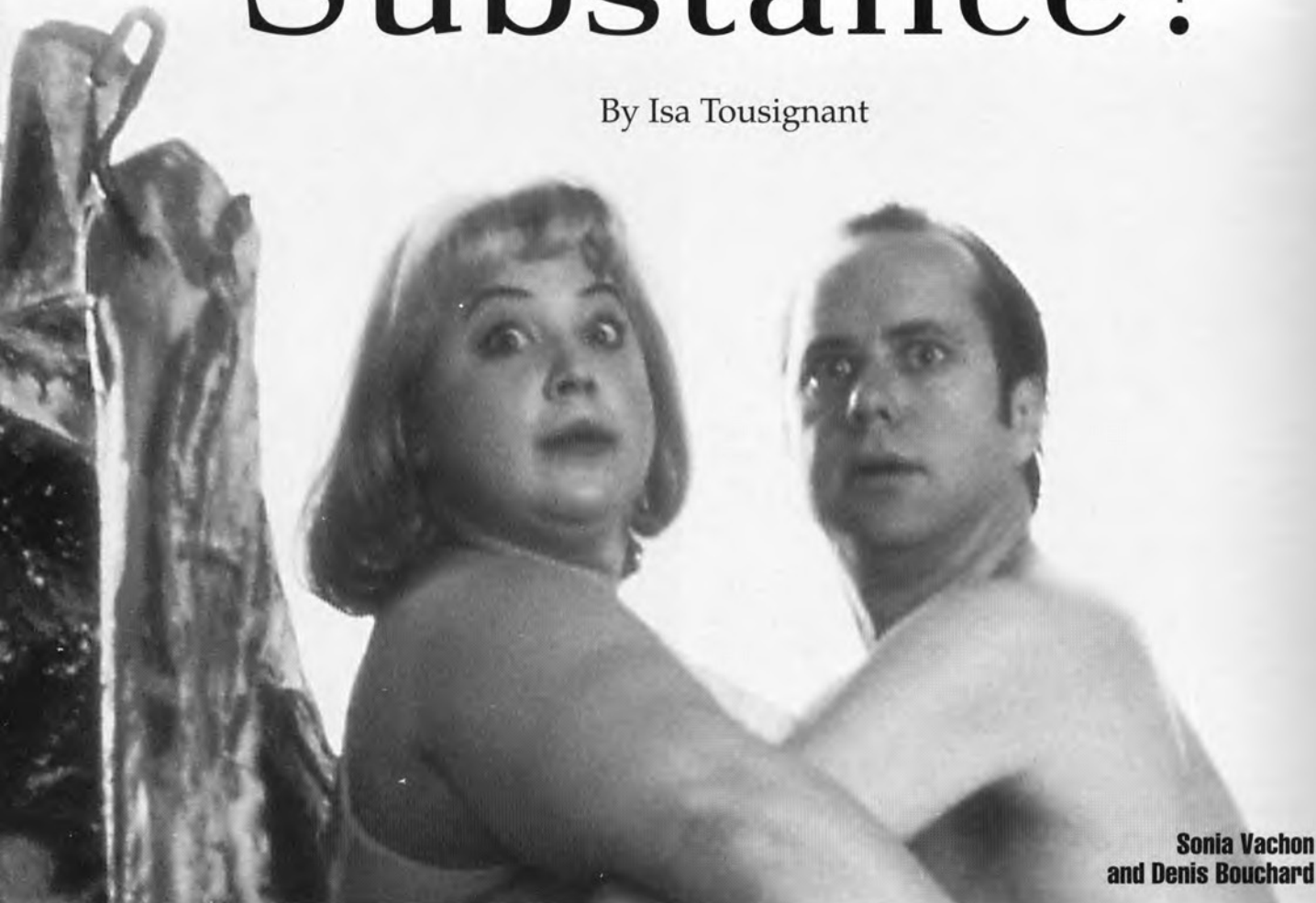


Denise Filiatrault's

C't'à ton tour, Laura Cadieux

A WOMAN OF Substance?

By Isa Tousignant



**Sonia Vachon
and Denis Bouchard**

C'est pas seulement à Montréal ou à Toronto, même en Europe vous rencontrez ces madames-là...elles sont internationales. —**Denise Filiatrault**

"*Un instant, s'il vous plaît! J'arrive,*" yelled the man who had just sold us our tickets, as he made his way to the candy counter where we now stood. Now, this was a small cinema. It's funny how you can completely forget the existence of entire neighbourhoods in your native city, if you haven't wandered that way for a while. I hadn't been in almost exclusively French-speaking Rosemont since my high school boyfriend lived there. Boy, had I found it suffocating. It's an area of Montreal that even today seems to remain untouched by the famous multicultural energy that hums through the rest of the city. It reminds me of a 1970s Plateau Mont-Royal, complete with grubby kids squealing in the streets, elaborate Christmas decorations that remain gaudy and flashing until mid-May, and buxom housewives loudly

chatting on balconies and eying passersby with suspicious interest. Exactly the kind of area Michel Tremblay, Denise Filiatrault, Ginette Reno—and I—grew up in.

So here we were, two of the seven people occupying the 25-seat cinema, stale popcorn in hand, neurons poised and ready to absorb pure, unabashed Québécois culture. *C't'à ton tour, Laura Cadieux*, marketed as the Québécois feel-good movie of the year, lives up to its reputation; its pastiche of humour and melodrama is charming and lighthearted, offering plenty of laughs and, at times, moments of unthreatening reflection. The characters are rich, with big and boisterous personalities; the settings give us a nice tour of Montreal at its most endearing; and the cultural references are sometimes almost



Left to right: Denise Dubois, Ginette Reno, Donald Pilon, Adèle Reinhardt and Mireille Thibault

uncomfortably perceptive. Best of all, *C'tà ton tour*, *Laura Cadieux* provides a refreshing voice for a segment of society that rarely gets to speak: women. Fat women.

The film, set in the present, stars Ginette Reno, Québécoise diva extraordinaire, as the infamous Laura. Directed by actress, writer, producer, singer and Genie-winner, Denise Filiatrault, it is based on a 1971 novel by the patron saint of 20th-century French-Canadian literature, theatre and cinema—Michel Tremblay. Tremblay (author of *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte*, *Demain matin*, *Montréal m'attend* and *A toi pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou*) is renowned for his eloquent exposés of life in the province of Quebec—more specifically Montreal, and more specifically still, east-end Montreal's back-lane culture. Denise Filiatrault is famous for her ongoing involvement (for over 45 years now) in many aspects of Quebec's arts scene, but principally for her acting in hits like the hyperpopular and hilariously funny 1960s TV sitcom *Moi et l'autre* and Gilles Carle's hugely successful 1981 large-screen adaptation of Roger Lemain's *Les Plouffe*. Both Filiatrault and Tremblay are immutable icons of Quebec culture, and though certainly not unheard of in the rest of Canada and in France, their fame could be termed somewhat site-specific. However, my glorious impression—as I exited the cinema that chilly evening and found myself miles from home with not a bus in sight—that I had been privy to a delightfully nostalgic glimpse of traditional Quebec values, would prove to be wrong. According to Filiatrault anyway, I was very wrong.

One of the first things Denise Filiatrault did when I spoke to her was to set me straight. "I chose the subject," she stressed, "because it is, above all, contemporary and international." Her argument was this: "Today, more women than ever are preoccupied with their weight and are continually on and off diets." The weight issue she explores has nothing to do with the widespread, quasi-anorexic teenager phenomenon, though. Filiatrault's characters are in another category altogether. She calls them "*des BS*"—a reflection of their dependence on *bien-être social*, or welfare. These are the poor, uneducated women who flock to bingo halls and casinos and hang out together in huge (in more ways than one) gangs. Filiatrault assured me that there are women like this everywhere: "It's not only in Montreal or Toronto, even in Europe you meet ladies like them...they're international."

I concede poverty, ignorance and sisterly friendship are worldwide realities. But it is with the film's pesky sub texts that the issue becomes complicated. Barely concealed under the film's main theme of obesity lie undercurrents of adultery, gambling, wife-beating and abounding prejudice against Jews, Arabs, gays, intellectual snobs and policemen. Quebec has always had its hang-ups. I remember the feel of Montreal when I was growing up; even in the mid-1980s, the Plateau was like some parts of Rosemont are today. Remarks would be made every time a lesbian couple was seen holding hands, I used to think twice before speaking English in shops, and taxi drivers would laugh when you told them you were going to Outremont: "*Ah! Vous allez-chez les Juifs!*" But today, the Plateau has been taken over by hipsters. "Peeceeness" (and a much higher level of general education) have worked their way through the intricacies of the city's darkest impulses. Separatism is becoming—dare I say it?—*dépassé*. Here, as in so many other places, multiculturalism is the face of the future. Where does "*Laura Cadieux*" fit in? And if she doesn't fit in to contemporary Montreal, what of universality?

I asked Filiatrault whether she had struggled with the issue of temporal recontextualization. "Not at all, not at all," she answered, dragging us back to the main theme of weight, which I had been edging away from. In the director's mind, Laura is an unhappy person because she is fat. And because she is unhappy, she dislikes herself and everyone else. It's as simple as that. For some people, obesity breeds unhappiness, and unhappiness breeds bigotry; how, when or where this trait reveals itself is neither here nor there. Filiatrault's perspective is not geographic, or even sociological; it's psychological. What she is attempting in her film, she assures me, is to paint a picture of psychological diversity. Unlike Tremblay, she is making no statement about Quebec culture or 20th-century ideologies. She is simply making a film. The juicy results of my gleeful in-depth analysis were thus brushed off the table by Filiatrault with a simple flick of the hand. She told me my focus was misguided. The racism and intolerance of some of Tremblay's characters were only reproduced in her film if they promised to be entertaining and add an interesting flavour to the plot. "Tremblay had reservations about me including some of the spicier passages. You know, he wrote the novel in 1971, and there are things about Jews in particular that he thought would be seen in a



Samuel Landry and Ginette Reno, Québec's diva extraordinaire as Laura.

different light today. But I thought they were so funny...." And it's true, *C'tà ton tour, Laura Cadieux* is funny. I slowly came to understand, as I spoke with Filiatrault and conducted a simultaneous inner dialogue with my bewildered, over-sensitive critical self, that she has transformed the work into something all her own. She has rid herself of the straitjackets of judgment, explanation and justification. She just tells a story, freely, and her characters just are, incorporating the good, the bad and everything in between.

In 1997, Filiatrault decided to create the screenplay of a book she had long loved. At the same time, she wanted to tackle a subject that prevails in female culture everywhere, and provide a showcase for some of Quebec's underexposed talent. "This is a film that portrays women in their 40s and 50s. There are practically no roles created for women in today's cinema. Roles are written for men or for girls." Based on her chosen source, she created a range of very diverse and well-rounded characters, most of whom were drawn from Tremblay's pages, but some of whom she spawned herself. The decision to set the film in contemporary Montreal was based on economics, she told me: recreating a whole era is much too expensive a venture. The decisions to explore Montreal's casino culture and to dwell at such length on Madame Therrien's wild goose chase around the city's metro system were based on a desire to aerate the film, to take it outside the doctor's waiting room where the book is set. The introduction of new characters—the lascivious butcher and his morally sensitive assistant, for example—served to create action, enliven the plot, and, in the case of the butcher, to illustrate that sexual promiscuity is not the exclusive province of the slim. And the substitution of Arabs for the novel's Greek characters was based on the idea that "this was in 1997, and Greek people, well, we can't even say they're foreigners

anymore. And Arabs, they're so noticeable with their veils, and all...it was a more contemporary choice." Denise Filiatrault had her audience in mind all through the making of this movie, and her main—her only?—goal was to provide them with a stimulating experience. Okay, now I get it.

Without sidestepping the serious aspects of embonpoint (frustratingly frequent bathroom trips, conspicuous perspiring, a horror of all reflecting surfaces), *C'tà ton tour, Laura Cadieux* succeeds in showing us just how much fun chunky chicks can have. Friendship is a key element here; it's the tie that binds these women together. But it doesn't keep them from sleeping with one another's husbands (in a meat fridge, no less), nor does it rule out discord. These are people like anyone else, and this, I think, is Filiatrault's main message. "Fat" is a label that describes people who are happy, libidinous, angry, expansive, funny, depressive, compulsive and bad-tempered. And though continually discriminated against, fat people can—and do—give as good as they get. They are not victims (necessarily). They are not to be pitied, except, perhaps, for what they share with the rest of us—their incurable humanity.

My take had been wrong, overcomplicated, oversensitive and overanalytic. My attempt to see more depth, more substance in the film had been thwarted by none other than its creator. It struck me as an unusual situation. But it definitely made things much easier. *C'tà ton tour, Laura Cadieux* was designed to be a catchy movie; an audience-conscious, entertainment-oriented, easy-to-swallow movie. It is the year's ultimate feel-good film experience. It is funny, and the characters are charming, and Ginette Reno is a delight to watch on screen. And it's not a film about intolerance, ignorance and xenophobia. It's a celebration of obesity, womanhood and friendship. I stand corrected. •