

A neophyte gets stagefright

The last time I was here at the Salon Theatre the lights were low, the boards were bare but the seats were filled and the air was alive with expectation. That night this theatre and many of the artists performing in it were still on the fringes of the wealthier, trendier Toronto arts district known as Queen Street West.

Three years later gentrification has pushed the epicentre of trendiness westward toward Queen and Dovercourt, where the Salon Theatre is located. And some of the artists who performed that night have started to make it in the mainstream.

On this snowy January afternoon the theatre is again humming with expectations, but ones of a different sort. It's been taken over by the cast and crew of *Shadow Dancing* (filmed as *Stagefright*), a merry tale of an understudy haunted by the ghost of a long-dead dancer. It features such veteran Canadian performers Christopher Plummer and Shirley Douglas along with such relative newcomers as Gregory Osborne (on loan from the National Ballet of Canada) and Nadine Vandervelde (recently seen in the television movie, *Shattered Innocence*).

The proscenium has been transformed by set designer Barbra Mattis from a plain stage to an ornate arch suited to the flowering of romantic dreams. Most of the seats are now empty, occupied by a few resting technicians and official observers.

On this day the orchestra, not the stage, is the focus of activity. Again and again four dancers explode into 30 seconds of precise and gorgeous motion. Between takes they collapse in exhaustion at the edge of the stage, brightening only when a crew member passes by with a tray of drinks. The dancers may be tired but each take manages to retain its spark.

Finally the camera is pulled back for a long shot of the same scene. While the camera crew sets up Gregory Osborne huddles with choreographer Timothy Spain and first A. D. John Board. They make some minor changes in the previous routine, rehearse the dancers, make further tiny adjustments, until it all seems as close to perfection as possible.

Board is a large curly-haired man who wears an impish smile and a red kufiyeh. He seems to be everywhere, gathering, prodding, organizing the movie into shape. He is the perfect right-hand man for director Lewis Furey, a smaller, quieter sort who remains for the most part, standing beside the camera.

Shadow Dancing is producer Kay Bachman's first venture into feature films. But she is an old hand at organizing. For over 15 years she produced a variety of television programs, including the highly rated *Quiz Kids* for



Playing to the crowd: Nadine van der Velde, Kay Bachman, Christopher Plummer and Lewis Furey

Columbia. After a two-year hiatus running an antique store, a venture she fell into almost by chance, she felt the urge to get back into show business.

Once again serendipity played a large role in shaping Bachman's moves. A newspaper account of the reopening of Toronto's venerable Winter Garden Theatre after decades of neglect sparked a story idea. A tour of the premises, which still had old photos of theatrical legends lining the walls and the odd program resting in a dust-filled corner, further kindled her interest.

After commissioning and rejecting a number of scripts – she wanted not only to attempt art but also to achieve entertainment – she attended a performance of the play *Rumours* and in playwright Christine Foster found her eventual scriptwriter.

As a neophyte film producer Bachman discovered that making movies was quite different from putting together television, in terms of budget structure, financing, story structure and even personnel. Television people are generally more businesslike, film people more creative, she says. Still she has unstinting praise for the practical help and advice she received from Telefilm, mentioning in particular women such as Linda Beath and Debbie Bernstein.

Shadow Dancing is now in post-production and may be released by Cineplex-Odeon films, as soon as this summer. And Bachman – even though she is relieved to once again be supervising a staff of 20 rather than a crew of 200 – has another great story idea and is already planning her next film.

Randi Spires •

A devilish dinner

It's April 7, the 17th day of the 18-day shoot of Jacques Benoit's first feature film, *Dinner for Four* (*Le Diable à quatre*). The location is a relatively small, dimly lit, art deco-ish restaurant on Boulevard St-Laurent, in Montreal. For the past few days, everyone on the restaurant staff has been replaced by Benoit's cast and crew, with the exception of the bartender. He's busy at work behind the bar making espresso, after espresso, after espresso for those on the set who might need the occasional caffeine jolt.

I arrive towards the end of the lunch break and find a relaxed atmosphere. The crew is hanging out drinking coffee, smoking, conversing, and laughing. I wonder why they bother to use a smoke machine, as there seems to be so many people smoking around the set. But one is not to be misled by the relaxed atmosphere. Once called into action, the crew is alert, professional, and very good-humored. Furthermore, they've been at it since 4:30 a.m. In fact, when I ask the perchman if they are at all tired, he frowns his eyebrows, cocks his head in confusion and says cheerfully, "Mais non, pas du tout."

Perhaps the quick-witted spirit among the crew reflects the comic tone of the film. *Dinner for Four*, written by Jean Harcoux, Bernard Dansereau and Annie Pierard, casts a humorous light on the difficult emotional ordeals which single, divorced parents face who want to remarry. The problems escalate when Jacques (Normand Chouinard) and Johanne

(Sylvie Legault) decide to inform their respective children of their decision. Magalie (Lucie Laurier), Johanne's 12-year-old daughter, and Francis (Sebastien Tougas), Jacques' 13-year-old son, do not react with open arms to their parents' decision.

Johanne and Jacques take the children out to dinner for their introductory encounter. As is to be expected, once face-to-face in the restaurant, the tension between the children soars as fast as the twinkling of an eye in the candlelight. Consequently, the children's mutual aversion to one another leads to a relatively unpleasant evening. Flippant remarks, smart-aleck behaviour and sighs of boredom are but a few of the attention-getting antics that have replaced pleasant and polite dinner conversation. As it turns out, both children succeed in making their disapproval painstakingly clear to their respective parents.

Both young actors are convincing and entertaining. It's obvious they are experienced and not unfamiliar with the demands of life on the set. Lucie stands next to me as the hair stylist tightens the soft, dark curls of hair that frame her face and I realize how perfectly she is cast. She's tiny, and her legs are so skinny it's hard to believe they can support even her slight frame. She's dressed in a green mini-dress and white tights to play up her elf-like qualities, and it works. But despite her delicate appearance, her porcelain complexion and her sparkling eyes, she's got a mischievous manner that makes her credible in her somewhat manipulative role. She's got that "12-going-on-21" attitude that allows her to project a delightful versatility in the part of Magalie.

Francis plays the "I'm-too-cool-for-all-of-this-13-year-old-stuff" with an incredible naturalness. He is cute but cocky and I want to laugh everytime I look at him because his hair is spiked straight up into the air. During a break, he transforms his energies into those of the set flirt as he gulps down cookies and chats with the make-up woman in between mouthfuls. As I steal a pack of matches from the bar and continue to watch Sebastien out of the corner of my eye, the publicist taps me on the shoulder and asks, "Don't you find Normand's face comic? He's a famously funny Quebec actor, you know?" And she had a point. Although he's attractive in that sort of *bon chic, bon genre* way, there is a certain exaggerated goofiness to his facial expressions. Sylvie also has that chic but conservative look paired with a comic touch. Are they destined to end up together?

All in all, the most impressive person on the set is Jacques Benoit. He possesses that omnipresent power apparent in most good directors. The much sought-after ability to somehow watch over all the details with an attentive precision, while simultaneously seeing to several other tasks. Although *Dinner for Four* is his first feature, his c. v. is long and



Not exactly the Brady Bunch – Francis and Magalie fail to hit it off

impressive. He has worked as assistant director with other directors like Roger Frappier, Gilles Carle and Jean-Claude Labrecque. But it is more

than just a skill he's learned; he has perfected a powerful but calm director's temperament. A temperament that demands respect and

attention. His voice resounds with depth as his comments and requests permeate the chatter and the shuffling-around on the set.

Despite Benoit's relatively concentrated and serious facade, he appears genuinely kind and even-tempered. He watches over the two young actors with the care of a father yet during the shoot he treats them as professionals. At his side is D. O. P. John Berrie. Berrie, like Benoit, has an impressive film background. And on top of that, is intriguing to watch. I find it incredible that his knack for visual composition isn't hampered by the long strands of hair that appear to fall directly in his line of vision. In any event, he seems to create and photograph exactly what Benoit is looking for. And, his long hair suits him, so who am I to comment?

I move my attention from Benoit and Berrie and notice the energy level of the cast and crew has taken a drastic, downward dive. It's almost time to call it a day, and they will need the rest for the final shoot tomorrow. The location will be a sushi bar, also on St-Laurent, where the four meet again. The rendez vous promises, at the very least, to be a more amicable one.

Holly Johnson ●



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