FILM REVIEWS

A Quiet Day In Belfast

Produced and directed by Milad Bessada, screenplay by Jack Gray, based on a stage play by Andrew Angus Dalrymple, director of photography – Harry Makin CSC, edited by Simon Christopher Dew, music composed by Greg Adams and Eric Robertson, opening dog chase music by Stained Glass, executive producers – Milad Bessada and Stan Feldman, associate producers – Harvey Sherman and Richard Schouten, produced with the assistance of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, a Twinbay Media International Production. Starring Barry Foster, Margot Kidder, Sean McCann, Leo Leyden, Mel Tuck and Joyce Campion. Feature length, colour, 35mm. Distributed by Ambassador Films.

The Marcel Ophuls film, **A Sense of Loss**, screened at Stratford last year but never released in Canada, deals with what is delicately referred to as "The Trouble" in Ireland. Through seemingly endless interviews, Ophuls attempts to define the nature of the problem. He succeeds in evoking the tragedy of the people by impressing the audience with the utter senselessness of it all. The strife in Ireland has no one cause and there can be no simple answers. The hatred which feeds on the suffering of the Irish is like the mythical many-headed Hydra; when you lob off one head, two more grow in its place.

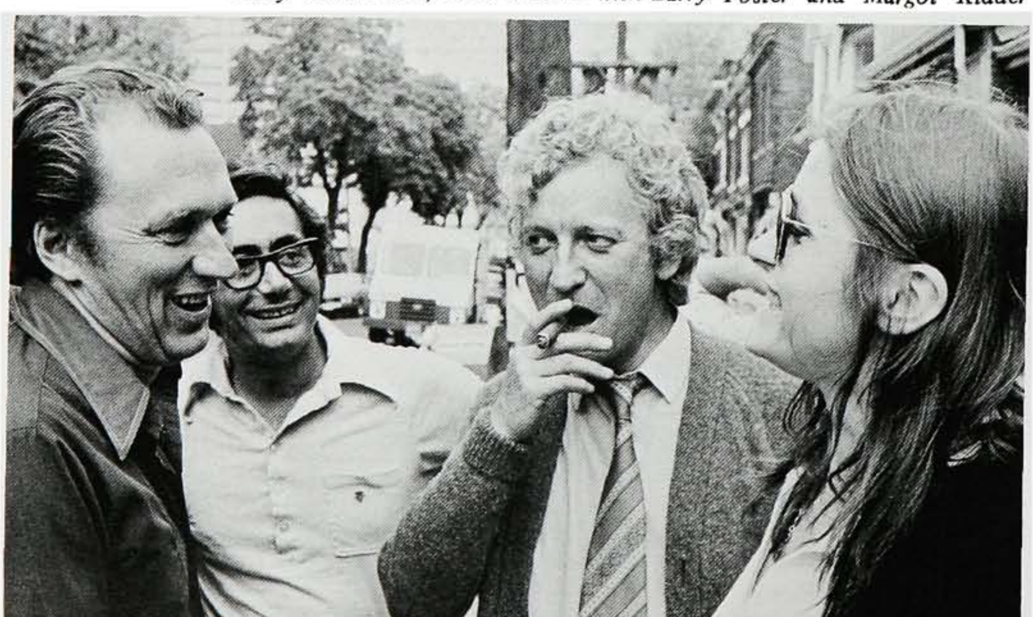
Whereas Ophuls' work is the latest in a long line of documentaries approaching the problem, there has been little attempt to treat the material fictionally. Now, the Canadian feature, **A Quiet Day In Belfast**, produced and directed by Milad Bessada, seeks to examine what effects "The Trouble" has on the citizens of Belfast.

The film, co-sponsored by The Canadian Film Development Corporation and Famous Players, is considerably rewritten from the play by Andrew Angus Dalrymple, which ran last year at the Tarragon theatre in Toronto. Bessada read the script at the Playwrights Co-op and bought the film rights before Tarragon bought the stage rights. Costing in the neighbourhood of $500,000, the film is the first Canadian feature to be shot in a foreign country. Many of the actors, Canadians of Irish descent such as Margot Kidder and Sean McCann, were taken to Dublin to shoot the exterior scenes. Interiors were filmed largely in Toronto.

The implied irony of a title like **A Quiet Day In Belfast** prepares an audience to be either amused or provoked. By the end of the film, however, neither has happened. The audience is left feeling let down because the experience lacks the unexpectedness of reality – the sense of wonder that marks the difference between Filmic and Television reality. Jack Gray's lacklustre adaptation of the play and uncertain direction by Bessada have resulted in a film of cardboard characters and newspaper plots.

A Quiet Day In Belfast contains a lot of good material; it is sad to see it squandered for lack of a rewrite. The attempt is made to deal with the waste of life that occurs in strife-torn Ulster and Bessada points out that the film isn't just about Ireland; it could be about Vietnam, the Middle East or even the F.L.Q. in Quebec. The names are different, the ideologies may be, but the people always end up suffering – usually senselessly. In such a situation, both the innocent and the guilty perish. In this respect, the film implies the inevitability of major tragedy, but it never quite succeeds in moving the audience to tears. Too much of the film's technique and style stand in the way.

Harry Makin CSC, Milad Bessada with Barry Foster and Margot Kidder



Bessada, in his first directorial effort, concentrates very hard on developing a style of his own. The result is a quirky jumble that leans heavily on textbook cinematography and on his own experience writing television drama for CTV. The film is too smooth – as slick as a Made-For-TV film. There is an overabundance of match-cutting; characters drinking, driving cars or switching on radios are linked to similar scenes with clockwork predictability. It becomes impossible to build up an atmosphere of tension, of events rushing to a sweeping climax because the audience can figure out a character's actions before he does himself.

And when suspense is attempted, it is signalled and underscored by overly dramatic chords on the soundtrack so that even the dullest of us will realize that something significant is happening. This is all fine for TV work, but in the privacy of a darkened theatre, this grates; and it grates hard.

The characters themselves lose out in the writing. Since the film is about the effects of hatred on their lives, it is curious that the characters are painted so shallowly. Like figures on a TV screen, they possess no background or complexity of emotions. They enact stock responses to their problems and never rise above them. Their dialogue is stagey and wooden: depth of character has been replaced by quantity of characters.

There are enough character types represented in the film, from earnest, turtle-necked rebel leaders to monacled majors with handle-bar moustaches and dotty old busybodies, that one could fill an encyclopedia of cliché with them. Their main purpose seems to be for local colour – to provide a quick laugh and to give a feeling of the spectrum of life in much the way a beer commercial gives us an understanding of the kind of people that drink beer.

Even the main characters lack purpose and meaning. John Slattery, played by Barry Foster (the murderer in Hitchcock's **Frenzy**) is a turf accountant who resents the fact that his sister is marrying a British soldier. Yet his hatred is curiously ambivalent. He grudgingly places a bet for a Protestant, acts respectful to his British employer and

Sean McCann in his role as a revolutionary

jokes about his sister's wedding. We never really learn why the script focuses on him other than the fact his betting shop figures prominently in the day's events. At best, he seems a bit befuddled by the situation. For most of the other characters, they play their one characteristic trait to the hilt. It is frequently difficult to tell just what beliefs a character holds; they merge together so readily in the mind.

But then, this is perhaps another way of looking at the film. If the characters are cardboard and the plot a creaky melodrama compiled from newspaper clippings, perhaps what we are left with is, in reality, a modern version of a mediaeval morality play where God and the Devil do battle through various symbolic players. Here though, God and Satan have removed themselves from the fray, leaving the marionettes dangling from their strings.

There is much in the film that serves a symbolic function. Radios coldly fill in the news of bombings and assassins on which the community thrives, yet ironically, this news is shown to be written with the distorted viewpoint of a drunken journalist who gathers his information from gossips. The motif of the dog race is also used in an interesting way. Though the people are separated by hatred, a common desire to bet on a sure thing easily breaks down the barriers of ideology. Symbolically the greyhound, trained through starvation to ensure a win, unites the Protestants and Catholics in the sport of racing and becomes the only survivor of the carnage when a bomb rips apart the festive gaiety of the betting shop. But still the symbol is obscure. Is greed-inflicted suffering an effect or a cause of the Irish situation? The film doesn't tell us.

The best scenes in the movie all connect to an underlying message of futility and hypocrisy. In one scene, a terrorist carrying one of his devices through the streets encounters a group of children, who have been haranguing the British Patrol. The boys seize the package from the revolutionary and toss it about until it explodes, killing them all. The scene brilliantly records the ironic justice meted out to men who breed hate and fear. They end up being destroyed by their uncontrollable creations.

In another scene, four young Protestants who have bombed a church, decide to help clean up the rubble. While the priest is piously wishing "If only we could work together", the "Prods" are in the background carting off the altar ware. The priest's words are rendered empty by the reality of the situation. Working together becomes a hypocritical act which is doomed to failure.

Touches such as these show promise, but a predictable script and uncertainty of style work against the film. As a result, the sheer horror of the final bloodletting is diminished by indifference on the part of the audience. Thus, what on paper seemed to be quite a day in Belfast ends up by leaving the audience with an advanced case of ennui.

– Günter Ott

Réjeanne Padovani

Ah yes, what would we do without politicians? They certainly can make life interesting, perhaps perversely so these days, but interesting nonetheless. They're the people we love to hate, and apparently not without good reason; the evidence continues to mount against them. Now, very much in the spirit of the times, filmmaker Denys Arcand has offered a Québecoise perspective on the controversy. The way he tells it in **Rejeanne Padovani** (no doubt much to the satisfaction of Canada's more ardent nationalists), we really don't need to import foreign scandals for our future entertainment.

As an expose of power and corruption in Quebec's high places (all fictional of course), **Rejeanne Padovani** hasn't much impact left, how that the public's once ambivalent attitude towards politics has, as Arcand has said, changed to outright cynicism. Rather, the film's impact lies on a more personal level, in its stark characterizations of people caught up in one man's corrupt empire and apparently not knowing, nor more importantly, wanting a way out. As it is revealed during a small evening party with these people, theirs is a society bound together by the free exchange of political patronage, expensive gifts and sexual favours and protected by the laws of bribery, threats and murder . . . all in the "best interests" of one Vincent Padovani. And all quite normally in the course of the evening's events.

This is, however, an empire built around something of a vacuum. As a big time construction contractor, Padovani has made his fortune through favourable dealings with the provincial government. This party is probably just one of many in the past, and many more in the future, to say thanks to his friends of influence. And having completed a new superhighway, the "St. Lawrence Autoroute", he has no choice but to reluctantly bid on the contract for a new airport. He may wish to get out while he's ahead, but he's now far too deeply involved. A beaten and careworn man (played sympathetically by Jean Lajeunesse), he seems no longer to be interested in the day-to-day details of the business. Those details rest in the coldly efficient hands of his political associates and their hired thugs, amoral men not (yet?) troubled by active consciences.

This general lack of guilt complexes (and surely they've all cause for more than a few sleepless nights) is less a

Scene from Réjeanne Padovani

matter of poor characterization than of effective exaggeration. And despite the coolness with which they take care of business, Padovani's protectors cannot hide the extreme sense of self preservation that motivates their actions. No one is allowed to threaten the security of Padovani's world, be they an overzealous photographer, an angry citizen's group intent on disrupting the official opening of the new highway, or an ex-wife named Rejeanne who wishes only to return to her children.

Rejeanne Padovani (played with quiet and controlled desperation by Luce Guilbault) is, in fact, the one character touched with any warmth. As mother of Vincent's two children, she is the only life force in a world otherwise characterized by coldness and death. Significantly, when she returns to Padovani's estate, she hides in the greenhouse, negotiating with her ex-husband through his thugs. Wanting simply to be a mother again, she promises to stay as much as possible out of Padovani's way. But as she finds out, his world demands complete loyalty, a commitment which she forsook in favour of another man. Padovani's thugs make sure that she will never betray him again.

Not an appealing lot then, and Arcand uses them to striking advantage, offsetting to a degree, the rather stagey way in which he has put the film together. By keeping the dramatic unities of time and place within reason, as the evening of wine, women and song unfolds, Arcand has inadvertently given the film something of the character of a "drawing room" play. It's a calculated approach which makes the party a contrivance, not so much to honour Padovani's guests as for the benefit of Arcand's audience When, at the dinner Padovani's lawyer rises to toast the mayor, the minister of highways, the minister's personal secretary and their respective wives, he proceeds in effect to introduce them directly to the viewer. The question then becomes: how much more has been staged for our benefit? Although the pace is drawn out and the people deliberate in their thinking, the evening seems improbably eventful. Indeed, it's easy to wonder how such an awful lot could be accomplished by such slow thinkers in so short a time.

Perhaps though, this is just the kind of apparent contradiction that we've come to expect and accept from the world of politics. How could it help but also be evident in its reflected image? And, like the world of politics, Arcand's film is interesting and often striking, even if its credibility is not always convincing. These days we're entitled to be a bit skeptical of everything.

– Mark Miller

Réjeanne Padovani*

The only Canadian film to cause any interesting reaction at Cannes in 1973, Denys Arcand's **Rejeanne Padovani**, a tale of the ugly world of corruption in Quebec, was premiered for English Canadians at the Stratford Film Festival in 1973, has been highly popular in Quebec, but did not open in Toronto until February 1974.

Still in his early thirties, Arcand has been making films since 1962 when his student work **Seul ou avec d'autres**, with Denis Héroux, and Michel Brault on camera, was completed. He is a committed Québécois whose other works include exposés of the colonialization of French Canada by the French, **Champlain** and **Les Montréalistes** (both 28 minutes, NFB), the unreleased, censored **On est au coton** (120 min. NFB) concerning the conditions of workers, and the film **Québec—Duplessis et après** among others. Unfortunately these are not seen in English Canada.

The treatment of business and political corruption in **Rejeanne Padovani** takes one step further the subject of his previous film, **La Maudite Galette**, a bright super-B crime-and-consequences tale of personal greed and ill-gotten gains.

As with most French Canadian films you can help yourself to the several possible layers of meaning in this story of the dinner party of contractor Padovani given to celebrate the opening of his newly constructed highway, and to thank his influential friends and connections, including the Mayor, for their part in awarding him the contract.

There are two significant interruptions to the celebration, but both are carefully kept from disturbing the joyless flow of what must be one of the most lifeless parties ever. Padovani's ex-wife Rejeanne arrives from the States and begs to see their children and return to Quebec to live, now that the young Jew she ran away with is dying of cancer, and some over-eager young journalists try to intrude, and foolishly disclose that a civic demonstration is planned for the highway opening.

Rejeanne, who deserted Padovani and her children and joined the "rival powers" now is desperate to return. "Ah God," she sighs, "I don't want to speak English any more; I'm sick of living in the States." But she never gets to see Padovani. She is forced to negotiate through an unsympathetic henchman, while Padovani sits brooding in his study, mulling the "moral question" of her fate. As Padovani ponders, the parallel implication is that the Québécois also ponder the fate of those who deserted to the "American way" and now want to return.

Fortunately the actress Luce Guilbeault, remembered as the uncomfortable waitress-stripper in **Le Temps d'un Chasse**, practically the only one of her ten most recent films (including **OK Laliberté** and **François Durocher, Waitress**) seen in Toronto, is such a good actress that she manages to flesh out the part of Rejeanne and make her an interesting believable woman. Guilbeault herself isn't so pleased with her performance. At the Stratford Film Festival she said "Arcand had too much confidence in me" and acknowledged that the tiny budget ($200,000) which permitted no rehearsal, no costumes, only one and two takes per scene in a brisk two and a half day shooting schedule, was very rough.

While the fate of Rejeanne as a deserter is pondered heavily, the fate of the erstwhile demonstrators is taken care of briskly and brutally in the plot. The super-highway is opened the following day as planned, and the camera allows one sentimental moment as a lengthy shot pauses at the rows of half-houses and destroyed neighborhoods the construction has created.

Everything is ugly. The little miserable men, their manipulations, their pathetic wives, their deals, their bodyguards, and their attitudes to life. And they live in ugly surroundings, unflatteringly photographed in their suburban milieu: the concrete-block rec room, the basement bar, the incredible tastelessness of the house, walls, drapes, lamps, fixtures and furniture. The kind of world they make and the means they use echo this.

Despite an intentional dragging in the film, it moves steadily and pragmatically to its not necessarily inevitable end. Any politically-minded English-Canadian must wonder, where are *our* films like this? and wish we had a determined and talented group ready to use film this way. Certainly we've got the subject matter.

– Natalie Edwards

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The opening of the autoroute