



Humanitarius beautificitus

Pascale Bussières
Shines in Léa Pool's

The Blue Butterfly

Probably the most surprising thing about Quebec director Léa Pool's latest film is the fact that it is based on a true story. *The Blue Butterfly*, the tale of a young boy suffering from cancer whose dying wish is to go on an Amazonian hunt for the rare and magnificent Blue Morpho butterfly with a world-renowned entomologist, is an exploration of magical realism, an onscreen surrealist painting where insects take on otherworldly proportions and vine branches come alive and clutch at passersby. For the first time, digital effects were used in the work of this soberly psychological director, adding a fantastical element still rare even in the wider context of Quebec cinema. In many ways it's a French-Canadian answer to *Amélie*; it was only fitting, then, that it stars our own national sweet-smiling pixie, Pascale Bussières.

Images courtesy of Odeon Films

BY ISA TOUSIGNANT



"I just thought, 'Wow, I feel like doing this project,'" she beamed in her hometown of Montreal, "because it's a beautiful story. Because it isn't banal and it celebrates the power of spirit, the ability to change the course of things, the kind of passion that can suddenly become a life force. And it was also because it was L a, whom I'd already worked with in *Emporte-moi* [1999], and it allowed me to go and shoot in locations I didn't really know about, conditions that I suspected would be extreme. I always like finding myself in real locations, where you're really part of the elements, where you must combat and really physically *feel* the elements."

The elements surrounding *The Blue Butterfly* were those of the Costa Rican rain forest, along the Caribbean coast, where the two-and-a-half-month-long shoot took place. Moist and wild, the land is filled with creatures most of us have only seen on screen: toucans, monkeys, crocodiles and a variety of rare insects renowned throughout the world. As a tribute to the fauna's exoticism, Pool inserted documentary footage of the area's indigenous animals in interludes throughout the film. The bursts of colour and sound emphasize the wonderment intrinsic to the story told. Mother Nature's magnificence is further amplified by the digital-animation effects, more prevalent in the latter part of the film, which introduce an even greater level of fantasy to this true story.

Glorious transformatorius
A multi-coloured six-winged insect found in the four corners of the globe, renowned for its grace and contextual adaptability.

Over her wide-spanning career, Bussi res has been immersed in an impressive range of cultures and contexts. She hit the screens in Quebec at the young age of 13, when she was nominated for a Genie for best female performance in Micheline Lanct ot's *Sonatine* (1984). Since then she has played roles in both English and French, set in Europe, South and North America, and for directors such as Charles Binam  (*Eldorado*, 1995), Patricia Rozema (*When Night Is Falling*, 1995), Denis Villeneuve (*Un 32 ao t sur terre*, 1998), Jean Beaudin (*Souvenirs intime*, 1999) and Jeremy Podeswa (*The Five Senses*, 1999). Her most famous role in Quebec was undoubtedly the nurse she played in *Blanche* (1993, directed by Binam ), an incredibly popular period television series. But unlike most other television stars in the province—especially those known for historical roles—she has had no difficulty in transmuting her talents to the big screen, and more importantly, to a contemporary



Marc Donato and Pascale Bussières

setting. In the last 20 years, she has played a spectrum of female roles, but has endowed them all with her particular brand of quiet sensitivity. It's a measure of her range that her follow-up to the roller-blading character in *Eldorado* was of a prim theology student who uncovers her desire for women in *When Night Is Falling*. She has a tendency to underplay, to speak loud through clenched lips; her regard is strong and straight, and her small frame solid and steadfast. For all the delicacy of her features, she is not what one would call a weepy sort of woman.



MUSCULUS MODERNIS Aphroditus

A roundbacked beetle able to carry 600 times its own bodily weight without outward appearance of effort. A natural oddity: only females of the species have ever been located.

In *The Blue Butterfly*, Bussières plays Teresa Carlton, mother of Pete, the young cancer patient, with characteristic

might. One of the points of departure between the real story and this fictionalized recounting is that the original child had both parents to support him. Pete, Pool's character, is a lonely child whose father died in a car accident a few years before. His mother, then, has had to not only steel herself against the loss of a partner, but prepare herself for the inevitable and premature loss of her son. It is a heartbreaking fate; but as played by Bussières, it is survivable, and not only that, she does it with dignity.

"It was a very interesting female role, but because of the very dramatic situation. We needed to be careful not to fall into sentimentality," Bussières says. "It's a bit of an easy trap in this kind of story, when the subject is a sick child. Representations we see on television or in films are often very sentimental. But knowing that it was Léa's project, I was confident she wouldn't take that road. I know her intelligence and sensitivity well enough. So we decided, on the contrary, to create a character that was a little more rock 'n' roll, a mum who's been living with a child that's been sick for a very long time. I've personally known a few families like that, and I know that they're people who have incredible strength; who are in many ways more alive than most. It was very important that despite the imminent death of her child, this woman be a fighter, a warrior,

a woman who has always taken care of stuff on her own. Someone who won't suddenly just fall, just break down, because she learns that her child is dying."

A new mum herself at the time of the shoot—Bussièrès had her one-year-old in tow and was expecting her second child while in Costa Rica—she felt an added level of empathy with the story than she would have before she had her child. "The fact of being a mother—like, a full-fledged mum—I'm sure helped me in the role. It gave me an utterly natural compassion and the maternal feeling that results in a complete understanding of the child-mother relationship. I believe that when we become mothers there is definitely something that gets into gear, that wasn't there before.

"From there, I think I was able to give my character a low-profile complexity, in that the film really speaks of this expedition from which she keeps a certain distance. As if for the first time in her life, it's not that she's abandoning her son but she's letting him go. It's like their first step apart. She tells herself it's what he wants, we're in the middle of a virgin forest, but that's the moment at which she needs to let him go. In an allegoric or symbolic way, it's perhaps at that moment that he gathers strength and is able to become autonomous."

Karma fatalus nebulus

Of the moth family, a broad-winged, silver-tued flying insect found most often when and where it is least expected.

In keeping with the film's poeticism, the world demonstrated its smallness for Bussièrès with this role. When she received the script a couple years ago, she read it and realized something seemed familiar. The real character behind *The Blue Butterfly* is George Brossard, a renowned entomologist, founder of Montreal's Insectarium and an old family friend of Bussièrès's. In 1987, Brossard met David, a young boy in the final stages of terminal cancer. The boy's dying wish was to accompany Brossard on a butterfly hunt in Central America. Brossard accepted; and upon their return, David's disease was in remission.

"I was with George about two years before we made the film, and he told me about his movie—just like that, at a party. He told me all about the script he had brought forward to the writer [Pete McCormack]. But this happens to me often. I meet people who want to make movies, so I took it with a grain of salt. I thought, yeah, we'll see,



William Hurt and Marc Donato

we'll see. It's a beautiful story. It's practically within the miraculous realm, even though I'm not a believer in miracles. But he was so inflamed when he spoke of it, like he is about everything in fact. He's such a passionate person. So when I read the script a couple years later, that's when I flashed. I thought, wait a minute, this story is familiar. And then I saw his name on the front page."

So Bussièrès joined Brossard, Pool and her co-stars, William Hurt and Marc Donato, on their own impassioned expedition. "It was so wild in the mountains that the Natives had to carve a trail because there was no road on which to travel. We really had the feeling of doing something exceptional, you know? To be so far, in a place practically untouched by man, where there was something like a sense of virginity... There were moments of true exaltation. Like the scene where William and Marc were at the waterfall, and they're swimming in this natural pool. That was absolutely fabulous. It was a truly paradisiacal image, but it was far up in the mountains and the crew had to transport all the equipment up a tiny muddy trail. And it was raining. It was always a little epic to get to many of the locations where we were shooting.

"One of the moments that most touched me by its beauty and, at the same time, its danger, was when we were canoeing through the little serpentine rivers, with treetops hanging down into the water all around. Knowing that the water was filled with crocodiles and all sorts of other things, you'd say to yourself, "I mustn't fall in!" But at the same time, there were monkeys and toucans all over the trees. We heard the wildlife all around us. There was something mythical about it, like in [Werner Herzog's] *Fitzcarraldo*

which was shot in such wild conditions that it played like a documentary. I love being in that kind of place and filming movies where real life moments are caught on tape."

Adaptowimbus fantasticus

Most often found in areas other than its native soil, this mutable 10-legged species is notable mainly for its ability to imitate others.

In many ways, *The Blue Butterfly* does feel real. Much of actors's work is natural, nearly ad libbed at times. Pool's attitude toward directing is one of trust, leaving the actors to do what they are good at. Other than expanding on the global aspect of a particular scene—what is going on in it and a bit of the characters motivations—she more or less lets them develop their own relationship with their characters. For Hurt, who played the entomologist, renamed Alan Osborn for the film, this bode well, according to Bussièrès. "I was very impressed when I met him. I knew his work, having seen many of his films, and I knew him to be a very intelligent, intense person; working with him confirmed it. He seems to be someone who doesn't do anything lightly, whose approach to his work is nearly one of spirituality. He lent himself to the role completely. He needed to act totally comfortable in the environment in which we were working; it wasn't easy, to appear to be old hat in the virgin forest, to give the impression of understanding everything that was happening.



George Brossard and Pascale Bussièrès



William Hurt and Marc Donato



“But he’s a very quick adaptor, someone who asks a lot of questions.

He learned the insect’s Latin names in order to be able to do his job with mechanism. That’s always the challenge for an actor, to very quickly absorb the tools, the way of speaking, the rhythm, the language of a character. And I think he really liked it. I think he was very comfortable making this film. It was really very enjoyable.”

Humanitaricus beautificatus

A delicate, iridescent, six-legged creature native to Montreal, Quebec; known for its unusually large chest cavity, attributed to its particularly generous heart.

For Marc Donato, the job may have been even more difficult, especially for an actor of barely 11 years old at the time, because of the character’s psychological complexity, says Bussières. Indeed, the role is a loaded one, speaking of death, perseverance and strength of a nature mostly unknown to children. “I think it’s widely known that young cancer sufferers share a sort of universal maturity.

A spirituality, or conscienceness, or lucidity that’s really impressive, that isn’t at all representative of their age.”

In the same way, Bussières’s own role pushed her imagination to areas that were unfamiliar. She may be a mother, but the pain one must feel at learning of a child’s illness and the strength one must develop in response to it, are still in many ways superhuman things to conceive. Luckily, Bussières possesses that signature sensitivity, the wilful wisdom she embodies onscreen and off.

“I know women who have handicapped children, or sick children, and I’ve observed them and the relationships such parents have with the strangers that surround them. You know, that slightly worried look sick people constantly get from those who cross their paths, that inevitable reaction we have when we see a child in a wheelchair, with no hair on his head, to turn and look. I’ve observed how these people live with other people’s stares. And I think I approached this character the way I would probably approach such a situation in real life, with a sort of nonchalance. To say, ‘there, this is it, this is my life, we’re not the same, and *vive la différence*.’ We should celebrate difference and human fragility rather than be ashamed and weigh them down with social malaise.”

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