



BY SUSAN TOLUSSO

Mambo Italiano



**SUPER-PRODUCER
DENISE ROBERT
RIDES THE CREST
OF ONE SUCCESS
AFTER ANOTHER**

IT would be misleading, wrong even, to draw a straight line between the word “producer” and the word “money” where film in Canada is concerned. It would be misleading because that would reinforce the tightly held notion that producers are only about financing and profit. It would be wrong because such strict parameters have no place in discussions of art, even so-called commercial art, because there are no straight lines in Canadian filmmaking and, more importantly, because we have so many creative producers among us, although few of the calibre of Denise Robert.

It's true that as far as the Montreal-based Robert is concerned, going to the movies is a relatively expensive pastime and so films should be entertaining and offer value for the money: for the \$12 ticket, the cost of parking, babysitting and, heaven knows, the snacks. But with this deceptively simple declaration—“audiences need to respond to films”—that at once speaks to a marketplace truism and obscures the complex formula for success with Canadian fare in Canada, Robert proves why it's no oxymoron to be known as a creative producer.

In fact Robert, who has been reinventing Canadian filmmaking for 15-odd years as a Renaissance presence whose tastes span more genres and subject areas than most, has done so by being “very, very hands-on. I consider myself as somebody who has to support the creative process. I want to make sure everybody has what they need.” Take, for instance, the production process on Robert's latest release, *Mambo Italiano*, adapted from Steve Galluccio's comedic stage play. Compared to Nia Vardalos's sleeper sensation *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* for months before its launch, *Mambo* offers a witty, insider point of view on the emotional tangle wrought by a second-generation Italian-Canadian who tries not only to live outside the silken, sticky web of community and *famiglia* expectations but also to do so as a gay man. From the day she “fell in love” with Galluccio's play and decided to make the movie, Robert knew she had innumerable challenges to overcome: should the cast have authentic accents, how many scenes should differ from the play, how to find the line between making fun of an ethnic group and just making funny?



Then too, what about finding a director? Fortunately, the play came to Robert's attention courtesy of a known quantity, director/writer Émile Gaudreault. Robert had produced his debut feature film, *Nuit de nocces*, a new take on the Québécois romantic comedy and a major box-office hit that won the Golden Reel for highest box office gross in 2001. Although *Mambo Italiano* would be Gaudreault's first foray in co-scripting and directing an English film, Robert expected him to be up to the challenge because he would be co-writing with Galluccio, and the pair had written together for such Quebec series as sitcom *Un gars, une fille* and "dramedy" *Ciao Bella*.

Robert knew both writers were strong on comedy. But how well would the Gaudreault/Galluccio combination succeed while writing a script that had not only to move outside the francophone milieu, but also to resonate with Italian audiences? Also, casting for *Mambo* produced a type of *mélange à trois* effect, melting three "national" groups, French- and English-Canadians and a lone American star, into the scenario's Italian-Canadian

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pot. Key cast include Canadians Luke Kirby (Angelo), Peter Miller (Nino), Ginette Reno (Quebec's mega-star as Angelo's mom), Claudia Ferri (Angelo's sister), Mary Walsh (Nino's mom), Sophie Lorain (Nino's sister) and U.S. recruit Paul Sorvino (Angelo's dad).

Because Galluccio is Italian-Canadian, however, the dialogue is authentic as are the temperaments and sensibilities of the characters. "As Steve was our real authentic Italian," Robert explains, "we kept him involved throughout the production." Still, a little trial and error was required to determine how to approach the bits and pieces of Italian dialogue in the script. "We hired a dialogue coach," Robert says. "But eventually we decided that imitating an Italian accent doesn't work. It just sounded imitation. There are not too many accents even in *The Godfather*. Most people from ethnic origins don't have an accent."

While observers may not expect producers to have much creative influence on the set, let alone on the entire metamorphosis of idea to film, Robert's choices and influence are apparent throughout the process. She says although she was delighted when Gaudreault brought her Galluccio's unfinished manuscript of *Mambo*, the stage version, she was nonetheless clear-eyed about the many changes that would be required to

costumes (by Francesca Chamberland) were able to marry with that vision." Robert does not mention that parts of the costumes match the zany wallpaper, in colour or pattern, but this is no serendipity: funny is as funny does and the crew members were all doing it, together.

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make it work for the screen. "The film is totally different. There are many locations, and only some of the same characters," including the two lead characters, Angelo and Nino. And the film genuinely looks and feels Italian, ethnicity seeping from its aural and visual pores. On the sound side, the pitched battles within and among stereotypical (and very genuine) Italian families gloriously evoke a culture coming to grips, through the sensibilities of its first- and second-generation offspring, with the ways of a new homeland.

FM Le Sieur's musical time signatures are *fortissimo italiano*. The vehemence of the often staccato dialogue could be heard in the streets of Little Italys anywhere, while the speech in non-Italian settings contrasts sharply: Angelo sparring with his sister sounds nothing like Angelo cajoling a customer through his travel agent's headset. Visually, the film is brush-stroke perfect, from the vegetables and flowers in the lanes of the allotment gardens to the furniture and columns adorning the parents' homes, to the loud, busy wallpaper that might have been aligned with the help of a plum line imported from Palermo. "The art director, Patricia Christie, wanted to create a look that's never been seen before on film," says Robert. "The

Robert came to *Mambo* having already accrued an impressive list of successful feature comedies, and here no English-Canadian producer is her peer. Along with *Nuit des noces*, Gaudreault's illustrious freshman salvo, Robert has contributed to the "excessively difficult" art of laugh-out-loud comedy in *C'ta ton tour Laura Cadieux* (1998) and *Laura Cadieux... la suite* (1999), both directed by Denise Filiatrault. Robert's success in comedies is the more remarkable given she's a native of Canada's capital, where the municipal infill is less affordable housing than Formidable National Artistic Institutions, most with high-concept, practically operatic reputations. "In Ottawa, where I'm from, the feeling is if it's not serious, it's not art." So when she wanted a tough audience as part of the focus testing for *Mambo*, she headed due west to—Ottawa. Even at the 9 a.m. screening, she says, the locals loved it. Still, if these touches seem quotidian producer fare, Robert raises the bar with a declaration of having successfully created a film form previously unknown in Canada: the *Shrek*-esque family film with storylines, dialogue and visual appeal for young and old.

Robert's triumphant launch of the family comedy fantasy is the music-laden 2002 hit *L'Odyssee d'Alice Tremblay*. Perhaps the most telling endorsement of this spin on *Alice in Wonderland*, beyond being third at the domestic box office in 2002 and critical applause, is Robert's assertion that her seven-year-old daughter "knows all the songs." So often, character types and music endure where the names of actors, plot devices and ingenious scripting may not. We remember *The Lion King* for its characters and story, but especially for its catchy tunes. Same thing for a slew of big hits, including *Mary Poppins*, *The Sound of Music* and even Jim Henson's *The Muppet Movie*, when Kermit sings "Rainbow Connection."

L'Odyssee d'Alice Tremblay owes its life to Barney the dinosaur. Or rather, to the fact that Robert was so bored when she attended a Barney movie with her daughter that she decided Canada should have its own class of films that entertain everyone from four to 104. "I created a new genre with *L'Odyssee*. It's the first film of that kind in Canada, where everything is happening on two levels, interesting for small children and adults. It's the same kind of movie that DreamWorks does. These days, most heads of (movie) studios have kids," she adds, and when they go to the cinema, they want to be entertained, too. With this in mind following the purple dinosaur debacle, Robert says she "hired writers who'd worked with and for kids," and posed for them this question: "What if the characters in a story went into the world of fairy tales and things didn't go as they should?"

L'Odyssee is certainly not the first time a Robert production made clever and effective use of a space-time continuum. Her first notable acclaim as a producer came with the release of another director's brilliant first foray into filmmaking, *Le Confessionnel* from Robert Lepage. In the Lepage debut, the action spans 40 years and focuses on two main characters who grew up in Quebec City, where the film begins in 1952. It was at this mid-century moment, in this staunchly Catholic provincial capital, that director Alfred Hitchcock arrived with a film crew to shoot *I Confess*, the story of the travails of a handsome young priest. Lepage's film explores the thematic

parallels and tonal interplay between the Hitchcock film and the lives of *Le Confessionnel*'s Pierre Lamontagne (Lothaire Bluteau) and his adopted brother Marc (Patrick Goyette). Pierre's journey home to Quebec City spawns a desire to reconnect with his brother, to discover why Marc's mother gave him up for adoption and to unravel the mystery of the identity of Marc's father.

This layered drama, enthusiastically rewarded by critics and admired by audiences, came to Robert at a time when she had begun to tire of making films that only her family and friends wanted to see. She concedes it may be somewhat satisfying for filmmakers to make edgy, artistically provocative and challenging films, but she didn't want a steady diet of the anti-entertainment, "statement" film. "Connecting with people is very important, connecting with audiences. I've made a movie where three people have seen it, you know my mom and my aunt or whomever. (Now), I have to make a movie that I'm willing to pay \$12 to go and see. I want to be entertained. I came to understand that with *Le Confessionnel*. To be effective, it doesn't have to be funny. But audiences need to respond to films."

The film's foreign success encouraged Robert in pioneering international co-productions, *Le Confessionnel* being the first example of a Canada/France/U.K. collaboration. She has gone on to orchestrate a number of cross-border efforts, including the strikingly beautiful Swiss/Canada co-production from Léa Pool, *Mouvements du désir*, a film that landed eight Genie nominations in 1994. Robert also worked with Pool on the Montreal-based filmmaker's 1988 breakthrough feature *À corps perdu* and invited Pool to contribute a segment to the collection of films examining and celebrating their home town in *Montréal vu par...* "A good story works anywhere in the world," Robert asserts, all the while conceding that the varying rules governing co-productions' content and cast/crew nationality force producers to do a fair bit of "artistic skating." But she has found that "co-production treaties can be excessively successful if they're administered with great flexibility, especially by Telefilm."

Stardom, another multinational co-production, also bears the Robert producer stamp. This much-hailed, \$12-million film from her partner, director Denys Arcand, closed the 2000 Cannes Film Festival and opened Toronto's international festival the same year, but moviegoers and critics were less enthusiastic. Discussing the prospects for *Les Invasions barbares*, Arcand's latest release, Robert told



MAMBO ITALIANO: FAR LEFT: PETER MILLER WITH MARY WALSH. CENTRE: SOPHIE LORAIN, PETER MILLER AND MARY WALSH. FAR RIGHT: PIERRETTE ROBITAILLE.

trade journal *Playback* that Arcand felt “less constrained” on the new film than he did on *Stardom*, a much more expensive movie. “That’s the number-one priority, that he’s happy doing this film,” she said.

“*Les Invasions barbares* is *Le Déclin de l’empire américain*, 17 years on,” says Robert. “It continues the stories begun in *Le Déclin*” and features several of the earlier film’s cast members, including Rémy Girard as Rémy, now divorced, Dorothee Berryman as Rémy’s ex, Dominique Michel as Dominique, Yves Jacques as Claude, and Louise Portal and Pierre Curzi. New additions include Stéphane Rousseau, as Rémy’s estranged son, Marie-Josée Croze and French actress Marina Hands.

Revisiting the eternal questions raised in *Le Déclin*—what do we leave behind us when we die and did our lives make a difference—*Les Invasions barbares* is, according to Robert, “a very personal film. It’s where (Arcand’s) life is now. He was 46 years old then, he’s 60 now. He has a child now, which he didn’t then.” Fatherhood has mellowed Arcand, drained away the sting of cynicism from his director’s vision. “The ending of *Les Invasions*,” she observes, “is very different than if he didn’t have a child. The glass is half-full now...growing old with somebody who’s young in front of you forces you to see things young again.”

Not that energy or youthful enthusiasm have ever been lacking in Robert. Having soared across a range of film genres, she is now tackling episodic drama for television for the first time. She produced the Arcand-directed movie for television, *Joyeux calvaire*, but *Le Petit monde de Laura* is a series and an extension of the *Laura Cadieux* franchise, so much so that Denise Filiatrault is once again directing, as well as serving as writer. Robert declared herself very happy with average-per-minute ratings of 400,000 when *Le Petit monde* launched April 4 on Astral’s specialty channel Series+, the first of seven one-hour episodes in the opening cycle.

Will Robert pursue more television deals? If the series is renewed, she says she’d be involved, but not hands-on. “In the end, I could say it was a wonderful experience but I’m more of a film person. Godard said film is like a painting in a museum. Television is like a picture of that painting on a postcard. Putting my imagination in a small box, that’s difficult for me,” Robert reflects. Also, she had to adjust to the pacing of a television shoot. “Ten pages a day,

that was an average shooting schedule. With film it’s one page a day. (Television is) trying to do a lot in a short time.”

Defining the essential Denise Robert is anything but straightforward: she is complex and simple, fuelled at once by white-hot creative curiosity and business-like pragmatism, a kind of down-to-earthness that’s rare and refreshing in this industry. She is undeniably a woman of Canada, but she refuses to define herself or project onto her work any hint of what she calls false patriotism. And she has had more than ample opportunity to hone patriotic urges, given her extensive work on production industry boards (Independent Production Fund, Les Association des Producteurs de Films et de Télévision du

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Quebec, Canadian Television Fund, Summer Institute of Film and Television and the provincial financing agency, SODEC), her appointment to the federal government’s feature-film advisory committee and her front-row access to the next generation of filmmakers via her involvement with Concordia University’s Department of Cinema.

But rather than pushing the importance of cultural nationalism, Robert says she tries at board meetings or other meetings and events to “promote the need to tell great stories. Your next-door neighbour, when they go out, they don’t care where a film comes from. False patriotism, for me, no. It’s not a good Canadian story; it’s a good story. To reach audiences you have to entertain them. We’ve succeeded if our films get people to appreciate our films at the same level as any other film. If they say, ‘It’s a great movie.’ Period. Our success is when we get out of the pigeonhole.”

As so many before her, Robert has learned the importance of investing in talent, in leaving room for producers and artists to make mistakes. “It took Denys Arcand 20 years to get to *Le Déclin*,” she points out. Art is a continuous learning and growing process and there’s no end to creativity.” Remembering, of course, that there are no straight lines between money and creativity, especially in Canada.

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