

Richard Boutet's

La Guerre oubliée

With *La Guerre oubliée*, a film which shows us how Quebecers lived through the First World War, Richard Boutet succeeds in combining classical documentary, TV-style drama and live theatre in an entertaining and instructive manner. Québécois filmmakers have rarely shown us our history in a more contemporary fashion. Even if the means sometimes seem to distract us from the message, *La Guerre* nevertheless proves its worth in the new genre it promotes.

La Guerre's style finds its roots in Boutet's 1984 film on The Great Depression, *La Turlutte des années dures*. Boutet and his co-director, Pascal Gélinas, combined archival footage, newspaper headlines and old popular songs with interviews in which middle-aged men and women recount how they lived through those difficult years. For example, one of them shows us around a log cabin in Abitibi, and, as he talks, we imagine the long rows of beds, the loss of privacy and the harsh weather he and his companions had to endure. *La Turlutte* remains interesting, especially for its historical value, but is not very engaging: the viewer has a hard time feeling the misery of these men for their testimony is not supported by visual evidence.

Archival film and newspaper headlines are also used in *La Guerre*, but Boutet combines them with fictional scenes that recreate particular moments of the years 1870 to 1918. Easier to "read" by the spectator, they provide visual background to the verbal and written information, and make a link with other non-fictional scenes.

Joe Bocan, a well-known Québécois singer and actor contributes to the film's cohesiveness. She personifies the "Madelon", a popular figure from a French drinking song, which recurs throughout the film. Before a reconstructed stage where film archives are rear-projected, Bocan sings of the wounded and the dead, of the aviation and the cavalry. She also plays different roles in the dramatic scenes, and comments directly to the viewer on the historical and political events surrounding the war. Because of her constant presence on the screen, she becomes the living embodiment of Truth. She replaces the Godlike off-screen narrator, thus gaining the same omniscient authority.

The official facts are not of prime importance for Boutet. The men he interviews lived through a hellish war and few ever listened to what they had to say about conscription or the "spotters" who would betray the deserting soldiers for a



Photo: Alain Chagnon

Film, theatre, Bocan and booze – who could ask for anything more?

few dollars. He wanted to document their memories before it was too late.

After having carefully chosen interesting – and often funny – subjects, Boutet has them dress in their army clothes and lets them speak of those difficult times: when they volunteered for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, nobody told them that the Germans were so organized and so well-trained; many of them enrolled because of severe unemployment at home ("When you're hungry, you eat anywhere"); some were drafted. And what did their wives do during that time? They prayed. In any case, this war was supposed to end after a few months, so...

The viewer also gets a hint of the true role of the United States in Canada's participation in the war. On a *New York Times* front-page, one read: "Shoot every anti-draft French-Canadian!". In a fictional scene, we then see what happens to a deserter given away to the Mounted Police by a well-paid spotter.

All these "bits of memory" are carefully integrated with fictional scenes and film archives to give us a feeling of what it really was like back then. All of this makes *La Guerre oubliée* more successful than *La Turlutte*... but it is not completely without faults of its own.

The press-kit says that Richard Boutet adapted the songs because he wanted them more uniform, more to today's taste. This explains why he chose a single singer to perform all of them. However, in so doing, he has taken away their uniqueness. These songs tell us different stories, but, in the end, they all sound the same, and the lyrics make no more sense.

Another problem lies in the editing. Until the "conscription" sequence, there is an equilibrium between the archives, the dramatized scenes and the stories of the old men, especially because of the music. The intensity and pace of the drama are even and well-articulated. Then it becomes totally different: not only do we often change locations (indoors as well as outdoors),

but the rhythm quickens. Because there are no film archives of the Easter riots in Lower Quebec or of the Spanish Fever epidemic brought back by sick soldiers, the editing now relies solely on fictionalized scenes and stories. The scenes are shorter and shorter, more powerful visually yet less understandable intellectually.

The different aspects of the film are then busily superimposed. They culminate in a reddish apotheosis where the earth explodes and a 40-year-old woman gives birth while the Madelon sings her last song. I must confess that these last five minutes lost me completely – what was after all a peaceable account of hard times, far too suddenly becomes vitriolic.

Richard Boutet claims that *La Guerre oubliée* was born out of a feeling of urgency created by today's nuclear menace. He felt a need to express this angst through a film on World War I, the first modern war in which the link between technology and mass destruction became appallingly evident. Maybe this urgency is responsible for that fast-driven conclusion full of uncertainty.

I personally have mixed feelings towards this film. In many respects, *La Guerre oubliée* is a reasonable success: the warm lightning of the storytellers is delicate yet strong, the sets are realistically designed, and the vivid fictional scenes are cohesive and convincing. Yet the Brechtian distanciation was too effective, there is too much distraction. For example, the early scenes show us different men telling us their stories, and at one time I hoped it would go on like this because they were so lively and "natural", as opposed to the contrived characters of *La Turlutte*, that I had immediate sympathy for them. But this link between me and those characters was broken every time Joe Bocan appeared.

I do appreciate Boutet's interest for intertextuality but he pushes this hybrid genre to its extremes. He has realized a baroque film, a blown-up performance, in which the spectator

could choose what to look at, depending on his interests, but in the end, this way of showing us history becomes merely that, a show.

Marie-Luce Côté •

LA GUERRE OUBLIÉE (*Fragments de mémoire*) d./sc./res. Richard Boutet p. Lucille Veilleux asst d. Michèle Pérusse d.o.p. Robert Vanherweghem art d. Karine Lepp m. Tom Rivest sd. Yves Saint-Jean, Diane Carrière, Claude Beaugrand asst. cam. Claude Brasseur, Daniel Fitzgerald cont. Lyne Guimond regie Guylaine Roy, Sylvie Roy Francis Van den Heuvel res. Pierre Anderson, Yves Alix, Maryse Dufresne, John Keyes, Gilles Raymond l.p. Joe Bocan, Eudore Belzile, Jacques Godin, Jean Louis Paris testimony Antonio Bourgault, Charles-Emile Dionne, Jean Duguay, Octave Jobin, Lionel Paquet, Ernest Deschenes, Marie-Louise Dorion, Annette Filiatrault, Edmond Langlais, Léa Roback, MarieLouise Deschenes, Cyrice Dufour, Adèle Goudreault, Georges Marcoux, Jean Thibault. Produced by Vent d'Est with the financial participation of the Société Générale du cinéma, Téléfilm Canada, Société Radio-Canada, Canada Council and the collaboration of the National Film Board. Distributed by Les films du Crepuscule. coul. 35mm running time 97 min.

Ivan Chouinard's

À l'automne de la vie

There are two *À l'Automne de la vie*'s. The first one – the project – is as honorable as the second one – the resulting movie – is, to put it plainly, *bad*. Ivan Chouinard's film has the making of a *cause célèbre*, one that might stir up fiery conversations in cafés and be shown in cinema courses under the heading "Brave Little Oddity in the Canadian Film Industry."

À l'Automne shows us the doomed journey of a motorcycle boy who gets stranded in Sept-Iles and is eventually gunned down by the village idiot. It doesn't break new ground in subject matter or *mise-en-scène* – Chouinard's movie often goes for *Easy Rider* effects. When *À l'Automne* juxtaposes this small-scale human drama to the more ominous news of an impending nuclear attack on North America (the feature ends with an unidentified voice asking us, the viewer, to calmly get out of the screening room and go to the nearest shelter), the movie tumbles into a moral(ist) tale of cosmic proportion, one on *intolerance* (Chouinard dedicates his film to his daughter, "pour que cesse l'intolerance: so that intolerance may cease".) This theme has been articulated before and in much more eloquent and artistic ways – ask D.W. Griffith. But the way the feature was