

A Director In His Prime: Denys Arcand's *Les Invasions barbares*



By Peter Howell

Cannes, France—After 33 years of emotionally rich filmmaking, Denys Arcand has finally learned how to cry at one of his own movies. It caught him totally by surprise.

It happened while the veteran Quebec writer/director was early in production of *Les Invasions barbares* (*The Barbarian Invasions*), the long-gestating sequel to *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (1986), his satire of 1980s attitudes and sexual mores. *Les Invasions*, recently named as the gala opener to this year's Toronto International Film Festival, tracks the reaction of friends and family to the impending death of *Le Déclin*'s "sensual socialist" Rémy (Rémy Girard), the philandering Montreal academic who is as fond of sex as he is of intellectual discourse.

The first scene shot was on a boat in the North Atlantic. It shows Sylvaine (Isabelle Blais), Rémy's grown-up daughter, sending her ailing father a video postcard via e-mail, expressing her love and concern for him. "When I saw it, I cried like crazy," Arcand said, speaking at the most recent Cannes Film Festival, where *Les Invasions* won awards for screenwriting and acting (Best Actress for Marie-Josée

Croze). "And as I was crying, I was thinking, 'Poor Isabelle.' I knew what she was about to say every time, but I was just so moved by it. During the whole movie, I felt the same way. It's very strange. It's the first time I did a movie like that, where I felt so moved by a story I wrote." His previous work has afforded many opportunities for a range of emotional responses. Anyone who recoiled in horror at the brutal gang-rape scene in *Gina* (1975), or who watched with wonder at the miraculous ending of *Jesus de Montréal* (1989), or who roared at the barbed humour of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* or Arcand's more recent satire *Stardom* (2000), may wonder how he managed to hold back tears of either sorrow or joy for so long.

He's been wondering, too. "For some mysterious reason (*Les Invasions*) is a very sad movie. I don't know why. Sometimes it's funny because we don't understand what we do when we make a movie and there's a magical sadness that comes out." The genial Quebecer is the first to admit that introspection isn't his forte. "I'm not too good at self-analyzing," he said, looking relaxed and cheerful as he lounged in

leisure attire inside a garishly decorated beach cabana next to the azure waters of the Mediterranean. (It's a locale he knows well: *Les Invasions* is Arcand's ninth feature and the sixth to be invited to Cannes.)

But Arcand, a youthful 62, knew why he wanted to revisit the characters of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* 17 years after he brought them to life. "I wanted to make a movie that talks about someone who is facing death. I've been thinking about it for 20 years. I was always obsessed by death. If I were analyzed, my analyst would tell you. Over the 20 years, I tried to write some scripts. The first time I did a draft of this film was for the CBC. And it didn't work because it was mawkish, it was sombre and it wasn't interesting. It was morbid. When I got the idea two years ago to make the movie with the people from the previous movie [*Le Déclin*], everything started to build in my mind. One of the reasons I came up with this idea is because of the love and respect there is between the cast members. If I were to tell that story through those characters, then it would work, because I knew that these guys would smoke a joint until the last night. They would open champagne bottles. They would shoot heroin and they would laugh at it. Which was the way I wanted to make this film."

Wasn't he worried about repeating himself, or having people get bored with his characters? "I never think about risk. I'm sort of fearless—although not in my private life. But in terms of movies, I'm too old to think about risks. It's behind me. So whatever happens with this film, it's not going to change my life at 62." (The risk appears very small. *Les Invasions* has been playing in Quebec theatres since May and earning impressive box office.) Arcand had little trouble reuniting the major cast members: Dorothee Berryman, who plays Louise, now divorced from the philandering Rémy; Louise Portal and Dominique Michel, who play Rémy's older and wiser ex-lovers, Diane and Dominique; and Pierre Curzi and Yves Jacques, who play Pierre and Yves, the forever cynical members of Rémy's boys-will-be-boys club.

Les Invasions introduces several important new characters, including Stéphane Rousseau as Sébastien, Rémy's adult son, a wealthy London money man estranged from his father, though he still cares for him; Marie-Josée Croze as Nathalie, Diane's junkie daughter with a needle and a pointed attitude; and former pop star Mitsou Gelinis as Ghislaine, Pierre's sexy and snappish young wife. It's a combination of the old and the new, of looking back and moving forward, but Arcand insists

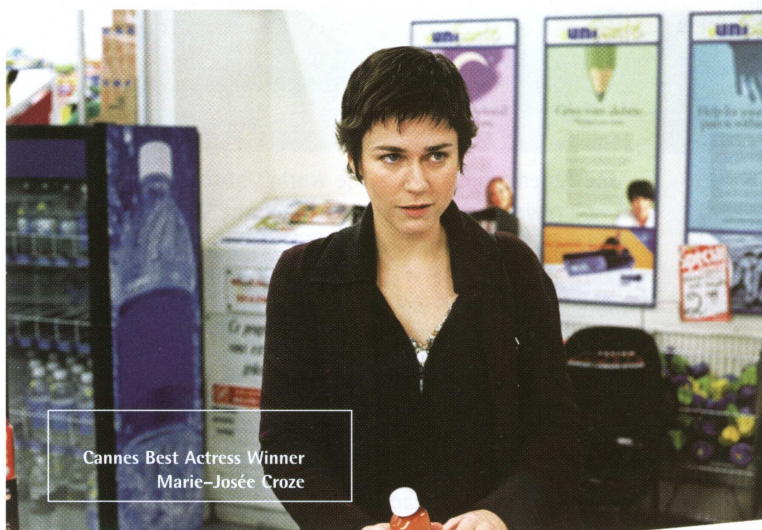
he doesn't think in such terms. "Each film is an adventure; each film is new," he said. "Each film is something that I can't really control, in the sense that I'm suddenly thinking about a subject and then I have this idea of phoning these

people and seeing should we get back together and make another film, and then the film happens. It may look as if it's calculated or it's planned. In fact, it's not. I go from film to film never knowing exactly what will be the future for me. It just happens like that."

There's no question, however, that his view of the world has darkened. The provocative use of the word "decline" may have been seen as a jesting or ironic commentary on world affairs back in 1987, but the sequel's title phrase "barbarian

"I go from film to film never knowing exactly what will be the future for me."

— Denys Arcand



invasions" springs from much stronger feelings that Arcand makes little effort to hide. In his production notes to the film, Arcand sounds exactly like his character Rémy in bemoaning the state of a world now led by a single superpower, surrounded by hordes of smaller, desperate nations:



The ensemble cast from *Les Invasions barbares*.

“The American Empire is the world’s absolute ruler. As such, it will have to constantly push back the stream of barbarian attacks. The first that succeeded, 9/11 struck at the empire’s heart. It’s the first of many more to come. I feel more and more out of sync with today’s reality. The most common sign of getting old, I guess. The constant acceleration of life and the media roar are repulsive to me. I have little interest for digital films. I love dialogues and actors. I believe that countries are a vanishing species. To the future generations, the notion of borders will be almost irrelevant. That’s where Rémy’s son is at already. There will be American citizens on one side and non-resident aliens on the other. Seen from Washington, the French, the Bulgarians or the Japanese are one and the same thing: barbarians.”

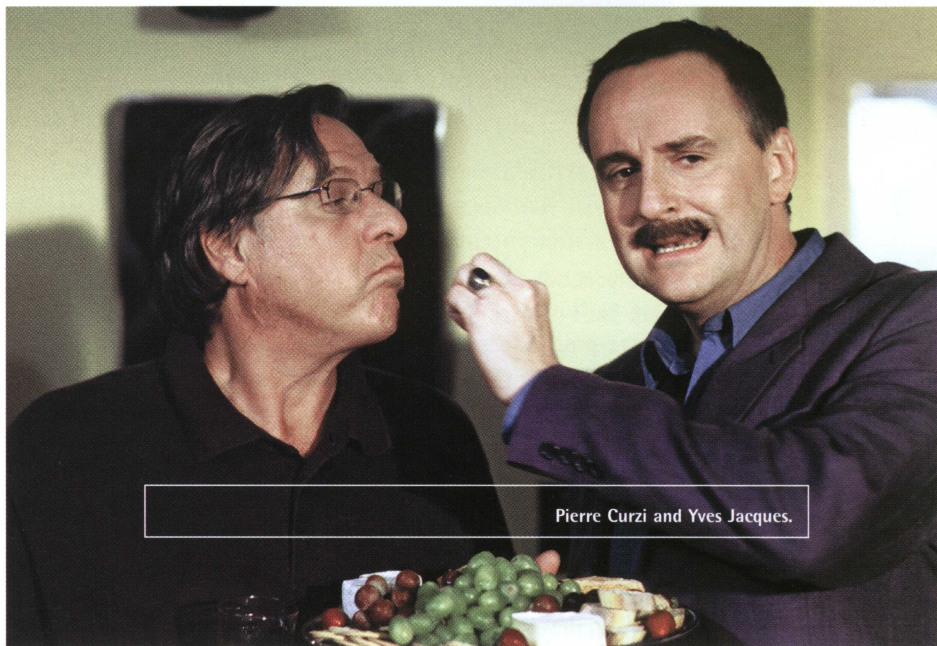
Strong words for such an apparently happy man, but Arcand makes no apologies for how he feels. His views about the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are so strong, he inserts into *Les Invasions* terrifying footage of one of the hijacked jets crashing into the World Trade Center. It’s from a newsreel he obtained from Radio-Canada, which had been shot by a Quebec architect who happened to be visiting New York on that terrible day. If anything, Arcand is resigned to the way the world has changed; he and his characters have all pragmatically decided to stop fighting and instead just enjoy what little time there is left for them on earth.

There’s a humorous moment in the film where Rémy and his friends reminisce about all the causes and “isms” they experienced: communism, capitalism, Marxism, separatism,

“Seen from Washington, the French, the Bulgarians or the Japanese are one and the same thing: **barbarians.**” – ARCAND

feminism.... "I'm post-isms, like it's said in the film," Arcand said. "But we've all gone through that, I think, at my age. We were all seduced by all of this. I was never totally seduced because I was always primarily a filmmaker. So being a filmmaker always puts a distance between you and any kind of ideology. Maybe it's not for everybody, but at least for me it meant that filming is a way of objectifying things. I was never a card-carrying Communist or separatist or whatist because I had to place my camera. I had to choose the angle. I had to choose the lens, which, at the same time, distances you from any kind of ideology. My only ideology was cinema, but I saw it around me all the time. Some of my best friends became Marxists or Trotskyists or feminists; it played a huge part in our lives. And yet when you're facing death, ideologies tend to fade a little bit."

Arcand takes a similar laissez-faire approach toward the Americans, whom he knows as neighbours both across the



Pierre Curzi and Yves Jacques.

Arcand is feeling on top of the world himself these days. Still basking in the double prize win at Cannes, he's looking forward to taking *Les Invasions* to the Toronto International Film Festival, where he and his cast will walk up the red carpet at Roy Thomson Hall on opening night, September 4. He's hoping English Canada will take to his latest effort the way French Canada has. The film has been rapturously received in *la belle province*, making box-office tills ring for many weeks. In the final analysis, he's not really worried

"I'm not anti-American. I'm not pro-American." — ARCAD

49th parallel and across his own backyard. He has a cottage in Boca Raton, Florida, and he's friends with the guy from New Jersey and the guy from New York whose properties border on his. "I'm not anti-American. I'm not pro-American. America is the biggest and the strongest country in the world, and we are all subjects of the empire of America." French Canadians, he added, have reason to feel more distinct from Americans than do English Canadians, and also to view them a bit more suspiciously. "Since we have another language, we come from another culture, there's this extreme familiarity yet at the same time this distance that allows us to see them for what they are—for their strengths and their weaknesses. But I don't know how I feel; I couldn't tell you. They're there, I know them, except that they're a superpower and they control the world."

about whether his film breaks box-office records. He's tasted both success and failure in his career. "It's true that it won't change my life. With *Le Déclin*, if it hadn't been a success, I was done. I was going to disappear into the television vortex forever. So at that time I was sort of playing my life, a do-or-die thing. Nowadays, it's fine. Of course, I'm happy but you know, what's it going to change for me at this age? It might make my next film easier to make, although they're all difficult. I don't have that many more films to do. It takes me three or four years to do a film. I'm 62. Count. So it's not going to change a whole lot of things for me."

But he's by no means getting ready to retire anytime soon. "You never know," he said, chuckling. "Buñuel did his best films when he was 70."

Peter Howell is a film critic with The Toronto Star.