival of contemporary Swedish cinema, is now ready to take on the French. For ten days, beginning March 27, the Premiere Dance Theatre at the Queen's Quay Terminal will screen what they claim are "some of the most controversial and soul-searching films of today."

It's true that there's soul-searching aplenty, but most of the controversy is likely to centre around what's become of French filmmaking. Only a handful of the festival's 21 movies were screened in advance, but in those that were, quality ranged wildly from winning entertainment to insufferable nonsense. Somewhere in between is a film which provides a perfect opportunity to witness the decline and fall of the French New Wave of the 1960s.

In 1964 there appeared a collection of short subjects about different neighborhoods of the French capital entitled *Paris Seen By . . .* featuring some bright young stars of the *nouvelle vague's* corral of directors. This Tuesday at 7:00 p.m. the francofest raises the curtain on *Paris Seen by . . . 20 Years Later* which is another compilation of six sketches of Parisian life, by a new crew of camera-cranks coming of age in the 1980s. The awkward and irritating title is somehow appropriate for this frustratingly uneven pastiche.

The first of the six segments is called *I'm Hungry, I'm Cold* by the young Belgian woman Chantal Akerman, who contributes a black and white snippet of street life as experienced by a couple of teenage runaways escaping the boredom of Brussels. The girls steal food, smoke Marlboros and run amok in the city of light. One of them misplaces her virginity, the other complains, "*J'ai faim, j'ai froid*" more times than is healthy for a 12-minute vignette. Akerman keeps the thing moving along at a spirited pace so that quite a bit of ground can be covered in a short space of time. No cause for despair just yet . . .

None in *Place Clichy*, either, the second installment of this Gallic six-pack. There are no quiet days in Clichy according to director Bernard Dubois; his world is populated by hookers, petty thieves and pimply pubescent radicals. The film's centrepiece is a rather long Beat-style poem about the neighborhood read over the radio by a hyper young DJ. Seventeen minutes pass agreeably, and still no reason for cutting off diplomatic relations with France . . .

Then comes *Rue Fontaine*, the kind of pretentious drivel which scares many people away from foreign films. Philippe Garrel's exercise in obscurity stars Jean-Pierre Léaud, who has been acting in Francois Truffaut's movies since his boyhood debut in *The 400 Blows* in 1959—long enough that he should know a dreadful script when he comes across one. In this, he's a middle-aged loser whose woman has left him, and left him with nightmares and guilt. Garrel's camera remains fixed on Léaud's for what seems an eternity as he delivers a bitter monologue on love and romance. The static camera owes a dubious debt to Jean-Luc Godard, as does the director's utter contempt for his audience; the camera may stay motionless but the viewer will be writhing with *ennui*. Similarly Godardian is *Rue Fontaine's* disregard for comprehensibility—great gaps are left in the narrative, which the spectator is presumably meant to fill in for his or herself.

Léaud meets his friend's girl. They have an affair. (This is another one of those tiresome pictures in which slovenly, over-the-hill men get gorgeous, chic young women . . . something which only happens in the minds of slovenly, over-the-hill



OO-LA-LAI! C'est un hunk of homme pour notre readers. *L'Homme Blessé* is part of a 10-day Festival down at Harbourfront celebrating contemporary French film.

screenwriters.) Then she kills herself. Then he picks up a prostitute. Then it ends. Whereas Akerman's narrative structure left out unimportant details for the sake of compression, Garrel leaves out important ones, leaving the story in shambles. The editing seems to have been done at random, and the color quality is unforgivably grainy.

The second half begins with the best of the bunch: Frederic Mitterrand's *Rue du Bac* also concerns love and memory, but does so without trying the audience's patience. A woman reminisces about a misguided affair with a history student specializing in the 1871 Commune. This provides Mitterrand with the opportunity both for some gliding, lyrical camerawork and some creative assemblage of newsreel footage.

It's almost enough to make up for the next one, *Paris Beach*, another foray into the Angst Zone. *Paris Beach* has a plot as obscure as its name, (why didn't director Vincent Nordon go all out and call it *Swiss Navy?*) and is much too intellectual to bother with anything so mundane as motivation or common sense. An English woman and several Parisians—including one whose husband died in India for reasons never made clear—lounges around an indoor pool and

talk about . . . well, they don't actually talk about anything. They just talk. Then they have a shower and talk some more.

In the final sequence, *Canal St. Martin*, a man bumps into a woman on a bridge, spilling the contents of her purse. They go home together and by morning they have a baby. (Why do these sorts of things only happen in France?) This one too suffers from an unwillingness to give the viewer anything more than the bare minimum in the way of clues as to what's going on. Leaving something to the imagination is fine—admirable, even—but leaving practically everything to the imagination is arrogant and elitist.

There must be short films which tell us more about contemporary French life than most of those in *Paris Seen By . . . 20 Years Later*. The most that can be safely discerned from these is that distress leather is still very much in vogue in Paris. Perhaps we will find more pertinent news about the state of *la République* from other films exhibited this week, such as the two from Jean-Pierre Denis. The second week of the festival contains at least one excellent comedy, *Stairway C*, which will be reviewed here next week.

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looks and acts like a harmless old man who would never hurt anyone. The strength in Jocelyn's portrayal of the grandfather lies in the fact that while he initially looks innocent, as the play develops his harmlessness begins to look more and more suspect.

The play is constructed in such a way that we believe both young Susan's story and the grandfather's denials. She has no reason to lie, but it seems unlikely that such a friendly man is capable of doing such a thing to his own grandchild.

Director Jordan Merkur, a York graduate, builds upon the family tension until it becomes uncertain what the family can do or should do. There seems to be no cut and dry solution to the problem, and because it is a family problem there is the additional conflict of whether to go to the authorities or to try to solve the situation from within. The actors

in the production convey a realistic sense of confusion and helplessness that makes the play cut close to the bone.

One of the things that prevents the play from becoming a family melodrama is the inclusion of two secondary characters who know nothing about the situation. Oblivious to the crisis the family is experiencing, the characters walk through doors unannounced and are loudly insensitive to the family's quiet confusion. They act as a reminder that in a crisis, the outside world still exists and it is necessary to put up a front of normality for friends to view.

This is not an uplifting play. It does not have a fairy tale ending, and it shouldn't have. The sexual abuse of children is not a comfortable subject, but *The Dolly* conveys an intensely sensitive understanding of the subject that is impossible to ignore.

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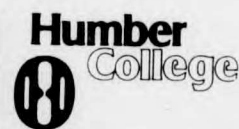
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