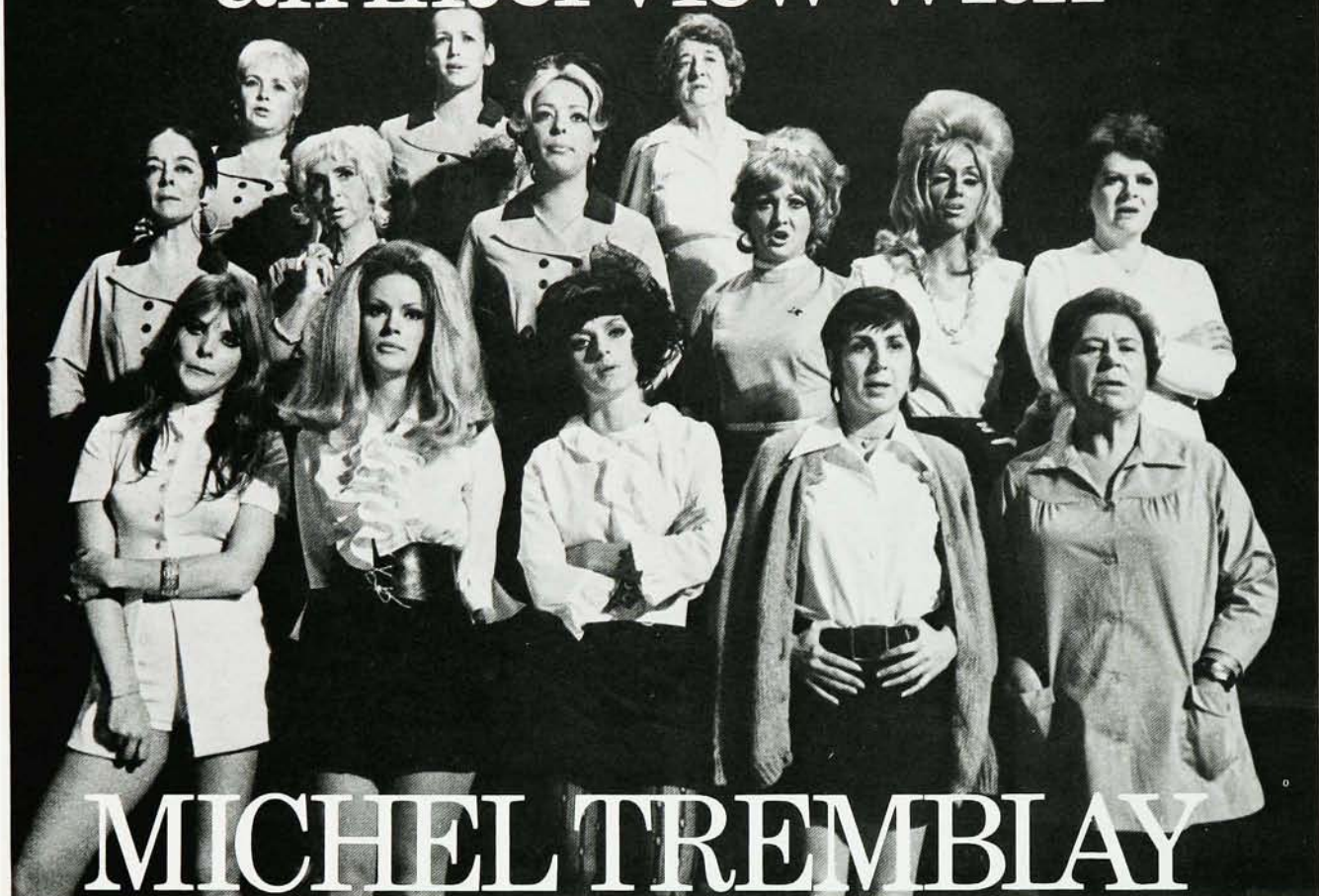


an interview with



MICHEL TREMBLAY

by Brian Clancy

From *Françoise Durocher, Waitress*

Michel Tremblay is one of Canada's foremost writers. He is, however, above all, a Québécois writer exploring the consciousness of the Québécois heritage and place in Canadian society. Tremblay has hitherto been known and revered as a playwright and has only recently turned his sense of wit and realism to the medium of film.

Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est, his first feature screenplay, has established him already as one of Canada's foremost and most uniquely aware film-writers. He is quiet and unassuming but behind that is a power and magnitude infrequently realized.

Tremblay began by writing short stories and in 1965 he wrote his first play, *Les Belles Soeurs* followed by: *En Pièces Détachées*; *Trois Petits Tours*; *La Duchesse De Langeais*; *A Toi, Pour Toujours, Ta Marie-Lou*; *Hosanna*; *Bonjours La Bonjours*; and a novel, *C'Est A Ton Tour, Laura Cadieux*. He is now at work on a new play entitled *Saint Carmen Of The Main* and has recently completed his second screenplay.

How did you arrive at your choice of the theme of Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est? There is a certain strength in the film that is unusual.

Since *Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est* was our first full length film with our director (André Brassard) we decided to deal with things that we knew, because we were a bit afraid of cinema. We did a half hour film in '71, *Françoise Durocher, Waitress*, but still it was only a short film and this was our big chance. So, we decided to deal with things we knew so we took our gang. It really is a gang

film. And we took characters out of my plays. Nothing in the film comes out of the plays I wrote but all of the characters but three come from five of my plays. We decided to take characters because in my plays from 1965 to 1973 or '72 I described two different worlds; one being born out of the other. The first is the family and the second is people who try to get out of the family and go on St. Laurence Street in Montréal and become cheap singers and things like that. So we decided to put those two worlds together.

They synthesize anyway.

Yes, because usually in Québec in the '50s and '60s when you went out of your family and became a Western singer you never came back to your family because your family was ashamed of you. So we decided to put back these people in the same film just to see what would happen to them. What happened is this very desperate film. It really is a film about despair.

Some people have taken issue with the apparent sexual content of the film and the film's treatment of homosexuality. What are your views on this aspect of the film?

We don't talk about sex in that film. It's very sad that they react that way because nothing is about sex as we know it in films in the usual way. But, it's a film about despair and we do need things about despair. Well, in Québec the time has not come to say that, "The birds are beautiful and everybody is beautiful" because it's not true. We're going back to sleep in Québec, in a way, and

this film was meant to wake people a second time because of what happened after 1970. The play, **A Toi, Pour Toujours, Ta Marie-Lou**, was a result of the '70 crisis and now, we're in 1975 and Québec is really going back to sleep and I don't want Québec to go back to sleep. So my things will be much more violent verbally. I don't really consider myself as an author, but I know that my power is the verb. My power is words. I have a powerful way of using my powerful language. The Québécois language is a very powerful language – a very effective language in theatre and on film. I found a way of magnifying the language, you wouldn't know that if you didn't understand the language. You just read the sub-titles. What is not obvious to an English audience is that this film, which looks so much like a realistic film when you don't understand the language, is a very magnified film. The monologue of La Duchess in the plane when she comes back is just like a poem in French. It's like a dream. It's incredibly beautiful. It's a very beautiful text but when you see the subtitles – subtitles are always cheating – but I prefer that to a dubbed version. You should hear a Western when it's translated by the French people in Paris. It's absolutely incredible to hear these cowboys speaking in Parisian! It's stupid. Still, I prefer the subtitles but you always lose the flavour and more than the flavour you lose the real meaning of the words.

When was Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est released?

A year ago. On February 28 (1974).

What has the film's reception been like inside Québec?

The public absolutely loved it. It was incredible. A real blockbuster. Line-ups everyday for the five shows. We had very very bad reviews and very very good reviews. Nothing in between. So I loved that. But as usual the bad reviews were wrong and the good reviews were right. (Laughter).

For one year we told everybody we were dealing with things we knew because cinema was new for us and when the film came out the critics said; "Well, they're still talking about the same old thing." But it's stupid to say that because they, as intellectuals, know me, know my work. When I have a play in Montréal there are 15 or 20,000 people who see this play . . . 350 or 400,000 people have seen this film. So, they don't give a damn about intellectuals saying that I am repeating myself. I'm not. When you write for critics you can be subtle but when you write for real people, who will not masturbate on your work and who will only look at what you give them, you can be obvious and it's okay being obvious. I think that the public needed **Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est** much more than the critics did and I don't give a damn about the critics.

Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est was Canada's official entry at the Cannes Film Festival in 1974, how did you do?

Well, we had quite incredible reviews in Italian, in Japanese and all over the world. We really had very good reviews. The film was sold in Italy but it wasn't sold anywhere else because our distributor is asking too much money for it. Usually, a Québec film, let's say **Death Of A Lumberjack**, was sold for \$5,000 to Paris, two years ago. Our distributor is asking \$100,000 for our film. Nobody in Paris will give \$100,000 for a Québec film and I can understand that because they have to make back twice this money to make their money back and they will never do \$200,000. That means – \$3.00 a piece – that means 75,000 people or 65,000 people and there are not 65,000 people in Paris who will go to see a Québec film. I don't think so.

You seem to be becoming quite an international success through your plays and now your work in film. What do

you think this is connected with? Why?

You have to have some kind of humility sometimes and when you try to describe the whole world you get fucked-up because you don't know the whole world. There is nobody in the world who knows the whole world but when you are dealing with things you know then you can be good and being good you can be international . . . We (the Québécois) are a people and we have things to say. Saying those things to ourselves means sometimes that we are saying those things to everybody in the world. When the Americans talk to the Americans everyone can understand what they mean – like Williams or Eugene O'Neill. Or even a Fellini film, everything is like that. The early Fellini is a very very local thing.

What do you think of Fellini's work?

He's one of my big favourites. The best film, well I don't know if that's the best film, but the most important for me is Fellini's *8 1/2*.

Why?

It's autobiographical and an ego trip that is for everyone. It is the perfect example of the good ego trip. He talks about himself in a way that everyone could understand and this is very rare. You don't see that many attempts because when an author or a filmmaker does an ego trip it's very inside, like an inside joke, if I may say so, and you don't fully understand what they say.

Last night (at the screening of Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est in Winnipeg as part of the Canadian Film Symposium III) you told me that you were working on a screenplay now. What is the film about?

I'm working on it. I'm not finished yet. You know what you have to say but when you write it you go elsewhere or you go deeper. I'm working on it now. It will be the opposite of **Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est**. A very intimate film with just a few actors and many small parts. There are three people in the film with hundreds of small parts around them and it's a very touching and Bergmanish film.

Similar to Cries and Whispers or a film like that?

Not that small. I mean, not in a house. The story-line is very simple. A girl, a thirty year old girl who is beginning to be an old maid and can't find anybody goes to a – I don't know what you call it – an agency where you have a computer who has you meet a boy or a girl to be married. She goes there and the computer has her meet the man she was in love with ten years ago. Meaning, that they were made for one another. And it doesn't work for the second time. It's a very, not sad, but moody script. And then she meets another man from the computer and at first they don't like each other. They don't even find themselves cute. But, somehow, they learn to love each other and at the end of the film they really . . . They got used to each other and then they love each other after. It's the contrary of loving at first sight. It's an apprenticeship of loving each other.

How do you compare film to stage as a medium for expressing yourself?

It's so different that it's very easy to go from one to the other for me. People often ask me, "How did you manage to go from theatre to film?" and I just switched. I didn't think the same way. I think that this film I am working on right now will be better because in **Il Etait Une Fois Dans L'Est** there are still things which are obviously coming from theatre. There's a whole style that comes from the theatre. But, why not? It's so different that I just switched very easily. □