



*Pascale Bussi eres as Alys Robi  
in Denise Filiatrault's  
Ma vie en cin emascope.*

# *reviews*

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Pascale Bussières



Compared to last year's dazzling successes, 2004 was a routine year for Quebec movies. Several films were critical and box-office successes, but none attracted the international attention, or rave reviews, of *Les Invasions Barbares*, *Seducing Doctor Lewis* or *Gaz Bar Blues*. Of the 36 Quebec features eligible for Les Prix Jutra (the Quebec film awards), Denise Filiatrault's true-life portrait *Ma vie en cinémascope* and Jean Beaudin's *Nouvelle-France* were 2004's most highly anticipated releases. While the storylines of these two pictures are worlds apart, both are period pieces about women whose star-crossed passions lead them to disaster: madness in *Ma vie* and violent death in *Nouvelle-France*. By revisiting the past, these two films—configured as mainstream hits—endorse commonly held notions about Quebec history and its collective psyche. The protagonist of *Ma vie* embodies an ambivalence about pursuing success beyond Quebec's borders while the heroine of *Nouvelle-France* is an obvious metaphor for a culture irrevocably damaged by the British, the French and especially—in the view of the movie—the Catholic Church. By the end of February, *Ma vie* won five Jutras, including Best Actress for Pascale Bussières, while *Nouvelle-France* took only one.

Maurie Alioff

## MA VIE EN CINÉMASCOPE

2004 105m prod Cinémaginaire, p Daniel Louis, Denise Robert, d/sc Denise Filiatrault, ph Pierre Mignot, ed Yvann Thibaudeau, pd Normand Sarazin, c Denis Spourdouklis, sr Don Cohen, mus Jean Robitaille; with Pascale Bussières, Michel Barrette, Denis Bernard, Normand Chouinard, Nathalie Mallette, Serge Postigo.

*Ma vie en cinémascope* opens in 1952. Quebec singing star Alys Robi has spiralled downward into a mental hospital where she is about to undergo a lobotomy, deemed the only cure for her violent bouts of manic depression. Awaiting surgery, Alys recalls the life and meteoric show-biz career that led her to this traumatic moment.

Wherever little Alice Robitaille performs—between fights in boxing rings or talent

shows—audiences love her. Her father, the popular boxer Paul Robitaille, manages her with a conviction that she's destined for stardom. However, when Alice grows up and decides to broaden her horizons beyond Quebec, her family balks.

But nothing stops the burgeoning star, for whom breaking away from small-town venues is merely a stepping stone toward Paris, New York and Hollywood. In Montreal, Alice

performs with the legendary vaudeville star Rose Ouellette ("La Poune"), then tours with impresario Jean Grimaldi's troupe of performers. By the time she meets composer and orchestrator Lucio Agostini, she has changed her name to Alys Robi and developed a repertoire accenting upbeat Latin rhythms popular at the time. Robi becomes a hit in nightclubs and on Agostini's Toronto-produced CBC radio shows (where he was musical director in the 1940s), performing numbers like "Tico Tico" and "Besame Mucho." During the Second World War, she wows the Canadian troops.

Robi falls for the sleepily sexy Olivier Guimond, and then the more worldly and ambitious Agostini. Both men are married Catholics, who can't divorce. Robi's romantic problems and her desperation worrying about her sick younger brother chip away at her psyche. She strikes gold in New York, Rio and Hollywood, but her tendency to zone out or fly into rages becomes uncontrollable and she is committed to the hospital by her father. When she awakens from her lobotomy, she asks, "Am I in heaven?" One day, her father comes for her, and the two walk out of the hospital into the light.

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*Ma vie en cinémascope* is a show-biz, rise-and-fall story that never lets you forget about the protagonist's fall. From beginning to end, the movie crosscuts between Robi's glamorous triumphs and the snake pit of a hospital where she spent five years of her life. Scenes of Robi (Pascale Bussi eres) seducing audiences alternate between shots of her trussed up, hosed down and pounding her head against a wall. The menace of the brain operation threatening to destroy her is summarized by a doctor's comment that surgeons once used ice picks to pry open skulls.

Like C eline Dion, Robi was driven by an insatiable ambition. But that kind of purpose, not to mention bold sexuality, could be dangerous back in the 1930s and 1940s. In the film's madhouse passages, the grim *mise en sc ene*

contrasts starkly with the warm glow of nightclubs and cabarets. Robi is relentlessly tormented by nuns who suggest medieval brutes in ecclesiastical drag. These sisters of cruelty are without, but also within. Despite her formidable self-confidence, Robi sees herself as a deviant, doomed to the hellfire a scary parish priest ranted about when she was a little girl.

Actress turned director/writer Denise Filiatrault, herself a renowned Quebec show-biz figure, imagines Robi as the kind of brilliant individualist who pays a high price for wanting to live her life in cinémascope. Like Robert Zimmerman (a.k.a. Bob Dylan), whose memoir, *Chronicles*, recounts how he found the name that best reflected the person he wanted to be, Alys Robi knew that "Alice Robitaille" would be a one-way ticket to Palookaville.

Filiatrault never sanctifies Robi as the untainted soul of *le peuple Qu eb ecois*. The movie presents her not just as ambitious talent; we also see the shrewdly calculating side that propelled her into the spotlight. As *Ma vie* hurtles forward, it captures her beautiful, neurotic need to lure an audience into bathing her in waves of warm approval. In a perfect match between actor and character, Bussi eres incarnates Robi's obsessive drive, her joie de vivre and her sensuous charm. She doesn't hold back on Robi's tortured guilt over her sick brother (Charles-Andr e Bourassa), or her failed relationships with married men (Serge Postigo as Olivier Guimond and Denis Bernard as Agostini). But when she sings, her arms trace arabesques, her torso swings to Latin beats and her lips curl defiantly. She is simply gorgeous. Bussi eres sings all the numbers herself, dances convincingly and pulls off brilliantly a flamboyant nightclub stairway descent right out of a widescreen 1950s musical.

*Ma vie en cin emascope* offers a colourful picture of Montreal show business between the Great Depression and the 1950s. We get glimpses of vaudeville, burlesque and the nightclubs that once studded the city. Back then, Montreal regularly hosted performers

such as Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie in hot spots like Chez Par ee and Rockhead's Paradise. In one of the film's key scenes, Robi falters during a Montreal performance, and the club manager sends out the emcee, a young comic named Jackie Gleason, to cover for her.

Produced by Denise Robert and Daniel Louis (*Les Invasions barbares*), Filiatrault's movie was shot by one-time Robert Altman regular Pierre Mignot. Working with limited means, compared to the huge nightclub sets in a movie like *The Aviator*, Mignot conveys just enough detail and sweep for the film to be convincing. He also knows how to use judicious composition and framing to reveal the tensions in a relationship. Unfortunately, however, we don't get enough of Alys Robi's show-biz world. The nightclubs, radio studios and hotels lack the crazed grandeur of the sets in movies such as *Casino* or *New York, New York*. Moreover, the picture's musical numbers get cut off just as they are building. In fact, the rapidly paced film relies too much on emblematic vignettes, rather than scenes that bubble to a boil. This biopic sometimes feels more like a PowerPoint presentation of Alys Robi's life rather than a big-screen vision.

Strong-willed, sexually voracious Alys Robi in *Ma vie en cin emascope* incarnates the spirit of Quebec and its contradictions. Beleaguered by hardship, Robi dreams in Technicolor and has the will to make her dreams come true. However, no matter how much she expands her horizons, she can't stop being haunted by ghosts from her past.

Post script: Ays Robi's lobotomy was considered a success and recently she celebrated her 82nd birthday in a Montreal nightclub where she belted out a 30-minute set that included her signature song, "*Laissez-moi encore chanter*" ("Let Me Sing Again"). Robi has also been appearing in the finale of a musical tribute to her, a show that's been a hit at the Montreal Casino.

**Maurie Alioff**