

La Comtesse de Baton Rouge photos courtesy of France Film



Fables of D

André Forcier's *La Comtesse*

By Gary Michael Dault

There is something compellingly and admirably childlike about the films of André Forcier.

Remarkably poised between outright vaudevillian fantasy and a certain wacko everydayness, Forcier's most recent works—*Une Histoire inventée* (1990), *Le Vent du Wyoming* (1993) and the current *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*—succeed in proposing and then proving that life is antic and that it may well be best understood by leaving it alone, by letting it unfold as it will.

Despite certain behavioural glitches, small-scale logjams of misbehaviour (mothers and daughters invariably strive to capture the heart—and the body—of the same man; romantic trysts depend upon the wiles of a hypnotist to boot them up; characters indulge in certain antisocial activities such as levitation, and are sometimes given to floating about as apparitions; people point guns at each other—and shoot them, too—the way the rest of us point our fingers when we're being emphatic) and despite certain instances of People Behaving Badly peppered into his films like seasoning (like the salt that makes the surrealist engine run), Forcier gives us a world of exuberant and sometimes intoxicating innocence, a world where everyone gets respectfully listened to regardless of being ravished in a Ferris wheel, chatted up in a shower (albeit under an umbrella), or shot out of a cannon.

It always occurs to me, while watching Forcier's films, that they are among the most magnificently antiracist films I've ever seen, if being antiracist can mean being in possession of enough generosity of spirit to acknowledge and indeed to revel in a compassionate, all-embracing Chaucerian/Rabelaisian largesse. What a tapestry of types! Nobody is ever ultimately excluded from felicity in an André Forcier film.



esire

de Baton Rouge

Forcier's films posit the existence of nurturing communities. They are often very small communities—a nightclub/bar/theatre (*Une Histoire inventée*), a gym/a motel/a bar (*Le Vent du Wyoming*), or a circus (*La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*). But they are invariably elastic enough to accept, hold and finally protect their denizens (gather hope, all ye who enter here). Each of these communities is a laboratory, a theatre for the working out of the individual destinies of its' characters.

These Forcierian communities (sites, locales) are the locus of the pinball-like movement, a slow Brownian motion, of Forcier's characters as they move toward one another, touch, are rejected or accepted, bounce away again, come to rest somewhere that is not always congruent with their own ideas of fulfillment, but is within the compassionate reach of Forcier's own vision for them. At the end of Pablo Picasso's play *Le Désir attrape par la queue*, there is a sublime passage of business that is reminiscent of Forcier's conceptual tone:

By the window at the end of the room, bursting it open suddenly, enters a golden ball the size of a man which lights up the whole room and blinds the characters, who take handkerchiefs from their pockets and blindfold themselves and, stretching up their right arms, point to each other, shouting all together and many times, "You! You! You!" On the golden ball appear the letters of the word: "Nobody."

André Forcier's films meld the Blakean modes of Innocence and Experience—all the while demonstrating a strong preference for Experience. As with Blake's gigantic categories of human possibility, the films emphatically suggest that mere—that is, untried—Innocence is not the desirable place to be. The citizens of Blake's world of Innocence are mostly children and, as I recall, a magnificently ineffectual, a not-quite-yet-female being named Thel who, in her infuriating dialogue with both a clod of earth and a pebble, recounts that she is petrified to wade into the river of life lest her clock start ticking and she end up *becoming—and therefore aging unto death*. Blake's world of Experience, by contrast, is a vigorous place whose citizens see the amassing of human events as accumulation leading to wisdom. ("The road of Excess," writes Blake in his *Proverbs of Hell*, "leads to the Palace of Wisdom." "The cut worm forgives the plow," and, "Better to murder an infant in its cradle than to nurse unacted desires.") In Forcier's films nobody nurses an unacted desire. And everybody is the better for it.

Indeed, Forcier appears to regard desire as infinitely touching and, ultimately, as the conduit to enlightenment. Nobody who attempts to act out desire is ever denied an understanding of their actions, which is one of the sources of the enormous sense of fairness and even kindness one feels hovering over each of the films, informing its progress, tincturing its unfolding.

Forcier's laboratory-like sites of community are, as we have said, warm and nurturing. (He is a deft hand at comfy, embracing bars and clubs where everybody knows your name.) They are also bracingly theatrical. In *Le Vent du Wyoming*, the bar/club around which the action revolves like a wheel spinning on an axle, is presided over by an amateur hypnotist whose ramshackle talents both release and constrict the film's characters.

In *Une Histoire inventée*, there is the club—also a kind of showplace—where the charmingly patriarchal Gaston reigns as "the best trumpeter in Montreal," a site central to the film's action. But this bar is shared in importance in the film by the actual theatre nearby where the young actress Soledad and her unfaithful swain Thiebaud, who are each night transformed into a stagy Desdemona and Othello, perform Shakespeare's hoary play before a crowd as peculiar and eccentric and loudly personal in their responses to the drama as the customers in the bar. They chatter and laugh in full-throated enjoyment at the wrong things. They applaud any surrealistic intervention into the play's integrity—as when Othello has to be kicked onto the stage by the director; or when the play's poor little elfin Iago nearly scratches himself into oblivion from the itching powder visited upon him; or when—central to the film—poor Gaston, already struck savagely in the mouth by a jealous rival (the aging Gaston is the locus of the romantic energies of both Soledad and her glamorous actor/mother, Florence) and thus unable to play his beloved trumpet, finds himself hand-cuffed to Soledad. He must stand awkwardly and mutely by while, next to him on the vast silken bed, Soledad/Desdemona is nightly strangled to death by her jealous Othello (much to the delight of Forcier's unruly crowd of theatregoers). The fact that poor Gaston is not only handcuffed to the expiring Desdemona but also, one terrible night, shot to death by the (doubly) jealous Thiebaud/Othello during the strangulation scene, seems really no more horrendous than any other of the film's incidents. Indeed the whole murder comes about in the goofiest, if inexorable, way—like some demented parody of classical tragedy. The only reason Othello has a gun in the first place is that the director's uncle, a rather adorably pixilated, deeply sentimental, retired mobster with money in the play ("I don't see any gondolas"), no longer able to keep artifice and reality separated (who can in a Forcier film? your

Une Histoire inventée



heart goes out to him), suggests that Othello shoot Desdemona because he cannot bear to watch the dear girl's nightly "suffering."

The desire to explore the self wherever it leads is so strongly written into Forcier's characters, they sometimes seem to have burst out into a kind of physical grotesquerie that functions as the index to a vitality no longer containable within normal bodily bounds. Whereas Soledad, of *Une Histoire inventée*, appears everywhere while still in her "Italian Renaissance" makeup, her eyes giant black-painted hollows like some Disneyfied raccoon, *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*'s Paula Paul de Nerval (Geneviève Brouillette), the beautiful star attraction of Montreal's Belmont Park *Tente des Creatures* "freak show" and sub-sequently queen of the Louisiana-based Circus of Happiness, actually has a moustache and a beard. Her friend and hopeless admirer, The Great Zénon (Frédéric Desager), who makes filmic images appear on a screen just by the impress of his powerful, incarnating mind ("Movies are passé, my dear Rex", he assures Rex Prince, the filmmaker/protagonist of *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*), is "Canada's one-and-only Cyclops." (His monocular condition, his optical singularity, so affectingly used here by Forcier as an emblem of the kind of vision that is knowing [informed], but uninforming [in the sense of making nothing happen] is surely one of the cinematic wonders of the world—you can't take your eyes off him, and you cannot, of course, really lay your eyes upon him either, there being no way to meet his non-stereoptical gaze.) It's as if the normal vagaries of appearance manifest in the characters of the earlier films (Gaston's bandaged lip, for example, which both exoticizes and ennobles him the way Jack Nicholson's broken and bandaged nose does in Polanski's *Chinatown*) are, by the time Forcier gets to *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*, no longer adequate as emblems of his characters' acceleratingly fable-like (i.e. fabulous) meanings.



Le Vent du Wyoming

The oddity informing and powering Forcier's films—the seduction by an ex-nun, for example, of a famous visiting novelist in the boxing ring of her father's gym, the woman's subsequent act of levitation as a response to her rejection at the novelist's hands, the female protagonist's mother receiving oral sex from her daughter's boxer/boyfriend while lifting and dropping through the night in an abandoned Ferris wheel (all from *Le Vent du Wyoming*)—are invariably made to seem—to feel—perfectly normal. This is consistent with Forcier's liberatingly nonjudgmental stance. Here is God's Plenty, the glories, jests and riddles of the world, and these are the goofy things they do. And by the time you get to Forcier's latest film, *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*, the mere eccentricities of his characters have accumulated into the building of something closer to an adjacent universe.

This is the way *La Comtesse* gets rolling: a young woman is painting (i.e., refurbishing) the screen in a small Montreal cinema. There is some mysterious problem with the film they are currently showing (also called *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*). She is told that its director, a charming little nebish of a man named Rex Prince (Robin Aubert), has arrived to talk with her. Almost the first thing he says, upon striding into the cinema, is "I once watched *The General* on an old sheet stained with cum." Welcome to Forcier's world—a world of commingled memory and desire.

The trouble, the young woman points out to Rex Prince (what a name for a director—"King Prince"!), is that during the 9 p.m. screening of the film, there was seen to be "a woman haunting the screen." It is, of course, the Countess herself, a floating apparitional manifestation of an old love, Paula Paul, the bearded lady of Belmont Park with whom Rex Prince had fallen so hopelessly in love 30 years before and who now beckons him back into the very film he eventually came to make about their love affair. Has there ever been a more operatic, full-bodied entrance to a flashback?

Rex Prince could, if he saw fit to, blame his apparitional lover's persistent intrusion into his film on filmmaking itself. When we first meet Rex Prince, he is a young Montreal filmmaker who is trying desperately to finish his first film. ("A first film is a first film; with it you lose forever your virginity...") He has just now run out of film stock and it is suggested to him by his faithful, fatherly editor and ultimately lifelong friend, Edouard Doré (Gaston Lepage), that Rex pay a visit to Belmont Park, to The Great Zénon, the Cyclops. "He'll find you some film," Doré assures him. Zénon, given to the projection of his own brand of merely mind-generated film, loftily dismisses Rex's request, but does introduce the earnest young director to Paula Paul—with whom he falls immediately and profoundly in love, much to Zénon's sorrow, since he loves her too with a hopeless, unrequited, monocular passion. The night of Rex's visit to Zénon is



the last night of the park's summer season and there is a wonderfully warm and bizarre dance to mark the occasion. Rex dances with the leathery-skinned Crocodile Babe (Francine Ruel)—who wants every-one to call her "Angeline" for the night—to a clumsy but brilliantly bittersweet rendition, on organ and drums, of "The House of the Rising Sun," a deft prefiguring of the entry of Louisiana, both as state and as state-of-mind. When Rex meets Paula Paul and hears her entire name (Paula Paul de Nerval), he asks adoringly if her name is "like that of the writer?" "No," Paula Paul replies, her eyes dancing, "like the circus freak."

The Great Zénon:
Canada's "one-and-only Cyclops."

But there are no "freaks" in Forcier's films, remember? Just characters so profoundly individualized they become—freaks or not—a part of the dazzling parade that makes up Forcier's version of the human universe. When Paula Paul announces that she is heading south, that she is going to "squander her youth in Louisiana," joining up with a bunch of ex-freaks to form the Circus of Happiness, Rex Prince finds himself with a new mission—as monocular, as fixed and staring as Zénon's locomotive headlight-eye: he will join her there. And be happy too.

At the train station, the lovelorn Zénon in tow, Rex and Paula Paul dance a farewell dance together under the big station clock. A sole saxophonist provides the music: a woozy, bleating, wacked-out version of "The House of the Rising Sun" again. "I hate you," Paula Paul tells her love-intoxicated filmmaker, "I feel like I'm abandoning you."

Not for long. The next thing we know, Zénon, heartbroken and needing to forget, announces he's going to the circus museum in Florence (everything at Belmont Park reminds him of Paula Paul). For his part, Rex Prince, his life forever changed, now heads off in his Edsel (a nice touch this Edsel, this failed, absurdly gendered American dream car, often howlingly described back in the late 1950s, as a vulva on wheels) to Louisiana to be with his hirsute love.

Louisiana is a golden magic kingdom. ("The full moon lasts four days here.") And here, the ecstatic Rex Prince, near to his love at last and needing a full role in her life and the life of the Circus of Happiness, makes a deal with a guy named Dudley, whose job is, at every performance, to be fired out of a cannon. Dudley, however, who has had quite enough of his life as a human projectile, has put his cannon up for sale. What he really loves is Rex's Edsel. So they make a trade. Rex Prince, film director extraordinaire, now becomes cannon fodder. ("It's easy", Dudley tells him. "You just suck in your stomach and keep your toes straight and POW!")

This is not *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*. This is just the beginning of *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge*. Suffice it to say that what follows is a film of great visual and narrative complexity—Forcier's masterwork to date. I have meandered around within the film's beginnings because it is in this first quarter of the work that Forcier sets up his gentle yet robust equating of filmmaking with freak show and freak show with the family of man. *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge* is about largesse, about possibility, about the tireless tempering of the human heart that is an ongoing requirement for meaningful life. And desire is what lights life's fuse. Rex Prince's exuberant cannoning is the finest and funniest filmic metaphor I know for the trajectory of the aspiring heart. Which is indistinguishable, in André Forcier's world, from the filmic act. ■



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