

In just under 30 years, Canadian films, in both French and English, have not only attracted an audience at home, but have also drawn the attention of *cinéphiles* around the world.

(This is not to say that cinema was non-existent in Canada before 1960. The National Film Board [NFB], for instance, founded in 1939, celebrated its 50th anniversary last year.)

During the 1960s, Canadian films were affected by the country's politics. Production facilities, as well as budgets, were severely limited.

But the situation has changed considerably since then. The range of subject matter dealt with now in Canadian films is far greater than ever before, and filmmakers have the benefit of production facilitators such as Telefilm Canada, a government corporation whose principal mandate is to develop Canada's film, television and video industry.

A More Mature and Confident Cinema

With films such as *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (*The Decline of the American Empire*) and *My American Cousin*, made in the late 1980s, the stage has been set for a more mature and confident cinema than was evident

during the "quota quickie" era of the late 1970s and early 1980s. With Denys Arcand's most recent film *Jésus de Montréal* (*Jesus of Montreal*), Canada has continued to win the accolade of critics and festival juries, both at home and abroad.

This current wave of popularity began in 1986 when *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* won the International Critics' Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. A low budget, intellectual adult comedy, *Déclin* went on to win eight Genie awards, including Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay, as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

Films by two neophyte directors at Cannes the next year kept up the momentum. *Un Zoo la nuit* by Montreal filmmaker Jean-Claude Lauzon won 13 Genie awards, and was sold to more than a dozen countries. Meanwhile, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* by Patricia Rozema won the prestigious Prix de la Jeunesse and was nominated for nine Genie awards.

In 1989, Denys Arcand reinforced his international reputation with *Jésus de Montréal*. Loosely based on the passion play, the film revolves around Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau) who is obsessed with staging an innovative version of the famous play. Daniel finally brings the play to life on a muggy summer's eve atop Montreal's famous Mount Royal. But the liberties the actors take with the Biblical story provoke and disturb the audience. Every night, an increasingly unorthodox group comes to see the play, only to have its deepest beliefs and faith questioned by the inventive staging of the story.

Poetic and challenging, the often wryly amusing *Jésus de Montréal* won the Jury Prize at Cannes. It also swept the 1990 Genie awards. And, once again, a feature by Arcand was nominated Best Foreign Language Film at the U.S. film industry's Academy Awards.

A scene from Denys Arcand's film *Jésus de Montréal* — winner of the Jury Prize at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival.



Max Films