David La Haye and Marie-France Monette in L'ENFANT D'EAU: youthful innocence

by Maurie Alioff

L'ENFANT D'EAU

directed by Robert Ménard; written by Claire Wojas; produced by Roger Frappier and Robert Ménard; with Marie-France Monette, David La Haye, Gilbert Sicotte; production company: Les Productions Vidéofilms and Max Films in association with the National Film Board; distributed by Film Tonic

In marooned-on-desert-island pictures, a genre as *recherché* as sluts-behind-bars flicks, the lead characters are required to be a mismatched duo who follow in the sandy footsteps of Daniel Defoe's prototypical Robinson Crusoe and Friday. The marooned ones cannot simply agree to jump off a cliff in despair, or quietly get on with hut building and fruit gathering. Dramatic fiction articulates an uplifting message about the ability of human beings to rise above their differences.

Another good reason to dump two characters onto a remote island and let them thrash it out, is that the exotic location is a relatively inexpensive, ready-made spectacle–as gorgeous as it is imprisoning. Palm trees sway, glittering turquoise water ebbs and flows in synch with the heroes' emotions.

Over the years, the genre attracted talent like Toshiro Mifune and Lee Marvin as mortal enemies learning about brotherhood in John Boorman's *Hell in the Pacific*; Giancarlo Giannini and Mariangela Melato as a working-class stud and a rich bitch screwing their way through the class barrier in Lina Wertmuller's *Swept Away*; and, of course, Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins discovering fulfilment on the banks of *The Blue Lagoon*.

Recalling *The Blue Lagoon* in that its protagonists are youthful innocents, Robert Ménard's *L'enfant d'eau* offers the oddest couple ever. Cendrine (Marie-France Monette) is a clever and sharp-tongued twelve-year-old, while Emile (David La Haye) is a handicapped young man with a mental age of seven. Total strangers, Cendrine and Emile get marooned on a tiny island in the Bahamas in the aftermath of a plane crash caused by a tropical storm.

Producer-director Ménard (*Cruising Bar*, *T'es belle, Jeanne*) is an unpretentious, mainstream filmmaker who favours intimate character-driven stories, often focusing on two people who bond during a crisis. *L'enfant d'eau*, the public's choice for the best Canadian film at the 1995 Montreal World Film Festival and a respectable money maker in Quebec, is no exception.

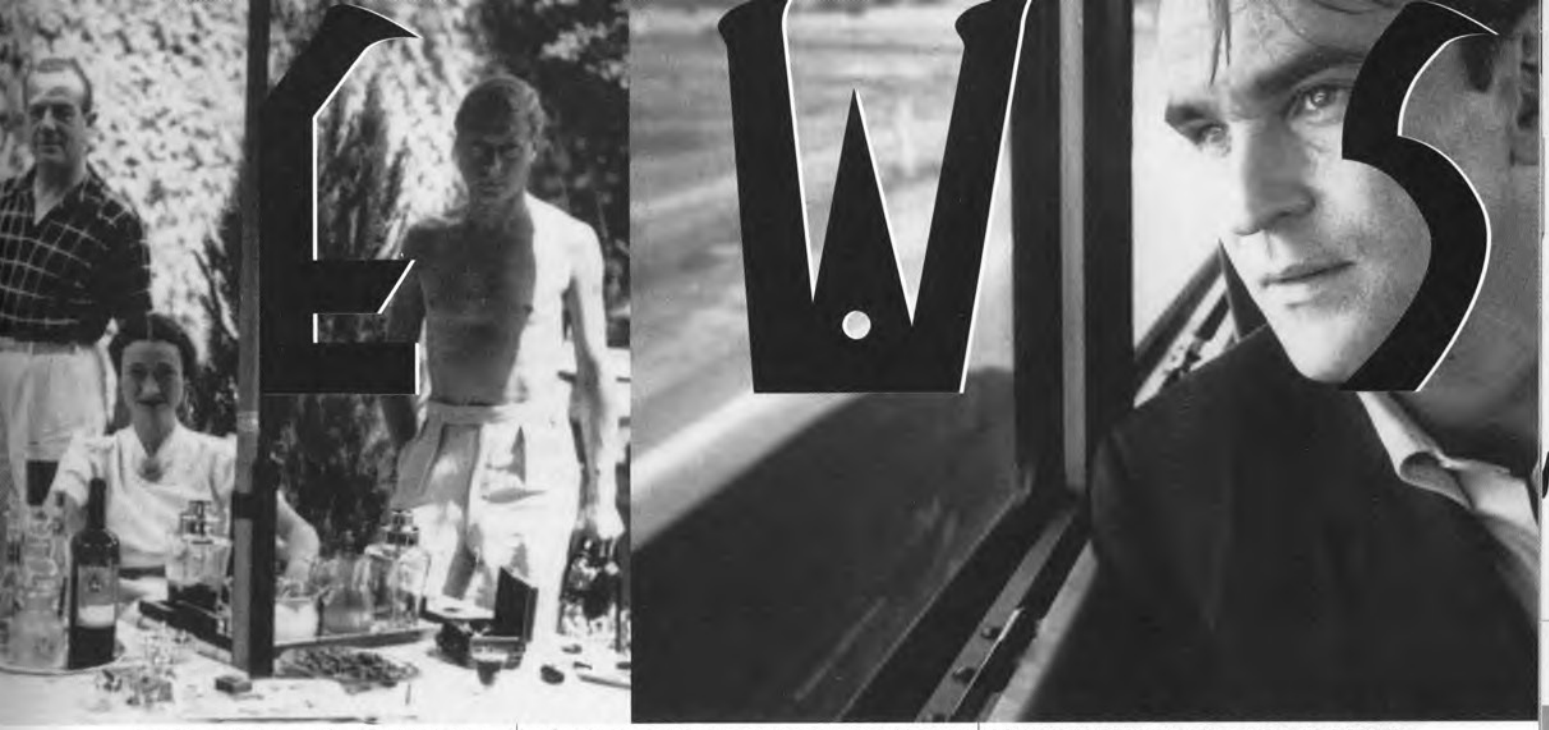
Scripted by Ménard's longtime collaborator, Claire Wojas, the movie's opening deftly cross-cuts between its back story about how Emile came to be adopted and raised by Thomas (Gilbert Sicotte), a teacher of handicapped children, and present-day scenes of Thomas agonizing over his son, lying near death in a Bahamian hospital. We learn about the events that led up to this situation via flashbacks when Thomas finds a diary Cendrine kept on the island.

You'd expect the movie's plane crash sequence to go for the jugular, but it plays mainly on a tightly framed, over-lit life raft occupied by a corpse Cendrine and Emile don't get overly excited about. In fact, the desert island in *L'enfant d'eau* must be the most convivial in the history of this kind of picture. Just above the beach the castaways get washed up on, they find a charming, fully equipped little house (complete with pen and paper for Cendrine's diary), where they have plenty of time to work on their relationship.

In a relaxed manner, punctuated by contemplative shots of windy beach and sea, the story takes you through a series of predictable, often schmaltzy emotional turns. Cendrine's fear and mistrust of a man who lovingly pets deadly snakes is followed by mutual protectiveness between the two, growing affection, and sexual attraction. Over the course of the film, Cendrine has her first period and ripens emotionally. Emile also grows, then a life-threatening accident leads to a neatly packaged, bittersweet finale.

In a scene dramatizing Cendrine's emerging sexuality, the movie sparks onto another level, the level that a director like Truffaut achieved in his films about young people. In one long, real-time take, the castaways play like affectionate pussy cats, a game that turns into an eruption of lust

PHOTOGRAPHS: L'ENFANT D'EAU BY JAN THIJS; THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD



left, Fern Bedaux, Charles E. Bedaux, the Duchess and Duke of Windsor in THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI: the rise and fall of Charles Bedaux, industrial messiah, amateur explorer and arguably one of the most controversial figures of the twentieth century; right, Daniel MacIvor in HOUSE: a journey through the mind of a mentally unstable person

painfully cut off by Emile's confused reaction. Here the characters come vividly, spontaneously to life.

Throughout *L'enfant d'eau*, Marie-France Monette has a firm grip on her character, the type of prematurely bitter young girl who has regularly appeared in Quebec films from *Les bons débarras* to *Le sexe des étoiles*. As the child-like Emile, David La Haye has touching moments, but his precious body language and obvious reddish-blond dye job tend to make him seem like an eco-tourist who got addled by yoga and ganja in Negril. Gilbert Sicotte's performance as the guilt-ridden and anxious Thomas gives the movie an emotional anchor.

Filmed by Michel Caron, *L'enfant d'eau* is postcard pretty. However, Ménard and Wojas have turned out a movie that is sanitized and sentimental. Every scene has more or less the same emphasis. The film quickly flattens out as the plot points click on and off with systematic regularity.

by Karen Tisch

THE CHAMPAGNE SAFARI

directed and produced by George Ungar; written by Steve Lucas, John Kramer and Harold Crooks; production company: Field Seven Films; distributed by the National Film Board of Canada

In June of 1934, a fabulously wealthy Frenchman attempts to cross the uncharted Rocky Mountains with a team of 53 hired Canadian cowboys, seven Citroën half tracks, a film crew led by prominent Hollywood cinematographer Floyd Crosby, and 130 pack horses loaded with such "essential" items as crystal glasses, sterling silverware, caviar and pâté. By September, the failing Citroëns have been tossed over a cliff, the horses have succumbed to hoof rot, and the project is abandoned. Forty years later, Montreal-based animator George Ungar, flipping through a 1956 issue of *Maclean's*, happens upon a small item describing the exhibition, coined "the champagne safari." His first instinct is to produce an animated satire featuring a Mr. Magoo-like character traipsing across the mountains in silk pyjamas. On further exploration, Ungar realizes that he has unearthed a tale of epic proportions.

The Champagne Safari documents the rise and fall of Charles E. Bedaux, industrial messiah, amateur explorer and arguably one of the most colourful and controversial figures in the 20th Century. *Time* magazine once wrote: "if a movie was ever made of Bedaux's life, they would have to tone down the facts to keep it within the realm of believability." Wading through the innumerable theories and controversies that surround Bedaux's enigmatic existence, Ungar spent over a decade distilling a cohesive and compelling story and bringing that story to the screen.

The Champagne Safari is a brilliantly researched and masterfully constructed film. At its core it is a film within a film, containing original safari footage salvaged from a basement of a country home on the outskirts of Paris. Using the expedition as a cinematic thread, Ungar blends contemporary and archival film, interviews, still photography, voice-over and sound to weave a tale of intense victory and searing defeat. Bloated with self-importance, Bedaux fills the screen and his story (in the hands of an expert writing and editorial team) unfolds like a good thriller.

Born in France, Bedaux immigrated to the United States at the age of 19, where he quickly rose to international fame by selling efficiency or "scientific management" systems. The Bedaux System offered industrialists a shop floor "utopia" not unlike "the vast industrial prison" depicted in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Protested by workers, Bedaux's prescriptions gained rapid favour among multi-national corporations such as G.E., Kodak and Dupont. By the early 1930s, he had sold his methods to 600 clients in 18 countries. He had also positioned himself at the centre of Western economic and social life, attracting aristocrats, statesmen and high-powered businessmen to his "playground for the rich," a refurbished château in the Loire Valley, France.

PHOTOGRAPH: HOUSE COURTESY OF THE CANADIAN FILM PROJECT