



# COSMOS

All photos by Jean-François Gratton, courtesy of Max Films

Above: Sarah-Jeanne Salvy in *Cosmos*. In Quebec, Roger Frappier's new *groupe de travail*—Jennifer Alleyn, Manon Briand, Marie-Julie Dallaire, Arto Paragamian, André Turpin and Denis Villeneuve—has become the latest *espoir* of Québécois cinema, the jolt it needs for renewal.



# The World According to Frappier

By Maurie Alioff

Conceived of and produced by Roger Frappier, *Cosmos* is typical of urban anthology pictures dating back to 1964's *Paris vu par...*. In these films, a tasty selection of hot or emerging directors explore a big city through wry short stories touching on themes of estrangement and failed human contact. Directed by six up-and-coming Gen-Xers, Frappier's movie is the second producer-driven urban anthology made in Quebec during the 1990s. Denise Robert's *Montréal vu par...* (1991) links stories directed by a seasoned blend of Quebecers and Torontonians, including Denys Arcand, Léa Pool, Patricia Rozema and Atom Egoyan. *Cosmos* aims for a less homogenized, more rough-hewed quality than its predecessor.



Frappier, centre, with (from left) Paragiamian, Villeneuve, Briand, Turpin, Dallaire and Alleyn.

Filmed on location in black and white, *Cosmos's* \$1-million cost is low even by Quebec standards. Then again, Frappier, despite his record-breaking hits like *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Un Zoo, la nuit*, is one of the most cost-conscious moviemakers working in the industry. His idols, legendary auteur-friendly French producer Pierre Braunberger and Hollywood deity Irving Thalberg, embody a golden mean where artistic excellence and good business sense are not mutually exclusive.

The boyishly good-looking 52-year-old Frappier grew up in the shipbuilding town of Sorel, Quebec, and moved to Montreal in the early 1960s. When I talked to him for this article, he remembered himself as a wide-eyed film buff, attending an average of two screenings a day and knowing in his bones that, "cinema would be my life. But how to get into it, I didn't know. The industry barely existed." Following an aborted sojourn at London's School of Film Technique, Frappier returned to Montreal and worked as an editor. He also wrote movie reviews for *Le Devoir*, directed commercials, picked up a gig assisting Robert Altman on *Nashville*, and flitted in and out of the National Film Board.

In 1984, Frappier was given an opportunity to "become the producer I would have liked to have had as a director." The NFB's French Department asked him to run its Studio C, and he agreed, but only if he were granted certain unheard-of freedoms. Above all, he would not have to deal with the program committees which sometimes could adopt the tenor of Maoist exercises in self-examination and drive filmmakers up the wall. "I wanted to make people understand the producer is responsible," Frappier says. "I told them, 'Judge me by

what you see on the screen.'" Surprisingly, NFB brass agreed to his conditions, and Frappier assembled a group of like-minded writer-directors who were eager to break away from a Québécois tendency to make elegiac period films.

Frappier's elite private unit, which included Denys Arcand, Pierre Falardeau and Léa Pool, met regularly to watch movies and kick around ideas for tough, contemporary stories geared to a sophisticated audience. Eventually, the filmmakers vetted each other's scripts, and as soon as a project was deemed ready, Frappier used the money at his disposal to "trigger the film immediately." The method yielded a number of landmark movies, but the one that turned Frappier into a "made man" whose offer you couldn't refuse was *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*. The unexpected worldwide success of Arcand's satirical fable was enhanced by another hit, Yves Simoneau's slick heist-gone-wrong flick, *Pouvoir Intime*. Although Simoneau was not part of the Studio C collective, Frappier used NFB money to co-produce the film with an outside producer, as he had done for *Le Déclin*. Frappier helped usher in a new era of co-productions between the NFB and the private sector.

He is too discreet and too grateful for the opportunities the Board gave him, to talk about the institution at its worst: bureaucratic obtuseness, rigid ideas about content, and petty, hostile bosses putting a spanner in the works of talented filmmakers. In any case, after what he calls "a kind of backlash," Frappier re-entered private industry to make movies ranging from *Jésus de Montréal* and last year's *Sous-sol* to this year's *Cosmos* and the latest from André Forcier, *La Comtesse de Batou Rouge*. Frappier is now busier than ever, but

at the same time, he worries publicly about the obstacles in the way of a successful feature-film industry. He asks, for instance, how Quebec pictures, with their minuscule budgets and shooting schedules, can compete for attention on the world stage. He also reproaches government funding agencies for endlessly and harmfully fussing over scripts, not to mention wasting resources evaluating "projects they know they will not do."

Above all, Frappier believes that the role of the producer is not given its due. "You know," he laughs, "in the movie business, they seem to believe that the only role that can be played by anybody is the producer. I think there are now a hundred production houses in Montreal, which is way too many." He doesn't understand why theatre director Robert Lepage decided to make *Le Polygraphe* with his own company. "Lepage was playing the game with himself," Frappier scoffs. While Québécois movies routinely do badly in France, the failure of *Le Polygraphe* may have been unprecedented. "In two theatres, there was not one spectator the whole day. I have a lot of respect for Lepage," Frappier continues, "but we have to learn to start with the producer in this country. The moment the institutions have more respect for us, they'll have better films."

Frappier hit on the idea for *Cosmos* during a period when he felt so apprehensive about his profession, he seriously considered throwing in the towel. It was the fall of 1995 and like many industry players, he had the heebie-jeebies over the empty kitty at Telefilm Canada, not to mention Pierre Juneau's potentially disastrous upcoming report on government media funding. During a brief seaside vacation, Frappier flashed on a story about "a day in the life of

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Above: Marie-Hélène Montpetit.  
Below: Montpetit and Pascal Contamine.  
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a taxi driver, and the passengers getting in and out of his cab." Back in Montreal, "I asked my assistant to find me tapes of short films made in Quebec over the past two years. I watched a lot of short films for months." His vague idea for a project merged with an impulse to fish for talent in Quebec's rapidly growing pool of young moviemakers. His plan was to assemble three men and three women, and then replicate the Studio C unit he convened more than a decade ago. If his favourite method worked once, maybe it could work again. Once Frappier had his team together, he pitched *Cosmos* to SODEC, which runs a program for young directors making shorts. "I told them I have six good ones," he laughs, "and they will become a feature." With SODEC in his pocket, it was a breeze for the producer to complete his financing.

Frappier's new *groupe de travail* consisted of Jennifer Alleyn, Manon Briand, Marie-Julie Dallaire, Arto Paragamian, André Turpin and Denis Villeneuve. Before *Cosmos*, they had won awards for shorts and music videos, filmed personalized travelogues and made TV news docs. The highest profile filmmakers in the group are Turpin, whose 1995 feature *Zigrail* gained some attention on the festival circuit, and Paragamian, director of an absurdist comedy called *Because Why*. Denis Villeneuve had made *REW FFWD*, a ganja-crazed short about Jamaican rastas. The team began meeting for script development sessions in December 1995 and Frappier provided them with a couple of rules—two lead characters only, five shooting days—a script consultant and, of course, his own intensive, hands-on involvement. "At the beginning of March," recalls the producer, "we were shooting. We made the movie fast, and in the spirit of the moment. We had no idea that it would be selected for the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, and be so well-received."

Certainly, *Cosmos* is a display of serious filmmaking chops. Fluidly shot by Turpin in an amalgam of styles, the picture brims over with fancy camera angles, ostentatiously long dollys, a trippy soundtrack and generally convincing performances. As in other urban anthologies, the principal characters are mainly young, loopy types who inhabit an inner city that's either sleek and trendy, or picturesquely low rent. In two of the stories, the filmmakers conjure up surreal dream spaces: a hotel that feels more like an insurance company office, a hairdressing salon that's also a music video station.

Thematically, the film's various episodes both draw from and satirize Gen-X angst, MTV-sensibility, serial killer mythology, immigrant alienation, and, of course, neurotic sexual relations. In Denis Villeneuve's contribution, a nervous filmmaker (David La Haye) gets trapped in a Felliniesque delirium of motor-mouthed vee-jays and vacuous trendies chanting mantras like "Hip, fashionable, too much." (Incidentally, this is the only appearance of English in a movie about a city where a huge chunk of the population speaks it.) Villeneuve's filmmaker descends into hell because he can't explain to an interviewer what his new *oeuvre* is all about, other than it has something to do with "fragility and fear." In Manon Briand's sketch, two exceedingly fragile, aging punk rockers (Marie-Hélène Montpetit and Pascal Contamine) are trying to have a good time despite the fact that one of them might be HIV-positive. At the opposite end of the human spectrum, the baby-faced "individual" (Sébastien Joannette) of Marie-Julie Dallaire's piece is a killer spreading fear as he prowls the city. Throughout the vignette, Dallaire toys with slasher-flick clichés that tease you into anticipating head-banging gore which never materializes.

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There's more gamesmanship in André Turpin's Woody Allenish comedy about a death-obsessed intellectual (Alexis Martin) who tries to con a former lover (Marie-France Lambert) into showing him her newly enhanced breasts. They bicker and bargain and as the woman comes close to acquiescing, the audience—like the protagonist—looks forward to an eyeful. The cynicism of the ex-lovers is countered by the principals in Jennifer Alleyn's anecdote about a brief encounter between a winsome young lady (Sarah-Jeanne Salvy) and a soulful old gentleman (Gabriel Gascon), who comes across as a refugee from an ancient French movie directed by a Marcel Carné wannabe. The stories are linked by the recurring appearance of a Greek cabbie (Igor Ovadis) who functions as a kind of protective guide for the characters, and then takes centre stage himself. In the finale, the driver (Cosmos, like the movie's title) gets into a debate with a black friend (Mark Jeanty) who believes that all human misery was caused by the invention of agriculture. While the two men engage in their ridiculous argument, Cosmos's taxi is stolen by two bank robbers. Arto Paragamian approaches the episode in a deadpan style reminiscent of Jim Jarmusch and Aki Kaurismäki. "Nothing means anything," we hear a character say before the fade-out "Agriculture is as good a theory as any."

Although Frappier originally intended to line up the film's tales one at a time in the manner of *New York Stories* or *Night on Earth*, a decision was made at the editing stage to intercut them. "We had the impression," says the producer, "the film was too divided. Some sketches were working well, others were not. Once we decided to try to mix the stories, the movie worked beautifully." The crosscutting, which does not extend into the last two episodes, masks the fact *Cosmos* is ultimately a cluster of vignettes, some very thin, that

don't all gel into fully realized dramatic situations.

Whatever the film's strengths and weaknesses, *Cosmos* marks a turning point in the career of an ambitious and adventurous producer. The picture has given new drive to Frappier and his company, Max Films. Buoyed by the International Confederation of Art Cinema Award the movie won at Cannes, Frappier has expanded the *Cosmos* venture into a full-fledged slate of features for the coming year. One of the anthology's directors, Denis Villeneuve, is already in production; Alleyn, Briand, Paragamian, and a new arrival to the group, Jean-Philippe Duval, are developing scripts that Max Films hopes to shoot in the near future. André Turpin will be on board as D.O.P. for at least two of the pictures. In a document outlining the scheme, Frappier argues that Quebec's moribund film industry needs new blood, and the only way to get it is to create learning opportunities for promising filmmakers like the ones he has assembled. In Quebec, Frappier's new *groupe de travail* has become the latest *espoir* of Quebec cinema, the jolt it needs for renewal.

In addition to its feature-film projects, Max Films will be opening a documentary section in the near future, and it has a couple of TV miniseries in the works—one of them is the story of a Canadian woman who contracts AIDS in Africa. Thirty years after he made his initial forays into the industry, Frappier still defines his profession as an exploration into "corners of reality where normally you would not go. It's a constant voyage, the best way to travel. You're always active in the reality that surrounds you." ■

**Gabriel Gascon and Sarah-Jeanne Salvy. Whatever the film's strengths and weaknesses, *Cosmos* marks a turning point in the career of an ambitious and adventurous producer.**