



• Mahée Paiement is Fanny and Harry Marciano is Charles in André Mélançon's *Bach et Bottine*

Pippi Longstockings: she is unconventional, straightforward, independent and has numerous odd animals as pets, in particular the Bottine of the title who is a skunk. As befits this age of feminism and the concern with the image of woman projected by the mass media, this depiction is not unexpected (even Hollywood can give us Sigourney Weaver as a macho heroine in *Aliens*) but it is welcome.

Pippi was a pirate's daughter and her world was one of adventure and fantasy where anything and everything was possible. Fanny, however, is thrown from the idyllic, almost 19th century setting of her grandmother's house in the country into the contemporary reality of a city environment: a place where the *Québécois* traditionally, in books and films, come to grips with the problems of a modern industrial society. For the child this is often a world of broken homes. One where, as in Suzanna Guay's *Les Enfants aux petites valises*, the short which preceded the film, children are trundled from one parent's house to another carrying their most precious possessions in a suitcase just as Fanny carries Bottine.

One of the virtues of the film is its specific social and physical context. This is especially important for the children of Quebec, since seeing one's reality on the screen does confirm and validate it. Most of the film is set in an older section of Quebec city, a typical *Québécois* neighbourhood made up of flats with steep staircases going down to snow-filled streets. But the action takes place mostly within Jean-Claude's flat which Fanny gradually takes over as she brings in her animals and her Corey Hart poster.

The interaction between the world of the adult and that of the child is at the core of the film and provides its most comic and touching moments. There are some wonderfully humorous scenes such as the one where Fanny and her friends blow bubbles over Jean-Claude's head as he reclines on his couch transported into the music he is listening to. And part of the appeal of the film lies in its use of music, the classical music of Jean-Claude's world

and the rock music of Fanny's world. Of course for the children the proliferation of animals which she manages to acquire and the antics of her pet skunk are a delight in themselves. But it is in the working out of the problematic child-adult relationship that the film is probably most worthy of praise. The frictions, frustrations and joys of such a relationship ring true in the film. And this is helped considerably by the completely natural and spontaneous expression of feeling in Fanny and the other child actors.

Yet, in spite of all this, I left the theatre feeling somewhat let down. I asked my five-year-old nephew, who I had taken with me, if he had liked the film. He answered, "yes." "Did you think it was funny?" "No!" "Did you think it was sad?" "No, it was silly." I gathered from this conversation that it is not the type of film a five-year-old boy can identify with. There is a sentimentality, a focus on the emotions which I doubt would appeal to that age group, especially on such a realistic level.

The mixture of comedy and pathos is a very familiar style, one which we constantly see on television and indeed, the film is sponsored by Radio-Canada and First Choice Television. The focus on the home as the space where family conflicts can be dramatized, the emphasis on close-ups and on the emotions and interactions of the family members are all features of the family situation comedies made popular by American TV. This format goes back to the '50s with the popularity of *Life with Father* and has been updated in the '80s to include black families and single-parent families.

The film can easily be placed within this genre. And it shares the problems inherent in it. The happy ending, the reunification of the family around Fanny, even if it is with a different set of parents, is too easy a solution. It is of course this sense of completeness, of the happy ending, which makes the genre popular. The fantasy and wish-fulfillment of the film is evident at the outset when a dream brings the dead parents back to the child. It is a dream which many children from broken

homes must share. But one wonders how healthy it is for them to be encouraged in believing that this dream can come true.

Mary Alemany-Galway •

BACH ET BOTTINE p. Rock Demers d. André Mélançon orig. idea Bernadette Renaud sc. consult Marcel Sabourin sc. Bernadette Renaud, André Mélançon line p. Ann Burke artistic d. Violette Dancau d.o.p. Guy Dufaux orig. music Pierick Houdy theme song Michel Rivard interpreted by Fabienne Thibault, Michel Rivard 1st a.d. Mireille Goulet cast. d. for children Danyèle Patenaude cont. Johanne Prigent loc. man. Estelle Lemieux prod. dir. Josette Perotta cost. des. Huguette Gagné gaffer Daniel Chrétien sd. Serge Beauchemin key grip Yvon Boudrias prod. co-ord. Marie Beaulieu a.d. Pierre Plante set. dec. Jean Kazemirchuk assist. dec. Claude Jacques props Claude Jacques set co-ord. Lise Pharand animal trainer Len Brook 1st. assist. cam. Nathalie Moliavko-Visotsky 2nd assist. cam. Sylvaine Dufaux boom Thierry Hoffman ward/dresser Murielle Blouin elec. Marc Charlebois, Manal Hasib grip Jean-Pierre Lamarche chief make-up Daine Simard art dept. trainee Andréanne Melançon prod. acc. Bernard Lamy prod. assist. Bruno Bazin, Jean-Pierre Fauteux, Frédéric Lefebvre, Marc Beaulieu resource person Lennard Wells stills photog. Jean Demers pub. Bernard Voyer, David Novek et associés. pub. relations Kevin Tierney, David Novek and associates. l.p. Mahée Paiement, Raymond Legault, Harry Marciano, Andrée Pelletier, France Arbour, Jacqueline Barrette, Régent Gauvin, Jack Robitaille, Marie-France Carrier, Diane Jules, Jacques Fauteux, Stéphanie St-Pierre, Djosef Laroche, Marie Michaud, Pierrette Robitaille, Marcel Leboeuf, Pierick Houdy, Murielle Dutil, Patrick St-Pierre, Doris Blanchet-Vasiloff, Denis Bernard, Louis-George Girard. color 35mm running time: 96 min.

Paul Jay's

The Birth of Language

This 55-minute documentary is one of the more curious works I have encountered. In trying to understand and articulate just why I did not like it, I am confronted first with the fact of my own anticipations in advance of the screening. Having a few years ago been very favorably impressed with another documentary by filmmaker Paul Jay called *Here's to the Cowboy*, I know that I brought certain expectations to this latest work: expectations

that it would incorporate many of the qualities I admired in the earlier film – engaging involvement with the way of life being explored, a very down-to-earth and unpretentious tone, risky and exciting camerawork and editing, a kind of nicely gritty, honest style of filmmaking that seemed full of energy and quite refreshing. This style was perfectly suited to the cowboy way of life being celebrated in the earlier work, and perhaps it is unfair to have anticipated that such qualities would carry over into a different subject for a film. And yet, *The Birth of Language* is so unlike the earlier work in tone and style that the difference deserves to be addressed.

The film is ostensibly an exploration of the origins of human language. This in itself may be the decisive clue. In contrast to the local, down-to-earth subject of the earlier film – rodeo circuits and the cowboy ethos of Western Canada – Paul Jay has here chosen a 'big topic', an international topic with academic overtones and kudos seemingly beyond the apparent 'provincialism' of the earlier film. But the switch from local phenomenon to international idea, from exploration of a way of life to exploration of a concept, has somehow scuttled the very qualities that made the earlier work so promising and delightful. One could even say that whereas *Here's to the Cowboy* was unique precisely because of its localism and down-to-earth energies, *The Birth of Language* is lacking in distinction because it pretends to a kind of internationalism, the 'great theme' approach to documentary so familiar in series like *The Ascent of Man*. This is not to suggest that a filmmaker's work may not span a wide spectrum to include both local phenomena and international ideas. The point here is that the switch in this filmmaker's focus has not served him well.

The Birth of Language is a somewhat lifeless, unenergetic film, often pretentious in tone, humourless, but aspiring to more than it delivers. Unfortunately, the film says very little of interest or beyond the obvious, at the same time that it seems imbued with high purpose and nobility of theme. *The Birth of Language* marshalls an impressive battery of anthropologists as interviewees, but manages to be simplistic rather than insightful, plodding and 'academic' in the worst sense of the word rather than challenging or truly informative.

We learn, essentially, that human language is different from animal communication, that humans speak many different languages and learn them from infancy, that apes, try as they might under human experiment and tutelage, simply cannot master human speech, that the development of spoken language must have coincided with the development of conceptual thinking. All this is delivered with a kind of wonder, turning the film into a simplistic homage to the fact that this 'momentous turning point' in human development occurred at all. Even this awe would be acceptable in all its simplistic delivery were it not accompanied by a strange subtext running beneath its overt content.

Throughout the film, the voice-over narration is oddly insistent on the point that human language be seen as a "ra-

tional, planned activity" clearly delineating humans from the animal world. This view is reiterated so often as to become a kind of anxious emphasis running as subtext. We are told that early hominids must have evolved speech because of the necessities of work, that, "the more they had to organize their activity, the more they had to say," that, "it was in work people learned to think." This insistence on language as work-related, 'rational' and 'planned' becomes the film's way of distinguishing between animal and human - a distinction that seems to carry with it an odd anxiety in the film itself. Much seems to be made of the 'fact' that animal communication arises out of instinct and 'blind drives', while humans are purposeful and rational and speech itself is to be seen as the very sign of this organization and planned rationality. A non-expert, playing devil's advocate, might well ask whether or not pleasure, emotion, love, joy, or play could have had some role in giving rise to the birth of language; but those factors are never addressed as possibilities. To do so might blur the anxious distinction insisted upon between animal and human.

This unconscious subtext explains, in a way, the lengthy sequences devoted to various apes' failure to fully master human speech. Though there is no reason to expect that any one species should be able to communicate in any other species' language, the failure of various apes and chimps to go beyond a certain stage of conceptual communication becomes a subtle way of reassuring humans as to their 'supremacy' in the world. That the 'supremacy' resides in "planned, rational activity" is reiterated throughout the film and even in its closing lines, where we are asked to consider that it was through the development of human language that the species gained, "knowledge, science and human enlightenment," and could "deal with nature and others in a planned and rational way".

Thus mirroring the rationalism of the dominant society, with all its anxious fears about the animal nature of humans, the film nevertheless cannot help but reveal an unusual split within its own workings. If there is any energy in the film at all, it is within the sequences which reconstruct life in Africa, "40 or 50 thousand years ago". Actors in full hominid makeup reenact certain dimensions of tribal life, but particularly aspects such as hunting, tool-making, food-gathering - the very purposeful activities which the film has been so in-

sistent upon as demarcating human from animal. Such reenactments noticeably exclude any sense of ritual, magic, song, pageantry, mime, dance, or spiritual expression that were such a central feature of early tribal life. Rather, the reconstructions suggest that early humans were as proper and subdued, polite and purposeful as Canadians in the twentieth century. Even so, that the film's only glimmer of energy resides in such scenes suggests that, like our larger society itself, the filmmakers are drawn to a reconnection with the 'primitive', a reunification of the rational and animal sides of our nature. This desire, however, must be masked by the high purpose and 'academic' tone of the film, and especially by the voice-over narration continually insisting on the planned, rational dimension of human beings.

Such a reading of the unconscious subtext of *The Birth of Language* seems necessary to not only partially reveal a specific ideology running through it, but also to at least partially account for the differences between it and the earlier documentary by the same filmmaker. It is as though the desire for international success has undermined the very qualities that made *Here's to the Cowboy* such a fine work. The very energy that imbued the earlier film and raised it beyond the ordinary has been squelched, tamed, and harnessed to efficient production. Like the factory scenes which end the film and are (strangely) offered as some kind of sign of great human achievement, *The Birth of Language* seems an unfortunate concession to the bland internationalism that the screen industry upholds.

Joyce Nelson •

THE BIRTH OF LANGUAGE d./sc. Paul Jay d.o.p. Joan Hutton art d. Gillian Stokvis music Russell Walker ed. Paul Jay add. ed. Chris Pinder assist. ed. Celeste Natale narr. Richard Monette III. Gillian Stokvis Dr. Laitman's III. Hugh Thomas sd. rec. Ingrid Cusiel, Marc Chiasson, Bruce Carwardine, Dianne Carriere, Anna George special make-up Maureen Sweeny make-up tech. Rose-Marie Czeszchowski, Judy Murdock, Delores Bruce, Margaret Cichara-Osmond, Sandra Etherington, Cvitka Marun cam. assist. Gillian Stokvis, Lem Ristsod, Celeste Natale sd. post-prod Glen Gauthier, Marc Chiasson, Celeste Natale re-rec. Film House, Tonly Van Den Akker timing Film House, Robert Borics horse trainers Rick Parker, Sue Perreault-Parker prod. assist. Lisa Hillman, Amy Bodman, Leonard Farlinger, Derek Rogers, Nina Sparks, Jessica Allan I.p. Carlton Watson, Laura Pudwell, Debra Chase, Jack Evans, Sally Ford, Diane Hawkins, Robert O'Connor, Patrick Jones, Margaret Ofori, Wendy Walker, Kamal McLaughlin, Jamal Mayers, Renee O'Connor color 16mm and all video formats running time 1 hour

Doug Harris' **Remembering Mel**

Remembering Mel is far from memorable. This first feature from Montrealer Doug Harris is like a Saturday Night Live skit that starts with a good idea but drags on way too long. The first 40 minutes are often funny but the comedy grows stale as the same jokes get repeated over and over again. Nevertheless, it is energetic and original enough to be a promising first film. It may not be a really good film but then again neither was Jim Jarmusch's first feature. Which is not to say that the next Doug Harris film is going to be a *Stranger than Paradise* but rather that just-out-of-university usually translates into less-than-fully-developed-filmmaker.

Remembering Mel uses two well-worn cinematic clichés: the film within a film and the mock documentary that sends itself up. The documentary is being made by a group of ex-film students dying to break into the movie business. They pick Mel as their subject because he's such a loser and the point of their documentary is to exploit his pathetic character for the sake of making a movie that will get noticed.

The opening sequences echo Woody Allen's seminal mock documentary, *Take the Money and Run*: talking heads from Mel's past life reminisce about what a loser Mel was. These interviews are funny because they're unexpected; we're so used to the TV documentary which typically begins with the fond memories of an old school-teacher rambling on about the subject's childhood. But once we're bludgeoned over the head with the idea that Mel's a loser, it gets boring watching him knock things over or get beat up by kids on the street.

Like several of Montreal's recent Anglo film and communications grads, Harris' style occasionally evokes the low-budget, underground aesthetic (à la John Waters). So there are the bizarre characters - Mel's grotesque aunt who does a ludicrous song and dance routine - and the compulsory grossness - Mel stuffing a huge smoked meat sandwich into his mouth and letting it dribble down his chin in close-up.

This indebtedness to American cinematic satire is counterbalanced by *Remembering Mel's* slickness. The production values are high enough that this film wouldn't look out of place on commercial television - which is more than can be said for many indie Montreal features. *Remembering Mel* straddles the fence between the commercial young Anglo Montreal cinema - the films of writer-producer Tom Berry (*Crazy Moon*), for example - and the more interesting underground style of young filmmakers like Demetrei Estdelacropolis, Bachar Chbib, and many of the directors associated with Main Film. *Remembering Mel's* position - squarely on the fence - evident? underlined? is crystallized in the contrast between the plot's sometimes twisted

satirical bent and the choice of music. The bands on the soundtrack are a who's who of dull top-40 Canadian rock: the Box, Images in Vogue, the Arrows, and Walter Rossi. This music is a poignant argument against Canadian nationalism in the music industry.

Still, *Remembering Mel* is a decent first feature. There are some genuinely funny moments, especially when Mel decides he's a serious actor who will not be pushed around by these filmmakers. The film also accurately conveys the desperation of ex-film students trying to make the leap from school to the "real" world of the movie business.

And that, in the end, is what *Remembering Mel* is all about. The director and writer, Doug Harris, and his co-writer, Larry Raskin are recent graduates of Concordia's Communications Program and they readily admit that their first stab at feature filmmaking was a learning experience as much as anything else. It was a learning experience of the vagaries of the Canadian film business and of how to make a movie *real* quick. Harris was working at Taurus 7 in December, 1984. According to him, the company discovered it had some investment money lying around which had to be spent by the end of the calendar year but it didn't have a film. Harris and Raskin wrote the script in three days and principal photography was completed between December 20 and the new year. They then slaved over an editing machine in Harris' basement for most of the next year.

The far from normal way in which *Remembering Mel* was made should not be used as an excuse for the film's faults. But the story behind the making of the film does underline *Remembering Mel's* implicit theme: it ain't easy being a young filmmaker in Montreal in 1986.

Brendan Kelly •

REMEMBERING MEL p.c. Taurus 7 Film Corporation Production p. Claude Castravelli, Peter Serapillia assoc. p. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin sc. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin d. Doug Harris d.o.p. Steve Campanelli, Nicolas Marion, David Franco ed. Doug Harris, Larry Raskin, Don Rennick assist. d. Frank Ross, John Fretz, Tom Groszman, Kim Berlin prod. man. Peter Serapillia, Sean Dwyer orig. mus. Les Leroux loc. sd. David Bannon, Steve Woloshen cont. Cynthia Harris unit. man. Dan Prevost post. prod. co-ord. Andrew Levine casting Larry Raskin, Cynthia Harris assist. cam. J. F. Bourassa, Robert Stecko, Esther Valiquette lighting crew Alain Massé, Christian Racine, Maité Sarthou, Raymond St. Jean, Marc Henault art dept. Dan McManus, David Blanchard, Lorrie Barth, Sheila McManus, Glen Scott Make-up/hair Wendy Boode, Simona Thurnheer ward. Cynthia Patton prod. assists. René Carré Jr., Donato Totaro, Robert Moisseau, Robert Rosman, Bill Conabree, Marc Degagné, Ron Mendelman sd. ed. Jacques Leroux creative consult. Simona Thurnheer I.p. Robert Kolomeir, Arthur Holden, Jim Connolly, Guy Laprade, Natalie Timoschuk, Allan Lallouz, Steven Light, Ariel Grumberg, Isadore Lapin, Estelle Cooney, Bob Brenhouse, Anna Harris, Roger Racine, Evelyn Kussner, Zander Ary, Stuart Simmonds, Tom Gormley, Julie Allen, Essar Raskin, Sharon Woloshen, Dan Prevost, Jacob Greenbaum, Chris Thurnheer, Roland Silva, Bill Conabree, Neil Asbil, Sailor White, Simona Thurnheer, Leslie Tochinsky, Keith Brown songs "The Camera Never Lies" - T.No, "Holiday" and "King's Service" - Images in Vogue, "Promised Land" - Tchukon, "Sexual Outlaw" - Carole Pope and Rough Trade, "Soldiers in the Night" - Walter Rossi, "Must I Always Remember" and "With all this Cash" - The Box, "Dancing with a Mystery" and "I'd Rather Be Dancing" - Foreign Affairs, "Talk Talk" - The Arrows. color 35mm running time, 78 min.

• Learning to talk in *The Birth of Language*

