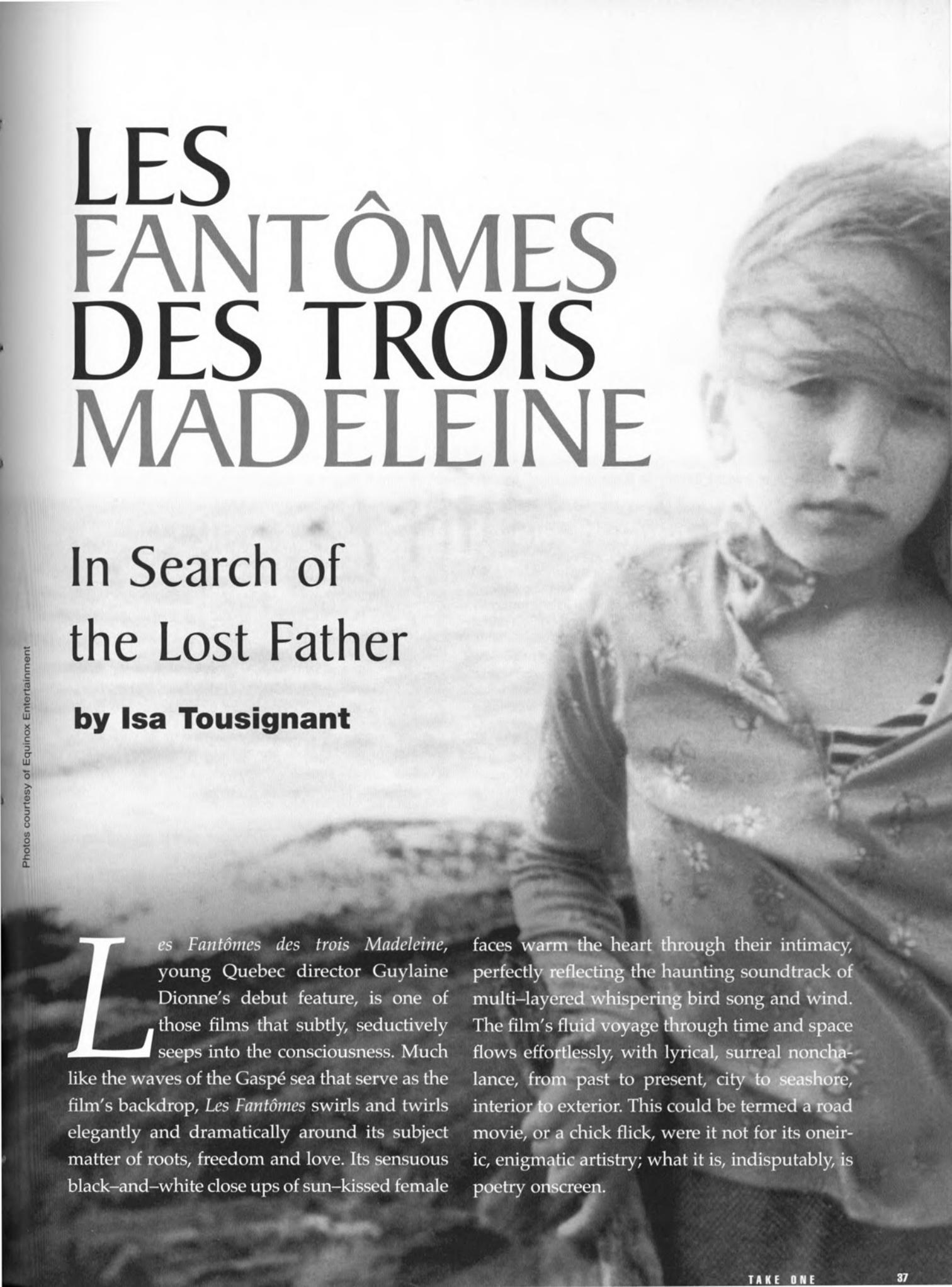


LES FANTÔMES DES TROIS MADELEINE



In Search of
the Lost Father

by Isa Tousignant

Les *Fantômes des trois Madeleine*, young Quebec director Guylaine Dionne's debut feature, is one of those films that subtly, seductively seeps into the consciousness. Much like the waves of the Gaspé sea that serve as the film's backdrop, *Les Fantômes* swirls and twirls elegantly and dramatically around its subject matter of roots, freedom and love. Its sensuous black-and-white close ups of sun-kissed female

faces warm the heart through their intimacy, perfectly reflecting the haunting soundtrack of multi-layered whispering bird song and wind. The film's fluid voyage through time and space flows effortlessly, with lyrical, surreal nonchalance, from past to present, city to seashore, interior to exterior. This could be termed a road movie, or a chick flick, were it not for its oneiric, enigmatic artistry; what it is, indisputably, is poetry onscreen.



Previous page: Isadore Galwey as Madeleine. Above: Sylvie Drapeau as Marie-Madeleine with France Arbour as Mado.

Guylaine Dionne,

much like her film, is charismatically indecipherable. I sat down with her one Saturday morning, in a techno café on Montreal's Main—on Saint Mary Magdalene's Day, ironically enough—after the most hectic of weeks. Instead of the intensely supercharged work experience I was expecting, I was invited to relax, sit back, let the weekend take hold and just *be*. We ordered food and chilled coffees and watched life pass by through the café's open facade—the passersby seemed framed like on a TV screen, we remarked. What started as a recorded interview quickly morphed into a free-flow conversation as I realized that all that would be audible on the tape was the backbeat overlaid with clinking porcelain. So we talked about camping vacations, her son, friends in common (Montreal: incest city) and—oh yes—filmmaking. Sort of. An hour later, I came away happy and entertained, but with only the most impressionistic idea of how the wheels in Dionne's creative mind turn. Our conversation had done little to untangle *Les Fantômes's* enigmatic web, but it also made me realize that this, in itself, wasn't the point.

Les Fantômes des trois Madeleine follows three intergenerational Québécoises, all named Madeleine, on a journey to the vast seashore land of the Gaspé, in northeastern Quebec, and into themselves. They are a peculiar trio of characters, not quite a clan, not quite a family either, but brought together by the shared desire to slowly peel away and recreate the layers of their fragmented memories. The narrative revolves around adoption: Mado, (France Arbour) about 60, is Marie-Madeleine's (Sylvie Drapeau) long-lost birth mother; Madeleine (Isadore Galwey) is Marie-Madeleine's twelve-year-old fatherless daughter.

Contrary to the interpretation offered by most critics, Dionne's use of the name Madeleine had less to do with biblical history than with a tradition existing in Quebec up to the 1960s by which women forced to abandon an infant named the child after themselves as a sort of remembrance. The Madeleines' summertime, open-road, white convertible pilgrimage serves as a much-craved revisiting of a barely known past; primarily for Marie-Madeleine (Marie, the narrator of the film), who

desperately needs Mado to supply her with an explanation for her existence, but also for the little Madeleine, who, though showered with love since her birth, craves more completely binding ties nearly as much as her mother. Through Marie-Madeleine's eyes we visit a newly discovered heritage, we witness her conception and the passionate love story behind it, we see Mado in her youth, we are transported in time and place, as is Marie, by Mado's illustrated stories of scratchy bebop and vintage cars. For both of them this trip is empowering: for Mado it is the discovery of responsibility, repercussion and a chance to return to a time of passion; for Marie it is the opening of a door onto a world of self-understanding, emotional awakening and freedom of choice—the choice to love and to trust. For all three, it is a rite of passage.

Not given to excessive self-analysis, Dionne is a tireless watcher and listener. She studied political science before entering Concordia University's film production program in 1987, and after graduation (with honours) moved quickly towards documentary making. She credits her broad cultural and geographic knowledge for this (on top of the fact that she can speak four languages fluently) rather than any particular penchant, since the film she shot in her final year of college was in short fiction: a film titled *Les Frissons d'Agathe*, which won both a Panavision Canada Award and an award from Le Festival des Première Oeuvre de la ville Sainte-Thérèse for Best Fiction Film. Dionne entered the NFB in 1989 as a camera operator, where for two years she honed her skills, refined her style and her aesthetic as well as her capacity to adapt to the most unexpected situations. It was the perfect preparation for her subsequent work as director and producer on independent projects.

In 1991, she took on the challenging roles of researcher, location scout and production supervisor for the CBC television series *Amérique 500*. For the following three years, as she travelled throughout both American continents, she discovered she was just as comfortable meeting the Yanomami tribe in the Amazonian jungle of Venezuela as she was interviewing music greats Milton Nascimento and Gilberto Gil in Brazil, or Luis Buñuel's legendary cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa in Mexico City. In 1994, while still in Mexico, she wrote and directed the

documentary *Les Rêves secrets des Tarahumaras*, which was nominated for Best Documentary Series at the Gémeaux Awards.

Her encounter with so many different cultures and the women who are part of them, says Dionne, is what inspired her to look deeper into her own foremothers' history. As she worked on the *Les Fantômes* screenplay, Dionne's knowledge of Quebec history was enhanced by her direction of three documentaries: two episodes for the series *Iles d'Inspiration* (1999)—one dedicated to legendary Quebec poet and singer/songwriter Félix Leclerc, the other to historian and author Louis Caron—and, more recently, an episode of the new series *Les Histoires oubliées* entitled "La Mémoire des lieux," to be broadcast on Radio-Canada and RDI. Interestingly, in the last year Dionne has also directed an hour-long documentary road movie entitled "Jess Goes West" for the WTN series *Through Her Eyes*, about a young Québécoise on a trip through Western Canada.

Dionne's decision to make *Les Fantômes* was sparked by her interest in how the lives of Quebec women are shaped by society's expectations. She was inspired more specifically by some astounding figures she unearthed concerning adoption: between 1949 and 1956, 20,876 illegitimate children were born in Quebec, two-thirds of whom were put up for adoption—that's about 2,500 children a year.* In the ultra-Catholic environment of Quebec during the Duplessis years, there was virtually no question of a respectable girl bearing and keeping a child out of wedlock. The unavailability of birth control and the religious zeal that forbade it in any form was evidently a large part of problem (so the double standard always goes), and hordes of children were conceived on the spur of the moment, the fruit of brief sexual escapades or one-night stands.

The construction of *Les Fantômes des trois Madeleine* was "like a puzzle," says Dionne. "I started with this idea of adoption and then kept adding and adding to it, for six years." So the theme of belonging and self-discovery was the starting point of this labour of love, but the development of her characters and the unfolding of the narrative required many research trips and much introspection. Dionne returned again and again to the Gaspé, repeatedly tracing the path her characters would take. She chose the site not only for personal reasons, but also because of its dramatic power: filmed in black and white, it is an environment that forcefully opposes "nature's harsh contrasts to the soft whiteness of the breathtaking seashore skies." The compassion and extraordinarily delicate insight of the film pushed me to ask Dionne if she herself or someone close to her had been adopted. Her treatment of the subject seemed too emotionally precise to be that of an outsider, but as I learned during our conversation, it was simply an example of great human empathy and imagination. "We all know one," she said of adopted people, but she didn't go into detail. The adept sociologist's touch.

Typical of life's always amazing circular waltz, just days before I saw the film for the first time I received news from the "one" I know, a close friend who had just finally, after 10 years of searching, learned about her biological father. What she had discovered through her newly found grandfather was that her father was, in fact, dead, murdered in the early 1980s. In complete contrast with her adoptive family, this unknown father had more than a rebel's streak in him: not long before he met her biological mother for their single-night encounter, he had gotten into a car accident and, though not under the influence, had killed three people. This tragedy apparently transformed him gradually over the years from a straight-A student to a troubled, unhappy man. He became a drug addict and an alcoholic, dabbled in crime (petty thieving, disturbing the



Director Guylaine Dionne

peace) and ended up murdered at 27. The police department sent my friend her father's unclaimed personal belongings and his mug shot; she discovered that she has his eyes.

However sad, tragic and unbearably romantically astonishing this story is to my friend and those close to her, what I was most struck by is the transformation I witnessed in her as the result of being finally able to explain her existence in its entirety and close the page on her past. An aura of peace has descended upon her, forever dispelling that slight tinge of insecurity I'd never known her to be without. The awe with which she told her story—the wideness of her eyes, the exalted nature of her speech—and the knowledge that somewhere, sometime, someone existed who looked like her and with whom she would have truly belonged has given her life new meaning.

And this is the energy Dionne has knowingly and artfully succeeded in tapping into. Marie's moody, moved and emotional meanderings throughout the voyage end with an almighty and genuine release. Mado, never quite as troubled by the event, never the rootless one, enjoys the reunion's high emotion; and the little Madeleine, released at the end by her mother for a summer vacation with her soon-to-be-met German father, emerges with a fuller life ahead of her. Redemption, enlightenment or just plain climax—whatever you call it—is achieved and relished.

Dionne has ignored the medium's pesky conventions and indulged in a stream-of-consciousness, bi-tonal filmic musing on things of universal concern. Not preaching, not exposing, just saying, showing, letting her characters be. Like Mado, Marie and Madeleine we draw strength from the freedom of the salty seaside winds, chirping birds and imaged reminiscing, leaving the experience with a sense of closure, a new-found taste for adventure and emotional daring. The Madeleines forge a world of their own where legends and memories hold the key to the future, and for a few moments, in this ode to the beauty of the unsaid, we are offered the privilege of joining them. Dionne has given us the gift of roots. *

**Adoption et rédefinition contemporaine de l'enfant, de la famille et de la filiation* by Françoise-Romaine Ouelette and Johanne Séguin, Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, Quebec City, 1994.