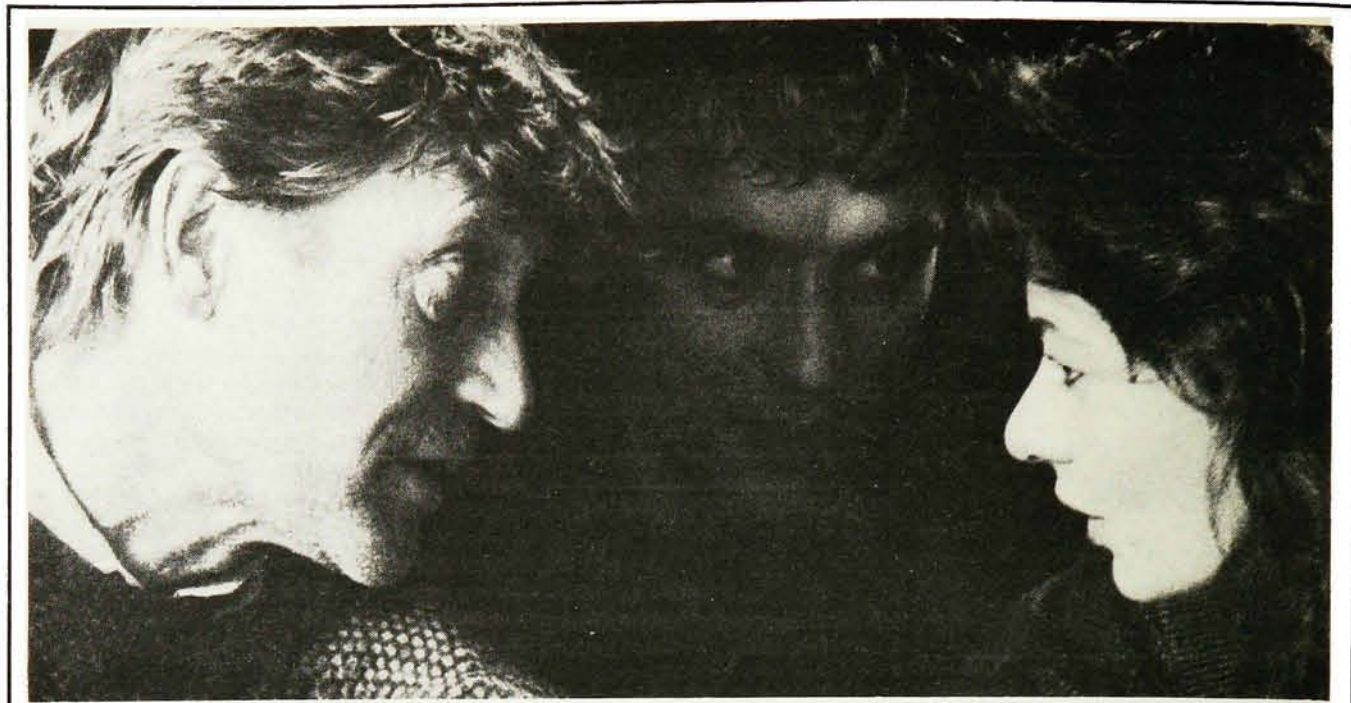


Quiet on the Set

My experience on the set of Léa Pool's new film, **Kurwenal**, was something of a disappointment. Precisely what my expectations were remains ambiguous, and having never observed the filming of a full-length feature, I probably should have had none. I suppose that I had hoped to witness that which has made me come to respect, admire, and, above all, identify with Pool's films. Although I am not much less ignorant in this regard, I now respect Pool as much for her means as I do for her ends.

My interest in visiting the set of **Kurwenal** increased upon reading the press release announcing the shooting, as I was struck by how the film's story resembles and yet is a departure from Pool's previous work. **Strass Cafe** (1979), **La Femme de l'hôtel** (1984), and **Anne Trister** (1985) relate the stories of women, with underlying themes of alienation and courage, and as such have been loosely termed a trilogy. Ideas and sentiments which are particular to women are not addressed in **Kurwenal**, but here as in the past Pool uses a cultural medium within a cultural medium as mediator between the character and his/her anger which is simultaneously personal and universal: photography is to Pierre Kurwenal as film directing is to Andrea in **La Femme de l'hôtel** and as painting is to Anne Trister, uniting the art form with the soul.

Pool once stated, "I am more concerned with communicating emotions in a film, as opposed to telling a story." This would appear to be the case with **Kurwenal**. Pierre Kurwenal's story is a simple one, that of a photojournalist who returns to the home he shares with two people, Sarah and David, from an assignment abroad, only to find the apart-



• A discreet moment: actors Matthias Habich (Kurwenal), Michel Voïta (David) and Johanne-Marie Tremblay (Sarah)

ment deserted except for the cat, Tristan. He responds by examining the misery which is his own and his city's, rather than that of atrocities so far away, with the aid of his camera lens.

The scene which I saw on my arrival on the location of **Kurwenal** at first seemed very far removed from all that I knew of Léa Pool, her previous work, and her latest film. My first impression was that of watching others watching television. A dozen or so people were crowded in the foyer of the old manor, all peering through a doorway to a classic dining room where nothing of any particular interest seemed to be taking place. However, these spectators were far from passive, creating an ambiance that was in sharp contrast with the warmth and sweet odor of their surroundings.

The appearance of a man, through the doorway, frantically arranging an elaborate table setting and shunning the help of an elderly woman at his side, reminded me of my purpose there. The face of that man, so anxious and intent, could only be that of Pierre Kurwenal, played by Matthias Habich. In fact, Denise Robert, the producer of the film, later told of how she and the others had been taking a break from the auditions for the title role, somewhat discouraged

by the absence of a suitable actor, when they caught sight of Habich passing by and exclaimed, "That's Kurwenal!" That afternoon, Habich, with his craggy, intense face and pensive, tense posture, appeared before them to audition for the role of Kurwenal.

If it were not for the presence of the spectators — the various members of the production team — and the one line called from off the set by Jacqueline Bertrand, Kurwenal's mother asking if she could come in, I could have easily forgotten that I was on a film set. Pool, the cameraman, the first assistant, even the lights and the camera were all invisible from my perspective in the foyer. Even between takes there was near-silence from the dining room; the stereotypical commotion on a film set was only a myth, with only the occasional command from the first assistant to be heard. This is apparently typical of the way Pool works; she herself has said, "*Ma façon de tourner n'est pas spectaculaire* (My way of shooting isn't spectacular)." Indeed this is an understatement. From my corner in the foyer, I could only assume that Pool was somewhere in the other room.

During another take later on that afternoon, I had more of an opportunity to see Pool at work. Indeed, her approach is so low-key that it would have been difficult to realise that she was directing

the production if I had been unable to recognise her. Every instruction or comment is intimately offered in almost a whisper to the person involved, and as such it was almost always impossible to know why one take was inadequate and another just right. While the filming is taking place Pool is even more discreet, huddled beside the camera, hands in pockets, studying every movement of the actors on the set. The result is an ambiance of simultaneous calm and intensity. Only once was there evidence of frayed nerves, when the telephone rang during a take. Pool, obviously annoyed that someone failed to take it off the hook, says with disdain to no one in particular, "*C'est élémentaire, ça* (That's basic)." But the moment is brief, and the calm soon returns.

To witness a filming which is so unspectacular by a director whose works are far from just that is rather disconcerting. Jeanne Crepeau, apprenticing as second assistant for **Kurwenal**, admitted that she, too, has attempted to discern in production that which creates a *cinéma magique*, only to be frustrated in that attempt more often than not. Pool herself has said, "I am always amazed by my own material." Having watched her at work, I am certain that I will be too.

Paula Sypnowich •