



Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour?

Monique Mercure's Balancing Act

by André Guy Arsenault

Her apartment is within one of those grandiose historical buildings in Old Montreal, one that tourists stand back from and wonder what great persons lived there in the past. There is a cello against a corner and a piano against one wall, with furniture arranged in such a way as to be people-intensive. The living room is comfortable and low-key, without pretense, much like its longtime present occupant: actress Monique Mercure.

She is off in one corner, having her picture taken for a magazine, patient as the photographer gives her minute instructions on how she should sit and how she should hold her hands.

"Please wear it," the photographer is

saying, urging her to put on the broach. It is a rather pretty, though by now tarnished, weave of interlocking filaments of gold. It is the Palme d'Or, her prize for winning Best Actress honours at the Cannes Film Festival 10 years before. The photographer can feel the sting of its sharp points on his palm. He can also tell it hasn't been out of its case in a long time.

"No, no," begs Mercure. I never wear it. It's not like me to wear it. "Please," he insists, looking intently at her eyes. She's amazing, he thinks. How old is she? Must be 57 now. I know women half her age who don't look nearly as good. And she's smaller in person than I imagined. Funny how you think film stars are bigger in real life. "And the cello," he says, suddenly inspired. "Just hold the cello close to you, like this, yes. Visually it will represent the route between playing the cello as a young girl and..." he fumbles with his lenses, trying to be quick, "...winning Best Actress at Cannes as a woman. It'll be perfect!", he

says as enthusiastically as possible.

The photographer begins to snap away, concentrating now on the technical task at hand. There is among the photographer's things a research-paquet of photographs taken of Mercure, young and old, throughout her career. After awhile, she becomes fascinated by one of them that lies on top of the rest. She picks it up and looks intently at the image for a long moment — an image that does not carry credits so that it cannot be dated or sourced, a picture of herself in the guise of some mysterious character that she played on some long-ago stage. Aloud, she asks "Who is she?"

"Funny," smiles the reporter as he busies himself inserting new film into the camera, how actors refer to characters they've played as real people, outside themselves. "I don't know, sorry," he says.

For a time she still stares at the photo. "Oh, yes, it was long ago, very early in my career," she reminisces...

Monique Mercure, one of, if not the most internationally renowned francophone actress from Canada, came close to never having an acting career at all. First trained as a musician, then for a long time content as a very private wife and mother, she came to acting later in life than most of her contemporaries.

Born Monique Hémond in the Montreal of the Great Depression, in 1930, she remembers her lower-middle-class neighborhood of Snowdon with affection. Standing out in her mind are the influences of her father, a poor bank teller most of his life, her mother who loved to play the piano, and a peculiar older aunt who played cello for the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and who encouraged the bright 10-year-old Monique into a classical music career.

Scenes etched into her childhood memory: listening for hours to dramas and operas on the radio; her uncle bringing her to see a Shakespeare play at His Majesty's Theatre (now gone) on Guy Street in an English language she did not yet understand; being called on to recite poems in front of the class because she had such a clear and distinct voice; learning to sing and to perform.

"My first time on stage I was only five years old. I remember only the panic. Also the pleasure of being backstage, of putting on a costume."

Her parents made sacrifices so she could attend a private music school, even buying her a \$75 cello — an incredible sum in those days.

Another scene of her youth: She, a petite 15-year-old, carrying that large instrument to classes, standing shoulder to shoulder on a crowded tramway car (also now gone) with the instrument case everywhere in the way. A handsome 19-year-old boy is sitting nearby. Looking at her he says "Well, I suppose I'll just have to give you my seat, won't I?" She laughs, and their love story begins.

He is Pierre Mercure, also a student with her at the Ecole supérieure de musique d'Outremont. He is a talented musician, destined to become one of Canada's most distinguished composers, author of complex works such as *Structures métalliques* (1962) and *Psaume pour abri* (1963).

Monique flirts with acting, her first play a Commedia dell'Arte amateur production, for which she auditioned without telling her parents. She now has two loves: acting which comes so naturally, and Pierre Mercure who is sitting in the audience, thrilled to watch her play.

Eventually she will marry Pierre and will follow him to Europe where he goes to further his career. Friends who knew them then remember the handsome couple: he the brooding intellectual, she the shy, sloe-eyed beauty, newlyweds hungry for living, driving hundreds of miles simply to listening to Pablo Casals play at the Prades Music Festival, explorers of the French countryside from the back of a tired Velosolex, their Paris apartment always full of music or

Québécois expatriates such as Riopelle or Claude Jutra. She remembers being introduced to Jean Cocteau, notoriously famous as the great poet-writer-painter-filmmaker and living legend of his time. "I just stood there with my mouth open. What else was a 19-year-old girl to do?"

Their daughter Michèle is born in 1952, with twin-boys Daniel and Christian two years later. The entire decade that was the '50s is dedicated to family life, though Monique was by this time feeling a growing fascination with acting. In Paris, she takes a few classes, discovering that despite a profound shyness that permeates her real life, in the make-believe world of acting the barriers fall and the characters breath multi-hued magic all their own.

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As the decade fades, so does the mar-

"Sometimes I wish we actors could practice and develop our instruments like musicians do."

riage. "For years I lived under my husband's shadow," she would say later. "But out of my own free will. There are moments in every marriage where it either evolves or breaks. For us...it broke. In any intelligent couple things can't remain the same eternally: sooner or later, I needed to live my own life."

She returned to Montreal with her children, at a time and to a place where a divorced woman was apt to be scorned. Even though Pierre would help financially with their upbringing of the children, most of the '60s were to prove extremely difficult; both from the raising of children alone and the attempt to build a career in a difficult profession.

Despite whatever natural talent she might have, her training was sparse. There was much to do. Getting parts meant taking frequent time off from a day-job working in a jewelry store, going from casting call to casting call, making contacts. She takes night classes in Method Acting over three years (most of her classmates barely out of high-school, while she is already in her '30s and a mother). She begins with small roles in small productions. The bit parts she does get in films pay little or nothing. Eventually there shall be bigger parts in bigger productions, but always they will be interspersed with those constantly recurring periods of actor's unemployment.

Throughout those hungry years, she will return home to children with their own demands of time and energy, and step by step slowly build up her training. "The stage is a great training ground -

you are forced into the reality of acting. I'm self-taught. I don't regret not having had formal, conservatory training, but I'm insecure. Insecurity is a kind of a motor. Through insecurity you're always looking to prove you can do better."

One of her first big breaks comes in 1963, after Jean Cascon gives her a small

role in *l'Opéra de Quat'Sous* at Le Théâtre du Rideau Vert. After only two weeks into the production Monique Leyrac, who holds the leading role, fractures a leg and cannot go on. Mercure is asked in desperation to take on the part, to learn the pivotal role overnight. (The old actor's call to 'Break a leg' will take on a new meaning here.)



photos: André Guy Arsenault

It is barely 24 hours later when the curtain rises on the practically unknown Monique Mercure: she begins slowly, warming up to the role, singing her six newly-learned songs, and earns her applause and her first notices from the critics.

For one month she will play that role, for one month she will fill the stage, and then disaster - she herself breaks a leg, skiing, and for the next five months she cannot work on the stage again, the momentum of her sudden rise smashed to a standstill, the insecurity of the profession like dark laughter on an empty stage.

Unable to do salaried work, she instead accepts Claude Jutra's call to be in his first Quebec-made feature-length, *A Tout prendre* (1963), her first important role in film. Neither she nor any of the other actors are paid, they have to shoot 'around' her broken leg, there are problems and constant interruptions in the shooting schedule. Mercure thrills at the work.

"People don't rush to see a certain actor in a movie here (in Quebec), they go see a film."

In 1966, she learns that Pierre Mercure has died in a terrible automobile accident on a French road. He was 39. Now she is really alone.

1968 saw two important events that would change her life. One was working under French theatre-director Jean-Marie Serreau in *Homme pour Homme*. Serreau would make Mercure discover herself as an actress, working together to perfect a pure distillation of the art of acting itself, a transcending career experience. It would also spark for her a lifelong fascination and love for the works of the great German playwright Bertholt Brecht.

The second important event was a chance encounter with an old acquaintance: Claude Fournier. According to the oft-told story, it is Mercure who jokingly told him he should put her in a movie. He took her at her word.

The script Fournier submitted to her was one of those quickie, comic sexploitation films (forerunner of the *Porkies* of our generation) aimed at the lowest common denominator. It required a great deal of nude scenes on Mercure's part, and promised to be one of those gross sexual farces (much to her dismay). It did, however, have two good things going for it. The script was very, very funny (and to this would later be added a brilliantly satirical music score by Robert Charlebois) and Mercure trusted Fournier. "I knew him as a poet. I knew his wit. I had great confidence in him." In addition, the \$5,000 fee offered her for a few weeks work was more than

FILMOGRAPHY

1952: *Ti-Coq*, by Gratién Gélinas
 1959: *Félix Leclerc*, by Claude Jutra
 1963: *À Tout prendre*, by Claude Jutra
 1964: *Le Festin des morts (Astataion)*, by Fernand Dansereau
 1964: *Ce n'est pas le temps des romans*, by Fernand Dansereau
 1967: *Waiting for Caroline*, by Ron Kelly
 1968: *Don't let the Angels Fall*, by George Kaczender
 1969: *Love in a 4 Letter World*, by John Stone
 1969: *Deux femmes en or*, by Claude Fournier
 1970: *Mon oncle Antoine*, by Claude Jutra
 1970: *Finalement...*, by Richard Martin
 1971: *Françoise Durocher, Waitress*, by André Brassard
 1971: *Le Temps d'une chasse*, by Francis Mankiewicz
 1973: *Il Était une fois dans l'est*, by André Brassard
 1974: *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, by Claude Jutra
 1974: *Les Vautours*, by Jean-Claude Labrecque
 1975: *L'Amour blessé*, by Jean-Pierre Lefebvre
 1975: *J.A. Martin, photographe*, by Jean Beaudin

1975: *L'Absence*, by Brigitte Sauriol
 1976: *Parlez-Nous d'amour*, by Jean-Claude Lord
 1977: *La Chanson de Roland*, by Frank Cassenti
 1977: *The Third Walker*, by Teri C. McLuhan
 1978: *Quintet*, by Robert Altman
 1978: *Stone Cold Dead*, by George Mendeluk
 1979: *Contrecoeur*, by Jean-Guy Noël
 1979: *La Cuisine rouge*, by Paule Baillargeon & Frédérique Collin
 1980: *Odyssey of the Pacific*, by Fernando Arrabal
 1980: *Une Journée en taxi*, by Robert Ménard
 1981: *La Quarantaine*, by Anne Claire Poirier
 1983: *Les Années de rêves*, by Jean-Claude Labrecque
 1983: *The Blood of Others*, by Claude Chabrol
 1983: *La Dame en couleurs*, by Claude Jutra
 1984: *Tramp at the Door*, by Allen Kroeker
 1986: *Les Bottes*, by Michel Poulette
 1986: *Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amours?*, by Louise Carré

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half a year's acting salary. "At the time I was naïve enough to think that I could change Fournier's mind about the trivial nudity. But once on the set, what could I do?"

She was miserable through much of the shoot, but she did manage to anchor her character with some semblance of reality and even to inject some funny bits of her own.

Deux femmes en or became the surprise hit of 1969, breaking all of Quebec's existing box-office records with a \$2 1/2-million take for that province alone (a record that, ironically, would hold firm until finally dethroned by that other look at our sexual morays: Denis Arcand's **Déclin de l'Empire Américain**). Her strategy worked: "If I did that movie, it was mostly to become known." In Quebec, Monique Mercure was now a household name.

Theatre-director André Brassard later offered her the role of her life: Rose Ouimet in **Les Belles soeurs** by Michel Tremblay, perhaps the greatest Quebec play ever. The role proved to be her most difficult and her most rewarding, earning both critical and popular acclaim. She would own that role for five productions, over 170 performances (some in English, which she by now regularly acted in) and take her throughout North America and Europe. **Deux femmes en or** may have made her a Star, but **Les Belles soeurs** crowned her as a Great Actress.

Though her theatrical career was at last solidly entrenched, lead roles in films remained few and far between. Claude Jutra was one of the few directors who regularly cast her in his films. In his chef-d'oeuvre, **Mon oncle Antoine** (1970), Mercure appears as a mysterious widow, a role important in developing the story line and the character of the young protagonists – yet consisting only of a few brief scenes.

It would not be until 1975 that the international film world would know of Monique Mercure.

In the late spring of that year, Mercure was finally relaxing through some measure of financial security – due mostly to her work in theatre. Following an extensive run, she had saved enough money to take a very special vacation with her brothers in France. "I was about to leave when Beaudin's assistant called concerning a leading role in **J.A. Martin, photographe**. At first I wasn't too en-

thusiastic, because I had my vacation in mind. I told him 'Look, I'll go to the audition because Beaudin is an interesting director and I'd like to meet him. But I don't know if the part is for me'."

The role of Rose-Aimée was a departure from the ones she was known for in the theatre: roles of harder, stronger, more complex heroines from works by Brecht, Tremblay and Tennessee Williams; not exactly this innocent, passive woman from before the turn of the century.

"I remember wearing one of those long, flowing dresses that were in vogue that summer. Since I didn't think I was getting the part I wasn't nervous at all and I just did it." Afterwards, without waiting for the official results, she took her plane and went on her vacation.

The office is on one of Montreal's trendier streets, in a renovated, rambling oversized Victorian house. The pretty receptionist, flanked by a series of artistic film posters, is busy organizing the small group of anxious actors waiting for their turn at a casting call. Tension rises as Jean Beaudin comes out a door and straight toward them,

then eases as he walks past to greet a visiting journalist.

Beaudin has a medium and angular frame, making him look almost like a middleweight boxer with his finely chiseled hands, his strongly textured face smiling easily behind a dark mustache and topped by short salt & pepper hair.

He leads me past the bustle of activity of secretaries and office people to his sparsely furnished personal office. A neat desk bathes in soft pastel colours. Against one wall the edging of an antique window acts as the sole decoration.

Beaudin admits that in the beginning he did not see Mercure in the pivotal role of Rose-Aimée, and said so to everyone. They screen-tested more than 20 actresses for that role, Mercure being the last one that day. It is later, in the privacy of the darkened screening room, that Beaudin was seized by the realization that Mercure, with that voice and those eyes and with that incredible mastery of the character... there could be no other Rose-Aimée.

They rescheduled the shoot slightly to accommodate for Mercure's return, and then they began the summer that every one of them would remember for so long.

• The shape of things in **Mon Oncle Antoine**



"Actors need to become apostles to their efforts, because being creative is very, very difficult. It takes much time and effort, much passion, and a great deal of love."

"Mercure was just brimming with energy that summer," remembers Beaudin, who was genuinely surprised at how deeply Mercure fitted into her role. "For those months, she became Rose-Aimée."

Members of the crew recall how she used to prepare the orange juice for everyone in the morning, full of old-style maternal attentiveness, almost always 'in character', a character some surmised must be her own.

Much of the film was shot in exteriors, during a summer most recall as the bluest, warmest in memory; in a turn-of-the-century-like countryside rich with the mournful sigh of summer winds mixed with the *click-click* of grasshopper wings and the metal-to-metal sounds of set-ups of equipment among the tall grass. Mercure played her Rose-Aimée confidently, beautiful in her period dresses, aware that it was a good role, that it was well-written, and that she was happy.

"If I summed up the last 20 years," Beaudin says. "I would have to say my meeting Monique was one that affected me the most. You know, when you're writing a script, a character, it's all still very... ethereal. But when you see a great actress take those words and really mold them into a living person, well... that was an eye-opener."

Beaudin raises his look to a 'period' photograph of Mercure taken from that **J.A. Martin** summer, it's ancient-like sepia-tone adding richness to those already expressive eyes. "I think Monique Mercure is perhaps our greatest francophone actress alive. I'd put her in the same league as Simone Signoret or Jeanne Moreau, certainly."

The film, or course, proved to be the watershed event for Mercure and Beaudin's careers. Selected to open the 1977 Cannes Film Festival, it won the Prix Eucomenique for Best Film to Beaudin and, to the astonishment of several Canadian critics, the Palme d'Or as co-winner of Best Actress to Mercure. (Though actors ritually refuse to refer to the 'competitiveness' of such awards, the fact that Mercure beat out such major-name actresses as Sophia Loren, Romy Schneider and Isabelle Huppert was not missed by the world press.)

Mercure, Beaudin and co-star/co-writer Marcel Sabourin met on the beach at Cannes during those heady days of winning, to share a long-promised



bottle of fine Champagne. With the satisfaction of the success came the realization that the future was assured for them all. Noted French film director Bernard Tavernier, in conversation with Beaudin, had confidently assured him that such plaudits for a film at Cannes guaranteed a European director or actor work for half a dozen films at least. All they had to do was go back and wait for the phone to ring.

But nothing much changed. Finding financial backing proved as hard as it always had been, and Beaudin had to return to filming commercials to finance his next film – which he could not start until five years later.

Mercure had a few roles offered her in the wake of the publicity, none of which panned out with any semblance of the success achieved with **J.A. Martin**. They included **La Chanson de Roland** (1977) by Frank Cassenti, an experience Mercure would just as soon forget, for the shoot was one long exercise of isolation from both director and crew – exactly the way she doesn't like to work. She was also cast in **Contre Coeur** (1979), where director Jean-Guy Noël was hoping a 'name' star would help save a weak script. It didn't.

Throughout those years, friends were recommending that she cash in on her international fame for a lucrative career elsewhere, where the action was. She would have none of it. "I was afraid to leave my country. I have enough of my actress insecurities without the insecurity of starting somewhere else where everyone is a stranger."

Robert Altman, casting for his **Quintet** (1978), was almost embarrassed to ask her to play a small role in his film, feeling it was beneath her 'stature' as an actress to have such a brief appearance. She is reputed to have replied: "I have no stature – I don't think in those terms. I am glad to work with you."

In a way, this stature remained like a weight around her neck. For years Mercure longed to work again with Beaudin, but Beaudin could not or would not ask her for less than a leading role. His films that followed **J.A. Martin**, **Cordélia** (1981) and **Mario** (1984), had leads of a 26-year-old and a 10-year-old, respectively.

Unfortunately, with the ticking of the clock, the roles available to Mercure are growing fewer and fewer. With today's accent on youth, the good roles available to women of Mercure's age group are rare (exceptions like **Dancing in the Dark** notwithstanding), and even though Mercure has a natural youthful look and exuberance, to use the parlance of a director of photography: "the camera does not lie."

Still, Mercure has appeared in memorable films during those years. **Une Journée en taxi** (1981) by Robert Ménard and Claude Jutra's final film, **La Dame en couleurs** (1986) come to mind. She was directed by Teri McLuhan (daughter of Marshall McLuhan) in **The Third Walker** (1978), and of Mercure's participation McLuhan said, "She was a ter-

rific person to work with – efficient, utterly professional, yet wonderfully warm and friendly. I was delighted to find out how approachable she was."

Filmmaker Louise Carré, who recently directed her in **Qui a tiré sur nos histoires d'amour?** (1986) agrees. "You know, I like Monique. For all of her achievements, she doesn't have one speck of snobism. She is a true professional in every respect. You can tell she works hard at what she does."

"Physically it was a difficult film for her to do. She was on a severe diet and she kept to herself in her dressing room during the lunch breaks, alone with her diet-food. She also had to do a stunt on a trapeze. You know, we never did succeed in having her do that stunt during the run-throughs. It was just too difficult." While hanging from a swinging trapeze, Mercure was supposed to turn to an upside-down position and hang from the knees as the trapeze made arcs above the heads of the crew, all this without a stunt double. "Yet when we got the camera rolling, wouldn't you know it she got it right the first time."

Pierre Mercure died in a car accident, and when she herself was hospitalized from a 1982 automobile mishap she spent a great deal of time in her hospital bed, talking to friends and remembering. In her life she had appeared in close to 30 films, more than 60 plays and several more television dramas and specials. She talked about Brecht. She now wanted to do his most famous play **Mutter Courage und ihre kinder** (1938). It was important.

One thing that struck me about Mercure's apartment was the lack of any visible souvenirs to remind you that she is an actress. There are no posters of any of her films on the walls. There is, however, a wall full of photographs of family and friends in her kitchen. These are purely souvenir snapshots, mostly old and worn at the edges, mementos of the years that made up her life. In one she is a teenager on a beach, looking at the camera simply, yet resplendent in the beauty of her youth, her legs long and her smile disarming.

All my comments to her about how I found her still beautiful and youthful-

looking seemed to be deflected away, as if mere polite words said in kindness. It is only when I commented on the daughter's good looks that she swelled with pleasure, her face shining with pride.

There were moments during our interview when a mere transcription of words could not do justice to what was really being said. When I asked her if there had been any changes in her career after her spectacular win at Cannes, there was a drawn pause that was almost painful in length, pregnant with meaning yet unfanthomable, before she answered in a very small voice: "No, not really."

I talked about filmmaking in this country, and about our star system, and then she laughed. "Oh, I'm not a 'star'. We don't have a star-system here in Quebec, not for film. You know, when you think of a 'star' in a 'star-system', you almost require a 'star's-way-of-life': to have your love life in all the papers, to be constantly jet-setting to your different palazzos everywhere from Italy to Hong Kong.

"We don't have rich actors or actresses in Quebec, the kind we associate with stars. So you can't come and visit my swimming pool, I don't have one; my Mercedes is not here because I don't have one; and my love life... well, that's very poor also!" And she laughed, the years falling away from her in her glee.

"Look, people don't rush to see a certain actor in a movie here, they go see a film."

So what's in the future for Monique Mercure? "Oh, I don't know. I'd like to work with Beaudin again, because it was a fantastic encounter.

"In the meantime, I make my living through the theatre. But I'm ready. I've always prepared myself to be good in movies. At one point I wanted to do only that..."

Mercure did get her wish to play Brecht's **Mother Courage**, at the Théâtre Denise Pelletier, a grand theatrical institution in Montreal and the scene of many former triumphs.

The story of the play is that of Anna Fierling, a tough but flawed widow who

follows the Imperial and Swedish armies across 17th-century Europe selling liquor and whatever to both sides in the Thirty Years' War. She does it for her children, but her survival plan is flawed and all of their lots will prove to be mere flotsam in the tides of fate.

In the 12th and final tableau, she is left to haul her heavy burden alone and in dignity across the stage, a heavy symbol of hope against adversity, loss and imperfect humanity.

Here is what noted theatre critic Marianne Ackerman wrote of that performance:

"From the set to music and individual performances, it is a magnificent achievement which lingers in the mind, a standard against which future productions can be judged. Barring some unimaginable surprise, Monique Mercure is the Mother Courage of her generation."

Until the 19th of December, Monique Mercure will be appearing in Eye to Eye by Ralph Burdman at the Café de la Place in Montreal; in a play where she'll eventually switch languages halfway through the run, playing the very same role in its French version of Tête à Tête. Such switching of languages is not an easy task for an actor, though one possible for Mercure due to her versatility in both.

In addition to her acting, Mercure will also serve as president of the upcoming Rendez-vous du cinéma Québécois, perhaps the premier event of Québécois filmmaking. It is the first time ever that Rendez-vous organizers have asked an actor or actress to serve at this prestigious position. "You know, most Canadian film festivals seem to focus almost totally on the directors-filmmakers," says Mercure. "Through my participation, I hope to influence at least a little more emphasis on the acting. Actors are part of filmmaking too, you know."

Just before I left she stopped at the piano and played for me, from memory, a beautiful piece by Mozart. She showed beautiful control of the notes, her soft hands gliding easily over the ivories. "Sometimes I wish we actors could practice and develop our instruments like musicians do. If a musician doesn't practice at least two hours a day, his fingers get 'rusty'. Actors need to become apostles to their efforts, because being creative is very, very difficult. It takes much time and effort, much passion, and a great deal of love."