

# Grinding through hard times in Quebec's Basse-Ville

by Greg Morgan

Adult French Canadian Household Grinds Through Some Hard Years. Such is the essence of Gilles Carle's engaging film portrayal of seven working-class existences in Quebec City's Basse-ville during the late '30's, **Les Plouffe**, which was screened at the Rebecca Cohn September 13. Unhappy abridging necessarily slights a work, and this two-hour cut, while not a dull movie, is something of a crucifixion. We're missing a lot of information here. **Les Plouffe** slips through its subplots without much focus or overall unity.

And to exacerbate the disconnectedness, a large amount of the characters' substance falls short of being completely credible. This is partly because of an occasional tinniness of word or deed: where the one might have convinced us, the other deprives it of solidity. The quality of the acting varies from very good to almost cartoonish. Much is described that could have been evoked. The co-writers Carle and Lemelin painfully spell out the tension between Ovide Plouffe's operatic aspirations and his girlfriends' orientation towards American jazz. And while many of the kitchen scenes seem authentic, some of the script simply doesn't cement to the rest of the movie, isn't believable by anyone's yardstick.

Undoubtedly, a certain amount of blame accrues to the film's sources. Although **Les Plouffe** is based on Lemelin's novel, and not on the CBC-TV series of the same name, it readily divides into separable episodes. Traces of sit-com poke through here and there.

Carle foresaw the danger and tried to avoid it. Speaking to **Cinema Canada** in December 1980 he said, "The TV series was okay -- sort of the Archie Bunker of its day -- but a little too cute. In the film we are trying to take Les Plouffe out of the kitchen and into the streets." Yet cuteness metastasized into his social and political commentary, especially in the one-liners: "Are you a Protestant minister? I do so admire your Pope, the King of England. Such a handsome man."

The movie is supposedly concerned with a stage in the passing of the ancien regime in Quebec -- a turning point comes with the death of Pere Plouffe. Unfortunately, its con-

geries of relationships and conflicts, most of them curiously telescoped, are never related to a tension sufficiently bipolar to engage strong emotions. Insofar as it succeeds, it is a triumph of mood and nostalgia.

True, lines run to the schematic. True, people are neither analyzed nor deeply developed. Yet despite a deal of awkwardness, the film, on the whole, works. The direction and cinematography are smooth enough occasionally to mask faults in the narrative's exposition. There are plenty of nice touches, as when, for example, Guillaume Plouffe takes to stealing chickens to help feed his family. And note, by the way, this is almost family entertainment. Sexual relationships appear vegetarian. Whatever the characters may say, it is difficult to believe that they are less than entirely chaste.

**Les Plouffe** does not collapse into slice-of-life plotlessness. It escapes by the grace of subplots recounting the family members' lives. Each strand is followed, 1938 through 1940, ending with a semi-resolution set on Armistice Day, 1945. They've come through the War and will live happily ever after, presumably in an evermore secular and American Quebec.

Mere Plouffe's epiphany is perhaps the most touching. Upon learning the long-concealed truth that Guillaume has had a "good" war in France -- VC for killing 50 Germans -- relief for his safety is not her first thought. Agitated, wringing her hands on the balcony, she cries, "How could he -- my son -- kill?" End of movie. Not mawkishness, not outrage, but a sentimental backward glance.

For an uninitiated Anglophone, the film may begin to remedy the myth of the Quebec monolith. The tendencies it sketches are at least as confusing as they must have been in

real life. Shident young Guillaume is shown knocking the Union Jack off the Royal limo during King George's parade. Yet for all his resentment against the Crown, he is shooting for a career with the Cincinnati Reds, a symbol of American cultural imperialism if there ever was one. And later he goes cheerfully off to war in the struggle into which Britain brought Canada.

Appropriately, the soul's schizophrenia is writ large in the city of Quebec. Here a prophet must express himself twice -- once

for his own house, and again for those who are ignorant of French. The opening scene aptly captures the repetitions necessary in a divided country. An English-speaking outsider is debarking in the city's train station: EXIT/SORTIE and all the rest of it.

Quebec is just beginning to taste consumerist joys. The contrast between French Canada's sombre ecclesiastical heritage and the Americanizing influences is made early and tongue-in-cheek as a brace of nuns comes gliding down a path on roller-skates. But the director gradually nuances his approach and we begin to guess where he is coming from. When urged to make an American sport more Catholic for the sake of his parishoners, the priest accomplishes his project with the smiling showmanship of a John Paul II. Forces are mixing in a strange new synthesis, but not the often-remarked combination of French and British. The influences visible in daily life are from the New World nations of America and Quebec.

The pre-war world upon which the window opens is conservative and a bit stodgy, like that of English Canada. In fact, the clothing, furniture and hardware are vaguely familiar. You've seen them in old photo albums and at your grandmother's house. Even the human landscape is recognizable. The Plouffes are a tight-knit family whose grown sons board at home because they are not yet married. They are people for whom vaulting ambition, while not entirely absent, is clearly not the unquestioned norm.

Curiously enough in view of the subject matter's potential for embittered commentary, the film grinds rather few axes. It doesn't even care to mock the visiting preacher's odd, Yank-tinged French. It declines to depict a social solidarity unsplintered in the face of adversity. The Plouffes and their

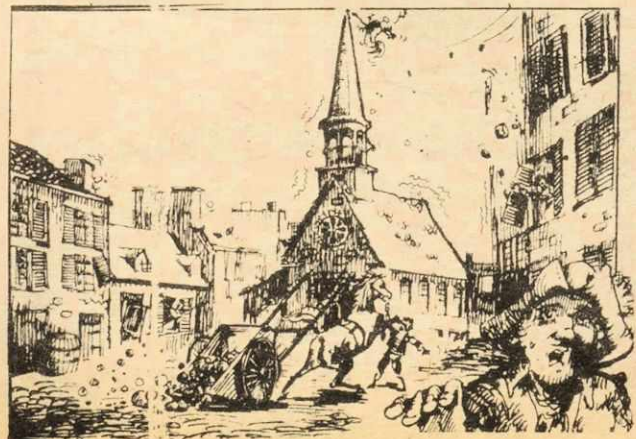


country men are not of one mind about WW II and the British connection. **Les Plouffe** keeps the fights inside the family. The paper that fires Pere Plouffe is not an English-run publication but the organ of Action catholique, a wholly Quebecois organization. Indeed, the Church comes in for more and harder knocks than les anglais. It is both partly the people's servant and partly the conquerors' flunkie, but not essentially either.

The Church's pivotal position in the film inevitably makes it the butt of some pointed ribbing. The foibles of French Canadian Catholicism are known and gently ridiculed, as when an after-dark procession is organized to petition the Sacred Heart. Massed partici-

pants have come to pray against conscription, or so they and most of their parish priests believe. But when Cardinal Villeneuve begins to preach, the message is quite different. Dozens of marchers blow out their candles and go home. One senses that the instruments of social control are losing their unity and efficacy.

About ten years after the film's action, in a town named Asbestos, a similar recalcitrance will balk against the "yellow" unionism of the Catholic labour syndicates. And Cardinal Villeneuve will waver briefly, then enter his support on the side of the strikers. That's in the future, of course, but already change is afoot.





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