

# Back's "Crac" Shot

by Joan Irving Herman

He planned to stay home and watch the Academy Awards on TV with the family. Should his name, Frédéric Back, be in the envelope for *Crac*, the film's executive producer at Radio-Canada, Hubert Tison, would accept the Oscar. But the Academy refused to give the ticket to anyone else. (The story goes that an Oscar disappeared last year after an eastern bloc "official" accepted in the place of the filmmaker.) So Frédéric Back was there to climb on stage in a hastily borrowed tux to say his quiet thank you's and salute Quebec.

No need to add that more people will have viewed Back on television and perhaps wondered about the French-speaking filmmaker with the black eyepatch, than will have seen *Crac*, his swinging tale of a charmed old rocking chair that refuses to be discarded or forgotten.

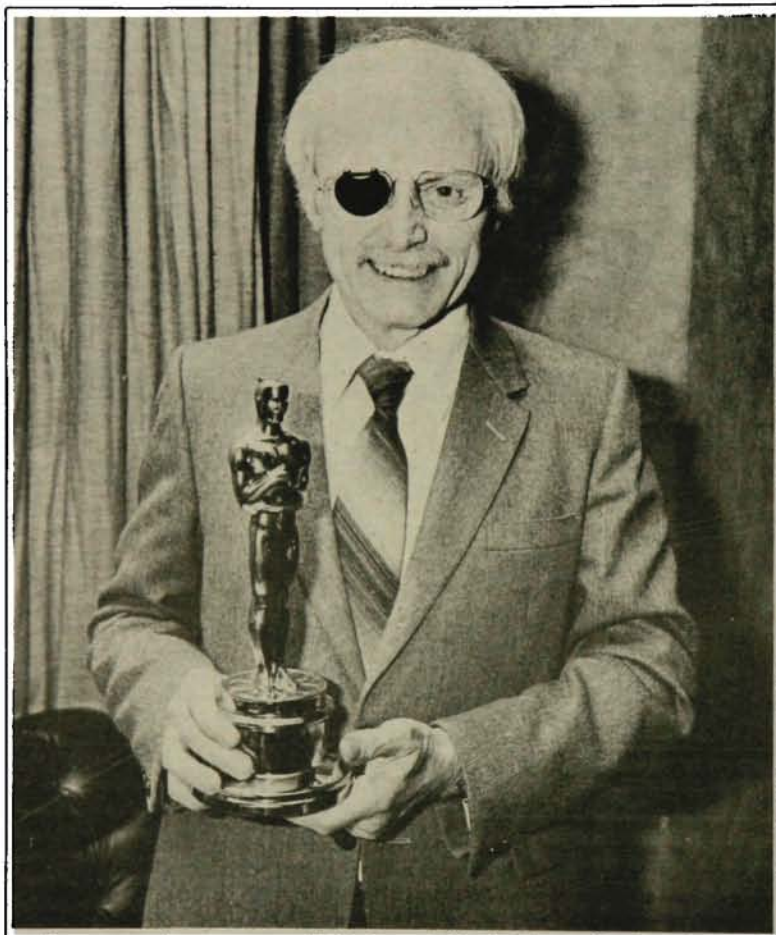
It is colored pencil animation but that is no adequate description of the color and vividness of images Back's technique evokes. Like his several other award-winning films, made at Radio-Canada in the animation department, *Crac* was commissioned as a film for children. The films are distributed on the children's circuit of the UER, or European Union of Broadcasters. Back is one of those few filmmakers who is not piqued whatsoever by the fact of having made all his films for the children's market - because they are not *only* for children.

"My films are my gift. I put the very best of myself, of what I believe very deeply, into my work," says Back.

"I decided some time ago that I didn't have enough talent to make revolutionary films. Therefore I would make films that communicate something, films that renew and give new life to the viewer. So you see, filmmaking is not just an occupation for me."

"Awards are important because they confirm that I have succeeded and that I have a reason to make another film." But the ceremony surrounding those awards, and certainly the west coast elegance of Academy Awards night.

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● With his Oscar for *Crac* this year, Radio-Canada animator Frédéric Back

Photo: Guy Dubois Photography

in winter. The couple, for they had decided to marry, settled in Montreal.

Back tells this story without embellishment. Ghylaine is, he says, a spirited woman who has greatly influenced his work. She introduced him to life in Quebec as it was then, "so different from today."

"In the country everything was done by hand. Everybody had work. They didn't make much but the distribution was just. They had the forests to live off and they lived well by the forest."

Caught in the expanding city by his teaching post at the Ecole du Meuble, where he replaced Paul-Emile Borduas and where he taught under the direction of the leading educator Jean-Marie Gauvreau, Back rather quickly realized he could not teach and continue to paint. He abandoned teaching.

With two children who avoided the system of art education in Quebec - one who taught herself drawing and now makes her living doing batik, and the other who studied in Switzerland - Back deplores our art schools, where "the teachers are busy just amusing themselves and where there is no possibility of the disciplined and structured approach to studying art."

In 1952, when television was getting underway in Montreal, Frédéric Back began to free-lance in the graphic arts department of Radio-Canada. He'd done every job at the network that required the skills of drawing and design, and had contributed animation inserts into a couple of long-running programs, when Hubert Tison recruited Back into the animation department he was organizing (1968). (Back was also known for his work with painted glass and mural paintings; he had completed a number of large commissions, including the stained glass mural in the Place des Arts metro.)

Viewing a retrospective of Back's films made over the past decade requires little more than one hour of your time. But these lusty short films will have restored the spring in your step.

They don't fundamentally differ in theme; the stories most often describe being in Eden and being lost from it. The child is lost, love or nature is discarded and destroyed, and it is found. The old family rocking chair ends up in a museum of contemporary art. It is the only object there that speaks to the children who

hold remote enticement for Frédéric Back.

Born in Strasbourg in 1924, he lived his early years in a third floor apartment that looked out over the 11th century Notre-Dame Cathedral, and, behind to the Château Rohan (the Rohan family motto: King I cannot be, duke I disdain, Rohan I am). As World War II closed in, his father, a musician, moved the family to the western region of France. In Rennes, Frédéric attended art school (beaux-arts) where his boyhood ability to draw was disciplined under the eminent illustrator Meheut.

"I had dreamt of being a peasant but that was going to be difficult during those years, so I turned to my passion for painting. The love of the land and nature is still very much part of me, as you can see in my films."

For three years, Back had studied with the fervor of someone who knows he won't be able to hold out against fate and conscience forever, and the school was finally bombed by the Germans then occupied as a hospital.

Disillusioned by the war and by the attitude of the French, Back began to think about the cold picture-book land he knew as Canada. In 1948, with no visa, he boarded a flimsy hulk of a Japanese freighter that drifted for days in the North Atlantic with no power. When he arrived he met the woman he had been corresponding with for seven years - his pen-pal, arranged through the Normandy-Canada society, and the most important reason he came here.

Ghylaine left the rural Laurentian village where she taught school to children who often came to class bare foot

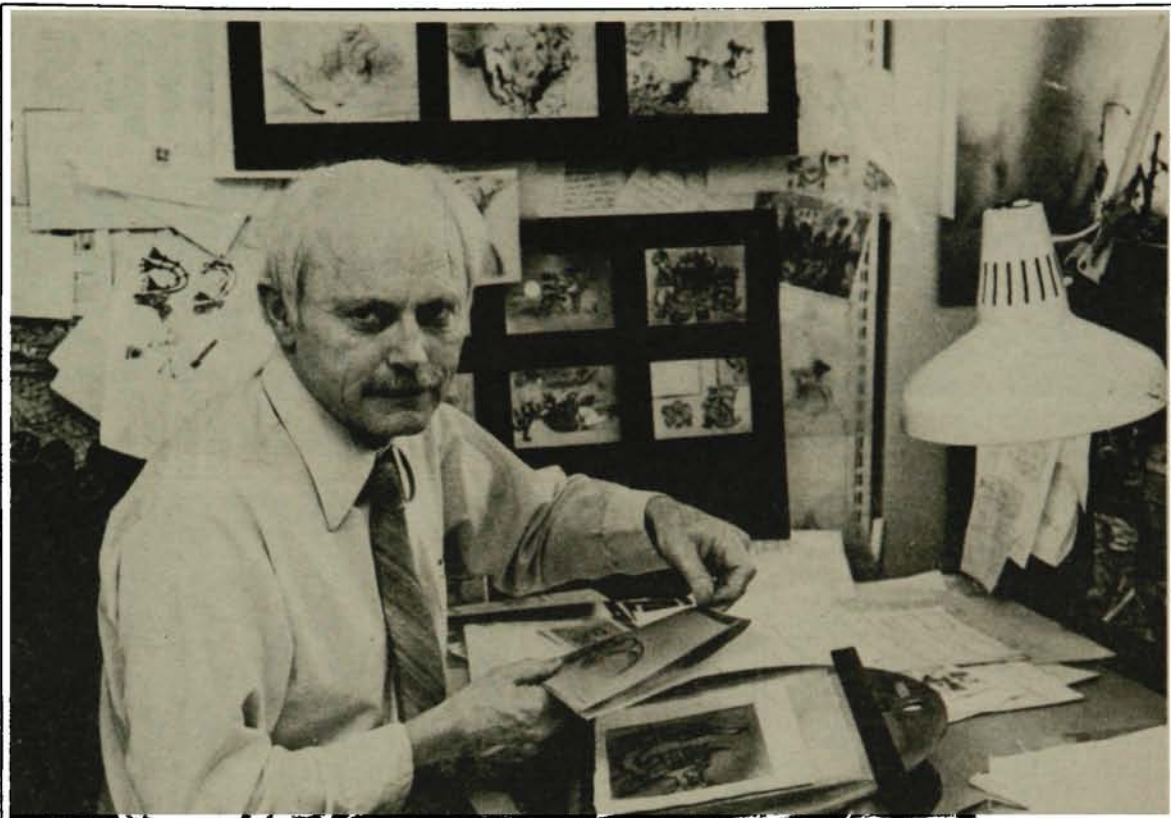
# AWARDS

visit and who are unsure of the aesthetic they encounter in the abstract paintings hung there.

"We've been through realism and hyper-realism in art and now we find it was a dead end. Looking back to the traditional painters we can accept that many were not great painters yet they left us images of what life was like then. They witnessed and recorded their era. *Crac* isn't an attack on contemporary art though I am sometimes dismayed at the lack of feeling in non-figurative art."

"Most people," says Back, "want above all to be original. To me this is exaggerated. What is important is to say things that reflect the way people live day to day. People are extraordinary, they are fantastic! Many may find this banal but they shouldn't think that way. We are surrounded by the miracle that we wake up to every morning. We have our health, we are not in jail... This is what my films are saying. Really they are not extraordinary."

Frédéric Back is just that kind of humble man; nevertheless it is shocking to hear him disparage his drawing talents after having viewed *Inon ou La Conquête du feu* in which he animated the Algonquin legend of the animals' search for fire using bold flat lines and smoky colors that reminds one of



● "10-hour days huddled over the animation disc in his metal-walled cubby hole of an office..."



● *Crac*

are busy with old posters and bits he has clipped over the years in support of his concerns.

And once again he wants with a passion to finish a film that will say it all. It is his first 30-minute film; he estimates he'll be working on it for three years. That means three years of 10-hour days huddled over the animation disc in his metal-walled cubby hole of an office at Radio-Canada. Working gruelling days to complete *Crac* last year, he had an accident using fixative in an unventilat-

ed room and lost the use of one eye. Though he tires more easily now, the drawings are accumulating.

"It's based on the magnificent story by Jean Giono about a sheep farmer who loses his wife and daughter and goes to live in the mountains. There he passes his days planting trees, until he has reforested an entire mountain.

"The story has an application in everything that man does," says Back. "Our daily actions do, finally, have an impact on others and on all that surrounds us."

Like his other films this will be a transparency of Back's thoughts and feelings, though *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres* (*The Man Who Planted Trees*) is real in another sense, too.

On their 54-acre farm near Lachute, Quebec, Back and his family have over the years planted 8000 trees. In those trees live 74 species of birds. Says Back, of his reforestation project, "It is the only good thing I will have accomplished in my life."

Not only, Monsieur Back, not only. ●

the drawings in the caves at Lascaux. Is he being playful?

Perhaps a little.

"Working alone and having the advantage of time, I can continually work on and improve my scripts. Every detail in each film is considered many films. And if need be I can put a project aside till I come across the solution. *Crac* waited six years for its present ending. I had the idea for the film - actually my 12-year-old daughter gave it to me - before making *Tout rien* but the only ending I could come up with for the rocking chair was in an antique store. The ending in the museum is much more interesting, for the contrast it provided.

"Too many people work spontaneously, not giving enough thought to the film script which is the most important element," says Back. "I look for ways to shock the spectator, in the positive sense, in order to hold the attention. You've got to catch the spectator's attention and you can do that by structuring the content and also the color and drawings, movement and music so that each element in the film plays off the other," he says.

"Films that are empty of content are just another kind of pollution. I'm opposed to pollution."

Well, we all are, or were. Few of us actually fight the old battles these days, unlike Frédéric Back whose office walls



● *Tout Rien*