

Jesus of Montreal: A rare blend of intelligence, wit

Jesus of Montreal
Cineplex Odeon

review by Paul Murphy

Canadian writer/director Denys Arcand asks an untimely question in his latest film, *Jesus of Montreal*. In contemporary western culture, dominated by technology and raging consumerism, can anything like the mysteries of faith be possible? Arcand asks this question in a richly entertaining film which expertly combines incisive social satire and moving tragedy. *Jesus of Montreal* is a multilayered, provocative film, surely one of the finest of the year.

Daniel Coulombe (played perfectly by Lothaire Bluteau) is an actor approached by a Catholic priest to perform a Passion play, acting out the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Daniel has been asked to modernize the play, to make it more accessible to a contemporary audience. As he becomes more involved in the casting, writing and staging of the play, Daniel's life increasingly follows the pattern of Christ's life.

Arcand sees the very idea of a Passion play as antithetical to the spirit of modern times, represented by the saturation of the world by the media and by the advertising industry. In a phenomenon which the post-modernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls simulation, everything becomes trivialized and made banal, such that everything can be communicated, marketed, consumed. Arcand gives many examples in the film. Actresses talk about the importance of good diction for performing Shakespeare, before dubbing the dialogue for a porno movie. The title of novelist Milan Kundera's profound meditation on sexuality, politics and metaphysics, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is used to sell perfume. The funniest example is Arcand's parody of a beer commercial, in which actors sing the lyrics, "The young crowd's here, we worship beer... Nothing's sacred to you but a good glass of brew."

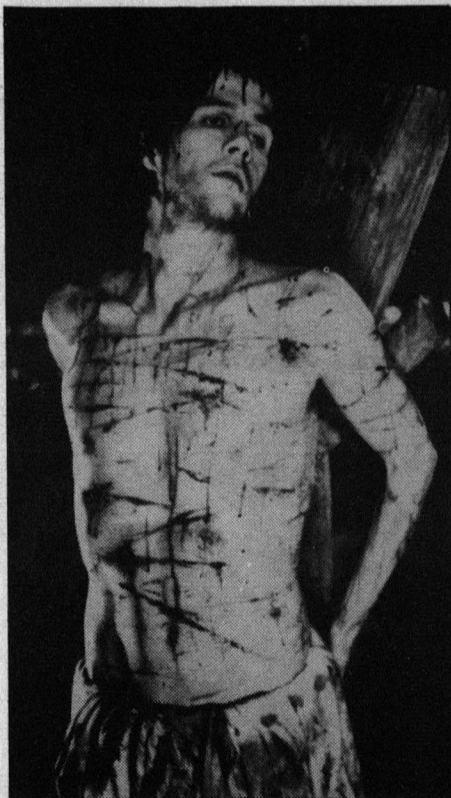
Against this background of banality, the Passion is performed. Occupying the centre of the film, lighted by the orange/red colours of torchlight, it is an arresting sequence. Arcand's embellishments to the story is what makes the sequence most interesting. In Pilate's conversation with Jesus, Pilate gives a lengthy speech about death, full of references to mythology and literature. Later, when Christ has been crucified, and the disciples grieve over his death, the character Rene recites Shakespeare's famous soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Arcand's gambit here works well: a seemingly incongruous text, old and familiar, is made compelling by its unfamiliar context. Arcand thus succeeds in bringing to life Shakespeare's thought on the mysteries of

death and the afterlife. His point is that the central mysteries of existence must be recovered for humanity to escape from the debilitating nihilism of contemporary culture.

All this sounds very deep and heavy, like just about every other film with subtitles. What sets *Jesus of Montreal* apart from so many other angst-fests is its ribald sense of humour, which it shares in common with Arcand's previous film, *The Decline of the American Empire*. Much of this film is extremely funny, particularly the porno-dubbing sequence, in which 3 actors (playing 4 roles) read out the dialogue of sexual ecstasy with absolute deadpan faces.

The flaws are minor. One of the characters is a priest who has lost his faith, yet he still clings to his office. This character has been seen before, particularly in Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light*, and Arcand fails to give the character any psychological depth beyond whining and self-pity. Arcand strains valiantly with this character, giving him the longest monologue in the film, but the writing is muddled and unfocused.

Jesus of Montreal nearly won the Grand Prix at the Cannes film festival this year, and it's easy to see why. Wit, intelligence, and restraint are rare qualities to co-exist in any film, and Denys Arcand has succeeded admirably in combining them.



Lothaire Bluteau in a modern passion play.

Kaige directs an impressive war movie

The Big Parade
Princess Theatre
September 28-30

review by Chris Helmers

The Big Parade is a cinematically impressive wide screen production by Chen Kaige, internationally acclaimed director of *Yellow Earth*. The theme of the tough army sergeant versus his raw recruits is a dead dog that has been flogged interminably in the West (yet we'll likely see it come out of Hollywood again) but Chen, finding it to be an apt metaphor for modern China, uses it in *The Big Parade*. The recruits in this case are being put through a gruelling eight month training in preparation for a one minute march in parade at the National Day celebration in Beijing's central square. The success of this film is primarily due to a skilled director exercising his ability with the assistance of a talented cinematographer.

I was impressed with this movie. I'm not much for army films but the panorama, the striving for excellence, the sorrow of "failure" (that is, failure that is honorable, coming after sincere effort) make *The Big Parade* a fine film. The visual impact of the film is accomplished through the predominant use of close-ups and special effect long range shots. The opening scene of the movie, for example, flies the viewer over a seemingly unending training strip displaying a vast number of soldiers executing marching drills.

This use of panoramic shots on the training tarmac is continually juxtaposed with close-ups of the straining, sweating, intensely concentrating soldiers' faces. Theatrically, Sun Chun is perfect as the sergeant Sun. He is able to carry the steely, cold and distant exterior required by the character. His character is necessary in providing the tension that is felt in the struggle of the recruits for excellence.

Sergeant Sun exemplifies the controlled passion of a man of experience whose concern for the perfection of his recruits is primarily so that they will survive in battle. Countering this character, Chen pits a bumbling recruit who succeeds only by his immense drive to support the group, a rebellious recruit who vehemently and openly detests the training (the purpose of which is to remove individuality) against a soft, caring squadron leader. Chen states that his major concern in the film is to study "the problems that arise between the individual and the group."

Unfortunately, the current version of the film does not have Chen's original ending. The original was of marching soldiers against a setting sun; the film never did take the soldiers to Tiananmen Square. The distributed version ends with a pseudo-triumphant scene of parade day but, fear not, this gratuitous ending is saved by the superlative cinematography.

A solid film. I look forward to seeing more by Chen Kaige.

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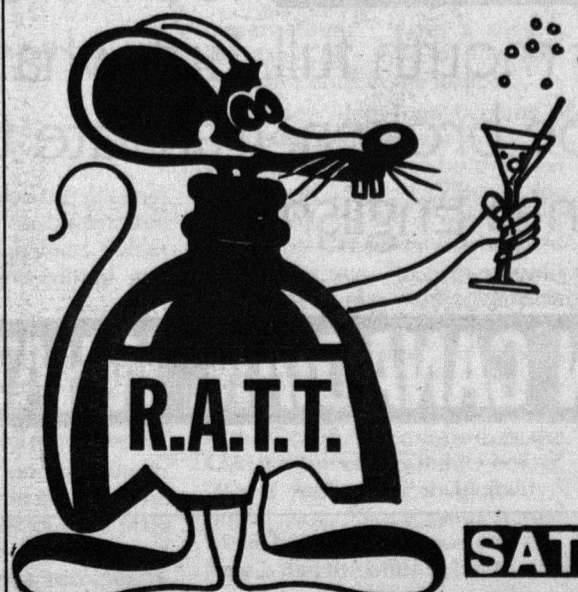
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