

## Canada at Cannes

by Kevin Tierney

no one else does."

Although Hérroux was the most open about his attitude, he was certainly not alone. His remarks had been formulated during the first week of the festival, particularly when *Les Plouffe* was screened. Although the film didn't sweep the French critics off their feet (a peculiar bunch they are, too: so determined were they to show up their American counterparts, they were writing favorably about *Heaven's Gate* before it was screened), audience response was very strong and additional screenings were added. Certainly there weren't many people complaining it was too long, having seen a new version with a running time of three hours and twenty minutes.

The story of the selection committee's

decision not to look at films with running times of longer than two hours and ten minutes is the kind of story that gains with each telling. It was the number one topic of conversation at a beach lunch in honor of *Les Plouffe* hosted by the Canadian government representatives in Cannes, Cinema Canada (no relation: it's actually the Film Festival's Bureau which is attached to the Ministry of Communications). *Les Plouffe* was chosen to open the Directors' Fortnight section of the festival and, because of that, was given official treatment. Unfortunately everyone involved with the film had hoped to see it entered in the main competition.

According to Jacqueline Brodie of the Film Festival's Bureau, Gilles Carle refused to view the four hour version of *Les Plouffe* because he would not entertain any version that was longer than two hours and ten minutes. The inference was that the selection committee was eliminating longer films this year, although, in fact, it was to choose at least three films that ran longer (including Claude Lelouch's latest chapter in a lifetime pursuit of ambiguity, *Les uns et les autres* with a running time of three hours). Based on Jacob's 'suggestion,' Gilles Carle cut a new version of *Les Plouffe* to two hours and fifteen minutes, but it didn't satisfy him,

nor Jacob and the selection committee, and after a screening, it was turned down.

The net result of all these discussions left both the producers and the press with the feeling that the festival wasn't being totally honest in its application of an acceptable running time guideline and soon everyone was talking about a two hour and ten minute 'rule,' that applied only to *Les Plouffe*.

Who is Gilles Jacob and why is he doing this? To answer this question, journalists from *La Presse*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, *Le Devoir* and *Cinema Canada* decide to leave the lunch for *Les Plouffe* and find Jacob. Although none of us expect to see him right away, we are ushered into his office after submitting our names and those of the papers we represent.

It's a spacious office and his desk looks out at the room from a corner spot, his back to a splendid view of the Mediterranean and La Croisette, three stories above Le Palais du Festival where the films in competition are showcased and where the tourists gather in the street to watch for stars.

Jacob greets us formally but is cordial: first and foremost, he is a politician — although I suspect the sense of the

**"I still have a lot of respect for the institution of the Cannes film festival and would hate to see it go down the drain; but that may happen if things don't change..."**

French word most often used to describe him, 'un tacticien,' is a better one. We've promised to ask him only one question and that has to do with the time 'rule,' but more to the point is why wasn't *Les Plouffe* accepted by the committee? His argument/defense centres around length and history: Carle's *Fantastica* opened last year's festival and didn't do itself or the festival any good; there wasn't a 'rule' about running time as much as there was a guideline. He felt he was helping *Les Plouffe* by not accepting it because long films cause people to walk out and early departures aren't good for any film. He gets more vague as he goes along. Ultimately, he says he is pleased that *Les Plouffe* was invited by La Quinzaine because it's a valuable lesson in humility to take one's place in this 'other important section.'

Jacob is in the style of Giscard d'Estaing: cultivated, articulate, aloof and cold. He doesn't use the word 'politics' in his discussion of how films are chosen, but it is tacit in all of his

Kevin Tierney is a free-lance writer in Montreal who teaches film and writing at John Abbott College.



● Critic for L'Humanité Dimanche, Samuel Lachize talks shop with Gilles Carle and Roger Lemelin (L.)

remarks: Canada should grow up and realize its place in the world market while other cinemas are given exposure. Wait your turn; you had it (he doesn't mention how many millions it cost to get it) but you didn't have the product and so you got burned. This year you have a product, fine - I'd like nothing more than to hear from everyone that *Les Plouffe* should have been in the competition, he says - but by all means, stop complaining and get on with what we're all here to do, sell.

A week later, when Héroux's remarks are published, Gilles Jacob is the first person to call him.

At the second Cinema Canada lunch, Canada's other participant in La Quinzaine, *Alligator Shoes*, is fêted (same beach, different menu). Director Clay Borris and a number of his crew are pleased as hell to be here in the 'big time' - and well they should be. There are few complaints here because there were no expectations.

These two films reflect a certain irony that shouldn't be overlooked: *Les Plouffe* is a \$5 million production and *Alligator Shoes* is a \$500,000 down-home style film. Didn't it used to be the other way around - down-home meant Québécois and big-budget gloss meant Toronto?

In between these two extremes lies *Ticket to Heaven*, directed by Ralph Thomas, and an even more difficult situation to handle. According to producer Vivienne Leebosh, Gilles Jacob accepted the film when he saw it in New York and took a cassette back to France, only to call and rescind his offer of a place in the competition, replacing it with an offer of a place in the category Un Certain Regard. His offer tells us even more about the festival's politics, as does the logic behind the producers' refusal.

It would seem that by offering *Ticket to Heaven* a place in the competition, Jacob was really offering himself a certain leeway - in case somebody dropped out, he could fill it with *Ticket*. Nobody dropped out. The producers refused the offer of Un Certain Regard because of the market they had decided to penetrate with their film. (Un Certain Regard is basically considered artsy, non-commercial, social document stuff - surefire disaster for a movie of this kind.) Instead, they are organizing their own screenings and sales meetings for interested buyers and doing well enough to be able to choose who to go with. When asked about the producers' logic in this matter, Jacob grudgingly agrees.

But these inner machinations of the festival reflect only one set of interests, one country's, and there are many others. For example, there are no Third World films in competition, but there are two well-budgeted American films, both from the struggling United Artists, *Thief* and the infamous white elephant, *Heaven's Gate*. Aren't there any number of conclusions that can be drawn from this? Or should we only believe that this year the American films are very good (they aren't), while the Third World didn't produce? Is the festival's renewed courtship of the majors a result of this



● Jean Lefebvre shares a joke with *Alligator Shoes* producer John Philips seated beside director Clay Borris (L.). Clay Borris and Jacqueline Brodie (standing) meet with Annette Insdorf of *Rolling Stone*. Tête-à-tête for Anne Létourneau and Rémi Laurent of *Les Plouffe*.

... the task of changing the festival's attitude towards English Canadian films has fallen to Jean Lefebvre and Jacqueline Brodie... who operate Canada's Film Festivals Bureau...

year's first-ever Los Angeles Film Market? - an event that at least potentially may lower the profile of Cannes?

This question brings us back to Héroux and the tone of his 'warning': "The L.A. Film Market was a clear warning to Cannes but it doesn't seem to have gotten the message. I still have a lot of respect for the institution of the Cannes film festival and would hate to see it go down the drain; but that may happen if things don't change in reality instead of mere surface changes. At least let the festival decide if it wants to stay international or become what it already is: a sick festival for locals."

But is all of this a real injustice or a mere childishness that suggests 'if you don't play ball my way, I'll take my ball and go home'?

Although everyone has an opinion, some are better informed than others and most answers perpetuate the dichotomy established in the question.

To some veterans of this festival, like Gerald Pratley, the director of the Ontario Film Institute - and more than a passive observer of the emergence of Canadian films given his 15 years of festival attendance - Canadians in general and Héroux in particular, have reacted (or overreacted) childishly. While he agrees that this year's films are much improved over those of previous years, he blames English Canadian producers for having failed to learn from past experiences that there are certain kinds of films that make their way into competition. There are 'big films' (*Heaven's Gate*, *Les uns et les autres*); films by name directors (Rosi, Scola, Bertolucci, Makavejev); exciting first films (*Angels of Iron*); and films that are strongly national in character (*Man of Iron*, Wajda's Palme d'Or winner from Poland, and *Mephisto* from Hungary). Above all, however, films should be events (at least from Gilles Jacob's point of view). For Gerald Prat-

ley, we should be creating films of national character and perhaps, by doing so, we will produce films that will become events.

Certainly the strength of Québécois representation in Cannes has always been based on its national character - besides the obvious fact that this is France and there is a common language. (The festival is international by definition, but its character is essentially French, but what has traditionally been Quebec's strength here is proving to be English Canada's major problem: imposing its own particular sensibility on the festival's powers that be.

Apart from various individual efforts (such as Héroux's), the task of changing the festival's attitude towards English Canadian films has fallen to Jean Lefebvre and Jacqueline Brodie, the people who operate Canada's Film Festivals Bureau and the Cannes arms of the operation, Cinema Canada. In fact, it has been their number one priority for three years now and if this year's festival has proven anything, it is that despite their dedication and determination, they still have a long way to go.

Until now, English Canadian films have been regarded as essentially American films, that somehow aren't as good as American films. Because of their experiences with Jacob and the festival, Lefebvre and Brodie were very much in sympathy with Héroux's sentiments, though they added no threats. For them, it is simply a question of heightening the awareness of the festival's selection committee by demonstrating the unique make-up of the English Canadian filmmaking aesthetic - an aesthetic they are both convinced exists.

Frankly, I wonder about that. In a film like *Heartaches* - a film which I quite like - there is a subtle but obvious attempt to *not* locate the film in a particular space: geography is never mentioned (I'm going to the country, Margot Kidder says); Kidder smokes American cigarettes and pays the rent for her apartment with American money. Even though we see Toronto in the background, it's never mentioned (remember what gave *Goin' Down the Road* its strength?). *By Design* is equally nowhere, and *Improper Channels* is consciously American. If content is being so consciously neutralized, can a unique aesthetic be seen emerging?

Ultimately the Cannes Film Festival is a complainer's haven and Canadians seem to feel very much at home in this environment. Maybe it's because of the pressure, the decadence, or the fact that everyone speeds their eyeballs out for two weeks. It's hard to know. This year we brought a lot less hype and a lot more quality. Whining remains whining unless it's followed up by action, and the last printed word from Canada was published in the very same *Le Programme* two days before the end of the festival. It appeared as a hand-written business card that said, "Au revoir, à l'année prochaine." And it was signed, "Justin et Denis Héroux." ●