

Take One REVIEWS

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GAZ BAR BLUES

2003 115m *prod* Coop Vidéo de Montréal, Les Productions 23, *p/ed* Lorraine Dufour, *d/sc* Louis Bélanger, *ph* Jean-Pierre St-Louis, *sr* Gilles Corbeil, *s ed* Louis Collin, *pd* André-Line Beauparlant, *c* Sophie Lefèbvre, *mus* Guy Bélanger, Calude Fradette; *with* Serge Thériault, Gilles Renaud, Sébastien Delorme, Danny Gilmore, Maxime Dumontier, Gaston Caron, Gaston Lepage.

It's the late 1980s. Monsieur Brochu runs a franchise gas station with his three sons, Guy, Réjean and Alain. Brochu's wife is dead; his daughter, Nathalie, is only a visitor to his all-male domain. As the movie opens, Brochu is taken hostage by a strung-out, gun-wielding thief. "It was the beginning of the end," he tells us in voice-over, and we segué to the events that led to this moment of crisis. They are mostly small things and daily routines in the lives that revolve around the "Gaz Bar."

A motley crew of kibitzers, many of whom don't drive, hang out on Brochu's premises, reading tabloids, exchanging wisecracks and arguing their theories. Someone, who

everybody knows is a car thief, keeps on showing up in different vehicles. Another, who clandestinely fishes money out of Brochu's safe, gets caught and the others improvise a preposterous punishment for him. Meanwhile, Brochu, the man they call "the Boss," deals with problems ranging from potentially violent customers to familial tensions to the Parkinson's disease that is weakening his body. Despite this overload, he finds the time to rescue a little girl from a locked car and perform other acts of kindness.

Family pressures build as Réjean, an aspiring photojournalist, and Guy, who plays harmonica in a local blues band, desperately need to expand their horizons. (Alain, who continually practises pitching an imaginary baseball, is too young to dream of leaving home.) Eventually, the idealistic Réjean travels to Germany at the moment in 1989 when the Berlin Wall is being torn down. He sends back reports to his family, illustrated with his own photos.

One day, Guy's wrecked car is towed into the station, and Brochu agonizes until his son returns safely. On top of this anxiety, an inspector from the franchise company's head office harangues the Boss about the casual way he runs his station. In Berlin, Réjean becomes disillusioned by the commercialization of the Wall's collapse and suffers a breakdown. He is hospitalized and sent home. Meanwhile, Brochu visits the bar where Guy is playing and is touched by his son's music. He comes to the realization that his three boys have their own lives to lead

We return to the holdup at the beginning. The panicky thief grabs Alain, but Brochu begs to take his son's place. The thief agrees, then moments later he is shot by the police who have been called to the scene. The Boss makes the painful decision to close the business. Some time later, he is shown in his modest garden surrounded by his family and their pet goose. Lou Reed's "Beautiful Day" plays on the soundtrack. They all look happy.

Once upon a time, Quebec movies showed warm regard for ordinary folk (Gilles Carle's *La Vie heureuse du Leopold Z.* and *Bar salon*, Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine*, André Forcier's *Au clair de la lune* and many others). Something changed in the mid-1980s when Denys

Images courtesy of Odeon Films



From the left: Gaston Caron, Réal Bossé and Gaston Lepage



"The Boss." Serge Thériault

Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and other films said, "Let's take a look at the discreet charm and psycho-sexual troubles of the bourgeoisie."

The pendulum now appears to be swinging in the opposite direction. Recent high-profile Quebec pictures have returned to the village and the proletarian streets. In fact, Jean-François Pouliot's *Seducing Doctor Lewis* and Charles Binamé's *Séraphin, un homme et son péché*, both rural stories, are two of the biggest box-office hits in Quebec cinema's history. Moreover, Benoît Pilon's

Roger Toupin, épicier variété, a modest documentary portrait of an ex-convenience store operator who lost his business because of skyrocketing rents, is one of the year's hot items. As for *Gaz Bar Blues*, Louis Bélanger's working-class comedy/drama, the 38-year-old writer/director's second feature is the seventh most profitable movie of 2003. As this is being written, it's been nominated for 10 of Quebec's Jutra Awards, including best picture, director, screenplay and actor (Serge Thériault, who plays Brochu). (Ed's note: It won two, Musical Score and Actor.)

Post-mortem, Bélanger's 1999 debut, was a smart, mordantly funny movie about the relationship between a lonely mortuary attendant and a single mom who supports her daughter by committing violent crimes. *Gaz Bar Blues*, its script based on Bélanger's actual family, fulfills the promise he showed almost five years ago. At the heart of this finely acted ensemble film is the touching figure

of the Boss. More interested in his extended family, which depends on his gas station than the profit it brings him, he has a protective, almost maternal, nature. Brochu is at his most heartbreakingly touching when he achieves tiny victories such as

getting the little girl out of the car or when he walks onto the lot and gazes silently at his son's demolished car. The movie climaxes with Brochu's willingness to die for

his youngest son (Maxime Dumonter), and ends with him in a state of grace, feeding the goose in his little garden.

Bélanger is a natural filmmaking talent who makes faultless angle and point-of-view choices that capture relationships within the frame and make them come alive. But as gracefully written, directed, filmed and performed this movie is, it's Serge Thériault's performance that gives it its transcendent beauty. It's hard to believe that the strong-willed yet deeply vulnerable Brochu is played by the same actor who played, in drag, a grotesquely over-the-top housewife in Quebec's surreal television comedy hit, *La Petite vie*.

With its seamless flow and unforced naturalism, *Gaz Bar Blues* is packed with finely observed detail. Bélanger follows the constant motion of the neighbourhood's ebb and flow. He celebrates comic rituals and contrasting body languages while evoking the precise look of family run gas stations that are disappearing in a corporate, globalizing world. Brochu's garage recalls the pizzeria in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and the tobacco-shop setting of Wayne Wang's *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face*.

If the Rolling Stones management were a little less tight-fisted, Bélanger would have worked the classic "Salt of the Earth" into his soundtrack. *Gaz Bar Blues* celebrates those who feel threatened by a brave new corporate world. As in Spike Lee's best movies, or the films by Québécois directors such as André Forcier and the late Jean-Claude Lauzon, the people in the movie seem to be breathing the same air as the audience. They are animated by body language, gesture and personal style. Battered faces speak



The boys of *Gaz Bar Blues*.

volumes; defeated, defiant, ridiculous, deceptive, they burst with energy. "Let's drink to the hardworking people," Bélanger is saying. "Let's drink to the salt of the earth."

Maurie Alioff