# Séraphin

## Charles Binamé Talks about the Enduring Appeal of a Classic Tale from Quebec

*By Isa Tousignant*

"Do you know what's so remarkable about this project?" Charles Binamé asks rhetorically one winter morning. "This is the first time I've worked on something that has such incredible resonance. There are people who were directly involved, actors in previous interpretations, who are still alive. I was constantly shifting from the reality that I was creating with my film to that other reality, the one that's true and vibrant for all these other people. It was fascinating."

With *Séraphin: Heart of Stone* (*Séraphin: Un Homme et son péché* in French), Binamé took upon his shoulders, more or less, the entire weight of Quebec culture. There are few tales so entrenched in the province's identity. Written by Claude–Henri Grignon, and originally published as a novel in 1933, *Un Homme et son péché* was adapted by its author into a serialized radio drama then as a screenplay, which director Paul Gury made as two features; *Un Homme et son péché* (1949) and *Séraphin* (1950). A sequel, *Donalda*, was planned but never shot. Then came a popular 15–year television series based on the same material produced by Radio–Canada. With the novel still an unavoidable element on all Quebec high–school reading lists, it's not surprising that the story of Séraphin, Donalda, Alexis, *et al*, feels like it's part of the upbringing of most French Canadians.

Images courtesy of Odeon Films.


Pierre Lebeau as Séraphin

Lebeau: *"If I didn't have him, I wouldn't have made the film in the first place."* – Charles Binamé

The durability of its appeal may have to do with the period it explores. Set in 1880s and 1890s, at the time when the *pays d'en haut* in northern Quebec were being actively colonized thanks to an initiative by Curé Labelle, *Un Homme et son péché* is a story of hard times and survival against dire odds. The land was a cruel lover for many Quebec agriculturists who fought to draw fruit from the dry, northern soil. Poverty was rampant and personal savings became *de rigueur*; however, the character of Séraphin is an example of that principle gone awry. He (played brilliantly by Pierre Lebeau in this version) is a power-hungry miser, a greedy manipulator of people, who robs the inhabitants of the town of which he is mayor. In order to save her family's finances, the general-store owner's (Rémy Girard) beautiful young daughter, Donalda (Karine Vanasse), accepts his demands for marriage. But she is in love with Alexis (Roy Dupuis), a rugged, good-spirited colonist who is away breaking new ground northward for most of the year. Theirs is a tragic love story.

For a director like Binamé, best known as the author of what has been termed an urban trilogy—*Eldorado* (1995), *Le Coeur au poing* (1997) and *La Beauté de Pandore* (2000), films that deal with the emotional existences of disaffected city dwellers—*Séraphin* is a marked departure. Although he has worked on period pieces before (notably with two hit television series, *Blanche*, 1993, and *Marguerite Volant*, 1996), this one differs because of its heavy folkloric associations. And while some would shy away from such cultural baggage, Binamé took a bite out of history. He maintained that the story's richness would persevere and reveal itself to be universal and timeless in its appeal.

And boy has he been proven right! On the morning of our interview, Binamé is beaming. He woke up to a front-page story in *Le Journal de Montréal*—the city's most widely read daily—exclaiming *Séraphin*'s box-office victory over *Les Boys* (1998), the province's previous biggest financial success. At press time, the film had grossed over $7 million, whereas *Les Boys* capped at $6.1 million. "It's as if it's become a national duty to see it," Binamé laughs.

*It must be an amazing feeling for you.*

I don't know. It's too abstract. I was happy to top the three-to-four million mark, which meant that people were breaking even, especially Alliance, which backed the project from the start. After that...I see it float, go up and up, but it's really difficult to feel anything when you're in the middle of it.

*What was Alliance Vivafilm's role in the project's initiation? Did they come to you?*

Yes, it was Alliance and [producer] Lorraine Richard who were trying to figure out what in Quebec's cultural baggage could be made into a popular film that wasn't a comedy.

*"Our country was truly one that had to be yanked away from nature. It's part of our history. It's intrinsic to what made-up characters such as Séraphin."* – Binamé

*So it was really a conscious effort from the start?*

Yes, it was her intention. I heard word about the project and right away I said: "I want to do it." Why? I could have felt the same reticence many others had already felt, in the sense that the character of Séraphin Poudrier, you know...for French Canadians of a certain generation, images come straight to mind. His story represents something quite folkloric, something passé, so why be interested in it? But my intuition was that we had a sort of *Jean de Fleurette* on our hands. I reread the novel, and effectively it was all there. There are definitely characters in Balzac's style—larger than life, the product of their time, examples of a certain form of perversion brought to bear through the craziness of colonialization.

*Is that what interested you in the project?*

Yes, there are such strong characters in the original novel. That's why I said "yes." I told Lorraine: "I want to do it." She said: "You, Charles? Aren't you the guy behind the urban trilogy and all that?" But I'm an emotional guy. I'm a good-story guy, and this is a good story. What was difficult from there was selling that idea. Radio-Canada jumped on board from the start; it found the project interesting in itself, and it coincided with its 50th anniversary. *Séraphin* was originally its show. And Alliance was already sold, since it originated the project. So I had the two essential components to bring to Telefilm and SODEC, but that's when it became a little more difficult. The people I was meeting were paralyzed by the images of what *Séraphin* had been in the past...they had OD-ed on it, you know. It was too much. Fifteen years on television is enormous. We can hardly imagine what it represents today. And it was on-air when there were only two channels to watch! Plus there was the previous features and 15 years on the radio before that. It was branded, you know? So I faced the difficulty of detaching people from the old images they had in their heads—that they liked—and I had to offer an alternative. In that sense, words were powerless. It wasn't until I brought in my actors in an effort to change those mental images—when they saw Pierre Lebeau, and then Roy Dupuis and Rémy Girard, and heard them talk about the film like an adventure, the adventure of revisiting a classic—it was no longer something banal. The challenge was to make the classic relevant for today.

*And presumably appetizing to a contemporary audience as a work of entertainment.*

Yes, which meant incorporating more naturalism. I tried to understand the tale better, to dig deeper into its characters, to try to understand the undertones, the hidden face, what Séraphin was made of, but without resorting to "psychologizing" or hackneyed attempts at explaining everything. As you can see in the early scenes, I tried to hint at things. His first sexual experience was linked to death, to decomposition, to the sight of a woman being abused, and then paying for that abuse. These are certain elements of his character. We are all made up of elements.

*Was the visual tone of the film—that replacement of the image you were talking about that's associated with the previous versions—present in your mind's eye from the start?*

What you see on screen, that's how I saw it. Right away. It was crazy. It was as if it were of an extreme density, then it exploded and all that was left to do was pluck the floating parts to make the film come together.


## Dupuis: *"I didn't have him in mind right away. Grignon describes his character in the novel as someone with a golden heart... I thought it wasn't really his image."* – Binamé

*And did you have your actors immediately in mind as well?*
No, the only one I had in mind was Lebeau. When I met him, he told me: "Charles, I dream of playing this role. It would be a gift of a lifetime." He jumped on board right away. But if I did not have him, I wouldn't have made the film in the first place. I mean, he's an icon, right? Jean–Pierre Masson and Hector Charland are two other actors who have marked history with their performances [as Séraphin], so I had to come forward with a powerful alternative. And from what I've heard, no one has expressed nostalgia for his [Lebeau's] predecessors, so it was a successful choice.

*And Roy Dupuis? He'd been on hiatus from cinema for some time, working on various projects such as the popular television spy series* Nikita *and the mini–series,* The Last Chapter. *Why do you think he came back to the big screen for this particular project?*
It was fun for him to come back with this, to return like a long–lost hero on a silver platter. It was ideal. But I didn't have him in mind right away. He is a very dark guy, and since Grignon describes his character in the novel as someone with a golden heart—a generous, open man; a lover of life—I thought it wasn't really his image. So I held auditions for the role. Then, by coincidence, I met him backstage at a theatre premiere and I didn't recognize him. He said: "Hey, Charles, hi..." and his vibe had just completely changed. He emanated light and beauty. I said: "We've got to do lunch."

*And Karine Vanasse?*
Even for Karine, I auditioned all the girls of her age. But her understanding of things, her maturity, was incredible. So everything fell into place. I do my casting very carefully. It's a harmony, you see; if you strike a chord in D, you have to harmonize in D or in E minor. You can't just say: "I want this actor or that actor." You have to compose. And I strove to keep a familiarity, a continuity, at least in terms of physical appearance, between the first–generation actors and the new ones. I didn't want a plump doctor, since the actor who played the original doctor was a skinny guy. I wanted to respect something of the characters' essences.

Roy Dupuis as Alexis Lahaie and Karine Vanasse as Donalda Laloge

# Séraphin: Heart of Stone: *The story of Séraphin, Donalda and Alexis,* et al, *is a part of the upbringing of most French Canadians.*

*What is it that fascinates you about this period in Quebec's history?*
The colonial period, which is the film's backdrop, is something I find really interesting. When I did *Blanche* I'd become aware of the Roman Catholic Church's and province's desire in those days to rid the cities of the poor, which they did by opening up the Abitibi region and handing out land allotments. They [the poor city dwellers] were told: "Okay, you've got land and a cow waiting for you in Abitibi. Now go." Eighty-some years before this, the province and church had colonized the north—north of St-Jérome—for the same reasons; it was the dream of Curé Labelle, who wanted to open up the country and occupy it. It was thought that Quebec's problem was one of geography, of occupying the territory. That's why, for instance, we didn't develop like the Americans around cities such as Boston, which had a concentrated population, an intelligentsia and a popular identity. Here, we had to occupy the whole St. Lawrence River valley. Parishes were miles apart from one another, and this made for a disjointed people, united only through religion. I think Curé Labelle's dream was to surround the English, to make a big crescent around them that would go up north and come back down via the western provinces to join back here, so we would finish by assimilating them.

> *" It's a story that I thought was beautiful. I just wanted to be a part of it."*
> – Roy Dupuis

He sacrificed generations of colonials to this ideal. You can see archival footage of men with carts trying to farm stone-ridden fields. There was two inches of earth over bedrock, and they're trying to sew grain. It's heartbreaking. It was a period of great suffering, in addition to droughts, famine and bad crops. That's why families were so huge in those days. It's because there was such a high death rate. People lived with extreme difficulty.

*And why do you find this relevant today?*
I find it interesting to re-actualize it. That's why there are many scenes in the film that show how tough it was. You know, all the tree stumps, the harsh conditions, the need to wrench the country away from the forest. Our country was truly one that had to be yanked away from nature. It's a part of our history. It's intrinsic to what made-up characters such as Séraphin, for example. He is the product of his time and harsh environment.

*You mean because of his hardness?*
Because he perverted a necessary part of life at that time, which was the need to save, what we call in Quebec the *bas de laine*. The wool sock is where you put your savings, the place where you kept your money just in case. The times were so difficult that you never knew what was around the corner. You always had to scrimp, save and keep some aside just in case. Basically that's what he [Séraphin] does, but he's perverted it. He's gone too far.

*What surprises me, with every article I've read, is the relevance the film seems to have for the Quebec public. We're talking about millions of people, fighting their way to the box office to see what is basically a work of folklore. Where do you think the appetite for the past comes from?*
I don't think the film is folklorized. I tried to avoid it. I've made enough period films to mistrust what I call the "oil-lamp syndrome," you know, where you try to work an oil lamp into the foreground of every shot. I tried to make it so that the time in history is treated like backdrop; it's true and important but not overly focused on. We were not trying to make a postcard. I think people go to see the film not as folklore, but to see a story they know and love and like to be told over again. When I was presenting the film to the people at Telefilm and SODEC, they kept asking me why I wanted to do this. They didn't seem to understand. I kept repeating: "The reason is simple. It's a good story." A lot of theatre owners have told me that they get a ton of repeats, people who come back a second time, or even a third time because they like that moment when Donalda says "yes" at her wedding, or when she's in Alexis's arms or sympathizing with how horrible her situation is. They just want to relive those moments of a familiar story because they have so much emotional meaning for them. Mankind doesn't change just because there is electricity and computers. We're still the same animal. People always ask me how I can shift from contemporary hand-held films to period films. But it's the same damn thing. It's the human soul. We're no different whether we're wearing breeches or surfing the Web. We all have the basic feelings—fear, angst and love.

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Vanasse: *"Her understanding of things, her maturity, was incredible."* – Binamé


Karine Vanasse as Donalda Laloge

# ROY Dupuis SPEAKS!

## Séraphin

*After a series of very contemporary and urban roles notably, in* Nikita *and* The Last Chapter, *how was it for you to return to a historical role?*

Well, I can't really say that the fact that it was historical was significant for me. It's a different energy, for sure, but that's true for every different character I play; each character has his own energy, his own psychology. Basically, it's the story and the character that decide whether I'm interested in a project or not. The period in which it happens isn't important to me.

*Did you feel a particular weight playing this role, because of its heavy cultural baggage?*

No, not at all. I'd even say that when I was first approached and told about a film being made out of *Un Homme et son péché*, I was apprehensive. The subject had already been so exploited, but after reading the script I realized I didn't know the story at all. The film is much closer to the novel, but I had memories of the television series when I was younger. I didn't know anything about any of the story's intensity or its beauty.

*Was playing the role of Alexis Labranche similar for you to playing Ovila Pronovost in the mini-series* Les Filles de Caleb*?*

There are similarities, for sure. It's more or less the same period, and in some ways they're the same kind of man, but in some ways they're diametrically opposed. Ovila is much darker, much more troubled than Alexis; Alexis is more stable, more in harmony with the world in which he lives.

*It's interesting that you speak of the characters' difference in mood, because when I interviewed Binamé he spoke at length about the change in your aura. Do you feel that you emanate more light than you did earlier in your career? Do you think people perceive you differently?*

Well, you'd have to ask other people [he laughs]. I could say that yes, personally I'm a lot less tormented than I was. Maybe. That's the end of it [he laughs again].

*What's also interesting about you playing this role is that it's such an incontrovertibly québécois role, and you're probably the province's most versatile actor, because, in part, of your ability to work in English. Do you aim at playing international roles in general?*

I never sat down and planned out my career. I take what comes my way. But when you speak of international roles, basically that means they're in English. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're more international. If you ask me, the best way to be international is to be as local as possible.

*What do you mean? In what way?*

If you look at great films, which have had an international impact, they often tell local stories with really specific contexts. Like *Life Is Beautiful*. It's the story about an Italian guy and his family during the Second World War. It's very local. Or *The Decline of the American Empire*, which is probably Quebec's most international film; well, it takes place in and around Montreal. At the end of the day, it's originality, I think, that manages to cross borders and interest people. So if you offer me the choice between an international project and a québécois one, it's the story and the character that will decide my choice.

*Do you find that you're limited because of your star status, or the fact that you're what some would call a "stud"?*

We're all limited by our physical realities at some point. And in cinema, image counts. It's all in the photography. But you'll have to wait and see. I've got some prospective projects that might surprise some people. They don't surprise me, but, you know, some people like to categorize actors. Others are more open. I prefer to communicate things that please me, that touch me, that I consider important or are simply beautiful. Like *Un Homme et son péché*; it's a story that I thought was beautiful. I just wanted to be a part of it.

It's as simple as that.

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