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FEATURE

Léolo

Directed and written by Jean-Claude Lauzon, produced by Lyse Lafontaine and Aimée Danis, with Maxime Collin, Ginette Reno, Julien Guiomar and Pierre Bourgault. Distributed by Alliance Releasing.

Reviewed by Maurie Alioff

Jean-Claude Lauzon's debut feature, *Un Zoo, la nuit* (1987), begins with its tormented hero (Gilles Maheu) garotted to the bars of his prison cell as he gets sodomized by a faceless rapist. Lauzon's new picture, *Léolo*, also opens on an unusual penetration.

In Sicily, an anonymous peasant eyeing a pretty girl jerks off into a pyramid of tomatoes. Cut to a Montreal street market. A bustling, corpulent working class housewife (Ginette Reno) loses her balance and pratfalls backwards onto a load of tomatoes which impregnate her with imported Italian semen.

Léolo's mock-mythic birth fantasy plays out in the hyper-active imagination of the film's protagonist, Léo (sounds-like-Lauzon) Lozeau, an isolated, haunted 12-year-old surviving the terrors of an impoverished, certifiably insane family by re-creating himself in dreams. After his mother tumbled onto those juicy tomatoes, she gave birth not to Léo Lozeau, but to Léolo Lozone.

Léolo (Maxime Collin), far from being a *ti-cul* with a dead-end life, is an Italian, a visionary, and the worshipful, courtly lover of his angelic-looking neighbour, Bianca (Guiditta del Vecchio). The distance between fantasy and reality comes into focus when we (and he) see his Boticellian angel administering peculiar sexual acts on his psychopathic grandfa-



LÉOLO: Léolo (Maxime Collin) with mother (Ginette Reno)

ther's flabby body.

In a film that obsesses on body functions (defecation gets a lot of attention), a big chunk of *Léolo's* first third is set in the family's moist, musty bathroom. The factory-worker father (Roland Blouin), a dim bulb with an absolute faith clockwork bowel movements are the key to human salvation, dispenses laxatives to his family like a priest dispensing the host. He tyrannically monitors all visits to the toilet, bullying his wife and four kids into satisfying his expectations.

The scene at the core of *Léolo* involves Ginette Reno, seated on that toilet like

an enthroned cave goddess, high above two-year-old Léolo squatting on his potty and crying desperately. Lightning flashes; the camera tracks ultra-slowly toward the dark territory between Reno's massive thighs. Clearly, Lauzon intends the image to be terrifying and awesomely beautiful at the same time.

In fact, all of *Léolo's* grist for a shrink's mill is expressed in the highly aestheticized dream-documentary mode invented by Fellini in films like *Amarcord* and *Roma*. (Other influences, which Lauzon says he's "not shy" about acknowledging, include the Travianni Brothers' movies, *The Tin Drum*, and especially Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*.)

The grotesqueries are medicated through perfectly composed and lit shots, suave camera movements (the D.O.P. was Guy Dufaux), cartoonish black comedy, and a series of lyrical *tableaux vivants* full of nostalgia for the past.

Léolo's evocative visuals and digressions within digressions are heightened by a complex, layered soundtrack.

Lauzon refused to make the film unless he was guaranteed the music he wrote into his script (the rights eventually cost about \$240,00), and it ranges from a sinuous use of Tom Waits' *Cold, Cold Ground*, to Arab, African, and New Age rhythms and harmonies.

The track also features a virtually non-stop voiceover (there's very little dialogue) conveying the thoughts and feel-



BEING AT HOME WITH CLAUDE: Roy Dupuis starring as Yves

ings *Léolo* constantly scribbles in his notebooks. Spoken by Gilbert Sicotte and Pierre Bourgault, the poetic, ironic words are drawn from Lauzon's youthful writings and Réjan Ducharme's legendary novel, *L'Avalée des avalées*.

Of course, the whole package would have fallen apart without the kind of natural, believable performances Lauzon drew out of most of the people in his cast. The standouts are Reno, in a courageous film debut that has alienated some of her fans, Maxime Collin, and Yves Montmarquette as *Léolo*'s brother Fernand, who replaces the father's kaka mania with a body-building fixation. Lauzon is justifiably proud of his work with Montmarquette. Before this film, says the director, he hadn't even appeared in a polaroid.

The repressed Fernand's story, involv-

ing his attempt to conquer his fear of an English-speaking bully (Lauzon claims he had nothing political on his mind), is the through-line that holds the picture's various fragments together. The movie's most touching moment, some viewers would say its only significant one, comes when *Léolo* witnesses Fernand's pathetic discovery that "even with a mountain of muscles, you can't change a thing."

Léolo's weaknesses include a voiceover that sometimes becomes insistently poetic and even redundant, like the "Word Tamer" character (Pierre Bourgault), a symbolic, bloodless abstraction of saintly protectiveness. Not only is this figure a bizarre throwback to allegorical characters in morality plays, his histrionic appearances, many of which were filmed on absurdly candle-choked sets in Rome's Cinecittà, are the corniest and hollownest in the picture. The "Word

Tamer" makes you long for Philippe Noiret in *Cinema Paradiso*.

Léolo flirts with similar problems critics have seen in Terence Davies' *Distance Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, which, like Lauzon's picture, are memory collages of a working-class childhood from a sensitive boy's point-of-view. In a recent *Sight and Sound* article about *The Long Day Closes*, John Caughie wrote: "The long static shot of the mother at the wash tub singing... beautifully composed, wonderfully lit, seems emotionally exploitive, rather than emotionally intense, aestheticized out of the reality which the image might represent." At its weakest, *Léolo* aesthetics do anesthetize emotions.

In Quebec, there has been bitching that Lauzon's vision of a ramshackle working class neighbourhood in the mid-sixties is excessively gross and brutal. You get the impression some members of the

chattering class believe filmmakers should only depict well-adjusted citizens sipping apéritifs on bistro terraces.

Léolo is a departure from the chic angst flicks, inane comedies, and historical mini-series that have tended to dominate Quebec screens since the eighties. Lauzon may not be a hunter who always hits his target but at least he gets out into the woods.

Maurie Alioff writes film reviews, articles, screenplays, and is a contributing editor to Matrix.

FEATURE

Being at Home with Claude

Directed by Jean Beaudin, from the original play by René-Daniel Dubois, produced by Louise Gendron in association with the Nation Film Board of Canada, with Roy Dupuis and Jacques Godin. Distributed by Alliance Releasing.

Reviewed by Will Aitkin

When Quebec playwright René-Daniel Dubois' *Being at Home with Claude* opened at Montreal's Theatre de Quat'Sous in 1986, the buzz was immediate. Partly about the play itself—in French, but with an English title, about a street hustler who kills a trick—but mainly about the performance of Lothaire Bluteau in the role of Yves the hustler.

Nothing Bluteau's done on film, in *Jésus de Montréal* or *Black Robe*, comes close to suggesting his astonishing range. As a detective takes Yves over and over the events leading up to the murder—the cop knows Yves is the killer, he just doesn't understand why he killed—Bluteau was feral, cunning, opaque, a stringy nocturnal creature slinking about the stage (you could almost see a tail lashing out behind him), dangerous and seductive, teeth bared, tongue darting.

But then, as the cop doggedly stripped away layer after layer of lies and fanta-

sy—Yves' whole protective carapace of toughness and self-sufficiency—Bluteau's skin appeared to turn transparent. Half-naked, skeletal, he seemed to glow from within, his final confession scene a jerking, spurning orgasm of pain that left the audience as spent and trembling as Yves.

For reasons that can only be guessed at—box office? fear of foreplay?—in his screen adaptation of *Being at Home with Claude* director Jean Beaudin has put the orgasm up front. We're barely settled into our seats before it's duck and cover time. In a snazzy, sixties-inspired black and white prologue, complete with jaggedy, rhythms-of-the-city editing and a retro-jazz track, we see Yves picking up Claude, a soft-spoken, ostensibly straight university student, in a park. Soon it's clear their relationship has progressed beyond the purely commercial. The camera hovers over their first romantic dinner for two: pasta, candlelight, wine glasses. The meal quickly forgotten, the pair are naked on the floor. Yves the hustler's on top, but Claude the client's fucking him, their climax a hot gush of sperm and blood.

That's the first ten minutes—stylish, sexy and sensational, Genet meets MuchMusic—leaving us only another 80 minutes of post-coital chatter to slog through when our natural inclination is to roll over and go to sleep.

Beaudin keeps the decibel level high enough to render slumber impossible, however longed for. Faced with a deliberately claustrophobic play, he could have tried to open it up—bring in other characters, new settings, maybe a subplot or two. Or—and this is the riskier choice—he could have gone with the claustrophobia, heightened it, made it inescapable.

Inexplicably, Beaudin—whose credits include *J.A. Martin: Photographe*, *Cordélia*, and the popular Quebec TV miniseries *Les Filles de Caleb* and *Scoop*—has tried to do both. After the pulsing prologue he confines Yves and the detective to an interrogation room, but it's a big ornate room, vast enough that the director can manipulate the camera like a third character, letting it crawl the room to no particular purpose, setting it at every odd angle but the right one.

And then there's the problem of two

“opening up” scenes, which feel as though they were shot and inserted as afterthoughts. In one the detective goes out into a courtyard garden for a smoke, in the second he calls home to say he'll be late, and we get thirty seconds of a generic wife cooking generic dinner in a generic suburban kitchen.

None of these maladroit ploys can distract us from the fact that it's not the play that needs opening up, it's the central performance. Casting Roy Dupuis as the hustler Yves was a shrewd commercial decision for the Quebec market, but a lousy one otherwise. Dupuis is a big handsome bit of beefcake with a exceedingly modest dramatic range who's made a name for himself by shucking his shirt at frequent intervals in *Les Filles de Caleb* and *Scoop*.

As the tempestuous Yves he's a master class in ineptitude, pouting, posing and swaggering, all textbook attitude and pin-up boy narcissism with no emotional depth. In interviews Dupuis—who, like Beaudin, has made clear that he is straight—has retailed his meticulous research for the role, which included a daring foray into Montreal's gay village. Dupuis doesn't inhabit the role of Yves—he's a tourist taking snapshots.

A better director might have gotten more from Dupuis, but Beaudin seems to have encouraged a crashing literalness. When Yves speaks of unbearable longing and loneliness, Dupuis hugs a convenient column. When Yves speaks of war as a metaphor for love, Beaudin puts the sound of distant drums and rifle fire on the soundtrack.

What's most remarkable about *Being at Home with Claude* is how René-Daniel Dubois' lines somehow survive this cinematic mangling. Despite the worst efforts of Beaudin and Dupuis, the central conception of Yves stalks the movie like the ghost of yearning. He's an implacable creation, this hustler who's let down his guard just once, letting another man into his life and then into his body. Yves' defenses have been penetrated, and all for a dream of love he knows has no chance of lasting—Claude's educated, the wrong class, he may not be gay. The only way Yves can keep that dream of love alive is by killing his lover—that way there's no denouement, no fading of pas-