



Pierre Falardeau's *5 février 1839*

Montreal Update

by Claire Valade

It may have taken a while, but Pierre Falardeau, Quebec's very own rebel filmmaker, has finally done it. *15 février 1839*, his film about the 1837-8 rebellion and the last 24 hours in the lives of patriot leaders Chevalier De Lorimier and Charles Hindelang, has finally come to theatres in Quebec. The most eagerly awaited Quebec production of the past decade, as it turns out, is also an excellent film.

The roller-coaster ride that was the making of *15 février 1839* is certainly worth recalling here. The saga began in the early 1990s when Falardeau started writing a script based on De Lorimier's memoirs of his final days in prison. Poet Gaston Miron, one of Quebec's literary giants of the 20th century (who died in 1996), brought his considerable insight into

building the emotional core of the script. In 1994, while shooting *Octobre*, Falardeau told actor Luc Picard about the subject of his passion. Seduced by the intensity of both story and character, Picard, one of Quebec's most charismatic stars, instantly lent his support to the project and he was joined by other artists, including Julien Poulin (Elvis in the *Elvis Gratton* series of films and videos), a long-time Falardeau collaborator, and acclaimed stage actress Sylvie Drapeau (*Les Fantômes des trois Madeleine*). Together, they embarked on a crusade to bring the film to the big screen in face of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles, the biggest of which was Telefilm Canada's refusal to participate to the film's \$3.3 million budget, despite SODEC's (then called SOGIC) decision to inject \$1.25 million into the project.

In 1997, after a third refusal from Telefilm, Falardeau accused the federal agency of censorship, turning the whole thing into a political affair. Telefilm strenuously denied Falardeau's accusations, pointing to the fact that it had helped finance another film dedicated to the same subject, Michel Brault's *Quand je serai parti...vous vivrez encore*. A heated public debate ensued. Telefilm held its ground, arguing that, with limited funds available, other projects took precedence. Despite the script's indisputable quality and growing support in the Quebec arts

community, many nevertheless questioned Falardeau's motivations. A vocal nationalist, he has a reputation for courting controversy and painting himself as a victim of a system controlled by Anglos (when, in truth, countless other artists and producers regularly suffer similar fates in their dealings with Telefilm). Falardeau replied that people of all political backgrounds had rallied behind his project, citing the fact that the SODEC official who green-lighted his project was Harry Gulkin, a highly respected Montreal (Anglo) producer who had been one of his strongest supporters from the beginning.

Soon a unique phenomenon developed. A small group of ordinary citizens, led by 20-year-old linguistics student Nadine Vincent, formed a popular committee for the purpose of raising funds for the film's production. A series of events and actions took place, such as benefit concerts, marches and the mailing of thousands of postcards of support to Telefilm. The committee collected \$100,000 in contributions over a period of four years. With SODEC standing firm behind the film, Telefilm eventual chipped in and filming began in winter 2000. When it was finally released, it received great critical acclaim (apart from two Anglo newspapers) as well as a tremendous response from moviegoers. The distributor, Lion's Gate Films, opted initially for a limited release pattern (in only a couple of theatres in Montreal and Quebec City), then a wide release on February 15, 2001.

15 février 1839 succeeds where Brault's earlier film failed. By opting to shoot the film as vivid chiaroscuro *tableaux vivants*, the prison scenes acquire an almost palpable intimacy and therefore are all the more poignant. With the help of a fantastic sound designer (Matthieu Beaudin) and a great composer (Jean St-Jacques), who knew how to build a layered soundtrack with almost unnoticeable sounds to great effect, the film avoids the pitfalls many Québécois films fall into with their flat, uninspired soundtracks. Instead, the film's atmosphere is allowed to breathe and the tension slowly mounts. But above all, by favouring dramatic impact and aesthetic conceptualization over realistic historical accuracy (language and social rapports are modernized and Hindelang's character is largely fictionalized), Falardeau delivers, quite simply, an engrossing film.

One doesn't always have to agree with Falardeau's point of view to acknowledge the film's worth. So, forget some of the film's more simplistic nationalist discourse. Forget Falardeau's often demagogic tendencies. (He embraces them with such a raw energy that makes him virtually untouchable.) Forget the infamous roller-coaster ride it took to get the film made. Ultimately and undeniably, *15 février 1839* is a powerful, moving drama and that is the only thing that counts. ●