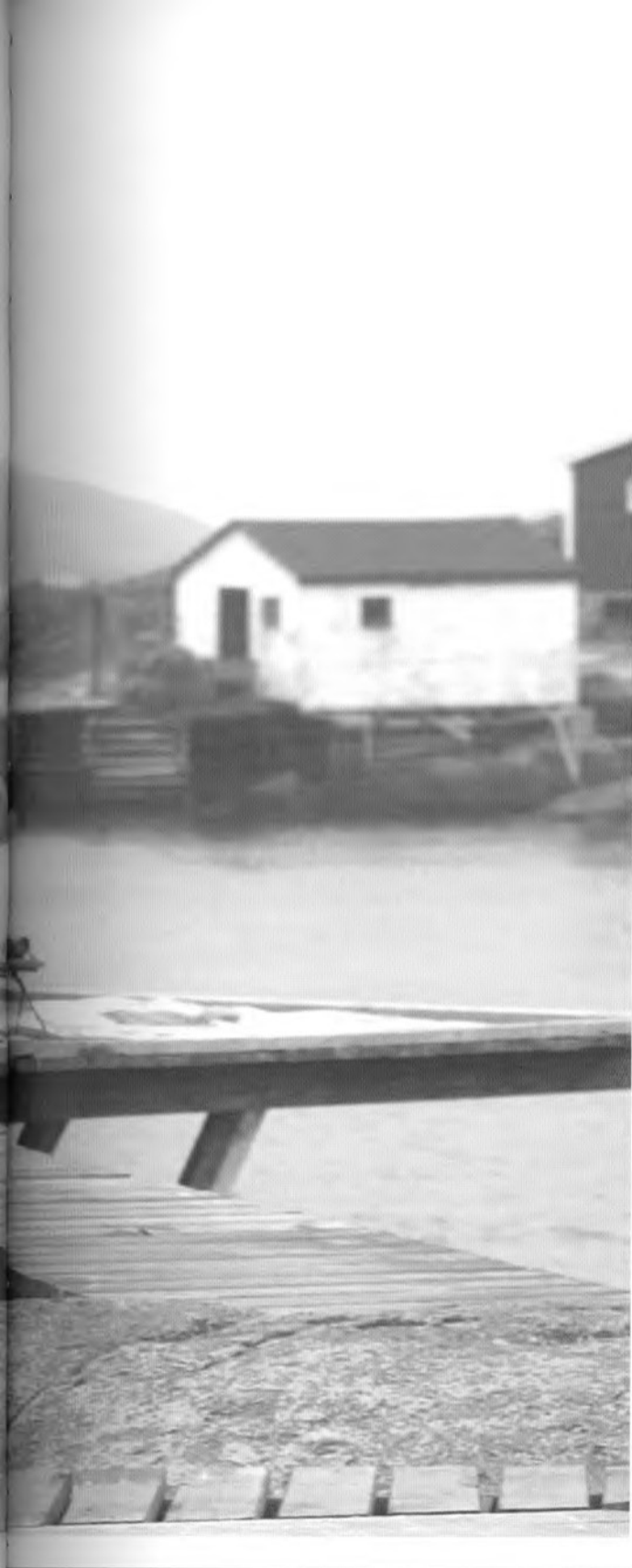




Images courtesy of Odeon Films.

SURVIVAL KIT:

# Jean-François Pouliot's



BY MAURIE ALIOFF

According to Jean-François Pouliot, the meteoric success of his film, *Seducing Doctor Lewis* (*La Grande Séduction*), arose from the audience need it fulfills. The picture “cuts through our resistance to having positive feelings about human nature,” the vivacious and boyishly enthusiastic director told me on a damp October Montreal morning. On top of its optimism, *Seducing Doctor Lewis* “transports you beyond day-to-day life. It’s almost a fable, a fairy tale. The place you go to is unknown; you’ve never seen it before.” The movie’s title, referring to its storyline, also describes Pouliot’s relationship with his audience. Ideologically correct tsk-tsking about audience manipulation is not on his radar. Manoeuvring viewers into abandoning themselves to a story, as long as it’s done thoughtfully and with respect, is what movie directors should know how to do.

The positive vibe on *Seducing Doctor Lewis* started in May when it was screened as the closing film of the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs at Cannes 2003. The audience lapped it up, media types at a celebratory lunch chirped happily and buyers approached Roger Frappier, whose company, Max Films, produced the \$5.7-million project. Then in July, just after the film was the public’s best-feature choice at Comedia (the film component of Montreal’s Just for Laughs comedy festival), it opened wide in Quebec and broke box-office records for a summer release of a homegrown movie.

# *Seducing Doctor Lewis*

# The picture opens on Ste-Marie-La-Mauderne's

Part of a trend that included Denys Arcand's *Les Invasions barbares*, Pouliot's film did better numbers than massively supported releases like *The Hulk*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Terminator 3*, earning over \$6 million during its initial Quebec release. Then it was a Special Presentation at the Toronto International Film Festival, closed the Independent Feature Film Project Market (IFP) in New York City and took the Bayard d'Or, top prize at the Festival of Francophone Films in Namur, Belgium. The packed house in Toronto's cavernous Elgin Theatre "was one of the best audiences," Pouliot told me. Although he worried about issues like cultural differences and language, as he did in Cannes, both audiences were "there from the very, very beginning," even applauding an early sight gag. "They loved it, something that did not happen in New York." To gauge reaction at the IFP, Pouliot says he used a time-honoured method: a lengthy post-screening piss. While the indie types in the washroom liked the film, they didn't exactly give it up for *Seducing Doctor Lewis*.

The news about the movie sweetened even more when remake inquiries came in from the United States. Yet, however elated Pouliot might be about this prospect, he wants to see his original version earn all possible returns before Americans do their take on the story. Clearly, the film has the kind of universal appeal that ranks as the Holy Grail of the Canadian film industry. Watching *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, you can easily imagine it being transposed from Quebec to Maine, or northern California. Written by Ken Scott (who previously wrote the 2000 hit *La Vie après l'amour*), the bittersweet comedy unfolds on a remote island where fishermen who can't earn a living collect welfare cheques and mourn the loss of the days when they had independence and self-respect.

The picture opens on Ste-Marie-La-Mauderne's only village, nestling under a starry sky. We hear a chorus of hyperbolic orgasms, and then exhalations of smoke puff out of the village chimneys. That was the storybook past, when happy lovemaking capped a satisfying working day. In the present, romantic moonlight is replaced by wan, North Atlantic greyness and unshaven men trudging to the post

office to collect their government dole. But before the islanders collapse into total inertia, they have one last shot at redemption. An entrepreneur will hire them to work in a small factory he intends to build on Ste-Marie, but only if they meet an insurance company stipulation that they have a resident doctor. The businessman, played by 1970s vedette Donald Pilon, also demands a hefty bribe.

It's a classic set up. Ste-Marie has never had its own doctor, and when the islanders mass-mail a solicitation to every physician in Quebec, they are greeted by dead silence. Scott's plot kicks in when, by a twist of fate and some benevolent blackmail, a young doctor is forced to leave Montreal and spend a month on the windswept outpost. For the rest of the picture, the locals try to entice Christopher Lewis (David Boutin) into a long-term commitment by satisfying his every need and desire. They research him thoroughly before he arrives, and when he is installed in what they deem to be the island's classiest home, they promptly tap his phone. Dr. Lewis's conversations with his girlfriend reveal his favourite foods, taste in





# ONLY village, nestling under a starry sky.



music and sexual preferences. The islanders already know that he is an obsessive cricket fan, so they pretend to play and love the game. When Christopher gets frustrated by his inability to catch fish, a villager dives under his boat to hook a frozen one onto his line. Meanwhile, Germain (Raymond Bouchard), the village leader who dreamt up the scheme, becomes a wise, caring father to Dr. Lewis, someone who obviously never had one. Throughout all these shenanigans a beautiful young woman (Lucie Laurier) distances herself from the scam and needles Dr. Lewis, but her smile holds promise.

Like Poullet himself, driven by a need to “make things that weren’t there before” (he’s referring to more than films), the villagers imagine a difficult goal and attempt to concretize it, inventing ways of tugging Christopher into Ste-Marie-la-Mauderne. The movie’s central tension is about the struggle to make a vaporous dream become real. The challenge is daunting because the islanders have little going for them, apart from their ingenuity and determination.



The villagers celebrate their cricket game.

*Seducing Doctor Lewis* is a culture-clash comedy recalling Bill Forsyth’s 1983 film, *Local Hero* (a wealthy oil company executive falls under the spell of a faraway Scottish village), or more closely a film Poullet says he didn’t see until after completing *Doctor Lewis*, *Waking Ned Devine* (where the villagers try to convince a lottery official that one of them is the dead winner of a huge prize). The picture’s storyline, incidentally, is the reverse of another movie that debuted at Cannes 2003, Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*, in which Nicole Kidman’s character spends most of the film trying to ingratiate herself into the lives of the people living in an isolated hamlet.

While some might see *Seducing Doctor Lewis* as yet another whimsical, feel-good picture about eccentric yokels, the movie has an undertow of pathos that deepens it. Poullet’s depiction of little people grasping at a tiny glimmer of salvation is credible, partly because of the actors’ authenticity and emotional range, especially Bouchard as Germain, Pierre Collin as his disgruntled pal, Yvon, and Benoît Brière as Henri, the village banker who worries about being replaced by an ATM machine. Beyond the Tati-esque sight gags, the deadpan reactions, the quirky dialogue and the funny details like one villager’s array of goony-looking hats, you genuinely empathize with these characters.

“I’ve always been convinced that comedy is a form of drama,” says Poullet. “There is no limit to the dramatic subjects that humour can treat,” citing Marcel Pagnol’s classic french serio-comedies from the 1930s and the Coen brothers’ *Fargo* as direct influences. “Reading [Scott’s] script, I knew that behind every line of humour, I would be able to bring out some form of dramatic subtext.” During script rewrites of *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, Poullet and Scott fine-tuned the relationship between humour and drama at the heart of their movie. They taped all the pages onto walls and colour-coded them, trying to calibrate the shifts between modes. For Poullet—who once became obsessed with building a house he imagined in a drawing—a screenplay is, more than anything else, “a very complex piece of architecture.” In the design of *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, the director and writer had to deal with modal shifts, various subplots and several thematic strands.



Raymond Bouchard, left, and David Boutin

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Jean-François Pouliot

The film is about more than the plight of people who are so down and out they lack even basic medical care. “There is,” he says, “in life, the apparent truth and the truth that lies behind.” As a successful doctor, “Christopher has the apparent truth, but he’s on a quest, and I think what he’s trying to find is a deeper truth. He’s not aware but he has a sense that everything in his life is false. And he’s going to find that deeper truth from the very people who are deceiving him at every turn. I thought *this* was very, very exciting: to have the liars become the bearers of the real truth.” For Pouliot, this irony was central to his vision of the movie. “When you can find one symbol, and you can build from that, then you know you’ll have a form of unity.”

Of course, to discover the truth he’s seeking, Christopher must embrace the island itself. When he first lands on Ste-Marie-La-Mauderne, its bleak rawness shocks him. He’s the kind of Montrealer who hangs out in slick restos; the island has one, purely functional café. As the film advances, *Seducing Doctor Lewis* effectively portrays the way a primitive, seemingly forbidding place can magically transform in the eyes of an outsider. In different parts of the world, many people have been through conversions like Dr. Lewis’s. At first he’s appalled by the isolation, poverty and lack of familiar amenities but then the island lights up. He falls in love with its landscape and people.

*Seducing Doctor Lewis* was filmed in a genuinely remote location: Harrington Harbour, a northern Quebec island that has a population of about 300 and faces across from

Newfoundland. “My fear from the beginning,” Pouliot recalls, “was that the island was too beautiful, and I tried to bring it down as much as possible.” The director of photography, Allen Smith, and the art department found ways of leaching out the island’s beauty for the opening scenes and then letting it re-emerge as it blossoms in Christopher’s eyes. The visual nuance added to the difficulties of a complicated shoot in a place inaccessible by road and sometimes dangerous to reach by sea.

Because Pouliot handled the difficult project so effectively, many are surprised to learn that *Seducing Doctor Lewis* is his first feature. The 46-year-old has shot several episodes of *Emily of New Moon*, but most of the credits on his resumé are television commercials such as his “Monsieur B” campaigns for Bell. Wildly popular in the Quebec market since 1992, the spots feature Benoît Brière, Pouliot’s friend and collaborator, playing multiple roles: the hapless “B” and the cartoony characters he interacts with. Unfolding on sets recalling 1960s Richard Lester movies, the ads are stylized mini-comedies about Bell services and products that don’t appear. Brière mimes all the actions.

For years, Pouliot didn’t make movies because he thought the scripts he was offered were lame and underfunded, or when he asked writers for more drafts on ideas with potential, they balked. “I need to have fun,” he explains. “I need to believe that somehow there is a chance that

what I'm doing may come out to be exceptional. Even if it's one chance out of a million, I need to have that feeling. When you're certain from the start you don't have it, what is there too gain?" And then ironically, when Pouliot found himself immersed in a business venture meant to compensate for the films he wasn't making—Eloda, a firm he helped create and launch which tracks television advertising campaigns and digitizes spots for clients who use the information to give them an edge on competitors—he read *Seducing Doctor Lewis* and wanted to do it very badly. Before Pouliot could even conclude a film deal with producer Roger Frappier, someone he deeply admires, he needed to get permission from Eloda's shareholders and his partner in the company.

But once production of *Seducing Doctor Lewis* was underway on Harrington Harbour, Pouliot had "a sense it was my third feature, but I didn't have time to do the first and second ones." As an advertising director, he had spent more time on sets than many people who make theatrical movies and television films. Constructing innumerable 30-second narratives, he collected "a lot of tools in my toolbox." On top of his commercial work, Pouliot wrote and developed scripts. He had the confidence and the educated reflexes to deal quickly with whatever the wind blew his way.

For Pouliot, a director's most important tool is his flexibility. "He must have the essential image in his mind but make sure he doesn't close it too early." There are always surprises waiting on a set, so a "precise vague" idea of what will be on the screen is the best anyone can do. "You let it come into focus as the elements that can't be changed appear to you." When he was a young director,

Pouliot had trouble "modifying what I had in my mind and I imposed," he laughs, "extreme stress on reality." As for connecting to an audience via comedy, Pouliot says, "People smile to make life more livable. That's the true purpose of humour. Life is tough; it's a question of survival. That's also what is exciting about life. But it's tough. And there are very, very difficult moments. I think Italian filmmakers like Federico Fellini and Guiseppe Tornatore (*Cinema Paradiso*) have shown more than anyone else how humour is part of our survival kit."

Maurie Alioff is *Take One's* Associate Editor.



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