



PAUL ALMOND

TALKS ABOUT HIS MARRIAGE TO GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD,
THE CREATION OF TELEFILM CANADA AND THE
BEGINNINGS OF FEATURE FILMMAKING IN CANADA

BY WYNDHAM WISE



GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD...



25-4 IN ISABEL.

A graduate of Oxford University, Paul Almond began his career as an actor with a repertory company in England before joining the CBC in Toronto in 1954 as a director. In 1964, he directed *Seven Up!*, a multi-award-winning study of a group of seven-year-old British children that has been used in countless university courses and was the origin of Michael Apter's continuing documentary series (*21 Up*, *28 Up* etc.). He also directed a number of episodes for such early Canadian television classics as *Wojeck*, *RCMP*, *Forest Rangers* and the American series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

When Almond turned to feature filmmaking, he attracted domestic and international attention with *Isabel* (1968), *Act of the Heart* (1970) and *Journey* (1972), a trilogy of understated, highly interiorized explorations of mind and spirit starring his then wife Geneviève Bujold. All three films are concerned with rites of passage, but more particularly with the change of consciousness undergone by his female lead. However, Almond's attempts to establish an art-house cinema in Canada met with critical resistance and only modest commercial success and he has since moved permanently to Los Angeles. His legacy in the canon of Canadian cinema is of a director who was far ahead of his time. The Almond filmography, complete with television credits, can be found on his comprehensive Web site, www.paulalmond.com.

Paul Almond spoke with *Take One* in Toronto this past June on his way to pick up his Order of Canada in Ottawa. He was awarded the distinction last year but wanted to wait until there was a presentation ceremony at Rideau Hall. "For me, this is a big thing," he said. "I'm so Canadian."

During the 1950s and 1960s you directed hundreds of television dramas for the CBC and BBC. What caused you to turn to feature filmmaking, especially at a time when there was no infrastructure in Canada for such a venture?

It really all started when I met Geneviève. That was in 1965 when I did *Romeo and Jennette* for the CBC. I had wanted to do motion pictures for a long time, but nobody made them in Canada. There is only one I remember from the early days, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* [1964], which was produced by Budge Crawley. I met Geneviève when I went to Montreal to cast a French Canadian for *Jennette*. I also cast Michael Sarrazin as *Romeo*. He was the big new discovery at that time. Geneviève and I got together and I did several television shows with her. We fell in love, then she went to France to do a picture for Alain Resnais called *La Guerre est finie* [1966] with Yves Montand. Then she did a film for Philippe de Broca called *Le Roi de coeur* [1966]. All the time she was in France I would fly over and stay with her. I thought, "Why can't we do a film in Canada?" While she was making Louis Malle's *Le*

Voleur [1967], we had a little studio flat on the Left Bank where I began the first draft of *Isabel*. Then I came back to Canada and continued to work on it. I never showed anything I was writing to Geneviève until it was completely finished; that way she could decide for herself if she wanted to be in it. She read it and loved it. Then I thought, "What do I do now?" Apart from Crawley, there was no such thing as a feature-film producer in Canada. So I went to New York to find a guy who liked it. His name was Joel Katz. After a month I asked him what was happening, and he said he hadn't started doing anything. So I said, "fuck this," pardon my French, "no way," and I said to myself, "I'll do it." I went back down to New York, hustled and met various people. Geneviève and I had a good agent, and we were meeting the right people. In a couple of months—and this is almost unbelievable—I had two major studios that wanted to do the picture, Columbia and Paramount.

Based on what? Geneviève or the script or both?

Based on the two of us because we made a couple. Here was this hot director—I had won a number of awards for my television work—and this rising young French-Canadian star. You know how these things happen; there was a swirl of energy. At the time, Paramount was being taken over by a conglomerate. It was Charles Bluhdorn who ran Gulf & Western, and he had just bought Paramount. His wife happened to be French and she knew about Alain Resnais and Philippe de Broca. She obviously said to Charles that Geneviève had done those pictures in France and that he should get hold of this couple. I believe she thought I was French, or something like that. Paramount got in touch and said Charles would like to meet me and Geneviève and talk over a deal. Geneviève said, "Well, if Charles wants to meet us, tell him to come over here." We were staying at the Plaza in New York. So I phoned back and told the people at Paramount that if Charles wanted to meet us, ask him to come over to the hotel and we would meet him in the lobby. Unbelievably, he came over to the Plaza and sat down with us. We had a drink in the bar and made the deal. Because this was the very first deal made after the takeover, everyone at Paramount was terrified of Charles and what was going to happen.

When we walked into the Paramount offices we were treated like stars. I don't think anyone had actually read the script and anyway, we were going to make it for nothing.

The next problem we had was finding a crew because there was no such thing as a professional film crew in Montreal at the time, except at the National Film Board. There had been some television series. Budge had done *RCMP*, which I had worked on, and there had been *Forest Rangers*, which Peter Carter had also worked on. Peter and I were close friends and I liked working with him. On *RCMP* he'd been my first assistant director. He worked very fast and I liked working fast. We were a hot team and he was instrumental on making things happen with *Isabel*. We thought, "How the hell do we find a crew?" So we got a couple of guys from the NFB to do the lighting and I got Joyce Kozy King to do the continuity. She had worked on the *Seaway* series. Then we got a makeup artist from Paris and hired Georges Dufaux, who was a brilliant cameraman working at the Film Board, to shoot it. None of the Canadians had worked on a feature before. So down we went to Gaspé on a train in the middle of winter. It was very unreal, almost like a dream. We were on this train, which I remember got stuck for hours because there was too much snow on the tracks. This is where I got the idea for the opening sequences of the film. I cut it in Toronto with George Appleby, a wonderful editor who died just recently.

"It was very unreal, almost like a dream." — PAUL ALMOND

Can you tell me a bit more about the shoot? You had a great cast with Geneviève, Al Waxman and Gerard Parkes.

Gerard played the lead opposite Geneviève. Al Waxman, who had done a film in London, was in it. *Isabel* was his first Canadian film. Ratch Wallace was in it, and Elton Hayes, who is my cousin, played a local farmer. Most of the other people were from Gaspé. Everything was shot in an old house, which is actually my family's home. Geneviève's parents also came from Gaspé. Her mother and father were born 25 miles away from where my father was born. They were from Ste-Simeon-de-Bonaventure, and I'm from Shigawaké. They were the French and we were the English, but we were very close. In those days it

was not done to say you came from Gaspé because it was like being from the sticks. You had to be from Montreal. But I found out one day that she was from there and I thought “Yes, you’re going back there! That’s what you’re going to do.” She had never been back. I thought this was an interesting idea. It was very exciting because it was the way I liked to make films, with a tiny crew who all liked each other. No hassles. No problems.

Paramount wanted to send someone called Norman out to see how we were doing. We flew him to Montreal, but he had to wait to get a train the next day. He took the overnight train and finally got to the tiny station, which appears in the film. I sent Elton to pick him up in his truck, which had a shotgun in the front seat. Norman asked what it was for, and Elton told him for the bears. “There’s a lot of bears around here, but don’t worry, you probably won’t meet one.” Elton then drove him all over the place and took two hours to get to the set. Norman was used to Hollywood sets, and here was this broken-down farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. We all greeted him and told him he could stay. I said there is a train leaving today and the next one didn’t leave for four days. He turned around and left after half an hour. No one came to bother us again! Everyone had a wonderful time shooting *Isabel*, although the house was full of ghosts and no one would go in at night. It was pretty scary at times.

“I don’t think anyone bothered to read the script. I would have really freaked them out.” —ALMOND

What about the launch?

Isabel was the first film in Canada to be made with a major American distributor, so everyone was kind of nervous. Now it’s well-respected, travelling around in retrospectives and playing on television. But then it was: “What’s this?” No one could understand it. It was slaughtered by a Canadian critic who saw an early screening.

Who was that?

I remember, but I don’t want to mention his name. But I knew we could not open the film in Canada. So I took it down to New York with Geneviève, where it got wonderful reviews. It was incredible. She was on the cover of *Time*. It was called one of the best films of

the year. It got great reviews from everybody. So then we opened it at the Towne Cinema in Toronto. There were queues around the block, and the Canadian critics had to backpedal because it had got the stamp of approval in America.

I understand that your next film, Act of the Heart, was the first film to be financed by Telefilm Canada, which in those days was called the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC)?

Immediately after *Isabel* I wanted to do another picture and I wrote *Act of the Heart*. It was much easier, after the reception for *Isabel*. I had received a nomination from the Directors Guild of America as Best Director of the year, so it wasn’t hard to set up *Act of the Heart*. But, of course, nobody actually went to see *Isabel*. There’s a difference between box-office success, like the films of Ivan Reitman, and *Isabel*, which was prestigious but made very little money. Paramount Pictures had never made a film that didn’t make any money and only got great reviews, so the people there weren’t all that interested anymore. So we decided to take *Act of the Heart* to Universal Pictures because it wanted to do a picture with Geneviève. I don’t think anyone bothered to read the script. It would have really freaked them out. But we got the deal with Universal and we were ready to move ahead when Michael Spencer [the first executive director of Telefilm] called me and asked if the CFDC could do my film. I had to say no because we didn’t

need his money. But he thought it would be good if the CFDC was involved with a film that had a big distribu-

tor attached to it. He really wanted to do it as their first film. So eventually I said okay.

It is so different today, of course. Now you have to beg and plead. I could tell you some stories about trying to get some of my other films made by Telefilm. But with *Act of the Heart*, Michael begged me to get involved. So I said yes. I had only a handshake deal with Universal, so they flew in Joel Katz—who was now with Universal—two days before Christmas to meet with our lawyer, Donald Johnston—who is now the secretary general of the OECD in Paris—and they sat down to work out the details of the deal over Christmas in Montreal. We were due to begin shooting

P A U L A L M O N D



GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD...



IN ACT OF THE HEART.

in January [1969] but now that Universal was backing the film, IATSE, which was the union in America, said we had to have their people on the shoot. I said no. I wanted the same people I had on *Isabel*. IATSE threatened to strike. Michael was terrified that there would be trouble and said we had better do what they said. I said no way. I was firm and said we are starting the shoot at a skating rink on Monday, January 10. I would be there, so would Geneviève and Jean Boffety, a cameraman who had come over from France to shoot it, and also Peter Carter. The crew turned up and we went ahead without the union. We shot all over the city. We shot in St. Joseph's Oratory with a massed choir of 400 voices. We had a huge number of extras for that scene. We didn't pay them of course; they just wanted to hear Geneviève sing. We had Donald Sutherland, who was unknown at the time. He had just completed *M*A*S*H*, but it hadn't been released yet. I had known him from my time in England where I had given him a small part in a play that I directed in London. I had done the first Tennessee Williams play on British television, *The Rose Tattoo*, in 1963 or 1964, and he had a small part in that. Now he works all the time, but you have to meet his price because he really only works for money. I wrote *The Dance Goes On* for him, but he wanted a million dollars. I asked him to do it for me, but he said no.

Which lab did you use for post-production on Isabel and Act of the Heart?

We were the first 35 mm film to go through Harold Greenberg's labs in Montreal. That was the start of his career in Canadian film. He had opened a lab, which was an extension of his photo-processing business. *Isabel* was his first feature film and Peter Carter was merciless. He would phone dear Harold in the middle of the night to make sure the rushes had arrived. He wouldn't let Harold get away with anything, and Harold was sweating blood. *Act of the Heart* was done in Toronto, at Film House. They were very keen to have us because at that time all the film shot in Toronto had to be shipped to Montreal to be processed and Film House was trying to reverse the process. I really can't remember, but I think it was one of the first films it had done, if not the first.

By now I had completed two pictures and Denis Héroux had made *Valérie*, which was huge at the box office in Quebec, so things were starting to happen and the CFDC was instrumental in kick-starting this whole new wave of new Canadian films. The next important thing to happen was the tax relief implemented by the federal government, which was thought up by Donald Johnston. He was an important Montreal lawyer who was also a friend of Pierre Trudeau's and later he became a member of Trudeau's cabinet. I had gone to school with Timothy Porteous, who later became clerk of the Privy Council. I phoned Timothy and asked him if he knew a good lawyer. He recommended Johnston, but said he [Johnston] didn't know anything about film.



GENEVIÈVE BUJOLD...



IN JOURNEY

I met Donald and he ended up becoming a great friend. Later, when Geneviève left me, she took our son and went to stay with Donald until she could set herself up.

Donald's law firm had been buying jet planes and leasing them back to Air Canada. In those days, if you bought an airplane you got a 100 per cent tax write-off. Donald thought the same principle could be applied to Canadian films. So he implemented the tax-shelter financing for feature films when he was in the Trudeau cabinet. Of course, this arrangement was responsible for some of the worst films ever made in the history of Canadian cinema. A lot of bad films were made but a lot of people got involved in the business. It was Donald who was responsible and he got his feet wet negotiating the deal for *Act of the Heart* before he became a politician.

You made a third and final film with Geneviève, Journey, which completes the trilogy. Did you see the three films as being connected at the time?

By the time I made *Journey* I did, in the sense I wanted to do another film with Geneviève. After she dies at the end of *Act of the Heart*, I wanted a girl out of time coming out of a severe trauma and being brought back to life. She is found floating down a river. It's purely symbolic. She's found floating on a log and is rescued by a group of 12 people. Their leader was played by John Vernon. I would have liked Donald Sutherland again, but that was not possible. We shot the film on the Saguenay River in a remote location.

Did you have CFDC backing on this one as well?

Yes, we had the CFDC and some distribution. I'm very proud of *Journey* because it was born out of such angst. I was really in a mental state. Geneviève had just left and her new lover was hanging around the set. Being the early 1970s, everyone was smoking dope, but not me. It might have been better if I had been, but I was too straight.

It was supposed to be a hippie commune in the bush, wasn't it? Well, it turn out that way, but the original idea was more Christian, with the 12 disciples. I just had enough money to make the film. So I got the actors to come up the river with me to live, like on a commune, and we would shoot the film. But then some of them wanted to get paid for overtime because we were working long hours. I didn't think so because some days we would be working all day, then we would take time off the next couple of days. Anyway, it ended up in a big mess and ACTRA got involved. I saw it at a retrospective just recently. It's so beautiful. I'm amazed I pulled it off. It's so lovely and strange; but a horrible experience to make. It opened here and in New York, but I don't remember what happened to it after that. I must confess that period of my life is a bit of a blur. I took off for a trip around the world and tried to figure out what I wanted to do next.

There is a sense in Canadian film history that what you did with those three films was something quite different, something

that hadn't been done before. You were creating an art-house cinema out of whole cloth. You were, in a sense, a pioneer.

Well, I guess if I wasn't consider that today, I wouldn't be remembered at all. So I'm delighted. Those two first films and *Journey* are unique, the beginning of the Canadian feature-film industry. If I hadn't done it, maybe someone else would have. Who knows? If I hadn't started something, then when would it have started?

There was a lot going on in Quebec at the time, especially at the NFB with Pierre Perrault, Michel Brault and many others. They were making docudramas and cinéma-vérité. Wouldn't it have been easier for you to work at the NFB?

But my background was drama. I had been directing television dramas since 1954 and I was being hailed as the best director in television, so it was only natural for me to want to make dramas when it came to film. I had been directing drama in England for the BBC and I also wrote plays, one of them being *The Hill*, which was a religious drama. I had directed Pinter and Shakespeare. That was my background. I didn't know anything about documentaries. When I was at the CBC in the 1950s it was all new and we were all pioneers, so we could do pretty much whatever we wanted. If I said I wanted to do *Julius Caesar*, they would say, "Okay, you can do it."

You were there with Norman Jewison, Ted Kotcheff and Arthur Hiller.

Arthur was only there for a year and did some half-hours. Norman wasn't doing drama. He was doing the variety specials. Ted was my floor manager and then he directed some stuff before he left. We were shooting at Studio One, which was on Jarvis Street, and Studio Seven which was up on Yonge Street at Summerhill. Those were the best times. We had the freedom to do what we wanted. Sydney Newman was in charge until he moved on to the BBC and later he served as the film commissioner. I was

doing a drama every two weeks. I started doing half-hours first before I got to one-hours and later 90 minutes. I did 120 or so dramas for the CBC, and they were going out live. It was tough but a lot of fun. There has been nothing like it since those days in the 1950s.

Of the dual functions you performed on your films, as director and as writer, which did you enjoy the most?

For the last 10 years I have just been writing and I think I always enjoyed writing, but I liked the editing the most. I hated finding the money. I like directing, and I really enjoyed live television but I hated getting up in the morning to go on set. It's very hard to do, and since I produced all my own pictures, there was a lot of stress and you have to watch the rushes each day. It was hard. I could do it in the early days but not anymore. I pass film sets all the time now that I'm in Malibu and I thank God I'm not doing that anymore. I'm very happy just learning how to be a better writer.

Do you have any regrets?

Not really. I have a character defect. I wouldn't put up with any bullshit. I won't be told what to do. I think if I was slightly less independent, I would have built upon the success I achieved with the first three films and perhaps gone into the American studio system to make personal films with more money. I could have worked with better actors. Maybe I should have learnt how to compromise and work with the fools in the business. But I didn't want to work with the producers, who can be such idiots. If I had any regrets, which I don't, I would have been built differently to accept the domination of stupid people in order to get more personal films done. I can say that, but would I have really? Perhaps not, because you end up doing what you are told. I think if you are going to be a pioneer, and go your own way, then you don't put up with any bullshit. I'm delighted with my films. I love all of them and I love my life of writing. I just wish I started earlier.

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