

André Gladu's
Pellan

Pellan, the latest documentary by André Gladu, is on the surface a film biography of Alfred Pellan, 80, one of the most important Québécois artists of this century. It is also, judiciously, a meandering journey through the influences that shaped both Pellan the Man and Pellan the Artist, namely: his times, his friends, his loves, and his art. It is this insight into life as total experience: struggle, faith, failure, love, work and success, that raises this film above the sometime dull biographical 'method' of establishing facts, dates, and places, etc. It cinematically 'paints' Pellan the man and the artist, into an enigmatic, multi-faceted, warm, fragile and totally human individual.

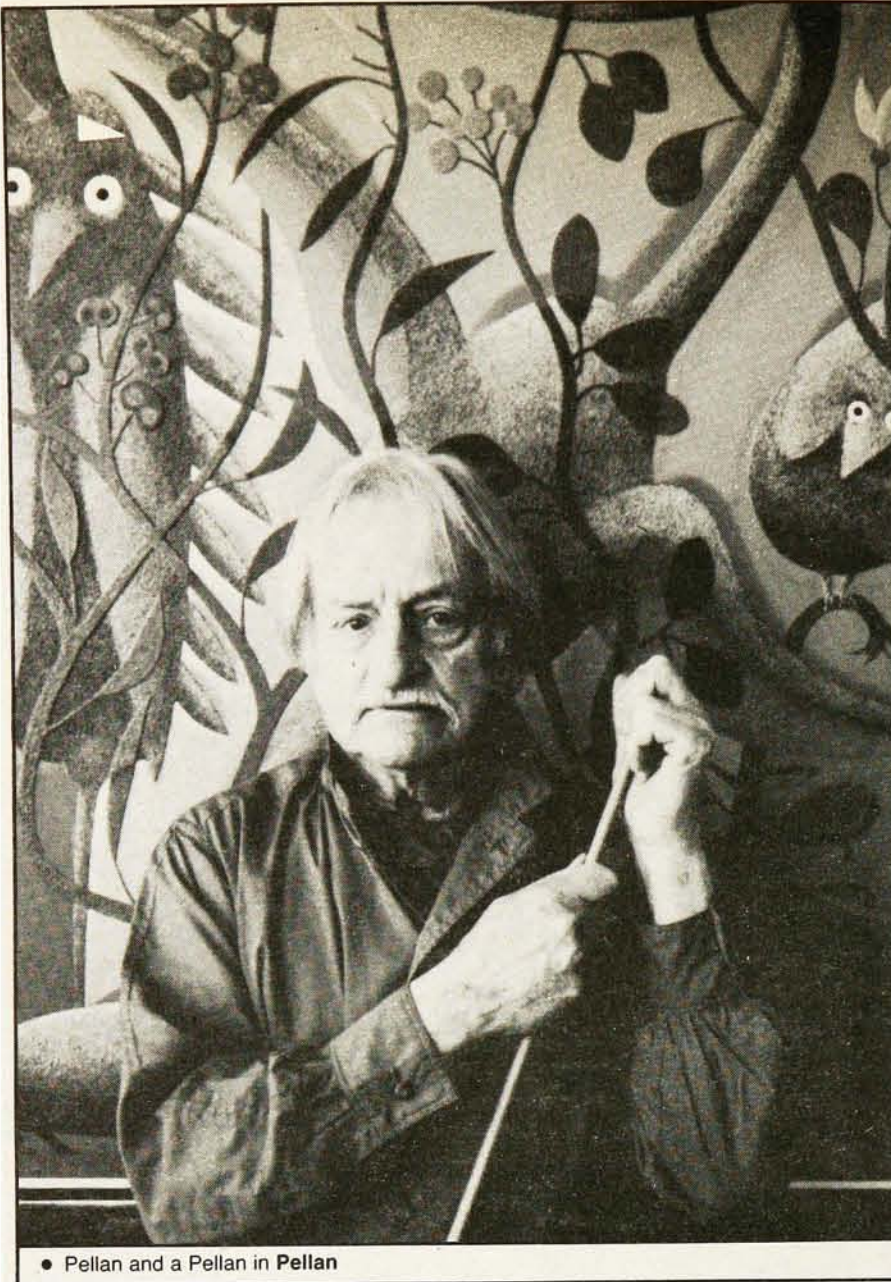
Gladu has wisely stripped his film of any omniscient narration, relying instead on snippets of systematic and well-researched interviews with contemporaries, fellow-travellers, friends, as well as with Alfred Pellan himself. Since there is no 'writing' involved, the various subjects' reminiscences and observations forming the raw material the filmmaker can work with, Gladu instead concentrates on the ordering of sequences and the pacing best suited to carry the story of this extraordinary man living through extraordinary times.

Rich with the bounty of a good story that also happens to be fact, the director then concentrates on adding polish to the 'product' with a judicious selection of archival footage, depictions of Pellan's work, and a staged reenactment of a certain important event in the artist's life – all effective tools in creating a portrait of the artist/man that is clear, fascinating and poignant.

Gladu's most important as well as wisest decision was in the choosing of the subject itself. Alfred Pellan sparkles as a content, unassuming, intelligent, hard-working, witty, rich-remembered jewel of an old man – everyone's fantasy of a perfect grandfather-figure. It is this film's *forté* that it creates such an intimacy with the audience that you almost see yourself sitting in his kitchen, perhaps sharing *un gin-chaud* Québécois style, and talking hour upon hour about life, love and happiness – or perhaps about a Pablo Picasso invitation for tea to his East Bank apartment, or about mass intellectual exile during *'La Grande noirceur'* of Quebec's Duplessis period, or even of sitting on his engineer father's knee as a child, driving the locomotive between Quebec and Montreal...

Alfred Pellan was born in the sleepy provincial town that was Quebec City in the early 1900s. He picked up the paintbrush from his father, who worked as a railroad engineer but painted as a hobby. It is Pellan's father who encouraged him in pursuing a career in art after young Pellan had clearly demonstrated his talent, his dedication, and his love for the medium.

Quebec was then (and would remain



• Pellan and a Pellan in *Pellan*

Madeleine Pellan

so for many years still) very conservative and very closed to the outside world. Its art was still representational, standardized and as staid as the Roman Catholic Church that still dominated much of everyday life. Young Pellan's use of bold new colour technique, his brilliance and his taste for experimentation led him to the only possible avenue that could allow him to grow as an artist: exile.

The Europe he arrived to study in, the 1920s Paris of the 'Lost Generation' chronicled by such writers as Ernest Hemingway in his *A Movable Feast*, would mark Pellan's life and work, for it was a city swarming with the cream of the avant-garde: writers, artists, intellectuals, all singing of dadaism, nihilism, cubism, and countless other 'isms' born from personal search for creative truth. It was a city awash with the new ideas and ideals of the postwar: a new order, new ways of seeing, new ways of *thinking*.

While in Europe, Pellan's star rose to the point where his work was hanging in the same major exhibitions with the Picassos, the Mirós and the Braques. Yet, on his return to Canada he was ignored. The old adage that says *On ait jamais prophète dans son pays* (We are never prophets in our own country) proved all too true, for the Quebec society of the mid-'30s was not quite ready for either modern art or for this thoroughly modern and brilliant young man.

The film details these events well, fol-

lowing Pellan back and forth across the ocean (literally and figuratively) between success far away and failure at home. That he should, eventually and deservedly, succeed in his own homeland was perhaps inevitable, but rife with decades of silent struggle and bitter with the taste of lost years.

This ongoing struggle is never better expressed than during the film's two staged 'inserts', if we may call them that. These concern a series of events that occurred in the mid-'40s when Pellan was hired as star teacher at the *École des beaux arts de Montréal*. With the help of actors and written dialogue, the inserts reenact scenes of the fights Pellan and his students had to wage with the narrowmindedness and conservatism of the school's hierarchy (and, by inference, with the Quebec status-quo mentality of the day).

Coming as they did sandwiched between blocks of interviews, unannounced, and lit, written and handled in complete contrast to the rest of the film, the inserts were a bit jarring to the viewer in the beginning. But once warmed to the subject, they brought a different, fresher perspective to the story that was daring and welcome.

Well-known character actor Jean-Louis Millette dominates (as usual) during his brief but crucial scenes as School Director Charles Maillard, but the actors do not fare as well – suffering through some stilted dialogue and odd scene development.

There are other, more flagrant weak-

nesses in the film, especially technical ones. Unfortunately, Gladu could have learned a few lessons from his subject about disciplining his art form and paying attention to detail. Amazingly, the camera sometimes jerked around in amateurish spasms that would have best been left on the cutting room floor. The sound editing was uneven, sometimes plain bad. The interviewer would ask a question off-camera, a question no one save Pellan could comprehend since the interviewer was un-miked. There were other technical incongruities that should raise the hackles of film professionals, and are unexplainable, coming from an experienced documentary filmmaker.

The accompanying music to this film never properly gels with the story. If film music, according to the old rule, is supposed to be the kind you do not outright notice yet feel moved and transported by, then this film's soundtrack is a failure. It has an effect more like gaudy lawn furniture – the kind you have to concentrate hard to ignore – and the mood it creates does not serve either the film or the subject.

The master's work is represented often on the screen, as is understandable for this kind of documentary. In the beginning, they are shown statically, with the full-frame painting filling the screen without any camera movement whatsoever. Later on, as if the cameraman suddenly discovered it was alright, the camera finally starts to move: concentrating on a poignant detail, panning to another highlight, pulling-back in a progressive disclosure of the total work. A welcome addition to the film, though late in coming.

Pellan is almost always lit in natural, very soft light, sitting in a very homey atmosphere, in tight close-up of face, eyes, hands. However, witnesses of Pellan's life, his friends, fellow artists and art-historians, are all interviewed lit harshly from the side, sitting before a black background in upper-body shots, period. As these interviews are constantly being inter-cut between themselves, the effect is one of making Pellan somehow smaller than life, dull, *old*; while the others become artificial, distant, somehow unreal.

Yet for all these weaknesses, this documentary still retains much to remember and to cherish. That Pellan's life has finally been chronicled for posterity, if nothing else, is enough to ensure this film's enduring viability – for Quebec and for the world.

Pellan has spent his life giving us the best of his art. Now Pellan, too, is ours. Old friend, we are enriched.

André Guy Arseneault •

PELLAN d. André Gladu p. Claude Bonin research and sc. André Gladu, France Pilon ed. France Pilon sd./ed. Jean Charlebois cam. Pierre Mignot (documentary), Alain Dostie (doc. and fict.), Philippe Constatini (Hotel Drouot) sd. Serge Beauchemin, Louis Marion, Maurice Ribière sd. ed. Serge Viau sd. mix André-Gilles Gagné original m. Ginette Bellavance violinist Claude Hamel l.p. Hubert Gagnon, Gérard Poirier, Jean-Louis Millette, Patrice Coquereau, Serge Lemonde with doc. footage of Omer Parent, Jean Chauffrey, Robert Devoucoue, Jean Barluet, Bernard Dorival, Maurice Renard, Margaret and Philip Surreytt, Jacques de Tonnancour, François-Marc Gagnon, Mimi Parent, Jean Benoit, Denyse Delrue, Madeleine Polisenio. p.c. Les Films Visions 4 with financial participation of Telefilm Canada, la Société générale de cinéma du Québec and the collaboration of La Société Radio-Canada. colour 16mm running time 72 min.