

renaissance woman

by barbara samuels



In search of outlets for her unbridled creativity, Micheline Lanctôt has proven herself a talented actress, writer, and now, director. In the process, she has developed a rare insight into the complexities of filmmaking.

Phase II. Just as they were polishing the obituary for the Quebec film industry, it was suddenly back in business. Despite the cynicism voiced in some quarters, and with all the energy familiar the last time round, the movies are being made again. Certainly a good many names and faces are brand new, but the veterans are still to be found — though not necessarily in familiar guise. A case in point: one of the top 'first phase' actresses has become a 'second phase' director, and the result of that metamorphosis is the engaging **L'homme à tout faire**.

Micheline Lanctôt has garnered international recognition for her performances in Quebec films; most notably as the star of Gilles Carle's **La vraie nature de Bernadette**, and in her role opposite Richard Dreyfuss in **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz**. Although she played in the recent **Mourir à tue-tête**, it is her work as writer/director that is generating the new excitement. **L'homme à tout faire** will bow internationally at the Director's Fortnight in Cannes this year; a rather heady tribute to a first-time director under any circumstances. But Lanctôt is far from blinded by the stardust. An experienced professional on both sides of the camera, she learned a good deal about that sudden "flush of success" the first time round, and remains guarded in her response to all the new acclaim. Independent, witty, and refreshingly frank, Lanctôt surveys the current scene from a distinctly unique viewpoint. Her observations become particularly relevant as the second era of Quebec film moves into gear.

Cinema Canada: Most people knew you primarily as an actress previous to **L'homme à tout faire**. How did your involvement with film begin?

Micheline Lanctôt: I was a film animator for about four years, so I was familiar with film from a point of view other than

acting. Acting gave me set experience. But I never had any formal training in either field.

Cinema Canada: Do you regret that?

Micheline Lanctôt: I don't know. Sometimes I envy people who've gone through exhaustive training. And yet I can't do it. I went to Beaux Arts for two months,

I find something stale about training...

because I was going to be an artist, and I couldn't stand it: much too academic. The schools compress you into a certain way of doing things, which I think doesn't apply to art. My music training was fairly exhaustive, but I still deplore the fact that it was rigidly academic. That kind of training doesn't let you expand: you've got to be a major talent to expand beyond the forms. And I never studied acting either, because when I saw what the schools were producing — people who walked and talked and acted alike — I thought, this isn't the way you should form an actor. You should let him express his own identity. When I was in Beaux Arts, they tried to teach me how to compose a drawing. You don't teach that: balancing a painting is an instinctive thing. I would have liked to study the technical aspects of film, but I've always felt that practical experience in the field is more enriching. I find something stale about training — but that's a purely personal opinion.

Cinema Canada: Where did you begin work in animation?

Micheline Lanctôt: I started in the NFB. I presented a project, and it was accepted — the arrogance of youth. I stayed there for a year-and-a-half, did all the 'kitchen' aspects. I worked on all the other projects,

assembly line work, and after a year-and-a-half I got fed up, because I wasn't getting ahead with my project. So we parted company — rather bitterly. I ended up at Potterton Productions, where I started at the bottom again and worked all the way up. I became an assistant animator after a year, and assisted for a feature. I looked at the work, and I figured 'That isn't so hard,' so I went to the boss and said, "I think I should animate." At that time, there were very few female animators, I think maybe two in Canada, and four in the States. And they guy said, "OK. I'm going to give you a scene to animate. If it works, you're an animator. If it doesn't, you're fired." And I swallowed hard and worked like crazy for two months. Boy, did I learn fast! I became an animator, and subsequently animated the next feature, which was **The Selfish Giant**. It got nominated for an Oscar.

Cinema Canada: What made you leave animation?

Micheline Lanctôt: I was going to go on, but I'm temperamentally unsuited to the work. It's monastic: twelve hours a day on a light box. And then I met Gilles Carle. And again, I learned by the steeping process. I was catapulted into acting for cinema (**La vraie nature de Bernadette**) which of course I said I could do. I was panicky for the first few days, and then began to learn how it was done. I had acted before in theatre productions, and now I was learning film acting. It was fantastic!

Acting didn't qualify me to be a director.

Cinema Canada: From an acting point of view, were you at all intimidated by the technology on set?

Micheline Lanctôt: No, because I was familiar with film teamwork from animation, which is nothing but teamwork. Although you work independently, you're drawing for a camera, you've got to know the cinematic language. And when I shot animation, I was working with people, and it was the same as features, except for the set. So it was fascinating, because I didn't quite know what the functions were on set. But you learn very quickly. And I would use all the idle time — and there were hours of it — to observe what was going on. It became very useful when I became a director. I didn't learn about camera placement — that was the

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Infecting her neighbours with the joy of life, Lanctôt in her first leading role, in **La vraie nature de Bernadette**

director's prerogative. But I learned to function with the people. I love film technicians — they're a great breed. I used to hang around them a lot, and absorb a lot of information, which became very useful. You bluff your way through. I'd hear a cameraman talking about a 9.8 lens, and so at one point on set, I'd say, "Why don't we try a 9.8mm lens?" It can be awfully handy.

Cinema Canada : *What about the transition from one side of the camera to the other?*

Micheline Lanctôt : Acting didn't qualify me to be a director. They're two totally different professions that appeal to totally opposite ends of the personality. It took me about four days to get into the director's personality, to convince myself that I

was a director. I think the vision of a director is a very peculiar thing, and you have it or you don't. You can either carry it through and impress forty-two people that that's the way it should be, or you can't. And that's what I learned in four days.

...few directors actually know actors.

Cinema Canada : *Did you find yourself more sympathetic to the performers than a director without an acting background would have been?*

Micheline Lanctôt : Oh yes. I've always been a bit irritated by the fact that very few directors actually know actors. It

creates a lot of tension, because actors are usually the last people consulted on set. It's a very unsettling feeling. You're shoved in front of a light, and you've got to hit your mark, and you can't move a certain way, 'cause you'll be out of focus. Because most actors aren't familiar with film techniques, it's very disturbing for them. On stage you've got an area you can work in, and a public that responds to you; but on a film set, you're just a cog in the wheel. Because I was aware of that, I think my actors felt very secure. I wanted to give them latitude, and I think that, as a result, the performances are very rounded. It allows for very discreet performances, too, because insecure actors will often ham it up.

You have to keep a balance between the actors and the technicians, and we had it on my film. If an actor fluffs his lines, and the technicians are sitting around muttering under their breath, the actor becomes more insecure and blows the line again. So you have to side with your actors, and tell them never mind, we're going to do it till you get it right; and you have to tell you technicians, pleasantly, to shut up. Mutual respect comes out of that. If it doesn't, it's technicians against actors, and I've seen that happen. Too often, directors get overburdened by their technical problems, and they separate from the set, which is the worst thing that can happen.

Cinema Canada : *Were the crew members you used the same people you had worked with on other pictures?*

Micheline Lanctôt : Yes. I had worked with them on a picture where I had made a scene during shooting, and they all came onto the set the first day *petrified*. It was very funny, because they realized after two days that I was a different person. And I explained that, as an actor, you are at the mercy of everything. An actor's job is to be emotional, and you have to deal with it. You have to manage their outbursts so that they don't contaminate the set, but you have to let them be emotional. A performer's emotions are skin-deep: if they're deeper than that, the actor can't play.

Cinema Canada : *Was L'homme à tout faire a pet project you'd wanted to launch for a long time?*

Micheline Lanctôt : Well, I was determined to do it, but I never expected to do it. It was like a kind of dream, because when I wrote it, I wasn't going to direct it. Having lived with a director for six years, I knew it was an incredible amount of work, and I didn't feel strong enough to take it on. Plus the fact that I didn't know any-

thing. And it was René who convinced me that I should direct it — it was a very personal script, in many ways. I thought that if this man was confident that I could do it, then I should be confident.

Cinema Canada: *Is this the first time René Malo has produced?*

Micheline Lanctôt: Yes, it's his first independent production. He co-produced some of Jean-Claude Lord's films, but it was his first time as a full-time producer. And the result was excellent. I came in on budget and on time, which is practically unheard of for a first time. I was too aware of the cost of film to squander it. And I'm exceedingly pleased with the results, although some things are missing in the film. I learned to compensate for what I couldn't get sometimes. Jean-Claude was extraordinary as a production director. I had told René that I wanted a team of people who could come to decisions quickly, solve problems. And René, Jean-Claude and my assistant were exactly like that. We had extraordinary problems that got solved in ten minutes.

Cinema Canada: *How long was your shooting schedule?*

Micheline Lanctôt: Thirty days. And we had thirty-six locations. For the first ten days, we had two locations a day.

Cinema Canada: *Here comes the obligatory question. Considering yourself, Anne-Claire Poirier and Mireille Danse-reau, there seems to be an upsurge of women directing films in Quebec. Do you think it's pure happenstance, or is there a specific reason for this?*

Micheline Lanctôt: I must exclude myself from that, because I don't think I do 'women's' pictures. I think there was a certain trend that facilitated women's access to film, but I personally don't believe in 'women's' films. I think it's useful that someone makes them, but I can't make them myself. I don't think of myself as a 'woman director', I think of myself as a 'director', period.

Cinema Canada: *Do you find yourself regarded as a 'woman' director, despite yourself?*

Micheline Lanctôt: No. My attitude is simply this: who's to say that because I'm a woman, I can't do something? And I guess that attitude influences people.

Cinema Canada: *Your central character is a man who could never have been created by another male...*

Micheline Lanctôt: Right. And I think that's making a true 'woman's picture': an alternative point of view. On reading the script, some people thought I was criticizing male attitudes. And I wasn't; I was just proposing an alternative.

Cinema Canada: *That alternative point of view also extends to the Marcel Sabourin character as well, I think. Very few portraits of homosexuals on screen have emerged so cliché-free.*

Micheline Lanctôt: I think Marcel hit just the right note in his portrayal. And I liked the character of Georges Poitras. I would have liked to have put more of him in the film, finally; but it would have diverted from the film's story. The husband's character was the closest I came to decrying

male chauvinists, and I wanted even him to be sympathetic. It amazes me, because some people see him as the villain, and he's not. There's no villain in the film.

Cinema Canada: *What about the female portraits?*

Micheline Lanctôt: A lot of feminists hated the females in the film. I used to say that the women in the film were the faces of Eve, and I believe it. The little waitress, the CEGEPienne... and Thérèse; they didn't like her portrait, because they thought it was a stereotype of a suburban wife. Well, I was a suburban wife, for Christ's sake, and I know how it feels.

Quebec films can't be released in the rest of Canada.

Cinema Canada: *I wonder how much these characters' behaviour is a result of the kind of protagonist you have. Women often speak of looking for a man who won't pull 'sexual rank' on them, or abuse them; and yet, when faced with just such a person, they're at a loss as to what to do.*

Micheline Lanctôt: Exactly. And that's why he fails everywhere. Because effectively, and this comes from my own knowledge of women, if you find someone who adores you, you spit on him, because he's not a 'man'. You're as much a victim of stereotypes, of set patterns. And I think men and women won't be able to understand one another until they break the patterns.

Cinema Canada: *I'd like to return to your role as writer/director. Do you intend to continue as such in the immediate future?*

Micheline Lanctôt: I would like to. I'm directing my own stuff, because people wouldn't come to me to direct their material. It's very hard to do, because right now I'm faced with having to write my own script, and that means about two years before I go back to a set. That's a very bad hiatus. I have a friend who says that the best time you can make a film is when you've just finished one; when you understand all your mistakes and you can correct them. I mean, I have three scripts already written, but they can't be financed: they're too expensive.

Cinema Canada: *"Too expensive" in terms of a Quebec film?*

Micheline Lanctôt: Yes. But that's a problem everywhere. Most people think that Quebec cinema is victimized. Well,

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...calling the tricks, as the madam of a rural Québec brothel in *Les corps célestes*

no more than Swiss film, or American film. Film is becoming more and more costly. Kodak has raised its prices, and now you can't make a low-budget film for less than \$800,000. Go find \$800,000. It's hard, because we don't have a market.

Cinema Canada: *This famous division between the 'Quebec' film industry and the 'Canadian' industry... people say it's made on the basis of market. There's certainly a different flavour to the pictures being produced here; and everyone says, "Marvelous movies." Then that little addendum: "Who's going to go see them?" Do you think that's a question for Quebec, or should it be directed to the English-language pictures?*

Micheline Lanctôt: I think it should be directed to the English-language pictures. Michel Bouchard, who's president of the

The only money the CFDC is going to see back will be from the Quebec pictures.

Directors' Association in Quebec says that the Canadian Film Development Corporation is going to be confronted with a very serious problem, because the only films that are going to be making money are the Quebec films. And the CFDC oriented its policies toward the super and co-productions, thinking that

these would feed the market. Look, Quebec pictures can't be released in the rest of Canada. For a variety of reasons, people just won't go see them. But I see no reason why Quebec films shouldn't be distributed in New York, France, Italy — the same route that any picture goes.



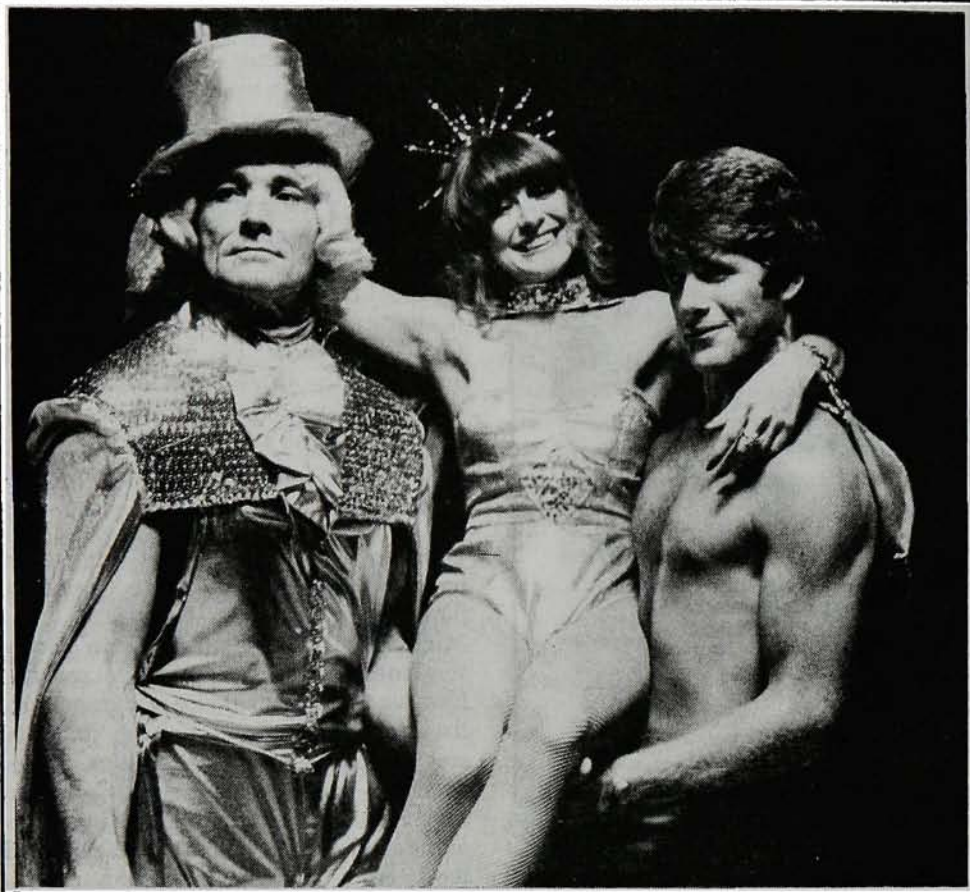
Closing a deal with a local farmer for her wheeling and dealing beau, Duddy Kravitz, Yvette soon discovers that her love for him isn't enough

Cinema Canada: *But what about the prevailing attitude that you don't aim for the art house circuit — which is where the Quebec pictures would probably end up — you aim instead for distribution under the majors' umbrella; you try for TV sales, home box office; and by that route, you'll see a return on your investment?*

Micheline Lanctôt: I know people think that way, but I think they'll be proven wrong. I think the only money the CFDC is going to see back will be from the Quebec pictures. I'm judging from the success of the Quebec pictures that came out recently. I haven't seen the figures from any of the super-productions, but I think most of them haven't made their money.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think there really is an English-language 'Canadian' film?*

Micheline Lanctôt: Yes. *Goin' Down the Road*. I remember when we saw that film, we came out singing and dancing in the street. I couldn't believe it. I was staggered. Despite its problems, it was precisely what I think of as a 'Canadian' film. I mean, Gordon Pinsent has three wonderful scripts, all set in Newfoundland. And he can't get them off the ground. And that is English Canada to me. There's a book called *Halfbreed* which a friend of mine in Alberta is trying to turn into a picture. It's a magical subject: totally Canadian, and yet it's universal. It's an autobiography. And he can't get the project off the ground.



Sitting pretty, until the love triangle threatens to become a tug-of-war, Lanctôt as Lucky in **Blood and Guts**. Below: In Jean-Guy Noël's **Ti-Cul Tougas**.

Cinema Canada: *I think people are a bit confused by the lack of an overall whole; Canada's regionalism seems to present identity problems.*

Micheline Lanctôt: But the regionalism is what makes it so fascinating. When I was asked to play in **Duddy Kravitz**, I didn't even know the book. I had read *St-Urbain's Horseman*, and I knew Mordecai. But even if it was going to be a crossover, I was going to do it. I was so excited that they were making the film out of a book that was *Canadian*. And then the film was attacked for "not being Canadian." That film is profoundly Canadian. It's *us*. It's not an American film. People all over the world recognize themselves as Duddy Kravitz, and yet he was a Montrealer. You can always spot Canadians abroad. It happened to me when I was in L.A. for five years. They're totally different from Americans. I don't know what makes them Canadians; you can't analyze it. But that's what they are. Now that I've been abroad, I don't question my identity any more. I am a Quebecer. I don't have to make *Quebec* films to be a Quebecer. And English Canada has to realize that, too; whatever they make, it's Canadian. They don't have to reach for this mysterious 'universality' to make the product marketable.

Cinema Canada: *The word 'industry' connotes something big; and in order to turn Canadian film into something big, I guess big box office returns are your best yardstick.*

Micheline Lanctôt: It's an impossible problem. People seem to think that an industry can be built in a matter of days. It took fifty years for Hollywood to get where it is; and it's known some very low

The regionalism is what makes it so fascinating.

periods. I don't think the answer lies in borrowing a structure from somewhere else. If you want to build a Canadian film industry, you have to build it for Canadian circumstances. If you want to make American pictures, go to America. I mean, even the unions borrow their rate structure from the American system. It can kill the industry here. You can't inflict market conditions on cinema which it can't support. No matter what policy the CFDC follows, it can't change the fact that Canada has twenty-three million people; and most of them live in rural areas, and don't go to movies. So I think that the art market is still the best solution for any Canadian film — be it English or French.

There are 1500 art cinemas in the United States; if your film runs one day, it'll pay. I also think that Canadian films should be sold as foreign films: it's about time we distinguished ourselves from the Americans, and that means re-evaluating the distribution system. France has the same problems: I think most of their cinemas are owned by American chains. The money doesn't stay in France — it goes to the U.S. We need a government-run cinema chain.

Cinema Canada: *You dealt with both the CFDC and L'institut québécois du cinéma to make your film. How do you view the two organizations?*

Micheline Lanctôt: Well, I think subsidies are bad, but I can't make films without them. I think L'Institut has less responsibility, because it deals only with Quebec film; so they can afford to be more artistically ambitious. Any government organization is going to draw parasites, liberty-takers; but despite the nonsense, some good pictures get made. I think that, because it's slightly freer of structures, L'Institut can deal on a more emotional level than the CFDC can. I know cinema is an industry. I'd rather it be an art. Honesty is not well-tolerated when you're dealing with money: and that's very wearying.

Cinema Canada: *You've mentioned that your last experience at Cannes, as a visiting actress, was a very distasteful one. How do you feel about returning?*

Micheline Lanctôt: The terms are very different this time. I'm going as a person with a product to sell — which is the only way to go. □

