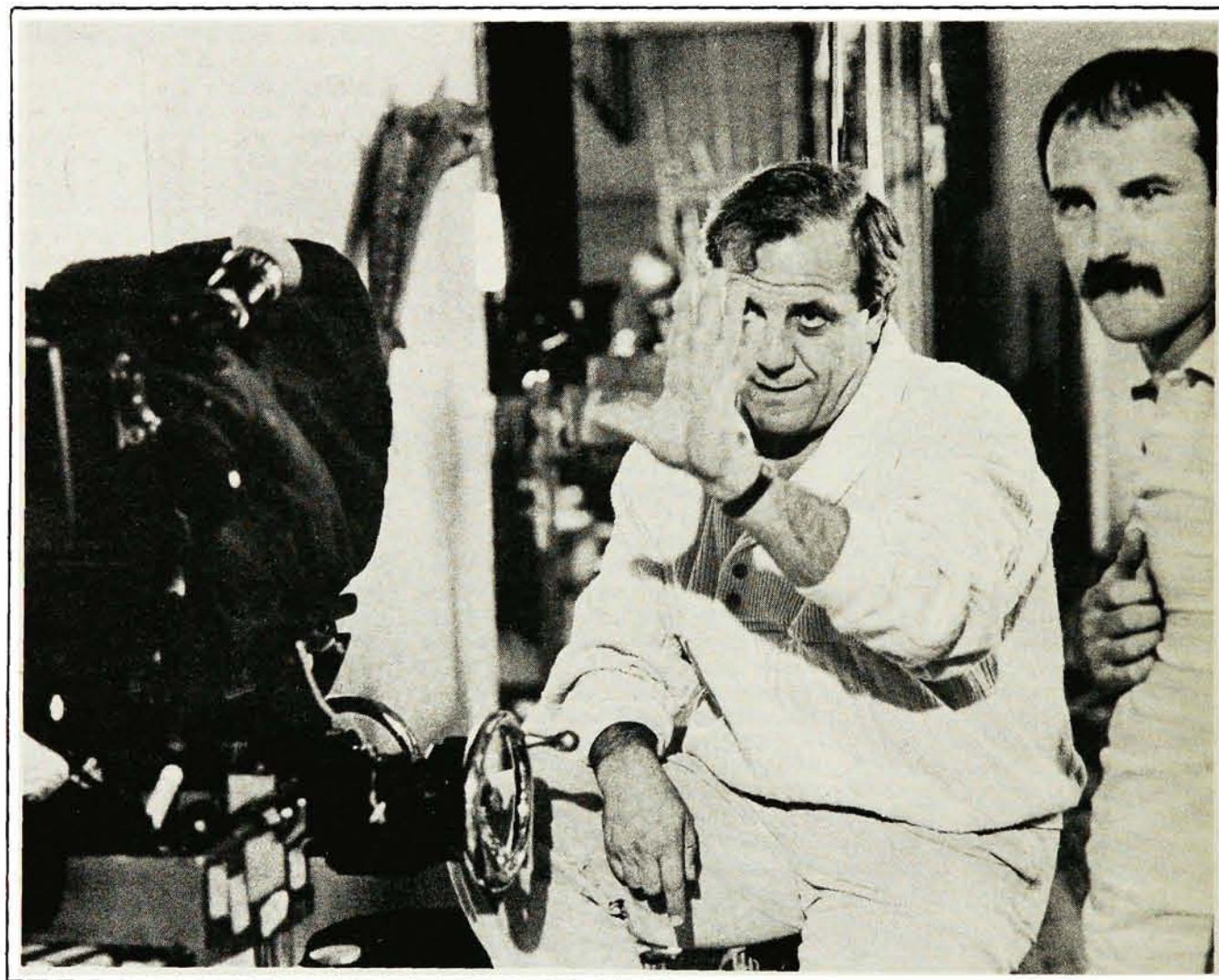


# Tilting at the windmills of the Canadian feature...

## Don Quixote of the SNOWS



An interview

with *Claire Cette nuit et demain* director Nardo Castillo

By André Guy Arsenault

**C**laire cette nuit et demain, the intellectual and emotional panorama of a thoroughly modern couple coming to grips with their own humanness in an ever more rapidly speeding world of synthetic humanity (see Cinema Canada No. 126 for a critique) is a film of rare and subtle efficiency with just an undercurrent of humour and marks Nardo Castillo's directorial debut in features. It also crowns years of dues-paying in the industry making the commercials

André Guy Arsenault is a freelance writer living in Montreal.

for which he is perhaps better known. And will continue to make as Claire was pulled from one Montreal screen after a brief run of a week that met with neither popular nor mainstream critical acclaim.

Castillo has had a long, if checkered, career as producer, commercial director, 2nd unit director, public relations writer, translator and, originally, common labourer. As a survivor of the German occupation of France during the Second World War and, before that, the Spanish Civil War, he retains a fierce determination and great love of liberty — all tempered by the bon-vivant effervescence of his Iberian blood.

The following Cinema Canada interview was held at Castillo's tastefully appointed office in Old Montreal.

**Cinema Canada:** Let's start from the very beginning. Where are you from?

**Nardo Castillo:** I was born in Barcelona, Spain, son of Spanish political refugees. As a baby my mother carried me across the Pyrenees into France during the Republican exodus that followed the Spanish Civil War. This was in October, 1939. We escaped the civil war in Spain only to stumble into the Second World War and the German occupation of France.

**Cinema Canada:** How did you come to Canada?

**Nardo Castillo:** I am glad you ask me that because it gives me a chance to honour my father who was a man of vision, of high ideals, as well as a pacifist. In the context we lived in in France, my

father knew that his sons, my brother and myself, would eventually have to undergo obligatory military service. "France has just been badly mauled in Indochina," he said. "And next it will be Algeria." He did not want his sons hurt in the name of whatever colonialism in whatever foreign country. My father had a very good job in France as a specialized tradesman and foreman. It was a very secure position that allowed him to look forward to a very comfortable future. But he abandoned all that on the strength of his vision, purely and simply from the fear of seeing his children wear a bloody uniform.

He searched for which countries in the world did not have obligatory military service. He found two: Canada and Sweden (paradoxically two countries



*“There is a wind of change in Quebec cinema now, and it may allow us to go in a direction we’ve long wanted – one that is modern”*

with very cold winters.) We lived in Monts aux Bancs, near Toulouse, and I remember at 14 going to the Canadian consulate in nearby Bordeaux for the interview. It was over quickly, and we came here.

**Cinema Canada:** *What were your first impressions of this country?*

**Nardo Castillo:** My first impression was one of exhilaration. You have to understand that, as an adolescent, going to Canada was a bit like having a new persona. I remember my school friends, the looks they gave me when I told them I was moving to Canada with my family. It impressed them very much, and since you like to impress people when you are that age, I milked it for all it was worth. In a funny kind of way it was a sort of revenge for all the reverses we had endured. Though France has historically been the country of welcome for the oppressed since the days of the French Revolution, it’s always retained a certain amount of xenophobia, you see.

We arrived around Christmas, 1952, and it was very cold. We got off the boat in Halifax and travelled to the immigration center in Quebec City by train. I remember the snow and the very strong impression I had of this country as being *immense*. I had a feeling of liberation. I have this strong memory of breathing in this welcoming immensity.

My father found work shortly after in Jonquière, on the Saguenay, where we were quite the curiosities. Not only were we “from the other side” as they say, but we were rare birds, Spaniards. We inspired much curiosity, but sympathetic curiosity. I felt comfortable from the very beginning. I never felt the *angst* that I had felt in France: the fighting in the streets with French kids because of name-calling, the gangs, the fists, the slingshots. A mental lock had been blown.

I recall the first Christmas we celebrated with a large Québécois family. They were many people, all approachable and generous. It was really very nice.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did you become interested in cinema?*

**Nardo Castillo:** Well, I started everything backwards. Due to the necessities of our moving, I worked very young as a labourer. Later I joined the Aluminium Company of Canada, where I started rising in the ranks. I was quietly settling into the secure habits and traditional mold that my parents seemed to want for me. But despite the success, I can’t explain why, I always had this thirst for something different. I liked my independence, and I could never accept the absolute authority of others, saying do it this way and only this way. Perhaps it is hereditary. I got involved in ‘Le Mouvement laïque de langue française’, where I was meeting fascinating people who were doing things I found more interesting than what I was doing. So

slowly I started abandoning the comfortable and moving towards things that were more personal.

I went to night school and graduated from McGill as a translator. I was also writing commercially – trade magazines and public relations – and, at the same time, I found myself hanging out with a group that called itself ‘Fusion des arts’. Some of the people included Robert Daudelin, now director of the Cinémathèque québécoise; Richard Lacroix who is now with la Gilde Graphique; Pierre Hébert now an animator at the NFB; graphic artist André Montpetit, and others. ‘Fusion des arts’ was funded by both levels of government to intergrate the arts into the urban milieu. Oh, we did many kinds of things, some of which were more or less cheeky – for which we received our share of knocks.

Around this time I met Jean Pierre Lefebvre, who was shooting *Patricia et Jean-Baptiste* at the time. So one day I went to see them shooting and as soon as I saw them – this may sound more pretentious than it actually is – I understood *everything*. Changing camera angles; moving actors; this, that; it made *sense*. To another it looked crazy, come-as-what-may, meaningless, but to me I could see that through the apparent total chaos they were doing exactly what needed to be done. And to me that is a parallel to life itself. Life, to me, is a kind of *creative disorganization*. There is in man’s intuitions something spontaneous that we must develop.

At the time I had no cinematic background. I went to see films only rarely. I left my career; I left a whole way of life to live the way I wanted to. To liberate myself personally. For me, what is important is to be *responsible* for my own will. Until that moment I only knew what I didn’t want to do. That cinema should correspond so much to the creative disorganization was pure luck. I adored it right away and I told myself: This is what I want to do.

**Cinema Canada:** *What kinds of things were you doing then?*

**Nardo Castillo:** Well, with ‘Fusion des arts’ we were going small things on video for citizen’s committees, interviewing workers, that kind of thing. We even began a little film, with me work-

ing the camera, doing direction, even doing the stunts. It ended up nowhere because, on a beautiful first of July summer day, the whole crew just kind of wandered off the set to enjoy the sun. Two never came back, they went on a boat someplace. So the film had no order, no ending. It still doesn’t, and it’s charming.

Then, one day, I was talking to someone who worked at the NFB, and I mentioned to her my desire to do something more than wandering around with my head in the clouds. “We’ll see”, she said. Later she called me up to say that a new production house was starting up, and they needed somebody special, dynamic, who would do a bit of everything. That company happened to be International Cinémedia, with John Kemeny, Joseph Koenig and George

know very much. I was quoting prices to the agencies, *very good prices*, and they would give me these funny looks. I’d say “What, 30 seconds? I’ll just shoot two in a day, no problem”. It didn’t take me long to figure out it didn’t work that way.

The last year I was with the Héroux brothers I made seven or eight commercials, and they seemed to be well received. One day I met Guy Fournier who was starting Les Productions du Verseau, and he offered me the whole commercial section of the company. So now I was ‘administration’, attending executive meetings for the first time in my life. During the next few years I really concentrated on commercials. These commercials became a kind of stepping stone for me.

So I started Les Films 24 here about



• Cinema as creative disorganization: Luc Matte plays Julien in *Claire*

Kaczender. The company was started in April. I arrived in May or June and by August I was off to Latin America to shoot a documentary. I did a bit of everything with John.

Eventually the company had new neighbours by the name of Denis and Claude Héroux with Ciné Vidéo. Because of the proximity of the two doors I was dropping in on both and doing things in both places. When eventually I left John, Denis Héroux told me, “When I have something for you, I’ll call.” He was a man of his word, and I became executive producer, first assistant and writer. This was the epic period of Canadian cinema when everybody did a bit of everything.

It’s around this time I started doing commercials. When I started I didn’t

seven years ago, finally attaining my longstanding ambition for independence. I’ve done a lot of commercials since then, and I must admit to having gained a certain notoriety for them, but at the same time I was always juggling these little projects, hoping to shift over to fiction eventually.

**Cinema Canada:** *How does commercial direction compare with feature film direction? And is a comparison possible?*

**Nardo Castillo:** If I could use an analogy, I’d describe it as the difference between a long-distance runner and a sprinter. The athlete who runs the 100 meters gives his everything for, say, 9.9 seconds. But the man who runs the marathon must measure out his effort.



must plot out his race. Commercials are an exercise in virtuosity for which certain individuals are more talented than others. That is perhaps why in commercials you have many cameramen-producers. Because of that *strong* emphasis on the esthetic, on the form. It's a virtuosity which attempts to reach the sublime in its own 9.9 seconds. While a feature film is more a marathon, a test of endurance – especially in its organization. But it also requires much thought about everything that you are trying to do. What I like about film is that the screen is an impartial judge; it mirrors back to you your own image. I find satisfaction in that. With commercials, the satisfaction is something less, in part due to the fact that there are so many third parties when it comes to decision-making. The client is very important. If he doesn't like something, even if it's in final edit and you believe it's artistically right, it has to go. The agency also comes into the process. And all the interventions are done from a different perspective. Though the common goal is to make a beautiful commercial, every level has a different view of what is beautiful and how to go about creating that beauty. It is the client's primary concern to sell his product or service that takes commercials away from entertainment and towards informing effectively and rapidly. I think both these schools are valuable as such, but the nature of feature film is closer to real life.

Let's take the example of another man who came from commercials. I'm thinking of the man who made *Alien*, *The Dualist* and *Blade Runner*: Ridley Scott. If you look at *Blade Runner* it is super – the imagery of the rain, the texture, the form, etc. The story isn't much, but the visual effectiveness is formidable. I once met Ridley Scott in London, and I recognized him as the man who made all the English commercials for Dubonnet and Martini-Rossi, very elegant work. But on the level of interpretation, of the actor's play, the effect of the director in commercials is very limited. In commercials the actor arrives already predisposed; he is applying his talent to a product. It is not the same for a feature film actor who must flesh out his character. Using that anarchic spontaneity I spoke of earlier, he and the director work; we search, we clash, we chew each other out, we agree, we discover, we get excited, we get depressed – it's a total experience.

**Cinema Canada:** Your experience in features includes two previous films *Saint-Louis Square* and *Black Mirror*...

**Nardo Castillo:** For *Black Mirror* I was only producer.

**Cinema Canada:** Could you talk a bit about your experience on these two films?

**Nardo Castillo:** Well, look, *Black Mirror* was... it's a bit embarrassing because it was a resounding failure. I liked the



• Claire's Claire: Lilliane Clune as a thoroughly modern woman

scenario. The project was French and came with its own director, and I took it as it was. What happened next was the result of a certain naïveté on my part. I gave them *carte blanche*. I should have exercised a little more quality control on the content.

But it proved quite a lesson for me. It is quite something when you are trying to sell it down in Los Angeles, on your own money, to be told they do not like it, that the answer is NO.

As for *Saint-Louis Square* I was the hired director. The production was already set up and they brought me in. I even had one of those thick Hollywood-type contracts with everything spelled out. So we shot *Saint-Louis Square* with a crew I can only praise. What none of us knew at the time was that we were dealing with an unscrupulous individual who eventually disappeared with the funds. So the film was seized by the bank, and finished by the guarantor. I asked that my name be removed from the credits because the film no longer corresponded to the vision I had of it.

But as a cinematic experience *Saint-Louis Square* had great value. You know, I find it amazing that a group of individuals who are paid at such various levels, from the gopher who gets four peanuts an hour to the leading star who gets a big piece of the pie, should be so committed to the piece of fiction we are trying to create.

**Cinema Canada:** After incurring such bad luck on those two films, one might have understood if you had stayed away from the camera. What made you persevere?

**Nardo Castillo:** If there are disadvan-

tages to being a refugee and an immigrant, there are also advantages: you learn to depend on yourself. In the first two cases I had no real control. I told myself I'd try something for myself, and then if I got my teeth kicked in at least it would be done by me.

**Cinema Canada:** So *Claire cette nuit et demain* is your first completed film as director. How did it come about?

**Nardo Castillo:** The birth of *Claire* was a simple one. After the misadventures that we spoke of earlier, I decided I wanted to make a low-budget film, but in French this time. (Both *Black Mirror* and *Saint-Louis Square* were in English).

I had renewed acquaintances with *Saint-Louis Square* scriptwriter Arnie Gelbart. Arnie is a very charming man with great intelligence and an excellent scriptwriter as well as a *connaisseur* of cinema. So I said to Arnie, "Listen, I wonder if we could find a small film, with two characters, not too complicated." He said: "Well, I happen to have this text in a drawer somewhere which Victor Désy wrote some 15 or 16 years ago. Why don't you read it?"

The script was all he said/she said – dialogue. It was straight dialogue, but of such refined sentiment and with much humour. I was fascinated by the formula. The word is a fascinating thing, especially the illustrated word. Radio is now mostly music, we no longer have that grand tradition of radio as theatre. We've lost that. Yet people still have great feeling for films such as those by Eric Rohmer and Woody Allen, where there is much dialogue and often funny situations. Not swashbuckling adven-

tures à la Indiana Jones, but situation humour, wit, give-and-take, human relationships – all things that are important to an audience. And I must say I am a fan of Eric Rohmer, having seen all his films. I like his work very much.

So I went to the Société Générale du Cinéma and told them: "I'd like to film this." There were no scenic directions. They took one look at it and said: "Is your brain working right? What is this, a radio-script?" But by sheer persistence and persuasion I finally convinced the SGC's Hélène Verrier. It turned out she had liked the script from the beginning and she was to become quite an ally.

So Arnie and myself started working on the script. For three or four months we rewrote the script I don't know how many times. We needed to situate the film in a context not often seen in Québec cinema: a limited social group living in modern Quebec society. Julien is a painter, Claire runs a successful publishing house; so both could be described as intellectuals.

We felt the need to handle a modern subject, but the dialogue wasn't pointing in any specific direction. We had to carve into it, change many things. But the moment we hung on to the principle that Claire wanted to be artificially inseminated, then everything became very clear.

**Cinema Canada:** Prior to actual filming you used a video run-through to establish the shot?

**Nardo Castillo:** That's right. You see, we had only 20 days of shooting. We were also dealing with two relatively inexperienced actors. So I budgeted for two weeks of full rehearsal using a VTR



camera, the first assistant, scripts, actual props, etc. We were shooting in the actual locales with the actual director or photography using a Beta camera.

I needed to test out the script in the mouths of the actors. Things that may be very attractive on paper sometimes turn out to be very difficult when spoken out loud. It also allowed the director of photography to experiment with his visuals. For two weeks we were rehearsing before a camera. At night I'd view the tapes at home. I could study dialogue and rewrite.

All this meant that when we showed up with the actual crew, the director of photography knew exactly where he was going, the actors knew their lines and most of the problems had already been ironed out. This made for a very relaxed 20 days of shooting, with never a moment of panic.

**Cinema Canada:** *How did you choose your actors?*

**Nardo Castillo:** For the role of Claire I auditioned. But for the role of Julien it was both simpler and more complicated. I had auditioned a few actors but they weren't right. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted for the role of Julien. I heard about Luc Matte, and I went to see Claude Gagnon when he was still editing *Visage Pâle*. He let me sit in and see parts of the film. As soon as I saw Matte on the screen I knew he was exactly what I was looking for.

**Cinema Canada:** *How do you read the multiple levels of meaning interwoven in the film?*

**Nardo Castillo:** Yes, there are many levels to this film and many things are said as statements. I had a great deal of fun with that, adding a half-smile to it. The Claire character is a very organized, successful woman, thoroughly modern. She knows what she wants. She has a simple human yearning to have a child, so she goes about it efficiently, by scientific methods, to father her child. But it's not that simple; it's a bit too cold. Claire's problem is one we all have concerning the modern world. You see, modern man has this immense capacity to do exactly as he likes — he can disintegrate an atom or launch a super-tanker; from infinitely small to infinitely large. Prehistoric man was afraid of things larger than he. Today our worst enemy is what we cannot see — the atom. Everything is reversed. With our enlarged capacity to alter our environment, we've lost touch of our philosophical responsibilities and human morality towards that responsibility. That's what I call the *Immoder- nities* that recur in the film as a book Claire is handling.

So the underlying theme of Claire's dilemma is that internal voice saying 'Imagine, you can do whatever you want, be artificial inseminated, choose which type of child you want, this one or that? But what about the consequences?'

I am not against progress, far from it. But I believe progress should go hand in hand with reason. We need human reason; whatever technical progress we undergo we'll have to fall back on our small 'm' morals. If not we'll all end up in the absurd situation where we all do one thing extremely well, but are incapable of living.

**Cinema Canada:** *In the scene with the ghosts dancing on Claire's lawn, I think anybody who gets a chance to see the film would like to have its director nearby, like now, to ask what those symbolize.*

**Nardo Castillo:** Well, it's actually a parody of life. But I don't know which is the parody of life: the Harlequin, Colombine or Death — that is Life, Love and Death, which have always existed. Then there is Julien and Claire sailing through their super-modern preoccupations, speaking the language of the universe — eternity. Which is real life?

At some point we are going to have to ask ourselves which we would rather be: clowns dancing happily on a lawn, or super-scientists doing something extremely well, but that is dangerous for everybody.

**Cinema Canada:** *One of the striking things about Claire cette nuit et demain is its European style: very talkative and intellectual.*

**Nardo Castillo:** That's several times already that I've heard this, that the film is very European. It is *not* European! It was made here, thought here, is about here. I felt uneasy about people mistaking it for European. Then I started thinking in more positive terms. Perhaps we have made a modest step in going beyond the recognizably Canadian pattern, and have finally broken the 'Canadian' stigma.

**Cinema Canada:** *In which direction,*

**"At some point we are going to have to ask ourselves which we would rather be: clowns dancing happily on a lawn or super-scientists doing one thing extremely well but that is dangerous for everybody?"**

*then, do you think Canadian and Quebec cinema is going?*

**Nardo Castillo:** I see a very interesting evolution lately in Québec cinema. For a few years now, perhaps two or three years, we've been moving away from our existential *angst*, Québecitude and its affirmations, and are going more towards a cinema of a people more secure about itself. I remember a time in Quebec when there were very few Québécois in the upper echelons of companies. This caused friction and rightly so. Today, young Québécois are in university in droves, studying business. As company executives they've risen to new levels, with a greater understanding and more control of their lives than their parents might have had. We've finally left the agricultural era to

move to the urban era.

I find that's what interesting about the work of Léa Pool, for example, with *La Femme de l'hôtel*. It's a totally captivating personal film that stretches the existing horizon. Also Yves Simoneau who does action films, making 'popular' films but in his own genial style, such as *Pouvoir intime* and *Les yeux rouges*. Or Danièle Suissa with her *Morning Man*.

There is a wind of change in Québec cinema now, and it may allow us to go in a direction we've long wanted — one that is modern. At the same time there is the current explosion of methods of transmission, pay-TV and all that. I think we need to find ways for us all to actually see the work of Canadian filmmakers, beyond the controls reserved strictly for the initiated.

**Cinema Canada:** *What can be done to help the creative process in Canadian cinema?*

**Nardo Castillo:** This may sound simplistic but the best method should be simply to affirm our Canadianism. Quebec has had less of a problem because of its isolation. But as for English Canada, I find it very troubling that you cannot distinguish between what is American and Canadian. This worries me because slowly people will identify with the American giant to the detriment of the satisfaction of Canadian cultural ideals.

Look at Martin Lavut's *Charlie Grant's War*. It was very Canadian; it was very good, and it had great ratings. There should be more of those. To be Canadian is to be something more than a farmer, a lumberjack or an Eskimo. We simply can't function like that. *Then* we can sell to the Americans, instead of vice versa.

But I can tell you one thing: the day they sell this country to the Americans is the day I leave!

• Castillo, left, with Claire d.o.p. Allen Smith

