

Robert Favreau's  
**Portion d'éternité**

I went to see *Portion d'éternité* at its premiere at the 13<sup>th</sup> Montreal World Film Festival, and just managed to slip into the last seat. Even Lise Bacon, Quebec's Minister of Culture, was there to see the only Canadian feature selected for the official competition. I expected to be disappointed. A movie about artificial insemination did not seem exciting. But, on the whole, I was pleasantly surprised. After all those "Old World" films, I felt like I was back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The audience must have liked the film as well, for it won the Stella Artois Award as most popular Canadian film.

Still, I don't know if the audience and I liked the same things about this film. After all, Danielle Proulx won the Best Actress Award, while I preferred Patricia Nolin who played Hélène. But then, I preferred that part of the movie to the passages in which Danielle Proulx plays Marie. For in fact, *Portion d'éternité* is almost two films – a hybrid genre comprised of a social melodrama and a science-fiction cum horror movie with a documentary base. I've always preferred horror movies to social dramas, so I admit that I am biased. The sight of ordinary people wrestling with their not so ordinary problems makes me want to get up and go for a walk. This section of the film has all the earmarks of a made-for-TV movie; it's shot in a television style, all seamless realism and lots of close-ups.

Marie and her husband, Pierre (Marc Messier), want a child (at least, Marie wants one desperately, Pierre seems cooler to the idea), but they can't conceive. Off they go to a fertility clinic for numerous tests to see which one is infertile. There is much emotional upset about this, particularly on Pierre's side when he finds out that he's going to have to accept his wife's eggs being fertilized by another man's sperm. You can imagine the tears and the jokes. This, in part, is what's wrong with this section of the film. One can see Robert Favreau, who also wrote the script, sitting around and imagining a typical couple's reactions to this situation, and he seems to have included all the possible variations.

It's obvious that Favreau has not lived/felt the situation. And it is to Danielle Proulx's credit that she does have empathy for the character and does manage to bring her to life through her emotional acting. But it is the situation that is at the center of this part of the film and not the characters. Like most TV movies and programs, this story is built around a problem which disrupts the smooth flow of family life. The situation can be dramatic or comic and it is often both. And like most TV programs, this part of the film mixes comedy and pathos in equal

degree. Each dramatic scene is ended by a line guaranteed to make the audience laugh. And it does; they loved it. Melodrama has been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the trials and tribulations of the young lovers in this type of drama offer the audience heightened emotions which are relieved by laughter.

In a true melodrama, however, there has to be a villain: enter the science-fiction cum horror movie. The head of the infertility clinic is a good-looking, older man, called Antoine, played by Paul Savoie. Now, the thing is that we are not so sure whether Antoine is a villain or not. This remains a mystery until the very end of the film and helps to make this part quite interesting.

The clinic itself is also quite fascinating, with its cold, technological environment and its dabbling in the mysteries of the universe. For, after all, an infertility clinic deals with the mysterious process of creation. This fact is brought home to the audience with beautiful, huge close-ups of embryos and fetuses seen through a microscope. It did remind me a bit of Godard's *Je vous salue Marie* here, but only a little bit. Actually, this part is more like *Dr. Frankenstein* minus his monster. (Unless the monster is what gets created inside Marie's womb.) There is a terrific scene in which the happy couple are looking at a video-scan of her finally fertile womb and they discover that they have twins. "Oh great, twins!" says Marie, "they'll never be lonely." Then the doctor moves the scanner and sees three, oh no, four babies. The worst is that two will have to be eliminated, and that Marie cannot face.

But Antoine is a truly dedicated researcher and he has even worse monsters up his sleeve. Out of one embryo, he can make 64 identical twins. This means that a cancer patient could cure himself with reproductions from his own organs – that one could live almost forever. He promises that we will be able to create human

beings outside of a woman's body and program them according to our desires. Dr. Frankenstein played God but created a monster. Our own fear of the ever increasing power of science, both as a creative and a destructive force, is bound up with the fear of the punishment that humans may suffer for this kind of hubris. This hubris of the rational mind trying to manipulate the forces of life is also the subject of films by another Canadian – David Cronenberg. But, whereas Cronenberg's scientists are truly villainous, there is a priest-like aspect to Antoine that evokes the idea of science as religion.

However, the true parallel drawn in this film is between the scientist and the artist. Pierre is a modern-day artist; he works with photography and collage and creates ads. His father is an old-fashioned artist – a sculptor – who works in stone, carving gravestones. However, once upon a time, he sculpted wood (living matter) and studied with Borduas and Riopelle. Much to his dismay, he had to give this up to support his wife and family.

And so, as in most Québécois films, the snake in the garden ends up being money, and the real villain is the businessman who has become Antoine's boss and who works for Technogène. (I wonder if a film made in Toronto would posit money as the ultimate evil?) Technogène ends up selling human embryos on the New York stock market and no one bats an eyelash. But by this time Antoine has quit the company. It is this ethical side to his character that makes Antoine likeable. It helps too that Hélène, the most intelligent and sympathetic female character in the film (played by Patricia Nolin with understated grace) falls in love with Antoine while investigating the case for the government.

Nor is Antoine entirely blameless either. He acknowledges using a fertility drug that could give a woman cervical cancer. But, as an artist / magician playing with the forces of life, he is quite fascinating. And the final image of

him walking like a trapeze artist on a narrow steel bar that overhangs a raging torrent, is a fitting end to the movie.

Mary Alemany-Galway ●

**PORTION D'ÉTERNITÉ** *del. p.* Monique Létourneau *ass. p.* Doris Girard *exec. p.* Jean-Roch Marcotte *sc. Dial. Id.* Robert Favreau *d.o.p.* Guy Dufaux *art d.* Vianney Gauthier *photo ed.* Pierre Guimond *cost.* Huguette Gagné *cast.* Emmanuelle Beaugrand-Champagne *sd.* Serge Beauchemin, Claude Beaugrand, Miriam Poirier *script-girl* Marie La Haye *1st asst. d.* Louis-Philippe Rochon *p. mgr.* Muriel Lizé *ed.* Hélène Girard *m.* Marie Bernard *p.* Marie-Andrée Vinet *2nd asst. d.* Emmanuelle Beaugrand-Champagne *1st cam. asst.* Nathalie Moliavko-Visotsky *2nd cam. asst.* Sylvaine Dufaux *stills* Bertrand Carrière *boom* Jean-Guy Bergeron *hd. elec.* Normand Viau *elec.* Claude Fortier, Robert Auclair *hd. op.* Serge Grenier *op.* Grégoire Schmidt *set dec.* Jean Kazemirchuk, Anne Galéa, André Chamberland *prop. mast.* Daniel Huysmans *asst. to prop. mast.* Anne Grandbois *cost. asst.* Lyse Pomerleau *m-up* Brigitte McCaughy *gen. co-ord.* Mario Nadeau *ext. co-ord.* François Fautoux *loc. scout.* Mona Medawar *p. adm.* Claire Lapointe *p. co-ord.* Nicole Hilaréguy *p. sec.* Jacqueline Marleau-Blouin *p.r.* Marielle Caron *NFB adm.* Monique Lavoie *NFB co-ord.* Sylvie Roy *p. acc.* Daniel Demers, Yves Rivard *p.a.* Catherine Faucher, Normand Fortin, Robert Packwood *craft* Yanne Poirier *driver* André Desrochers *asst. set dec.* Jean-François Pichette, Stéphane Côté, Louise-Anne Bouchard *carp.* Martin Leblanc, Gilbert Leblanc, Dino Larossa, André Villeneuve *sp. fx.* Jacques Godbout, Yvon Charbonneau *stunt* Peter Cox *stunt co-ord.* John Walsh *asst. ed.* Myriam Poirier *asst. sd. ed.* Diane Douville, Francine Poirier *sd. fx.* Lise Wedlock, Marie-Josée Vermette, Louis Hone *post-synch.* Diane Boucher, Marie-Claude Gagné, Paule Bélanger *sd. rec.* Paul Pagé, Sylvain Lefebvre, Ambroise Dufresne *m. mix.* Paul Pagé *mix.* Hans-Peter Strobl, Adrian Croll *neg. ed.* Claude Cardinal *titles* Serge Bouthillier *opt. fx.* Susan Gourley, Micheal Cleary *anim.* Pierre Hébert *scient. cons.* Jacques Testart *med. cons.* Dr. Alain Campbell *bot. cons.* Marie-Fleuriette Beaudoin *microphoto.* Jean-Pierre Ozil, Jacques Testart, Thierry Ozil, Bruno Lasalle *retro-proj.* Denis Gillson, Simon Leblanc, Richard O'Shaughnessy *l.p.* Danielle Proulx, Marc Messier, Patricia Nolin, Paul Savoie, Gilles Pelletier, Maryse Gagné, Raymond Clouthier, Joanne-Marie Tremblay, Daniel Gadouas, Hélène Mercier, Patricia Tulasne, Pierre Chagnon, Marie-Lou Dion, Roger Joubert, Jean-Bernard Côté, André Lacoste, Huguette Gervais, Luc Gouin, Sylvie Drapeau, Monique Chantrier-Hoffman, Benoit Lagrandeur, Alain Campbell, Jean-François Pichette, Marie-Andrée Corneille, Francine Guénette, Danielle Garneau, Manon Vallée, Josée Lacle, Suzanne Bonneau, Marie Cantin, Gaétan Côté, Julie Drolet, René Gagnon.

Patricia Nolin and Paul Savoie in *Portion d'éternité*

