



**Above: Richard Moffatt and Chloé Teasdale .  
Insets: Louise Portal and Patrice Godin.**

**Pierre Gang's *Sous-sol* was Quebec's Official Selection in this year's Cannes Film Festival.**

All Photos courtesy of Film Tonic





# Primal SCENE

## Pierre Gang's Sous-sol

By Maurie Alioff

**Like Robert Lepage's** *Le confessionnal* and Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*, Pierre Gang's *Sous-sol* is a psychodrama that looks back in time at sexually explosive family relationships. Although Gang is far less eager than either Lauzon or Lepage to discuss the links between his life and his movie, he does reveal enough to suggest that *Sous-sol* (literally "basement") is at least partly aimed at personal catharsis. "I don't like to see the film anymore; it's too close," the writer-director told me when I interviewed him in his Montreal home a few weeks after the picture had its debut at Cannes.

Soft-spoken and gracious, the 39-year-old Gang makes a point of not coming on like an oracle, a mad visionary, or some other persona-of-choice in the Quebec film milieu. Pleased by the warm response his first feature received in the Critics' Week sidebar at Cannes, he says about *Sous-sol*: "Maybe I've done something honest and focused. I don't think I made a masterpiece. I don't think the film is great. But I think there's real emotion there."

Gang's picture displays an artful, delicate touch that won him mostly glowing reviews when the movie opened in Quebec, although it went on to be a box-office disappointment. For one thing, Quebec moviegoers—like their counterparts elsewhere on the continent—were preoccupied by the bland thrills of *Twister*, or the more complicated ones of *Mission: Impossible*. Far removed from such extravagant action fantasies, *Sous-sol* is a restrained depiction of a lonely and imaginative boy's troubled private world. As in *Léolo*, the young protagonist's daunting mother shapes his life and haunts his dreams and visions. But while *Léolo*'s mother was an obese, awe-inspiring slum matriarch, Gang's 11-year-old René (remarkably played by first-timer Richard Moffatt) sees his as an alluring, dangerous whore.



**Incarnated by** Louise Portal in a performance that has "Genie" written all over it, Reine is a middle-aged woman who lives for and defines herself through her beauty and sexuality. Like Diane, Portal's sado-masochistic character in *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, Reine is, in a sense, doomed to her appetites because nothing else makes life in a sad, tainted world bearable. Hers is a melancholy sexuality symbolically linked to death by the cemetery viewed through the windows of her family's basement apartment, not to mention the trauma that sets the film's plot in motion.

In the movie's arresting opening, René peers into his parents' bedroom where Reine, back turned to him, straddles his father's hips. Dressed appropriately in a bordello-red slip, she is efficiently but mechanically sliding her fist up and down her husband's penis. Wrists tied to the bedposts, Raymond (Daniel Gadouas) groans in apparent pain. René, aware of his parents' anger with each other, assumes that the erotic tableau in front of him must be about inflicting punishment. He turns his head. In the shadowplay on an adjacent wall, Reine is stabbing Raymond with a long knife that recalls *Psycho*, and every other homicidal maniac horror movie of the 1960s, the period when *Sous-sol's* action begins.

Although René's confusion of reality and hallucination terrifies him, it also incites what is probably his first orgasm. One scene later, we see him burning his pyjama bottoms in the furnace room, which like the film's other apartment building settings, becomes a manifestation of René's disturbed psychic landscape. Terror consolidates its hold on the boy the next morning when he discovers Raymond is dead, and assumes his mother killed him. From this point on, the movie veers off in a risky direction. Gang tracks the impact of the dirty secret René thinks he shares with Reine over a period of nine years, from 1967 to 1976. In what he calls a series of "linked tableaux and moments" reminiscent of Terence Davies's movies (Gang reveres *Distant Voices, Still Life*), he fuses skewed perspectives of René's tormented thoughts and visions with grounded impressions of working-class family life.

In an early scene, a gracefully executed travelling shot takes Reine from her husband's funeral to her wedding reception, where a male relative says about her: "She's the most beautiful perhaps, but not the most proper." Later in the movie, René plugs himself and his mother (who continually asks him, "Aren't you gonna give me a kiss?") into the whorehouse setting of a black-and-white TV show. Dressed in an

approximation of a Playboy bunny costume, Reine is about to do a trick when René imagines coming to her rescue. In the cut back to colour, René and Reine are running down a real staircase on their way to the restaurant where she enjoys working because she's the focal point of endless male attention.

The sequence defines René's dilemma. For Reine, flirtation and sex are her release; for him, they are murky, repugnant, a threat to be rescued from. When Reine brings Roch (Patrice Godin), a young stud of a lover into the apartment, René tries to sabotage the affair. Near the end of the film, in an ambiguous scene tingling with homoerotic vibrations, half-naked Roch tells René that sex is part of life, fun, normal, but the kid screams: "It's not normal to shout like crazies, to hurt each other."

As disturbing as the affair is to René, Roch, the intruder, is basically a decent guy, and while Reine's not exactly *Good Housekeeping's* ideal of what a mom should be, Gang portrays her as a fairly dependable parent. Moreover, her sexual nature is not as unleashed as it seems to her son. Louise Portal's look and body language suggest that her character's role models are Simone Signoret and Lana Turner, two icons noted for portrayals of tragic sexual heroines during the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, as the movie progresses from 1967 to 1976, Gang clearly intends Reine to encapsulate the female sexual liberation of that period. As she gets older, she looks more carefree, and sex with Roch is shameless and playful.

Meanwhile, traumatized, angry René finds his only relief in Françoise (Isabelle Pasco of Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Book* and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Roselyne et les lions*), a young Parisienne who rents the apartment upstairs. Françoise's blond tresses and virginal smile make her seem like a visitation of purity and light, contrasting sharply with Reine's dark sensuality. But René becomes disillusioned by his beloved's false promise of salvation. In a key plot turn, the angel falls by releasing her own appetites with mom's boyfriend, and René runs around the exterior of the building, staring into windows, horrified by the apparition of one sexual scene after another.

A psychologist friend of Gang's was impressed by *Sous-sol's* dramatization of volatile unconscious forces, particularly in the way the film vividly illustrates Freud's concept of the primal scene. As is well known to analysts of the inherent voyeurism in movies, Freud claimed that the witnessing, or as

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is far more common, the imagining of parental sex triggers anxiety in children. They can't accept their parents engaging in such a seemingly violent act, nor can they admit to their own excitement. So many of his patients brought up the subject of the primal scene, that Freud concluded that it is a fundamental component of the human psyche. "Among the store of fantasies of all neurotics, and probably of all human beings," he wrote, "[it] is seldom absent."

**In the subterranean world of *Sous-sol***, Gang's little protagonist acts out a typical pattern of feeling abandoned as he seesaws back and forth between tender impulses and violent ones, continually spurred on by desire that mingles with terror. The movie's central image is of Reine, soft and fluffy in a fur coat, smiling at René from behind the door chain he just clicked into place to lock her out.

To highlight René's imprisonment in his morbid sexual fears, Gang uses the film's most idiosyncratic device, the one that made his script a very hard sell until producer Roger Frappier went for it. Throughout *Sous-sol*, the passage of time over nine years is marked by events (Reine's affair with Roch, René and Françoise becoming friends, René's older brother and sister leaving home), as well as changes in outfits, hair styles, and other period details. But René, throughout the years of his adolescence up to age 20, doesn't visibly age. He remains an 11-year-old boy, an inner child suspended in time, until the movie's closing scene. Even when René does finally appear as an adult, the actor playing him looks more like 16 than 20.

Gang says that when his script was making the rounds from production companies to funding agencies, he was continually being asked, "Can you decide? Do you want to do a dream film, or do you want to be realistic?" Naturally, he told various producers and arts bureaucrats, "I want to do both." A big fan of Jaco Van Dormael's *The Eighth Day*, Gang loves the way the Belgian ex-clown and moviemaker flips onto a purely imaginary plane—a character's vision of singing mice, for instance—and then "comes back to the normal."

At the same time, the realist in Gang grounds what he calls his alternate perceptions in a very specific time frame with resonances in Quebec: 1967-1976 encompasses the consolidation of the Quiet Revolution against the stultifying controls of the church and anglo industrialism and the first election of the separatist Parti Québécois. The era was framed by two crucial, international events: Expo in 1967 and the Olympic Games in 1976. This was, says a Montreal movie critic, "a period which saw Quebec coming out of its shell." By the end of the film, René finally (and several critics have said unconvincingly) breaks away from the womb of his mother's tight little environment. Instead of the 11-year-old we've seen all through the film, we have before us the actual young man, quietly but determinedly walking away from yet another primal scene. The character obviously suggests Quebec in 1976, taking tentative steps toward overcoming its collective neuroses.

Although Gang is aware of these allegorical implications, they don't seem to interest him much. He seems far more absorbed by issues of performance, lighting (*Sous-sol*'s cinematographer



was Robert Altman regular Pierre Mignot) and art direction (*Le confessionnal*'s François Laplante). After directing two medium-length films, he has achieved in his debut feature impeccable production values that look like they cost more than the picture's \$2-million budget. *Sous-sol* is a poetic film with a meticulous sense of time and place, including the best evocation of a sultry Montreal summer since Mireille Dansereau's underappreciated *Le sourd dans la ville*, a film with which it shares many qualities.



**Director Pierre Gang**

As for theme, Gang wants to address his concerns about entrapment and liberation on a personal scale, not a political one. So how intimate is this movie, which makes you feel the strong tug of psychological autobiography? "It's a question of how public I want to go," Gang told me when I asked these questions. "It's not that I'm afraid or shy. Maybe I want to protect my family. My mother saw the film, and she recognized things. At the same time, I never saw my parents make love. It's not my family, but it's close to my family. "During my childhood, I really spent four years in a basement. There really was a view of a cemetery. I wanted to re-create that; it's all part of what I am. I don't want to read that the character is based on my mother, but she's close to my mother. She was seductive, and for a kid, a seductive mother is weird.... Plus, in the area where we lived, it seemed like prostitution. I thought it was really tough when I was a kid. You know, people thinking.... So, maybe I did this to exorcise. The film is maybe an acceptance of that, and it shows a great character at the same time." ■