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Pierre Falardeau

by Maurie Alioff

“Bring on a revolution/I want
Bring on a revolution/I want

AN AFTERNOON IN OCTOBER 1970. I was in a Montreal street, watching armored military vehicles rattling by while soldiers in helmets and battle fatigues clutched their rifles and sniffed at the threat of anarchy in the air. Suddenly, I felt a finger jabbing at my shoulder.

“Open it,” said a cop with a potbelly and rumpled white hair. He meant my army surplus shoulder bag, which on this particular day happened to contain two or three Black Panther newspapers and other revolutionary tracts. Ah, hah! The cop thumbed through the subversion, lingering on images of leather-jacketed black men flaunting rifles. Then he tossed aside the papers and looked me over: hair puffed out long and frizzy, boots with Cuban heels, very *Blonde on Blonde*. I shrugged nonchalantly and told him I was a student (true) researching an essay on American political extremists (false).

Pierre Laporte, provincial minister of labour and immigration, and James Cross, a British trade official, had been kidnapped by members of the Front de Libération du Québec, the militant organization which advocated



Consider

a die for something/
a die for nothing” **Chrissie Hynde, The Pretenders**

terrorist violence in the cause of Quebec's independence from Canada. In response to the kidnappings, numerous FLQ bombings, and a so-called “apprehended insurrection,” the Canadian government had invoked the War (now Emergency) Measures Act and deployed the army in Ottawa and Montreal.

The act gave Quebec police license to round up hundreds of men and women, often on flimsy pretexts, and throw them into jail incommunicado, without having to file charges. Then on the night of October 17th, the authorities found Pierre Laporte's bloodied corpse in the trunk of a green Chevrolet sedan. According to the coroner, he had likely been strangled to death with the gold chain of his religious medal.

During that crazy time, who can say what was inducing more paranoia: the feeling of living under a state of siege (chillingly dramatized in Michel Brault's 1974 film *Les ordres*), or the ugly, pathetic death of a man who may not have been a model of virtue, but was far from being an agent of a murdering, totalitarian regime.

I, and most people I knew, sympathized with the complaints of historically victimized French Canadians and

author Pierre Vallières' characterization of them as the "white niggers" of America (in his seminal 1967 book *Nègres blanc d'Amérique*). But the FLQ's "assassination" provoked disgust and dented those sympathies. René Lévesque, founder of the peacefully separatist Parti Québécois, was outraged.

In June 1994, I'm sitting in a tiny apartment in Montreal, talking to a man who has dramatized the abduction and murder of Laporte in a way that has never been done on film before – from the point of view of the killers (unlike previous movies like *Les ordres*, Jean-Claude Labrecque's *Les années de rêves* [1984], and Robin Spry's excellent documentary *Action: The October Crisis of 1970* [1973]).

Pierre Falardeau's *Octobre*, in post-production as I write, began to take shape in the early seventies when the director met Francis Simard, one of the convicted men, and began visiting him regularly in prison. Falardeau recently told the Quebec film magazine *24 Images* that he and Francis would get together to discuss "politics, prison, pieces of ass," and the events of October.

Simard and the other members of the FLQ's Chénier cell committed a bloody crime, but in Falardeau's view, there were plenty of reasons for it. "It's not the first time in history," he once said, "that a bunch of poor people grab a rich guy to be done with it. And it won't be the last."

In 1982, paroled after serving 11 years of a life sentence, Simard offered Falardeau his co-operation in the making of a movie about the crisis. The *ex-felquiste* agreed to record hours of interviews with the director and longtime collaborator Julien Poulin (*Elvis Gratton, Le party*).

Since the early eighties, Falardeau has been trying to get *Octobre* made. He wrote and re-wrote numerous scripts, deals materialized and collapsed, he shot other movies. From its earliest days, the project was a tricky undertaking. According to the director, Jacques Bobet of the NFB "trembled" when he read an early outline, even though the Board had already purchased the rights to Simard's book about his *felquiste* experiences, *Pour en finir avec Octobre*, for nine thousand dollars.

Falardeau persisted because for him, the subject is not only important, it's virtually sacred. An unapologetic, old-time separatist with few illusions about Lucien Bouchard's designer nationalism, Falardeau views October 1970 as a cli-

matic moment in Quebec's turbulent history. For him, Simard and his comrades were not sadistic psychopaths or misguided fools. They were idealists representing a widespread and passionate indignation, who risked damning themselves for what they believed they had to do. *Octobre* begins with a quote from Albert Camus' *Les justes*: "Nécessaire mais injustifiable." Necessary but unjustifiable.

The producer who finally committed to this vision of the event was Bernadette Payeur of the Montreal company ACPAV (it made Falardeau's three *Elvis Gratton* shorts and his debut feature *Le party*). Meanwhile, C/FP agreed to distribute if the director came up with another instalment in the hit-in-Quebec *Gratton* series, "a kind of an agreement that I'm trying to forget," Falardeau tells me during a conversation.

The one-and-a-half room apartment he uses for writing is located on a tiny *ruelle* in the southeast of the city in a neighbourhood as far removed from chic francophone Outremont as it is from Westmount, traditional symbol of English power. There is no computer, or even a typewriter in sight. Falardeau works in longhand on a battered old desk. Tacked to the walls are black and white blowups and posters of his films, and in one corner an inevitable picture of Camus.

Falardeau has a lanky, wiry build. Wearing a sweatshirt, loose army-green pants and red deck shoes, he expresses himself in raw, uncensored language punctuated by shouts, wheezes, and disdainful groans. He'll suddenly jump up, eyes and mouth scrunched like a boxer who's taking punches.

I've just asked him why he has so much obvious respect and love for Francis Simard. Jabbing out a Lucky Strike and lighting another, Falardeau talks about intelligence and down-to-earth humanity and then gets to the disturbing heart of the matter: "Francis took someone's life without hiding, without excusing himself by saying, 'I was young, I didn't know what I was doing.' Most of the others blame it on the errors of youth. In his book, Francis repeats 500



times, 'I could never justify killing a man, but I did it.'

Falardeau acknowledges that like other rebel movements of the sixties, the FLQ attracted its share of whackos with an itch to play with guns and bombs. But he emphasizes that his movie is about the Chénier cell, a particular group of men trapped in a situation where "you start something, and then it's bigger than what you started, and the whole society is pushing."

Like many journalists who covered the crisis, not to mention politicians as diverse as the late Tommy Douglas and Robert Stanfield, Falardeau sees the Liberal cabinet's imposition of the War Measures Act as a move that was itself hard to justify. Furthermore, he suspects cynical and Machiavellian strategizing on the part of the feds.

Instead of negotiating for Laporte's release, "I think that at one point, the feds said: 'If we push them, they're fucked; if they stop, they'll look ridiculous; if they kill him, they're lost.'" Backs against the wall, divided about their next move, the *felquiste* went – as Falardeau puts it – *au bout* (to the limit) "of dreams, or an idea."

If this makes a group of men René Lévesque once called barbarians sound



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Octobre (from left): DENIS TRUDEL (felquiste) and SERGE HOUDE (the Minister); PIERRE RIVARD (felquiste); LUC PICARD (felquiste)

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like heroes, he claims that simple-minded heroics are the last thing on his mind. Falardeau even draws an analogy between his characters and the pitiable murderers Truman Capote wrote about in his non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood*. Arguing that *Octobre* is a tragic, rather than a dramatic work, Falardeau explains that in drama, the hero must choose between good and evil. On the other hand, "in tragedy, there's no good or evil. No one wins, no one loses. There's a choice that doesn't make sense. That's the essential subject of the film."

No simple heroes, no cardboard villains either, Falardeau emphasizes that the film does not turn Pierre Laporte into a dehumanized symbol of corrupt power and oppression. When he talks about the final scenes of his movie, all of which were shot in long takes and without visual pyrotechnics, his mood becomes quiet and somber. "At one point, Laporte eats spaghetti knowing that he might have only hours left to live. I did a shot of him on his bed. He plays with his spaghetti. "Then" - Falardeau begins to mime the actions - "he puts down his plate and looks at his watch. He massages his neck, takes off his tie, looks at it, looks back at the spaghetti. I liked that a lot because there's nothing,

No car crash, no blonde. Just a human being about to die in two hours eating spaghetti. I said to the cameraman, 'don't move, stay there, look at him.'"

Falardeau claims that he was so moved by actor Serge Houde's portrayal of Laporte, he worried that the audience would have no emotional energy left for the *felquistes*. "That's why it made me so angry when the senator was running after me, saying the film was all good guys and bad guys. Fuck, it's not a cowboy movie, man."

The senator is Liberal Senator Phillippe Gigantes who, in the winter of 1993, received a draft of the *Octobre* script from an anonymous source at Telefilm Canada. (The agency had yet to commit to the production.)

Gigantes was shocked by what he interpreted as glorification of murder, racist perpetuation of the myth of the Evil Anglo, and insinuations that Laporte had Mafia connections. (Falardeau does claim he's examined a "mountain" of documents, including transcripts of police buggings, which suggest that the deputy prime minister of Robert Bourassa's 1970 government had links to organized crime.) How, Senator Gigantes asked in the media, could institutions like Telefilm and the NFB even consider investing in a project like *Octobre*?irate editorials and headlines mushroomed in the English-language press as Falardeau, supported by Quebec's francophone media, accused Senator Gigantes of trying to muzzle him. Inevitably, the storm waned, federal (but not Quebec) agencies came through, and in October 1993, the unannounced shoot of this controversial picture began.

One of the script details that incensed Gigantes was dialogue about a vicious foreman whom he misunderstood to be

both an anglo and a Jew. Denying that this character was written as Jewish, Falardeau mutters impatiently: "It was a boss, an English boss. It was like that during the sixties." Expressing simple realities, the director believes, is getting tougher every day in a milieu intimidated by a stifling combination of bureaucratic control and political correctness. The repression is so complete, movie-makers have become their own watchdogs, one of the reasons why, says Falardeau, Quebec cinema "has disgusted me for more than ten years."

Probably one of the few movie directors in the world who detests Fellini's *8 1/2*, Falardeau says he responds to movies where "people are in extreme conditions, so you can see what they have inside," movies like the Kurosawa-scripted *Runaway Train* in which a character tells Jon Voight that he's a beast. Voight replies, "No, more than a beast. Human." "How come," wonders Falardeau, "do Quebec films always have stupid, fucking bourgeois filmmakers living with a writer, having problems with their masculinity?" He raises his arm helplessly and groans.

The Quebecers in Falardeau's pictures don't live in the same universe as the smug neurotics of Denys Arcand's *Decline of the American Empire*, or the shellacked, comatose ones who float through Léa Pool's work. For instance, *Le party* (1990) is a prison film about one day in the lives of horny, desperate inmates and the low-rent comedians and strippers who put on a show for them. Jacked up with lines like "violence shows you have feelings," the movie champions the ordinary guy, portrayed as repressed and smoldering under the control of the heartless authorities who watch the show, a kind of populist ritual from a balcony on high.



from left: Le steak; performer and audience from Le party; JULIEN POULIN as his alter-ego Bob "Elvis" Gratton



with the 1990 Mohawk standoff at Oka and Kahnawake. In fact, he still feels incensed about events in Kahnawake, where the Mohawk blockade of the Mercier Bridge forced residents of adjacent Châteauguay (his childhood home) to take long, tortuous routes into Montreal. "If the problem hadn't been solved by the army, the people would have solved it themselves. The rifles weren't far away," says Falardeau, launching into a critique of the Indian strategy. He argues that if the Mohawk warriors were really against the government and not the French people, they would have blocked "the water routes on the St. Lawrence. But if you create 5,000 new enemies, even if you're right, you won't win, man!"

When I point out to Falardeau that the warriors – like the FLQ assassins of Pierre Laporte – might have felt they were doing something "necessary but unjustifiable," he sinks his head and mumbles an agreement. But a few minutes later, he says "Indian lovers don't make me shed tears for two seconds." As a member of a group that was once oppressed, Falardeau compares himself to Spike Lee's homeboys in *Do the Right Thing*, who freely vent their hostilities as a normal part of the give-and-take of daily conversation. "I'm not a racist," he tells me. "If in your article it comes out that I sound like a racist, then you'll be wrong."

The director of *Octobre* is not a man to iron out his various contradictions into a tasteful package. Honest about everything from his moments of intolerance to his doubts about himself as an artist, he leaves himself open to attack. But self-censorship is anathema to Falardeau. Like Brian Moore in his virtually lost novel *The Revolution Script*, Falardeau has told the story of the FLQ assassins in a way that humanizes rather than demonizes them. Moreover, he says that he wants *Octobre* to be a tragic story transcending politics.

However, Falardeau is a man with a political agenda. He is fully aware that *Octobre* will appear just as Quebec and English-speaking Canada gear up for another showdown. In 1993, he released a vitriolic video called *Les temps du bouffons*. Narrated by himself, he scoffs at colonizing "bourgeois full of shit," and their lackeys, "the French Canadians in service." His movies are more ambitious and complex, but they do sometimes get polemical and on-the-nose. When this happens, his work loses the power of its raw yearning for freedom ●

Years ago, studying anthropology, Falardeau began to believe that the true heart of a culture is less books and paintings than the ordinary rituals of "the way people live, eat, arrange their families, the way they marry." Anthropology also led him to see the Québécois as a tribe, analogous to the ones he was reading about and observing, a fragile tribe that could easily disintegrate.

Bob "Elvis" Gratton, the anti-heroic garage owner of three short films the director made during the 1980s, is a betrayer of the tribe. Gratton (hilariously played by co-creator, Julien Poulin), lives to practise obsessively ersatz Elvis body moves and gorge himself on cheap sensations. A racist, sexist, fascist, not to mention anti-nationalist, he is the polar opposite of real-life boxer Gaeton Hart (1992's doc *Le steak*), Falardeau's projection of a hero.

Throughout *Le steak*, the skull-shaved, jowal-talking Hart fights, trains, labours to refine skills that earned him respect, but didn't quite take him to where he wanted to be. Near the end the film reveals that Hart's career almost derailed completely when he accidentally killed an opponent in the ring. Trapped in the under-class, this boxer will never eat the figurative steak of the title, but he'll also never lose his determination.

In 1994, an illiterate prize fighter is not exactly the image of Quebec today's cool, business-oriented nationalists are eager to promote. Falardeau is a person who grew up on the crest of the sixties, an era when the U.S. had the Weathermen, Italy the Red Brigade, and Quebec the FLQ. French Canadian poets of the time blasted out lines like, "I machine-gunned the dawn."

But today, there are no revolutionaries. The feeling in the air is, "We can compete worldwide. We are major play-

ers." It's not surprising for Pierre Falardeau that an independent Quebec – run either by Jacques Parizeau or Lucien Bouchard – would be like "changing four quarters for a dollar." Nothing significant would change. "What's the big deal about Bill 101," he laughs ruefully. Before it was Kentucky Fried Chicken, now it's Villa du Poulet. The same fucker is there." But despite his cynicism and disillusionment, he wants independence to happen. "It has to be done. And I'll fight until I die for it. Even if I'm wrong, I still dream."

Obviously, Falardeau's dream of Quebec is the old vision of an alternative, maverick society. He doesn't just yearn for a split from English Canada. He wants distance from the entire multinational/American mass media lollapalooza.

If Falardeau's ideal Quebec is utopian, it's also deeply and unfashionably tribal. When I ask him now he feels about a rapidly growing multi-ethnic population that's likely to alter the way people in his society live, eat, and arrange their feelings, he talks about the diluting of Québécois identity and the final victory of the shopping mall, as if the two were synonymous. He thinks Quebec must control immigration to be able to achieve a workable proportion of newcomers to native francophones. At his son's school, where one quarter of the kids are immigrants, "the mix is very good because these people become like us." Falardeau adds, "I don't give a damn about colours – black faces, yellow faces. For me, a Quebecer is someone who decides that he's a Quebecer."

As he ventures into this thorny area, Falardeau says things that he knows will sound inappropriate, but he says them anyway. For example, when it comes to native people, he did not sympathize