

## Goin' South

Under a large tree, a dozen men in blue take refuge from the noonday sun. It is no less than 35 degrees here and the humidity makes moving an arduous task. Despite the oppressive heat, there is a sense of ease and pleasure on the set of *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*, the Canada-France co-production presently in Montreal. And a sense of humour...

A shot is set up and rehearsed. The men in blue are playing a S.W.A.T. team called in by the governor of Rhode Island to control an emergency situation: an old man threatens to blow himself up along with two hostages, one a nun. Director Claude Fournier sits behind the camera and coaches the commander of the S.W.A.T. team on how to approach the shed where Baptiste hides out. The young actor listens intently and absorbs the direction. Good rehearsal. Now the camera is ready to roll but one of the actors is missing. Here he comes.

The bald and burly Dennis O'Connor rushes back from the canteen. He almost makes it to his place in front of the camera before first assistant director Mireille Goulet grabs his hamburger and fries and places them on an equipment box, then prods him off. The minute O'Connor turns his back to them, the technical team descends upon, and devours, his entire lunch. Belly-laughs and shrieks are heard as O'Connor makes his way to the background of the set-up. Fournier enthusiastically helps himself to the fries; there goes the last bite of the burger. And then someone calls "on tourne...action" Two takes and this shot is over.

Fournier's expertise, confidence and relationship with actors allow for this economy in filming: he rarely asks for more than two takes. His directing style encourages actors to improvise freely with their characters. If Fournier dislikes what they come up with, he says so, right away. This openness inspires them to develop aspects of the character that may not be written into the script.

Vlasta Vrana plays Frank, a Viet Nam vet who owns a small community cable TV station. He talks about "not giving in to the script", which for him means creating subtleties in his character which do not exist on the page. He feels that an actor runs the risk of becoming boring if she or he remains blindly devoted to the script. Frank is a cocky vet who struts around town in cowboy boots and bright floral shirts. However his vulnerabilities are evident as he becomes progressively more nervous each time he encounters the enraged Baptiste. This anxiety was not in the script but is crucial, Vrana believes, in portraying the man. It also makes acting as interesting as it can be.

If Fournier's take requirements differ from the norm, so does his shooting schedule. On *Tisserands du pouvoir* the day starts at 10 a.m. and is finished by 7 p.m. No overtime, no 20-hour stints. People are happy and relaxed, says John Boylan who has come from Toronto to



• Taking aim at the Mills of Power/ *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*

work with Fournier. This is Boylan's 18th feature film; he acted under Fournier's direction in 1972 in *Alien Thunder* and, more recently, in *Bonheur d'occasion*.

*Les Tisserands du pouvoir* was originally conceived of as a television miniseries to be shot in 16mm and produced by Marie-José Raymond, president of Rose Films. René Malo, president of the Malofilm Group, producer of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Sonatine*, became interested in the project after reading the scenario written by Claude Fournier and Michel Cournot. He joined Raymond by signing a co-production agreement at which point the project was converted into a 35mm epic which consists of two feature films. France 3, a French television network, has since become involved. The film is being shot over a six-month period on a \$7 million budget: principal photography began in France in May.

The Aqueduct at Verdun, not far from the heart of Montreal, has been the location during the last three weeks of shooting. The waterworks building, a sprawling old brick structure, has been made up to appear as the deserted Lorraine Mills, where a textile company once prospered in New England. The mill figures importantly as the film tells the story of a mass exodus of over half a million French Canadians who left Quebec at the turn of the century for the textile mills of New England.

Gratien Gélinas, the Quebec playwright and first president of the Canadian Film Development Corp., says he is pleased to play the principal role of Baptiste, a Quebec emigrant who left his home for the United States and never stopped fighting for the rights of the Franco-Americans. Approaching 80, Baptiste nevertheless takes up the fight once again when the mayor of Woonsocket reneges on his promise to ensure the continuation of French television broadcasting. To call attention to this act, which denies francophone rights, Baptiste plants dynamite and installs himself in the small building beside the mill where he once worked. If the city council doesn't listen to his demands this time, he and his hostages will die symbolic deaths.

Gélinas' love and concern for the French culture fill the works he has created over the years. It is no surprise

to hear him speak fervently about his role in this film. He regards the French, who left Quebec to escape poverty, front-line fighters in the struggle to preserve their language; he sees the subject as one hardly touched on, and therefore considers this role an important one. Gélinas' presence on the set indeed has a great effect on those around him. Vlasta Vrana speaks of Gélinas: "I'm not comparing him to Jackie Gleason, but watching Gratien work gives me a feeling like watching reruns of the *Honeymooners*. There is a certain mythology present."

If Gélinas' career has earned him respect, it has also given him the chance to relax, at least temporarily. In fact, he refers to his participation in *Les Tisserands du pouvoir* as a holiday, especially when they were in France. Gélinas often directs, produces and acts in his own plays: now he welcomes the chance to simply act. Such respite will not last for long however. As soon as the film wraps, Gélinas and his wife start a tour of Quebec with his latest play, which they opened in Toronto prior to production of the film.

*Les Tisserands du pouvoir* has a cast of some 35 principal characters, including both French and Québécois actors. Gérard Paradis and Juliette Huot, veterans of both radio and television in Quebec, play Baptiste's two rather willing and supportive hostages who have set themselves in an attempt to get to Baptiste before it is too late. Francis Reddy, who played the lead role in *Mario*, is Rick Lanaudière, television reporter and man-about-town, who gains quite a reputation and fan club as he takes up Baptiste's cause. Originally looking for a good scoop, Lanaudière becomes more involved with the issues at hand and draws the public closer to Baptiste.

The 200 extras here today play that curious public who have come out to see Baptiste's confrontation with the town and state authorities. Many of the police, firemen and S.W.A.T. team look convincingly familiar with their roles. Such is the case as these men are the real thing, spending a day off in Verdun. One way to beat the heat - join it. Mopping their brows, it looks like they will never forget it. On a cool September evening, in '88 they'll get a chance to see it again in *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*.

Patricia Kearns •

## Strangers in a Strange Land

In G.B. Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip, Duke, the then fictitious ambassador to China, took great relish in explaining that his Chinese hosts were "an especially tricky people." Although this is a hysterical view, there is little question that the Chinese authorities deserve their reputation for being difficult.

Any Western businessman who tries to set up a deal with a Chinese factory or any traveller who tries to buy a train ticket on his own, for that matter - invariably runs into the brick wall of government functionaries and the red tape of the Chinese bureaucracy. The one word which crops up more than any other when dealing with anyone vested with some form of authority is "meyou", a catch-all slogan which means either "we don't have any," "you can't have it," or "don't even bother asking." There is rarely any malicious intent involved; this is just the way things are done in the People's Republic of China. One's only recourse when confronted with such situations is to try again (for days, if need be) and hope for a more positive response. In short, China is not the best place to be if you are in a hurry.

Despite the difficulties, China has become an almost irresistible magnet for many Western businessmen in the last eight years. Some are attracted by China's seemingly unlimited potential as a market of consumer goods and source of cheap labour. Others seem to have a somewhat more philosophical approach and are drawn to China for much the same reason that people are drawn to Mount Everest: because it's there. In the last few years, directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Steven Spielberg and producers like Dino De Laurentiis and Québécois maverick Rock Demers have been drawn to the People's Republic with the aim of making a film where no (Western) man has gone before.

The Bethune film project has, over the years, taken on the proportions of Everest. It has been a mountain which many have wanted to scale, but whose slopes have deterred even the bravest. Certainly, the 'because it's there' factor was one of the things that attracted director Philip Borsos to the film. "I think a certain amount of Canadian pride went into it," said a tired Borsos after a long day's shoot in the remote Chinese town of Yan'an. "No one has successfully realized this project since 1952. Directing the film really seemed like the chance of a lifetime." For most of the Western crew, though, the *Bethune* shoot will no doubt be remembered as the experience of a lifetime.

The town of Yan'an is situated 800 kilometers southwest of Beijing in the north of Shanxi province. The closest major city is Xian, home of the Qin dynasty terra-cotta soldiers, which is a 10-hour bus ride to the south. The film crew, along with a continual stream of Chinese tourists, have all made the pilgrimage to the place where Mao Tse-



tung set up shop after completing the Long March in 1936.

Years ago, several Westerners made the same trip to visit Mao at his command post. Edgar Snow slipped through the Kuomintang blockade and gathered material for what would become **Red Star Over China**, the first Western account of the Chinese Revolution. Several years before that, in 1937, a determined Canadian doctor, fresh from the front lines of the Spanish civil war, also made his way to Yan'an. His name, of course, was Norman Bethune. In many ways, Yan'an has changed considerably since Bethune's visit. It is now accessible by road (a paved one at that) and planes fly in weekly from Beijing. Much of the population still lives in the caves above the town, but unlike in Mao's day, power lines bring electricity to even the most inaccessible of mountaintop dwellings.

On this rainy morning in June, though, Yan'an seems to have been recast in its pre-revolutionary mold. Today is the day when the meeting between Mao and Bethune is to be shot. Mao (Zhang Keyao) stands on the hill as Bethune (Donald Sutherland) descends into the courtyard below, boards a waiting truck and drives away with the rest of the convoy. An impressive group of extras, dressed in the grey uniforms of Mao's Eighth Route Army, carry out manoeuvres with perfect military precision as many inquisitive Chinese tourists over the wall of the enclosure hoping to catch a glimpse of the two heroes from a bygone era.

These are the extras of August First Film Productions, the military film studio which produces most of the war epics seen on Chinese screens. Along with Filmline from Montreal and France's Belstar Productions it also happens to be a co-producer of **Bethune: The Making of a Hero**. Authenticity is often hard to

come by in the low-budget world of Chinese filmmaking, but this military demonstration surrounding Bethune's departure from Mao's headquarters is about as authentic as it comes. At other times, the Chinese notion of production values leaves much to be desired. Says Borsos, "I think we have different ideas towards filmmaking. Things are just done differently. They'll bring in a 1952-model car and say that it will pass for 1937. Faults in set design or props will just go unnoticed. If it were up to them, they'd film irregardless. By our standards, a lot of things, from food to transportation, are inadequate."

When co-producer Nicolas Clermont, from Montreal's Filmline Productions, spent New Year's Eve of last year in Beijing hammering out a deal to make the Bethune film a reality, the actual problems which were to be faced by the crew in Yan'an were furthest from his mind. The deal, which calls for the Chinese to put up about one third of the \$16 million budget in the form of services, seemed, according to Clermont, "like the logical thing to do for everybody." On location, however, the drawbacks to such a co-production agreement (China's first with a Western country) became obvious. "Language is the main barrier," admits Clermont. "It takes double the time for everything because you have to explain it to someone who is not necessarily a film technician or a film expert." The end result is that the crew has to put in long hours and has to content themselves with getting only one or two pages of script shot each day.

The primary gain made by the Canadian producers in co-producing the film with the Chinese is the ability to make an expensive-looking epic while only having to fork out a fraction of the film's actual cost. What they have to put up with in return is, among other things, a lack of

efficiency in the decision-making process and a dependence (perhaps even overdependence) on the Chinese to get certain things done (which, at times, can be quite problematic). Both drawbacks invariably lead to delays and conflicts.

"I often feel compromised," comments Borsos. "Because it's a co-production, I have to resign myself to not always getting things the way I want them. We're a crew of about 35 Westerners working in fairly adverse conditions relying on a Chinese support staff whom we can communicate with only through interpreters. We couldn't really go any faster than we already are. We're supposed to be finished in China by July 15, but I don't see us getting out of here until August."

And so it goes. Ironically, the troubles faced by the film crew are not dissimilar to those experienced by Bethune himself when he came to China in 1937. Nor are they terribly different from the more recent experiences of other Western visitors to China. There's always a danger in doing things first. If something doesn't work out quite right, there's no one else who can set you straight. If mistakes are made, you're the only one who can sort it out; and that process invariably costs time and money. Added to these standard complications is the simple fact that doing anything in China requires patience. What you are likely to end up with is an experience that can be quite uncomfortable and trying before it becomes rewarding. **Bethune: The Making of a Hero** is a project which seems to be stuck in this first (and almost unavoidable) stage of the Chinese experience. One can only hope that the troubles are overcome and that the ensuing results are worth the hardships endured.

Greg Clarke •

## Making the Scene

It is the sixth consecutive day of a rare mid-July heat-wave in Montreal. The production of **Revolving Doors**, a Canada-co-production/France is into its third week of shooting in the Eastern Townships. Highway 10 leading to this region of Quebec is laden with Sunday day-trippers, seeking refuge from the cruelty of the heat in the shade of the surrounding mountains and lakes. The traffic trickles down to only a few cars as it approaches the town of Rock Island, at the end of the highway. It is here that director Francis Mankiewicz is working on "a very important scene" of the film.

Rock Island is an anomalous Québécois town only a few metres away from the Canada-U.S. frontier, with some houses confusedly falling within the borders of both countries. It is a jumble of Québécois and New England architecture. However, the turn-of-the-century 'Silent Movie Theatre' where the scene is being shot on this day is congruous with the film's period.

Based on Jacques Savoie's *Les Portes tournantes* which won the Prix France-Acadie in 1982, **The Revolving Doors** is described as both "a period piece and a modern-day drama"

The movie is the story of Celeste, a famous jazz pianist from a small town at the turn of the century. As a has-been, a much grayer Celeste reminisces on her "star" days in present-day New York.

Concurrently, the film tells the story of her son, Blaudelle, a painter, who was brought up by his grandmother in complete isolation from his mother. The complex family drama, co-authored by Savoie and director Mankiewicz, is untangled through yet another character, Antoine, Blaudelle's son, as he reads his grandmother's secret diary.

The theme of a family drama and the dissection of its intricate interrelations is not foreign territory for Mankiewicz — two of his two earlier films, **Les Bons débarras** and **Les Beaux souvenirs**, dealt with similar subjects. Where the first explored the possessive and obsessive relationship between a mother and a daughter, the latter concentrated on the triangular relationship of two daughters and their father.

"He (Mankiewicz) is very sensitive," says Gabriel Arcand, who plays the role of Blaudelle, Celeste's son in **Revolving Doors**. "Francis is attracted towards psychology like other directors are towards social problems. He is concerned with behaviour, feelings and relations. This is not to say that he is not interested in social issues, but only through behaviour," continues Arcand. "This makes it more interesting for the actors, because it allows them to explore their characters."

Although not needed for today's shoot, Arcand is here to observe. With a wildly overgrown beard for the role, he is unrecognizable from his last movie role as a leather-clad Buñuelian cow figure who shatters the hypocritical bourgeois com-



• Phillip Borsos giving direction on **Bethune**