

Green tutor Laurel Bresnahan animal handler Laura Fisher casting Arlene Berman, Rose Lewis (extras), Darlene Kaplan (consultant) catering Blue Heron Catering labl mixing PFA Film and Video neg cutter May Bischof opticals Film Opticals titles Meta Media prod. company Atlantis Films, Lancit Media Productions, Revcom Television in association with Bayerischer Rundfunk (Munich), CHCH Television (Hamilton) Corporation for Public Broadcasting running time 10x 30 minutes distribution Atlantis Films International, Lorimar (Videocassette) l. p. Sarah Polley, Barry Flatman, Lynda Mason Green, Lori Chodos, Jayne Eastwood, Nerene Virgin, Bobby Brecken, Marlow Ortela, Kerry Segal, Nicole Lynn, Alexandra Barrett.

## Jacques Santi's Flag

In *Flag*, a Franco-Canadian co-production directed by Jacques Santi, we follow the lachrymose Inspector Simon (Richard Bohringer) through the familiar *mise-en-scène* of a typical French *policier*. The drizzling Parisian streets. The unmade beds and sad saxophones. The tough-guy *tripots*, filled with cigarette smoke and flurries of epithets like *mec*, *flic*,  *salope*, *flambeur*, and the ever-popular *con*!

The key epithet in *Flag* (argot for catching a criminal in *flagrante delicto*, with his or her pants down) is not *flag*; it's *con* (literally vagina; figuratively dumb jerk). The *c*-word appears so often in the picture, every second line of dialogue seems to cling to it. "Petit con!" Inspector Simon snaps at some *mec*. "Grand con," another *mec* snaps at him. "Quel métier du con," Simon says ruefully about police work. "Arrête la connerie!" says everybody at one time or another. Eventually, you want to make your way through those drizzling Parisian streets and find the *con* who wrote the script.

There's not much in that script, or the film made from it, to sustain the interest of even the dullest *mec* in the audience. As *Flag* opens, we discover that for some vague reason, Simon has a deep need to bust the Dijan Brothers, a gang of North African thieves with connections in the contentedly corrupt police department and in the government. Because of those connections, Simon's slick, sleazy superior (Pierre Arditi) orders the inspector to dump the case and take a vacation. The rest of *Flag* could be called *Inspector Simon's Holiday*.

We watch the inspector hanging around African dance clubs, Tunisian cafés, and all manner of illicit Parisian gambling joints. Simon shoots craps, plays cards, and checks out a weird game that is a hybrid of roulette and billiards. When he's not getting deeper and deeper into gambling, our hero bickers with his girlfriend, and, in one exciting scene, he separates an egg!

The gambling milieu of *Flag* is populated by suitably shady, *louche* types – the kind of nervous, hawk-beaked, amusingly eccentric hoods who are the *policier's* gift to the world. Julien Guimar (the chef in Jean Beaudin's *Le*



The gang that couldn't shoot straight make a movie. Jacques Santi's aim is off in *Flag*, with Pierre Arditi (above, center)

*Matou*) almost brings the film to life as one of the head hoods, a tortoise-faced, weak-willed gangster who makes threats with his face stuck in an inhaler. When Inspector Simon is asked why he is hanging around one of Guimar's joints, Simon answers, Bogart-like, "The odor – it pleases me." It pleases me too, but unfortunately, the odor in *Flag* is really just a whiff of the kind of pungent, underworld poetry that Jean-Pierre Melville got on the screen in films like *Bob, le flambeur* and *Le Doulos*. And as Simon wanders into African nightclubs, we get an equally faint taste of the atmosphere and the Hi-Life music that could have charged up the film.

When *Flag* is not offering a pale reflection of the world according to Jean-Pierre Melville, it serves up a little evil according to Claude Chabrol. All the main *crapules*, or villains, are seen amidst the details of their banal domestic lives: bourgeois apartments; dining room tables strewn with the remnants of dinner; proper mothers, wives, and daughters. Even the nasty Dijan Brothers appear *en famille* in a crowded, tastelessly decorated little parlor. A TV blares away, *sexy poules* sprawl on the boys' knees, big guns appear suddenly, and in the foreground, the family matriarch sits at a table calmly peeling vegetables. The scene, like a few others in the film, has a certain wit, although you might wonder uneasily whether it is supposed to play to the kind of anti-immigrant racism that surfaced during the last French election.

Probably not. *Flag* is the most lackadaisical of *policiers*, unmarked by the kind of icypick-in-your-ear viciousness sometimes characteristic of the genre. The Dijan Brothers don't get around to doing anything significantly nasty until near the end of the film; the car chases are remarkably relaxed; Inspector Simon *flags* the bad guys without beating anyone up or firing a single shot. In fact, he doesn't even change his sweater

until the picture is almost over.

The laid-back atmosphere of the film has a lot to do with Richard Bohringer's performance as Simon. Famous for his roles in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva*, (as the cool guardian angel who wears a diving mask while buttering *baguettes*), and in Jean-Loup Hubert's hit, *Le Grand chemin*, Bohringer is rapidly becoming an institution. In *Flag*, he pushes his patented style of zen detachment to new extremes, meandering through the movie, his big sleepy face seemingly indifferent to everything around him. When his old girlfriend decides to move to Montreal (possibly because she wants to escape a damp autumn in Paris for an early blizzard in Canada), Bohringer barely flickers one of his considerably over-made-up eyebrows. When the Inspector spends the night with his new girlfriend, a *minette* called Josie (Anne Létourneau), he looks as if he would rather be buttering a baguette.

Anne Létourneau, who engraved herself on our memories as Rita Toulouse, the sweet tease in the *Plouffe* films, appears currently in Quebec's daily TV soap, *La Maison Deschênes*, and will be seen in the upcoming *Les Tisserands du pouvoir*, is one of the Canadian contributions to *Flag*. There's not much for this very talented actress to do in it – and even less for Donald Pilon, who knocks off about six lines in a completely expendable role. Quebecer François Protat's cinematography is decently professional.

*Flag* is not really an offensive movie. Like many other pictures, it is simply unnecessary. The only mystery the film generates is why did anyone – the young French director Jacques Santi (sadly, he died recently), or the French and Canadian co-producers – want to have anything to do with the project? And why would Telefilm invest in it?

It is extraordinary that more than a quarter of a century after Jean-Luc Godard took the *policier*,

turned it inside out, upside-down, and then sent it into a spin, the French are still making films like *Flag*, and, in this case, Canadian money helped make it possible.

Maurice Alioff •

**FLAG** d. Jacques Santi sc. Jacques Santi, Simon Michel, Tansou cam. François Protat sd. Bernard Aubouy ed. Françoise Javet sets Dominique André stunts. Roland Neunreuther, Alain Guerillot mus. Jean-Pierre Mas l. p. Richard Bohringer, Pierre Arditi, Philippe Leroy Beaulieu, Anne Létourneau, Julien Guimar, Philippe Pouchain, Smain, Donald Pilon, Philippe Besson, Philippe Sfez, Charlie Chemouny, Laurent Gendron, Smail Mekki, Patrick Poivey, Michel Melki, Jean-Luc Porraz, Jean-Paul Muel, Jenny Astruc, Simon Michael, Philippe Alexandre. prod. Les Films Ariane, Cinévidéo, FR3 Films Production, Soprofilms. France-Canada co-prod. running time. 104 min. dist. Gaumont.

## Herménégilde Chiasson's Le Grand Jack

Acadian director Herménégilde Chiasson has made, in his *Le Grand Jack*, an incisive and multi-angled rendition of the rather complex Jack ("Ti-Jean") Kerouac: an American son of Québécois expatriates who grew up to become an internationally known writer and the Beat Generation's most eloquent voice as author of *On the Road*.

This biographical documentary, out of the "Américanité" series by the National Film Board, utilises several cinematic 'tools' in painting its picture of Kerouac, trying to separate the man from the myth, the profoundly gifted artist from the self-destructive, raging drunk.

At the same time, Chiasson explores Kerouac's cultural background as an influence, quoting his "Everything I know I owe to my French-Canadian background." The term "un grand Jack" is a popular expression among French Canadians meaning anyone of particular great height, but its use in this title denotes a different kind of stature: part of the pleased astonishment most Québécois must have felt in the early 1960s when they heard him interviewed in French, *their* particular breed of French, as a best-selling American writer, the man who coined the term 'Beat' adopted by the Beat Generation, Beat Poets, Beatniks, and even a British musical group called The Beatles.

Born in Lowell, Mass. in 1922 to Léo and Gabrielle Kerouac, who had moved to Lowell as part of the mass emigration to the American textile mills at the turn of the century, he was raised in the totally French-speaking atmosphere of the French 'ghettos' and as a youth spoke no English whatsoever – the language which, like Joseph Conrad before him, he would eventually write in.

His formative years are documented abundantly, especially through his writing but



also through the use of interviews with people personally familiar with either Lowell or Kerouac of that era. We get a hint of just what kind of peculiar events marked Kerouac and why he became the extremely complex, somewhat disturbed, mother-fixated, compulsive, brilliant individual who would ascend the pedestal, in spite of himself, as counter-culture's great mythical hero/victim and, according to poet Allan Ginsberg, its "saint". (In his "Is There Any End to Kerouac Highway?", writer Ken (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest) Kesey agreed, writing, "I have to go along with Ginsberg: sweet sad Jack has every right to be, in the most traditional Catholic sense, considered a candidate for canonization. He not only manifested Grace, and Mercy, and Glory, he also in some beautiful way died for our scenes".)

As a child he witnessed an accident where a man died, and when he was five, his older brother Gérard died of rheumatic fever, slowly and at home, so that "Ti-Jean" watched his life ebbing away like the colour on his face. (Later his mother would say to him, "You should have died, not Gérard.")

He went to Columbia University on a football scholarship, but left to join the navy. After two months in the service, he was given a psychiatric discharge, and he gravitated to New York City where he met Allan Ginsberg and other young, penniless writer/poets/intellectuals searching for new truths in the post-war era. He also met Neil Cassidy, the man who would help inspire *On the Road*, and together they explored America in all its richness: the wide open spaces, the

smoky jazz bars, the Mexican brothels, throwing down the foundations to what would be the new consciousness of the 1960s and beyond.

The film reveals these life-events by a methodical layering of several different resources: archives, eyewitness accounts, old footage of an interview Kerouac did in French, but especially Kerouac's own writing on the subject coupled with directed recreations of these events using actors in period dress and backgrounds. Interwoven between all of these we hear Chiasson's voice narrating bits of a prose-poem, a kind of Ode to Jack, that recurs from time to time to offer both a contrast to and a welcome respite from the delivery-of-information, nuts-and-bolts-style of documentary.

The one method that works best throughout is, of course, Jack's own high-powered writing, bits of his contemplations of youth and of life as read (very well) by actor Guy Nadon. The use of two narrator voices, however, tends to be somewhat confusing: is Chiasson reciting his prose-poem here, or is it Nadon 'speaking' as Kerouac? The rule of thumb seems to be simply to look through to the quality of writing, for though Chiasson is a very competent writer, he cannot for a moment compare with the flow and the power of a Kerouac, even a translated Kerouac.

As for the use of acted recreations of the writer's life-events, they do lift from the page those things which give themselves easily to the necessary visual appendage of film, but we are left with the impression that on the page they were better. For the most part, the work of the actors is competent, but pale in comparison to the imagery evoked when reading Kerouac.

Visually, I was struck by how archival photographs were handled, i.e., an old group-shot of 'transplanted to the U.S.' French-Canadians where the camera slowly pans a close-up of their eyes, evoking the new rootlessness, the inner strength, the diversity, the humanity of kindred souls stuck on foreign soil.

The musical soundtrack, by Robert M. Lepage, also works well, giving us a languid, jazzy sound reminiscent of period and place.

In some of these recreations, Chiasson uses an 'I-am-a-camera' technique in trying to dive into his subject's psyche and, literally, his point of view: hands underneath and seemingly part of the camera, which turns as a head would turn to see his old father dying slowly while sitting in a chair, pausing only long enough to curse his son one last time. When paired on audio with Kerouac's own recollections of what he was thinking at the time, the method works - when used in moderation, and it is.

However, Chiasson's decision to concentrate so much on the man and his life is a detriment to Kerouac's true and enduring quality: his work. Only *On the Road* is ever mentioned, and this in passing, despite the fact that he wrote a prodigious 20 or so novels between 1957 and his

death, bloated, destitute and alcoholic, at his mother's home in 1969.

Literary legend tells us that Kerouac knocked off the 175,000 words of *On the Road* in 20 days - feeding a 120-foot roll of teletype paper into his typewriter so that he could write continuously without stopping to even change the page. He could type 100 words a minute, in the age before the word processor, and he developed a personal style reminiscent of how jazz is played - free form, yet following rigid parameters; straight from the gut, yet still coherent and surprisingly concise; flowing with its own energy through the grace of its primal truths.

The body of his work forms a huge and inter-resonating Kerouacian drama of incredible scope, something like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga, yet kinder, fairer, less violent, ever searching for meaning in this convoluted world.

Sadly, it is precisely this most important of all aspects of Kerouac that is missing the most from this film.

André Guy Arseneault •

**LE GRAND JACK** d/sc. Herménégilde Chiasson p. Eric Michel cam. Jean-Pierre Lachapelle ed. France Pilon sd. Richard Besse, Yvon Benoit, Michel Charron sd. ed. Alain Belhumeur, Louis Dupire mus. Robert M. Lepage sd. rec. Louis Hone mix. Jean-Pierre Joutel prod. mun. Michel Dandavino p. asst. Claudette Babineau coord. Monique Lavoie admin. Joanne Gallant rsrch. France Pilon, Herménégilde Chiasson, Hélène Harbec l. p. Guy Nadon, Albert Belzile, Mance Emond, Carl Helmy, Freddy Helmy, Bertholet Charron, Clarence Poirier. Colour 16 mm or video running time 54 minutes, National Film Board of Canada.

## Jean-Daniel Lafond's Le voyage au bout de la route

The road motif, used as a dynamic vehicle (no pun intended) by the various explorers of national/cultural/social/self-discovery landscapes in the post-Kerouac era, is the method-of-choice orchestrated by director Jean-Daniel Lafond to explore Quebec's social-cultural-historical-geophysionomic soul in the documentary, *Le Voyage au bout de la route ou La ballade du pays qui attend*, the fourth film in the 'Américanité' series by the National Film Board.

In it, Lafond and his crew follow aging French chansonnier Jacques Douai as he returns to the province after a 30-year absence, allowing the camera to see through his stranger's eyes the many changes that have happened to this province and its people during that period: the Quiet Revolution, a growing sense of nationalism and pride, the Parti Québécois' election victory, the referendum, etc. - events that Douai did not experience firsthand.



Part-tourist, part-troubadour, Douai is a perplexing choice: a little-known chansonnier (especially here in Quebec) who after 30 years, is still singing the same minor 'hits'. He is never sharply defined and remains a kind of vague personage wandering around the province talking to people. His main forté seems to be his profound ignorance of Quebec society, dwelling with Lafond's help on lumberjacks and

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