

SPOT LIGHT

on

françoise berd

photo: Lois Siegel

*Françoise Berd was in her forties before her long involvement with the theatre and cinema gave her a chance to act in a feature film. Since then, she has worked a lot: in a dozen Québécois films, in the Academy Award nominee **A Special Day** by Ettore Scola, and now in **Quintet** by Robert Altman.*

She, like many other Québécois working in film, considers cinema a logical and necessary extension of cultural life. Unlike her anglophone counterpart, her training and her professional attachments are European; the American experience is foreign to her.

Françoise Berd is a survivor. And she, like others who want to work and still live in this country, has started over and over again.

Cinema Canada: *Françoise Berd, how did you first get interested in the theatre?*

Françoise Berd: The real impetus came after a trip to Europe where I met Françoise Spira. I worked at the Bell Telephone Co. in Three-Rivers (sic) then, and I began to come up to Montreal to go to the theatre.

At that time, working at the Bell was good because you could work for two years, get your promotion and leave. The only condition was that you had to be back inside of two years. So I used to do that: work two years, leave, go to Europe, come back and then leave again.

In 1957, after a trip to Europe, I came back and said, "There's no way. I've got to have a theatre." So I got transferred with the Bell to Montreal, and went to see Fred Barry to tell him what I wanted to do. At that time, Barry was one of the most important actors in Quebec. He was there at the beginning of theatre.

Barry told me to go and take lessons from Sita Riddez. At that time, I had no ambition to become an actress. But I did have trouble speaking French. In Three Rivers, my friends were English and I was more English-speaking. So I went to see her.



I think that most of the actors in Montreal went to study with her at one time... She really introduced me to the theatrical world of Montreal.

What were your first jobs?

I did some amateur things at the Centre at the Beaux Arts School. We had a production every week and did everything, acting, props, lights, everything.

Then we had a production called "Les Sept Péchés Capitaux" by Félix Leclerc and that was a flop, my God, it was a flop. I had acted in it, and I

started to cry. I went home and didn't go out for a week, I was so disappointed. Then, my cousin François Soucy, who is a painter, came and said to me, "That's enough. You've got the guts to have a theatre but you have to try to work with professionals. Before you give up, you must give it a try."

Just then, I met Mousseau, the painter. I would say he was really my *maître*, my master. He taught me so much. He taught me to see, he taught me paintings and lights, and he taught me how to work.



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And that was when you founded the theatre L'Egregore?

Yes. To get the funding for it, I went to see Maurice Duplessis. I knew him because I lived in Three Rivers. He said to me, "You're going to make a *théâtre de cuisine*," — he meant that we were going to produce plays by Beckett and Adamov, but he said he'd help us anyway. He promised me \$3,000.

A couple of months later, he died, and I never did get the money. But his encouragement was the stimulus. It took me another two years to get the backing. I then founded the theatre L'Egregore.

What was your role there?

I gave myself the title of Artistic Director but that was a mistake. I was the director, and in charge of the administration. We were really a group — André Pagé, Gilbert Fournier, Mousseau — and the group animated the theatre. My real ambition was to discover new directors, and many got their start there.

How long were you with L'Egregore?

I was there from '59 to '65. By the time I left, it had become my whole *raison d'être*, and I needed to get things back into perspective. So I went to Europe again.

I won a fellowship from the Canada Council and, after L'Egregore, I wasn't dealing with an unknown subject anymore. I met a lot of people — Peter Brook, Jean Vilar, Jacques Fabbri — and was really able to sum things up for myself.

But you stayed on and worked in Europe, didn't you?

That was really when I began to get involved in filming. I went to see a man at Park Film named Philippe Dussart. I went there often, looking for a job. I was almost sitting on the doorstep, waiting to get in. He finally got tired of seeing me there and said, "Oh, come in!" He went on, "The girl working at the telephone is sick and we've got so many productions. What are we going to do?" And I knew how to work the telephones, so I began right there.

So you started back at the bottom?

Yes. And my age really helped me. I'm 54 now, so in '65 I was not a young girl. They thought I was probably serious.

So I stayed there. Dussart is a marvellous producer. His most recent film was Alain Resnais' **Providence**.



photo: Lois Siegel

Well, they really put me to work. And I wanted to learn everything because, then, I really wanted to work as a producer: not one who sat behind a desk, but one who knew what to talk about. I met Mag Bodard and worked on great productions.

I learned the most from working with Jacques Demy on **Les Demoiselles de Rochefort**. That was a co-production with Warner Bros., and since there were only 2 people on the crew — the first assistant and me — who spoke English, I became the official interpreter for the whole production. I learned about contracts. I was on location, I went everywhere. I also met Catherine Deneuve and Françoise Dorléac and we became great, great friends. They introduced me to others and brought me with them. I was everywhere on every film. That was a great experience for me.

How long did this period last?

About two and a half years. The last film I worked on was **Raspoutine** with Robert Hossein. I don't know what happened then. All of a sudden I was on that big set (that was a great big production) and I started to talk with Peter McEnery. His coach was sick, and I just went in and started to work with him. He started to talk about his country, and something happened; all of a sudden, I just had to come back to Quebec.

There were really two reasons for my decision. First, although I liked

working in Europe and I liked to learn with all those people, I realized that I would remain a small technician all my life there. And then, I felt that since I had had the privilege of gaining all that experience, I should try to bring it back to Quebec. So I came back without a cent, without a job, without everything.

And what did you do once you came back?

For a year, I worked in a restaurant as a waitress. The first person to hire me in film was Gordon Shepard for **Eliza's Horoscope**. I worked with him for a year and what a production! Did I work! Did we work!

I started off right at the script with Eliza and with Gordon. I kept the office for a while, I did the casting, then I went on location as manager. Later, I was the only one whom Gordon allowed to talk with Warner Bros... it was a Warner Bros. production. I took care of the actors and the publicity: a real *Girl Friday*. I guess I really established myself as second assistant and casting director.

Then I met Francis Mankiewicz and I worked hard on casting for his first feature **Le temps d'une chasse**. Now I think that Francis is a great, great director, and especially, a great director of actors. We were shooting out of town and there was a small part. And I said to Francis, "Let me play that." And he said O.K. That was my first surprise. So, I went in and I played it. I said to myself, "This is a test for me. I'll make it, and I'll keep on, or else it won't be any good and I won't think about acting anymore."

Michel Brault was on the camera then, and he came directly up to me after he finished filming the part and said, "Françoise, promise me that you will play in the cinema." He said that he was so impressed that he was going to get Claude Jutra to hire me for **Kamouraska**, and he spoke to Claude, and I was hired.

And since that time, you've worked in 13 other films. What were some of the highlights?

To me, the most important thing — the most important man — is André Forcier. If I have a career today, I owe it to him. I did three films with him: **Bar Salon**, **Nightcap** and **L'eau chaude l'eau froide**. Forcier gave me the chance to act and, no matter what happens, if André asks me to work, I'll be there.

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Article 1

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Article 2

The Festival will choose and invite films to be presented at the Festival. All producers can submit their film(s) to be eventually invited by the Festival.

Article 3

The 1978 Montréal Festival will have the following categories:

- I) Official Competition
- II) Section hors concours
- III) Latin American Cinema
- IV) Canadian Cinema
- V) Presence of the French Cinema
- VI) Homages: "Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow's Cinema"

Article 6

The entire documentation on each film (registration form, introductory text, stills, etc.), must arrive at the Festival before the **1st of June 1978**.

Article 10

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Another important film to me was **Parlez-nous d'amour**; it was the reason I went to make **A Special Day** with Ettore Scola. They saw that film and hired me.

And so you were back on your way to Europe.

Yes, and was I scared. I took the plane at night, and I thought about what they always say about the *solitude*, the feeling of loneliness which actresses have. I was going to a production where I didn't know anyone.

In Quebec, working in film is like working in a small family. Going abroad is different. It gives you nourishment, a feeling of exchanging experiences, of working more professionally.

What about Scola's film in terms of its being a Canadian-Italian co-production?

Well, it seems to me that the producers have to fight for their rights in a co-production. I ask myself if they are in it just to make money or because they really like cinema. There is so much one could learn by working on the co-productions. The technicians could learn. On the set of **A Special Day**, I didn't see one Canadian technician. It's up to the producer to see that the Canadian participation is protected.

Right now, I have an offer to do a film in France, and the producer, André Link, is thinking of making it a co-production. After the talks I've had with him, I know that he's imposing things; he's trying with all his heart to respect the co-production conditions.

I suppose the government will have to look into those agreements. I've heard, for instance, that the government is looking into the co-production **Angela**, so they must be aware of the problems.

But Angela is supposed to qualify as a fully Canadian production.

But that can't be! I was on the set. Boris Sagal, the producer, was an American. Zev Braun, the producer, was an American. Sophia is certainly not Canadian...

Your first love was really the theatre, and now you're acting in film. What is the difference, for you, between the two?

I'm not really a theatrical actress. I haven't got that background. When I first went to study acting, I tried to work with Jean Gascon, and he turned me down. He said, "Françoise, you're



photo : Lois Siegel

going to stay in the theatre but you're not going to be an actress." And for a long while, that was true.

But what is the technical difference between acting for film and for the theatre?

The cinema doesn't require the same study, the same preparation – I'd even say technique – that theatre requires. It's not an accident that people go to the National Theatre School to learn how to act for the theatre. That takes diction and voice training... things like that.

In the cinema, you can be yourself. You don't really need all that technique.

There's a big difference, too, in motivation. In the theatre, you've got to have the motivation to play the continuity, to get ready every night to play the same thing for an hour and a half. That requires concentration.

Film requires concentration, too, but of another sort. You don't need to play in continuity, although you do need to remember what came before and what's coming after. But you do have to be ready, when the director says to shoot, to play something for 30 seconds with all you've got. It's totally different.

I couldn't say which is more difficult, but I'm a cinema actress and I love it.

Françoise, despite all your recent success as an actress, you hold down a full-time job at the National Film Board directing the program, Aide au cinéma artisanal. In many ways, it seems an extension of your life-long goals of working in all phases of production, and of discovering new talent.

Yes. In Quebec, the situation is different for the NFB. In other provinces, it has opened up regional offices to promote talent. In English Canada, the talent goes to the States, and so, creating a pool of talented people is a problem.

In Quebec, we've got too many people, and they stay here. The NFB decided to open up a program to give young filmmakers help in finishing their productions. It's a three stage program and, so far, about 100 films have received aid.

But isn't there a potential problem in helping young filmmakers get started when so many of the well-known, recognized directors are out of work?

Yes, there is. What can I say? You know as well as I do that we've got a film industry but it doesn't belong to us.

To whom does it belong?

Well, it seems that it belongs to the Americans. We are strongly influenced by the Americans, but we can't compare our work with the big American productions. The salaries are getting higher and higher but the budgets don't go up.

As for those of us who make films in Quebec, I don't know if it is our ambition to cross that ocean: is it to cross the ocean, or simply to make a film?

I want to make films in that international world, not for the glory of it, but because I like to live on what I like to do. And it's so much fun to enlarge your vision of things. I wish that every technician, every actor could have that possibility.

But right now, in Quebec, we're really building up our culture. And it's difficult for a Québécois to live somewhere else.

I remember when I was 20 years old, people would leave the province as soon as they became well-known. They were not staying. I made a promise to myself then. I realized that because they had left, we had to start all over again all the time. We had to start at zero. And I said to myself, "I mustn't do that. I must build things up. I must keep the door open so that we don't have to fight all the time to open the door again." I wasn't the only one to make that decision. Félix Leclerc is in Quebec, Gilles Vigneault is in Quebec, and so is Yvon Deschamps. They work elsewhere, too, but they're here and they're building a culture. I feel a part of that, too.

Connie Tadros

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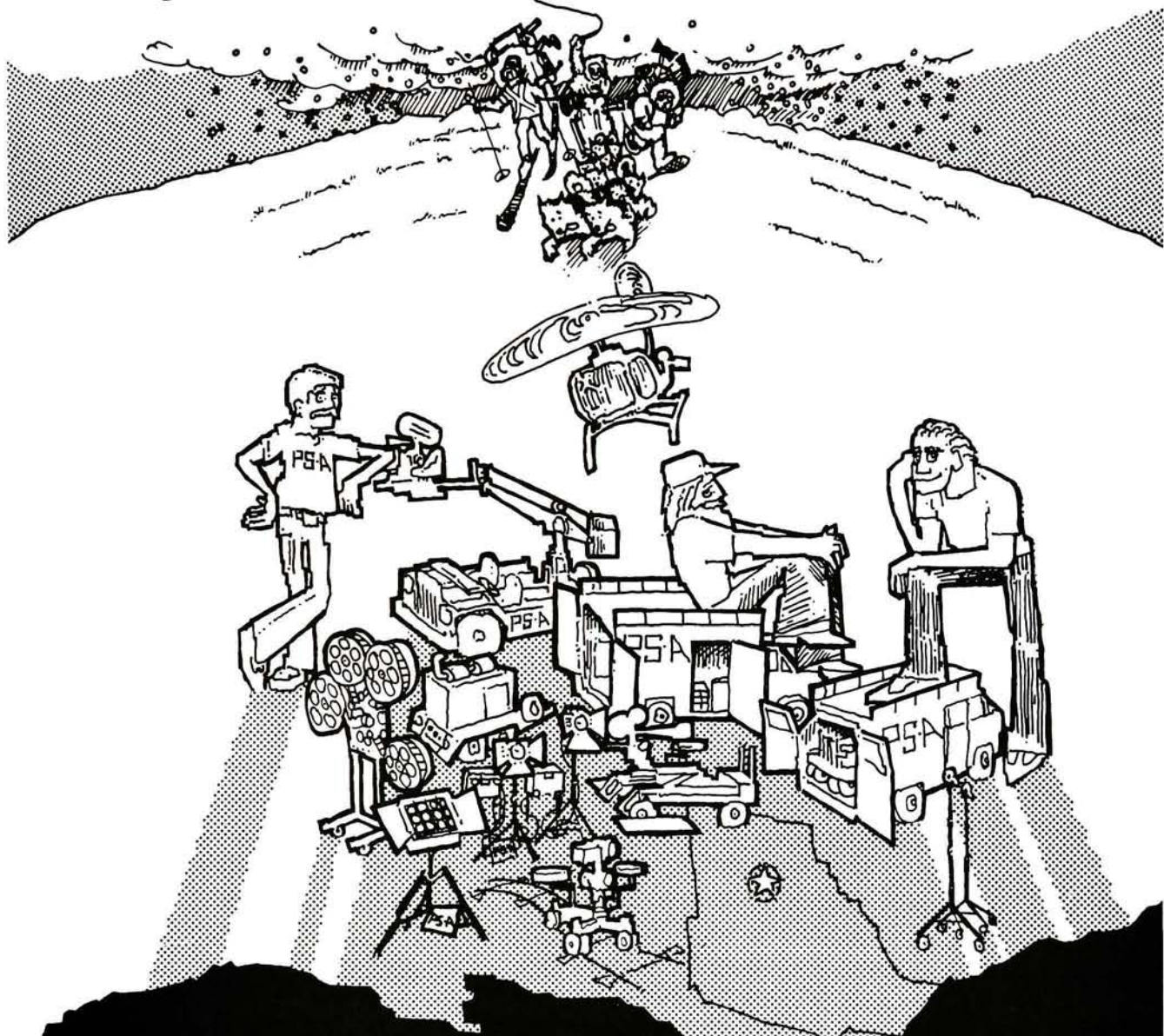


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