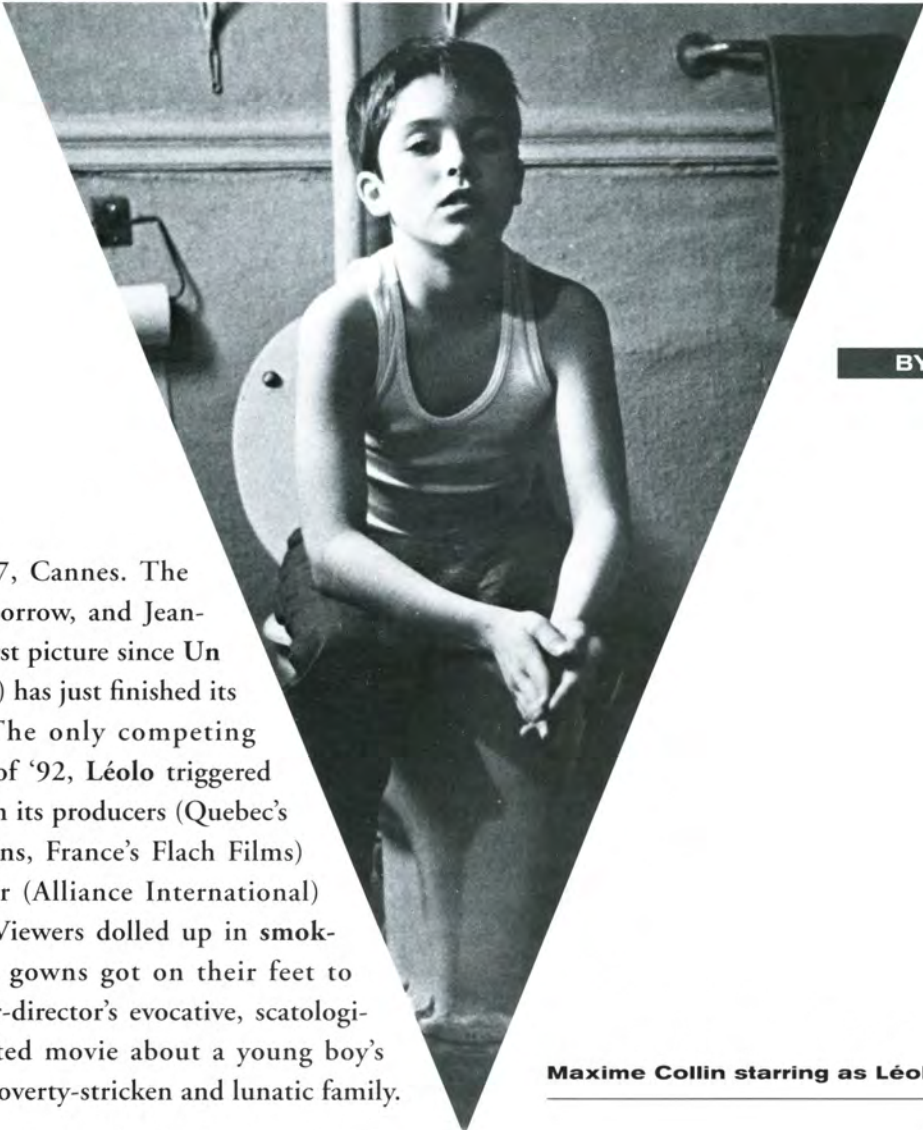


F C H I L D H O O D

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L A U Z O N ' S

Léolo



BY MAURIE ALIOFF

Midnight, May 17, Cannes. The festival closes tomorrow, and Jean-Claude Lauzon's first picture since *Un Zoo, la nuit* (1987) has just finished its gala screening. The only competing Canadian feature of '92, *Léolo* triggered the kind of reaction its producers (Quebec's Verseau Productions, France's Flach Films) and its distributor (Alliance International) were hoping for. Viewers dolled up in **smokings** and evening gowns got on their feet to applaud the writer-director's evocative, scatological, carefully crafted movie about a young boy's experience of his poverty-stricken and lunatic family.

Maxime Collin starring as Léolo



Latourelle (Luc Seguin) with a girl from the neighbourhood (Catherine Lemieux) and Léolo (Maxime Collin)

On one of the chartered buses transporting hundreds of people to the Palm Beach Casino, where Alliance's schmooz-until-dawn party for *Léolo* is about to begin, a woman turns to her male companion and says, "You just saw a film made by an *auteur*." "What's that?" queries the guy.

The eighties and early nineties have not been kind to *auteurs*. In Cannes '92's hottest ticket, *The Player*, Robert Altman and writer Michael Tolkin ridicule the mythology of the film artist as much as they jeer at film company execs. The picture begins with a corrupt studio cop droning away about virtuoso

tracking shots in movie classics, and goes on to depict supposedly impassioned writers and directors as pretentious, untalented idiots with the flimsiest of ideals.

On this continent, personal moviemakers—whether phoney or the real thing—are disappearing from view, especially if they work in non-English-speaking countries. "A subtitled film in North America will do 85 percent of its gross in nine theatres," said TV critic Roger Ebert at a Cannes symposium. In other words, "the subtitled market doesn't exist" in a context where "one guy with a computer in Hollywood books 1600 theatres on Friday, and then pulls the film out the next Friday if it doesn't perform."

In defiance of all the frightening numbers and bad signs, Jean-Claude Lauzon's second feature is nothing if not personal work. For one thing, he based a character

in *Léolo* on and dedicated the film to a man who once turned his life around. Twenty-one years ago, a now-retired NFB employee called André Petrowski went out of his way to encourage Jean-Claude—then a Montreal street punk—into pursuing a gift for writing, educating himself, and eventually making films.

When the two first meet, Lauzon says today, he thought Petrowski had a tidbit of youthful ass on his mind. But the sophisticated intellectual's fascination was, in fact, with an unruly talent he had determined to cultivate. What would have happened to the slum-bred kid without Petrowski's intervention? "I would have become a crooked businessman," Lauzon told me, perhaps exaggerating, perhaps not. "All my relationships were with crooks. Eight people who were close to me then have been shot or stabbed and they're dead."

Lauzon's script transposes the man who played André Bazin to his Francois Truffaut, Henry Higgins to his Eliza Doolittle, into a symbolic figure known as the "Word Tamer," incarnated in *Léolo* by another real-life mentor, the Quebec *indépendantiste* university professor, Pierre Bourgault. In fact, most of *Léolo*'s characters are—like those in Terence Davies' films—meticulously detailed, fantasized, sometimes hallucinated reconstructions of people from the director's youth and childhood, particularly parents and siblings.

According to Ginette Reno, the rotund singing star who plays the mother, Lauzon got her to haul around a bag of bricks so that she would learn to walk, like his real mother, tilted to one side. He also induced Reno to sit on a toilet, immense thighs completely exposed, for the sense-memory shots that are already among the most talked about images in the film.

These days, how many five million pictures get that personal? Not surprisingly, Lauzon looked a little subdued and apprehensive when he showed up at Cannes, the tension cranked up further

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by the fact his much-anticipated film had been slated for the last weekend of the festival.

To make matters worse, Cannes' waning days were dominated by 1990 Palme d'Or winner David Lynch, and his theatrical prequel to *Twin Peaks*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. Lynch's gala screening segued into a party that closed the Croisette with thousands of people, fireworks, plumes of eerie orange smoke, and a floating band with its interpreta-

tion of *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*.

When I first saw Lauzon, he was standing in bright sunlight outside the Canadian pavilion, clutching his rolled-up jacket, looking fierce and vulnerable at the same time. He seemed to be nestling in the custody of his producer, Lyse Lafontaine, a blonde woman with an attractive face and warm smile.

Half-an-hour later, on the airy terrace of the Carlton Hotel's La Côte restaurant, Lauzon—wearing a black T-shirt

**Fernand (Yves Montmarquette),
Léolo (Maxime Collin) and a neighbour-
hood friend (Jacques
Marcotte)**

and jeans, eyes masked by silver-rimmed shades—looked ready to meet the press. During a chit-chat around one of the tables, a reporter from Washington informed him that she couldn't look at Léolo's cat scene.

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The scene in question, a hellish one staged to the Rolling Stones's mournful and ecstatic *You Can't Always Get What You Want*, involves a gang of black-leather-jacketed teens encouraging their sickest member to rape a terrified cat.

Whatever else he is, Lauzon is not a liberal humanist displaying “pc” credentials. In a recent *L'Actualité* article about him, Nathalie Petrowski (André's daughter) wrote: “The destabilization of an adversary is a technique he practices with great art. It's the hunter in him...the hunter who gets up at dawn with the firm intention of killing.”

Lauzon didn't blow away Washington at that lunch table in Cannes—the sunny afternoon had put everyone in a mellow mood—but I glimpsed the kind of destabilization skills Nathalie Petrowski was talking about. As the wine waiter refilled glasses, Lauzon spoke fast, staccato and deadpan as he responded to Washington's queasy concern: “I had a puppet cat for a rehearsal and I put it on the table. The kid said, ‘What do you mean? You ask me to fuck a doll? Everybody's gonna laugh at me. Put down the real cat. I can't do it with a puppet.’”

Of course, Lauzon also pointed out that he loves animals, and that when humans get raped or shot in movies, nobody believes it's for real. “We've got to stop banging on the heads of creative people,” he continued. “I think my work as a director, personally, is to be able to show our deepest fears. And right now,

ics raved. *Time*'s Richard Corliss eventually wrote that *Léolo* is, “wildly imaginative...an earthy, surreal, and deeply felt account of a dysfunctional Montreal childhood.” A jury prize seemed certain; the Palme d'Or beckoned.

But the jury, headed by Gérard Depardieu and starring John Boorman, Pedro Almodovar, and Jamie Leigh Curtis, gave Lauzon's movie the cold shoulder. This was a shock to many observers, who immediately began lamenting this year's conservative decisions. *La Monde*'s critic wrote: “Is it not the role, the work of the Cannes jury to lean towards works that are the most unexpected, the most innovative, the most imperfect, the most disturbing?”

A few weeks later, on June 4, *Léolo* had its Quebec premiere in Montreal's Place des Arts. The reviews were mainly favourable, and the picture earned close to \$100,000 during its first week. At the same time, controversies swirled around the film's raunchiest, most provocative images, and some of Lauzon's statements in interviews. Complaining to film critic Luc Perreault that Quebec artists get far less media attention than sports heroes and murderers, he asked the *La Presse* staffer, “Do I have to go down to rue Ste-Catherine with an ax and kill 45 children to get your attention?”

When I spoke to Lauzon a month later, he lashed out at the way reporters take a few hyperbolic wisecracks out of context and then fixate on them, as if he nothing else to say. But he also told me

ily, he would “run away to the shores of Rivière des Prairies and spend time in the bush.” Although, recently he has been flying his Mac II up to the camp and disconnects from his identity as auteur filmmaker (and busy commercial director) when suspended in his plane high above a forest, or hunting knee-deep in a marsh. Up north, he's “a totally different person.”

What's he like in the city, pressured by deadlines and his own urgent, creative impulses? “I can't tell you I'm really happy,” he says, the pitch of his voice rising. “I get in this mood, and it's really fragile. If somebody pulls me out, it takes me a month to get back. The process is too hard. It's hard on the people you live with. It's hard on your friends. It's hard on everybody. I become compulsive and totally obsessed. And I don't like that.”

Like the 12-year-old hero of *Léolo*, Lauzon has been possessed all his life by unsettling dreams and waking visions. When younger, “it got to the point that to live chased by images, and not be able to sleep quietly once in a while, and having this kind of wave coming through you” induced a “serious fear” that he could, like most of the principle characters in his new film, lose his mind.

In lieu of pulling the plug on himself, Lauzon used deep sea diving, bush-piloting, and ultimately filmmaking (beginning with a student effort, and then *PIWI* in 1981) to expurgate the many demons squirming around in his psyche.

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there are creative people who are afraid to talk about the real thing.”

By the next day, the final one of the festival, everyone had forgotten about David Lynch, and a *Léolo* buzz was in the air. Sales looked good, and although the film had its detractors, powerful crit-

his exasperation ceases the moment he climbs into his seaplane (he's logged 1200 hours, “a lot for a private pilot”) and flies up to hunting and fishing camp about 400 miles north of Montreal.

Lauzon's infatuation with nature began when, as a poor kid from a troubled fam-

“When you do a movie,” he says, “the obsessive images disappear—like this image of *Léolo*'s mother teaching her kid to take a shit. I wrote it, I directed it with actors, and now my mind is totally free of it.”

Lauzon's deployment of moviemaking



Jean-Claude Lauzon

UP AT DAWN WITH

as a form of exorcism might be one reason why five years elapsed between *Un Zoo, la nuit* and *Léolo*. Although his first feature led to a contract with the American talent agency, ICM, he passed on all scripts that came his way. At one meeting, a studio exec told him, "I hope

you can survive with that attitude."

"Right now," the 38-year-old moviemaker informed me, "I have a script on my table that Oliver Stone wants to produce. My agent pushed me very, very hard to meet Stone and get involved, but it's not the kind of film I want to do. People believe I'm looking for a project, and I'm not looking for anything. If I have another idea, I will make another film."

Although *Léolo* offers ample proof of

both Lauzon's ambition and his absorption in film technique, he has claimed for years that he's not really a filmmaker and expressed nothing but contempt for the movie business.

Lauzon makes a living by directing commercials and public service spots, many of which have won awards. He likes the speed of advertising shoots, the travel opportunities, and the absence of emotional involvement. At the same time, he acknowledges that commercials generate their own types of problems, and doing them is "getting harder and harder." For the first time Lauzon feels he's beginning to lose his professional cool, that he "should sit down immediately and start working on another film. I didn't have this impression between *Night Zoo* and *Léolo*."

Marcel, the protagonist of *Un Zoo, la nuit*, is a bundle of contradictions wrapped up tightly in a black leather jacket. He's an ex-drug dealer; a musician; a would-be loving son who cokes-up his dying father and gets him to shoot an elephant; a would-be lover whose hooker girl friend reproaches him: "I never know what you want!"

Clearly, at this point in his career, Jean-Claude Lauzon's contradictions have amplified. He's both proud and disdainful of success. He appreciates the artistic freedom Canada has given him, but he's drawn to the bigger budgets and wider range of opportunities in the States, then balks when someone makes him an offer. Lauzon is a blend of bravado and insecurity, a public figure with a lingering desire to fade away into obscurity.

He states his bottom line, fallback position in his comment about some of the bad local press he received after returning from Cannes: "I don't really care. You know what I mean? When I have gas in my airplane, I don't fucking care." **T 1**

MAURIE ALIOFF writes film reviews, articles, screenplays, and is a contributing editor to *Matrix*.