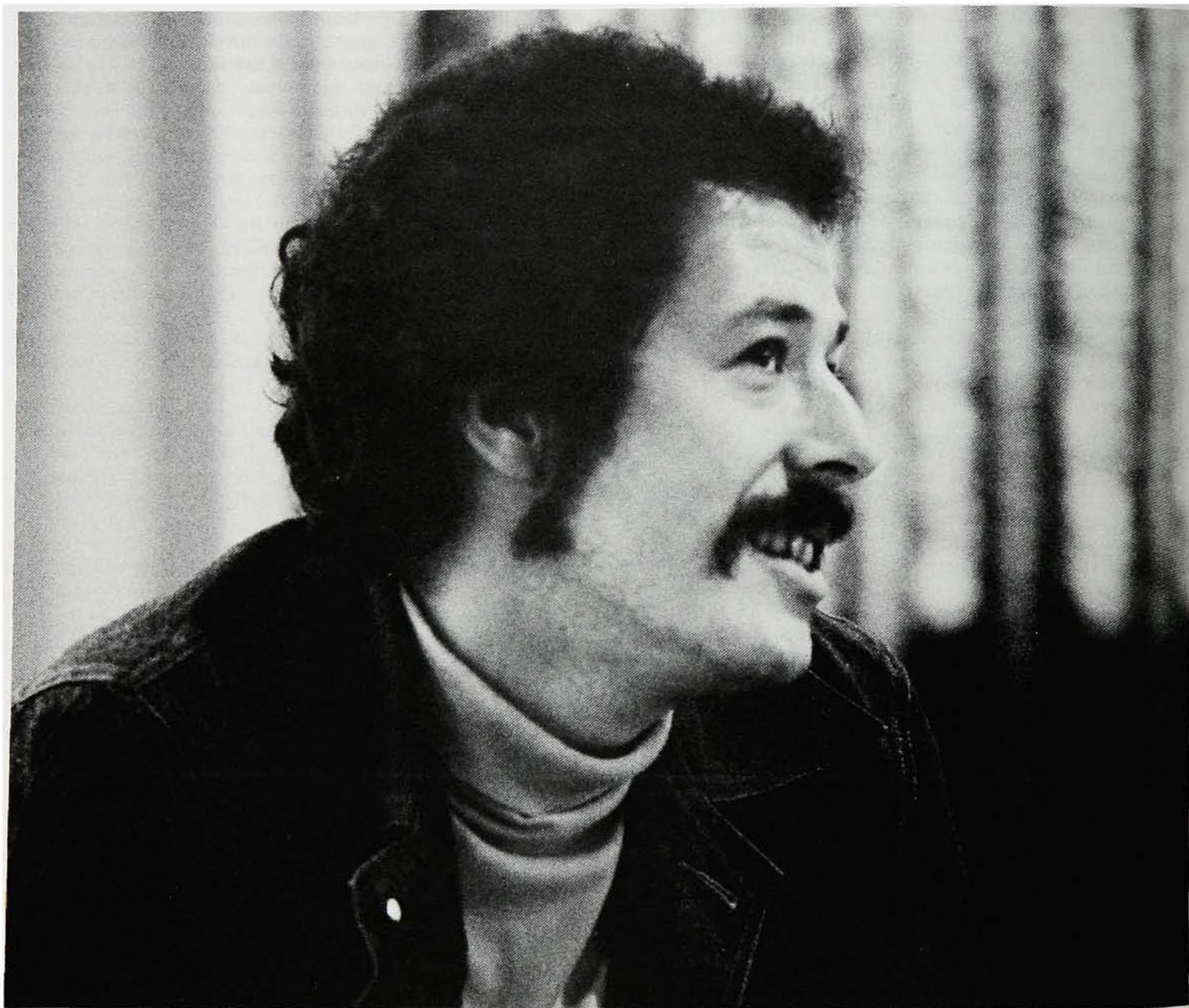


# How to have your cake and eat it too...à la Denys Arcand

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## Filmography

- 1961 *Seul ou avec d'autres* (Denis Héroux, Association Générale des Etudiants de l'Université de Montréal) Co-writer, co-director with Denis Héroux. 65 minutes, b&w.
- 1962 *Champlain* (NFB) Writer and director. 28 minutes, color.
- 1963 *La Route de l'ouest* (NFB) Writer and director. 28 minutes, color.
- 1964 *Les Montréalistes* (NFB) Writer and director. 28 minutes, color.
- 1965 *Volley Ball* (NFB) Director and editor. 13 minutes, b&w.
- 1966 *Montréal jour d'été* (NFB) Director and editor. 15 minutes, color.
- 1966 *Park Atlantique* (NFB) Director and editor. 17 minutes, color.
- 1966 *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (Pierre Patry, Cooperation) Co-screenwriter. 87 minutes, b&w.
- 1970 *On est au coton* (NFB) Director and editor. 115 minutes, b&w.
- 1971 *Québec: Duplessis et après* (NFB) Director and editor. 115 minutes, b&w.
- 1972 *La Maudite Galette* (Cinak, Carle-Lamy) Director. 108 minutes, color.
- 1973 *Réjeanne Padovani* (Cinak) Co-writer and director. Color feature.
- 1974 *Gina* (Carle-Lamy) Co-writer and director. Work in progress.





Scene from *Réjeanne Padovani*

Denys Arcand has style. No question about it. Now shooting his fifth feature, he already has an impressive reputation in Québec and is starting to become internationally well-known. For one thing, among his credits is the NFB-censored, unreleased documentary about textile workers — *On est au coton*. He followed that up by directing another feature documentary, *Québec: Duplessis et après*, a scathingly satirical look at provincial politics. Then *La Maudite Galette* (also politically-oriented) followed by *Réjeanne Padovani* which became The Underground Hit of last year's Cannes Film Festival. French critics hailed Arcand with so much enthusiasm that he spent most of his non-Petit-Carlton-drinking time giving interviews. . . . The film has since gained acclaim even in English Canada which was, of course, the last to see it. Did the response surprise him?

"Oh, yes. Well, the critical success . . . maybe not. I sort of hoped the critics would see it my way. But the public! I was very surprised. Everybody was surprised. Cinépix was surprised!"

He laughs with a mischievous glint in his eyes. Cinépix, distributors for *Réjeanne Padovani*, hadn't originally planned any distribution for English Canada. But since the rousing successes at box-offices in Montréal, in Paris (two months in 2 theatres) — well, who can argue with money? As Denys Arcand quips, "*Padovani* is almost a financial success. I play it both ways. I'm doing good these days — I'm sure next year I'll be in the dumps. . . ."

Not necessarily. His fifth feature, *Gina*, is being produced by Carle-Lamy. "Now I'm going with this big outfit. They offered to produce anything I'd like so I just submitted *Gina* and they said fine, what about \$300,000, maybe more? We have loads of money! I mean, \$300,000 is not enormous, but for me — I can't imagine what I will do with all this money. I'm very happy because we have production conditions I never had before. It's a pure dream. I'd be paid for it! I have a salary! They will pay me. Can you imagine that? That's fantastic."

With a Robin Hood-style glee, he recounts how he didn't have to change anything in the script, not even for the CFDC — the other major investor. "I guess they set aside a little money for projects they consider 'prestige product' or whatever. I get good reviews these days and they counted that. I image it's that."

When you consider his reputation it's obvious *Gina* will also be very political. It is. The basic story line concerns a travelling stripper in northern Québec who happens to be staying at the same hotel as a film crew shooting a documentary about textile workers. . . .

Shades of paranoia . . . is Arcand planning to include scenes from the still-censored *On est au coton*? "I could but I won't. Parts of it will look like *On est au coton* a lot. (I hope.) I'm transcribing parts of the dialogue. But I want to shoot something else, from the moral standpoint. I don't feel I should mix people who are making \$200 a day under the



Vincent Padovani, construction company chief

Actors' Equity System with people who are being paid \$16 a day to die slowly in a factory. I could rationalize it very well, but it's just a feeling I have that this would be immoral. I don't know why, even though I want to make as strong a statement as possible I prefer not to mix real people with a totally fabricated story."

Totally fabricated? Perhaps as much 'fiction' as *Réjeanne* which deals in an almost slickly beautiful way with political corruption. Arcand has been enormously amused by English Canada's response to that one, "So Québec is really corrupt. Well, you can't trust those French Canadians. . . . We have nothing like that here!"

"That's what's fun with making this kind of film. Even though I know the pitfalls of doing a Coca-Cola commercial with professional actors, but you can be really subversive if you get a chance to get into that circle. People will see that film not because they're politically motivated, but maybe they saw the ads and it looked like good entertainment and they like this actress or whatever. Maybe it shocks some people, but I guess that will be helpful"

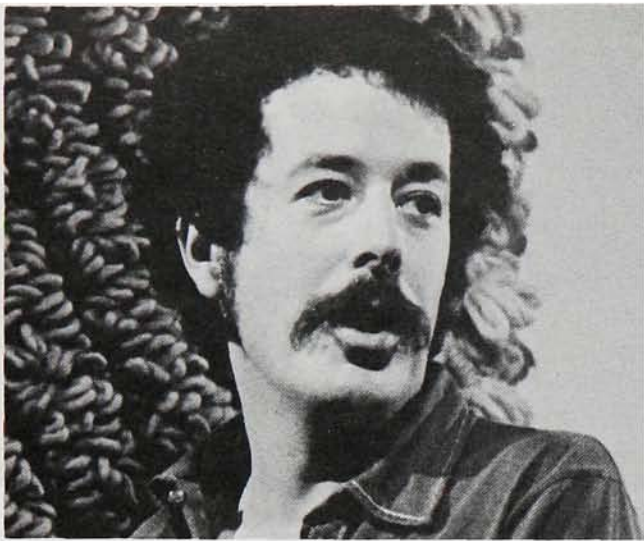
In some respects *Réjeanne Padovani* is subversive in a similar way to Costa-Gavras' *Z* or *State of Siege* — commercially successful yet highly political films all. Does he see any similarities himself?

"It's very difficult because I can't judge myself. I'm not trying to and I'm not even thinking about it. I know Costa-Gavras a little bit, but he's in a very different circle. He's a very BIG filmmaker who makes world successes, and he thinks a lot in terms of audience. When he's making a film, he's thinking — here I'll put a car chase or this kind of sequence because people will be entertained by it. Costa-Gavras tries to be attuned to the pace of the audience, even if he is politically committed. His films have to make money because he works on a purely commercial basis, otherwise he won't make any more films. Whereas I never think of the audience. I don't care. I make films for purely egoistical purposes — because I like the story and I try to entertain myself primarily."

Egoistical or not, his political slant would seem to make the Montréal Co-op (ACPAV) the ideal place for him to work, but he refrains because he can get money elsewhere. Instead, he hires the Co-op's members as assistants on his features to give them experience. "I have 2 or 3 directors from the Co-op who will be sort of assistants, just looking at how we work. I think it's marvelous. I can beat the system right now. I'm not saying I will be able to do that all the time, but if I can con people to give me money — why should I take money away from the people in the Co-op? They have so little."

Arcand is very impressed by the work of some of the young directors, many of whom he considers very promising, "I think there is one mainly. Jacques Leduc. He makes absolutely impossible films — two-hour films about two people in a room! Mind you, he does the complete opposite of what I'm doing. His films are psychological and totally on another level. But he has an absolutely fascinating style. He will become very





Celine Lomez, now starring in *Gina*, as she appeared in *Padovani*

famous at 50 and he has a chance because he's on staff at the National Film Board who, of course, never distribute his films. They're only known to a few happy people. There are a few others in Québec — like André Théberge who should come in solidly in the years to come; and maybe also Michel Bouchard who made *Blanc Noël*. Théberge and Bouchard are very young, 25 or something like that. Leduc is about my age, about 32."

This 'new wave' is developing very differently from those in Denys Arcand's generation. "The fact is that they are different. I was still brought up in the old tradition of the NFB. I learned my trade before making any films. While I was at the Film Board I shot every kind of film possible — 16 black and white, 16 color, 35 black and white, 35 color, I made animation films, short films — anything you can imagine. In a way, these young guys have it more easy and more difficult. Their first film is a feature! If it is very badly received they can be down for a year or two. I'm sure it comes as a shock — you can't think you're talented if you bomb at this age. But at the same time, when they get to be my age they'll have a lot more experience. They will already have had four or five dramatic features — even if they're extremely low-budget. They'll have learned a lot of things I'm still learning. Technically I feel rather confident, but actors — this is another problem. Also, you can be technically very competent but it's a totally other story to be able to write a meaningful film that is dramatically well-constructed. This you can learn only by doing it."

Yet it seems no Québécois filmmaker ever has to look for scripts, while English Canadian directors rarely write their own material and are constantly bemoaning the lack of good scripts. Why this basic difference? "Maybe, in Québec we were brought up thinking a little more about the *auteur* theory of film and English Canadians go along with the American tradition where the director is somebody you hand a script to and he directs and that's it. In our case, we think you express yourself in your film. You don't have to look for scripts. You can get help and occasionally choose a script that's already written, but I wouldn't want to make it a policy. I'm working on developing myself as a better writer."

As with the script for *Gina* "I wrote it myself but I have always worked with Jacques Benoit who is a novelist. I use him as a mirror. When it's all written I give him the script and he makes suggestions or rewrites one or two scenes. Then he gives it back to me and I correct what he gives me. The final version is always mine. For *Gina*, I'm doing this with three writers because I don't have much confidence in myself as a writer. That's not my trade, but I have a perfectly good idea of what I want to say and they help me say it."

It seems to work rather well. Réjeanne Padovani was virtually ignored at last year's Film Awards but Arcand and Benoit did receive the Etrog for Best Screenplay. Arcand was not in Montréal during the Awards week but authorized his

cameraman to sign his name also on the famous Manifesto. "For Québec the Awards mean nothing in terms of publicity, commercial value, TV exposure, anything you can think of. Mind you, if the prizes would have been very meaningful to Québec filmmakers maybe you wouldn't have had that solidarity. They were angry at the pre-selection committee which didn't even submit to the jury very important films made by young filmmakers who were promising, but had no name or big company to back them up. But awards are always so unjust. There shouldn't be any awards — you don't make films to win awards! The problem is in commercial cinema where you can say — this film won such and such an award — and it drives people to see it. But I think a festival where everybody gets together would be very helpful. That would be nice. I don't think it has to be competitive."

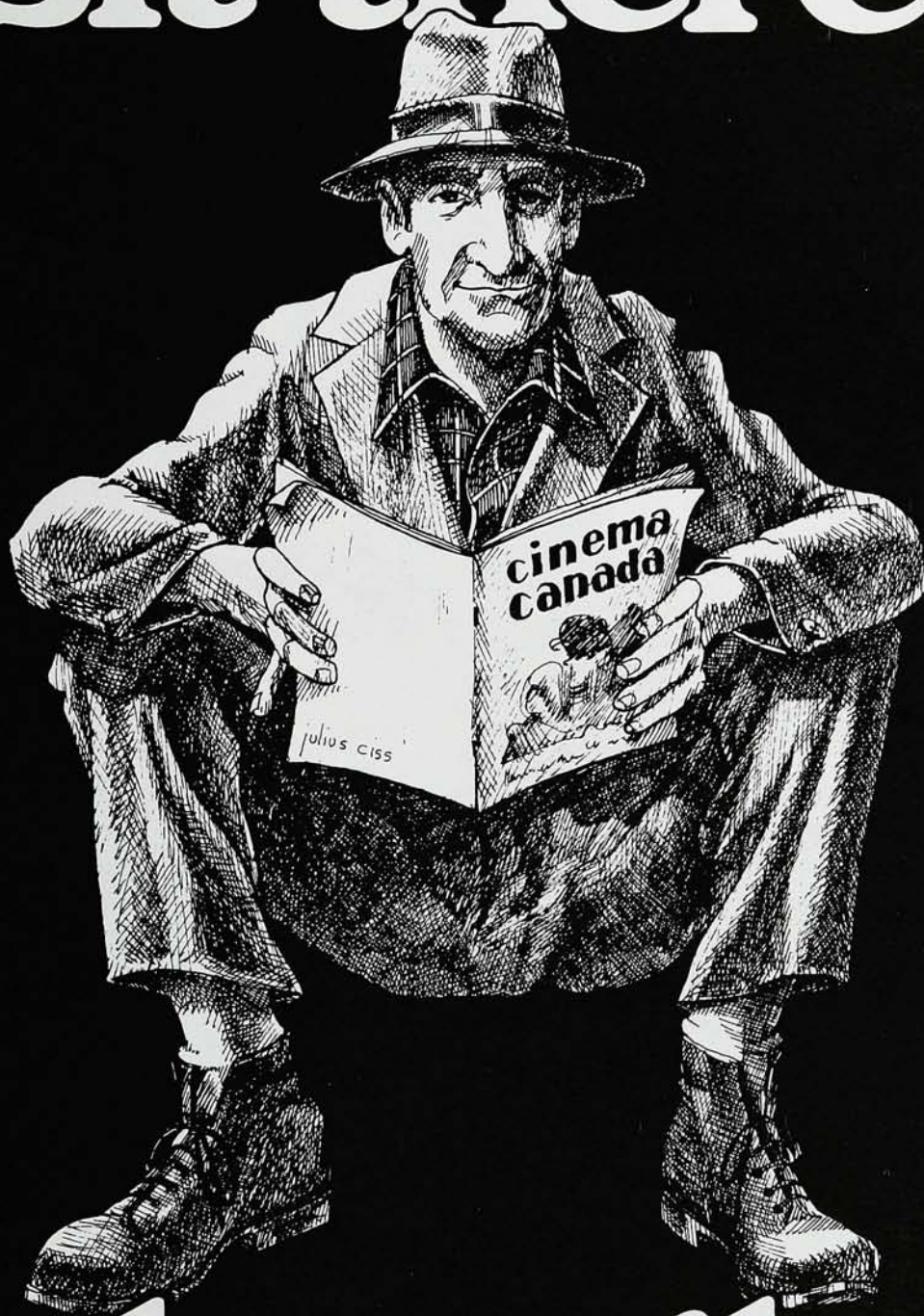
Non-competitive is also how Denys Arcand works on set. He not only writes collectively but during shooting, decisions are often communal. "I've been overruled in *Padovani* a few times. The crew said — no, we won't shoot this. We're very sorry but it's a completely stupid part and we must find something better. . . . It's not a question of the last word being mine. More often, they suggest ideas which are better and I replace them or add them on top of mine. Everybody suggests things, I'm just like the executive. When you're on the set somebody has to be responsible for something. Then, I have a very particular job which means I'm talking to the actors. If everybody were talking to the actors it would be complete chaos! So somebody has to have that job and we call it the Director. It gets complicated when journalists or TV people want to simplify and it's so much easier to say a film BY so and so than to say Réjeanne Padovani is a film by Alain Dostie and Jacques Benoit and Jean and so forth and so on."

Celine Lomez, who starred in *Réjeanne Padovani*, is doubly experienced to play the lead in *Gina*. "She was brought up as a tap-dancer. Her mother put her on the road at 12. She grew up in clubs. So I'm working with her and it's pretty helpful."

Denys Arcand has used the same crew for all his films. One of the biggest problems facing them in *Gina* is the role of the stripper. "I still haven't solved the problem of that fact. I will have to shoot some sequences where she's doing her job and I don't know how to do it so you won't get this thing where the film is supposed to denounce exploitation and yet shows a girl undressing in a very seductive way. I'm not ready yet, but we're doing the exteriors first so I won't shoot that until the extreme end of the film. I put the problem to the crew and everybody's supposed to be thinking of it right now. Will we have a solution by the end of April? I don't know, but I don't want to talk about tomorrow. I want to work. That's basically my point of view, and I hope you won't publish this for a while because I need authorization to enter the textile mills. We'll try to con them to get in with a film crew. With the reputation I have in the textile business, it won't be easy. . . ."



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