

Jacques Godbout's
Alias Will James

The relationship between Quebec and America has been of great interest to Jacques Godbout, writer and filmmaker, for many years. His latest film, a documentary, called *Alias Will James*, tries to investigate this relationship through a study of the Western writer, Will James, who was really Ernest Dufault, born in St. Nazare d'Acton, Quebec. Will James had fabricated for himself an identity true to the image of the authentic cowboy, born and bred in the far West and this even in his autobiography. In the last years of his life, when some of his books had been made into successful Hollywood films, he was terrified that his true identity would be found out and that he would be accused of being a fake. But, even so, he still came back to Quebec, to see his mother and eat tourtière. Like another well-known "American" Québécois writer, Jack Kerouac, he became an alcoholic at the end of his life and died of sclerosis.

To tell this story, Godbout has adopted a form of filmic collage which is becoming quite prevalent in the new documentary films coming out of Quebec. In these films there is a collage of different cinematic modes being used, both in the visuals and in the soundtrack. Thus, some of the soundtrack consists of an actor (whom we sometimes see on the screen) reading from Will James' novels and his autobiography.

Sometimes this voice-over is superimposed on images of the places concerned, the wide-open spaces of the far West or the jail in Carson City where he spent time for cattle rustling. We also see images of the little village in Quebec where he was born, old photographs of Montreal in the '20s, and over these we hear another voice, one which relates the true origins of Ernest Dufault, alias Will James. And to mix-up our sense of reality even further, there are also clips from old Hollywood Westerns (I presume made from Will James' stories) which are cut in throughout the film. It is here that one of the basic questions of the film emerges. That is, what is the relationship between reality and fiction, life and myth? Here was a man who fell in love with the myth of the West and first, through his drawings and then through his writings made of that myth a reality to millions and of his life a legend which had little relation to his own identity.

Godbout explores the questions further through a series of interviews with representatives of Quebec in the West. There is a discussion with Ernest Dufault's relatives about who he was and his roots in Quebec. There is an interview with Ian Tyson, the well-known folksinger, who was inspired by Will James' books, which he read as a child, to become a cowboy and we listen to a song which he wrote



A latter-day Will James, Dan David, with Ian Tyson

about his hero. There are also interviews with two contemporary Québécois cowboys, who, like Will James, could not resist the lure of the West and became bronco riders.

What is this lure of the West? What motivates someone like Will James to leave his family and culture behind and try to find himself another reality? Ian Tyson, at one point in the film, says that he tried to write a verse for Will James' song where his mother warns him that he dreams too much and that dreams are dangerous. In the process of trying to become a cowboy, Ernest Dufault killed a man in Western Canada, fled to the States, got caught rustling cattle and spent time in prison. It is here that he decided to settle down and try to make it as an illustrator of Western scenes. In other words, he decided to fabricate the dreams rather than be led astray by them. That this relationship between Western myth and Western reality still exists is shown in an interview with one of the Québécois bronco riders. He too is artist, a sculptor, and as in Will James' drawings, his subjects are mostly horses and their riders. Of course, Ian Tyson is also an example of an artist cowboy.

What is the myth of the West and why should it exercise such fascination on non-Americans? Presumably, this is an American myth and little related to our national identity and presumably even less to that of a Québécois. The film never really answers this question except, maybe, through its images. The collage technique of this film gives us bits and pieces of information but, as in an Eisensteinian montage, it is up to the audience to put together the pieces and find an answer. What stays in the mind is the coldness, the closed-off quality of the environment as shown in the images of the small Quebec village and even of 1920s Montreal. This impression is

reinforced by the sequence where we see one of the bronco riders moving out of his sterile Montreal apartment to escape to the wide-open spaces of Alberta.

The views of Ian Tyson's ranch with the horses walking through the mist, the views of Will James' ranch in Montana which he tried to make into a natural paradise, serve to make us aware of what the lure of the West means. The basic conflict in the American Western is between individual freedom and the restrictions imposed by society. The lone cowboy at one with his horse and nature recurs throughout the film. Yet, as in the American Western film, social values come into conflict with this freedom and the film constantly reiterates Dufault's mother's warning. Godbout seems to see in Will James' life and death a sort of parable, a warning to the Québécois that to succumb to the lure of America, and its individualistic ideals and dreams of freedom, can mean a loss of identity which will ultimately be deathly, not only for the individual, but also for the Québécois nation.

At least these were the thoughts and reflections that the film brought to my mind. Jacques Godbout has certainly made an interesting and thought-provoking film.
Mary Alemany-Galway •

ALIAS WILL JAMES p. Eric Michel d. lsc. / research Jacques Godbout cam. Jean-Pierre Lachapelle ed. Monique Fortier mus. Robert M. Lepage sd. rec. Richard Besse, Diane Carrière n. d. Serge Lalortune cam. asst. Seraphin Bouchard animation cam. Raymond Dumas mus. rec. Louis Hone mixing Hans Peter Strobl the song of Will James Ian Tyson voice of Will James Jean-Guy Moreau mus. ed. Suzanne Bouilly add. narr. Rejean Lelran/lois add. sd. Vital Millette rec. Christian Fortin p. admin. Johanne Carrière, Gaetan Martel p. sec. Carol Gagnon l. p. Michael Bénéard, Carole David, Daniel David and Ian Tyson. Produced and distributed by the NFB.

Morley Markson's
Growing Up in America

In the interest of honesty it must be admitted that the critic comes to this film with certain skewed preconceptions. My wife comes from Worcester, Massachusetts, and has had to battle all her adult life with the furrowed brows of Canadians who have never heard, much less can pronounce, the name of her home town. To get around this she has developed a kind of capsulized Worcester history that she can spew out in 89 seconds.

Worcester is where Freud gave his first American lectures; it is where Goddard started the U.S. rocket program; it is where the inventor of the birth control pill comes from (well, actually, he comes from the little town next door), and, my wife finishes with a triumphant flourish, Worcester is where Yippee Abbie Hoffman was born.

Abbie Hoffman is always at the end of the listing because she can add, for those who want to know more, that he was good friends with her next-door neighbour (now lawyer to the Rock Stars); and for those who are really interested, she notes her family knew the Hoffman family from long standing. What she doesn't generally reveal is the pursed-lipped analysis which her family indulges in when the A. Hoffman name is brought up. The word, from one and all, is that "he broke his father's heart". By this they mean a literal heart attack and a more figurative attack on the heart.

I indulge in this discursion because its images - a montage of Worcester-related things and grieving Hoffman parents - kept reappearing in my mind during Morley Markson's cinematic remembrance of times lost if not entirely past. Twenty years after the height of hippiedom the grouping together of the film's star subjects, including the famous Mr. Hoffman, is as eerie as my wife's Worcesteriana.

What Markson has done is go back and visit a number of the people who originally appeared in his 1971 documentary *Breathing Together: The Evolution of the Electric Family*. Then they were all adjectives: hairy and hip, druggy and revolutionary, sexy and poetic; men (interestingly not women) whose media-hogging politics put them less on the same side than in the same (maybe outer) space. Now they have become middle-aged occupational nouns: social activist, lawyer, father, poet, student, and businessman. Only Black Panther Fred Hampton escaped the slow, grammatical drift out of youth by fixing his future under the career heading of "dead".

The technique the movie uses to revisit its past is both an intercutting of the earlier film and a