



“ I will always be interested in characters who are in movement, trying to find a place. [I’m] fascinated by people who have no frontiers—a dangerous, vertiginous state ”

Léa Pool

NO FRONTIERS

B y M a u r i e A l i o f f



Léa Pool

By chance, I'm writing about Léa Pool and the Quebec moviemaker's flashback to the 1960s, *Emporte-moi* (*Set Me Free*), during a week haunted by sharply converging echoes of that era. When John F. Kennedy Jr. crashed into the sea just before the 30th anniversaries of the Apollo 11 landing and Woodstock blasting off, images of John-John flowed into a media stream of consciousness that was already obsessing on Stanley Kubrick (whose early movies revealed the shadows behind Camelot).

The focus on Kubrick was occasioned by the release of his last picture, the sex-and-death extravaganza, *Eyes Wide Shut*. Apart from its content, *EWS* draws attention to the unlikelihood that 21st-century commercial moviemaking will accommodate radically 1960s- and 1970s-type individualism like Kubrick's, or the kind of trance picture his eerily premonitory farewell to the world has turned out to be.

In the dawning era, controlled by brand-name franchises, cutie-pie mini-stars and hot Web sites, Quebec cinema is undergoing its own distinct transformation, one ripe with contradictions. Last winter, producer Roger Frappier yanked his releases out of the Genie pool and admonished "English" Canadians for ignoring Quebec films; however, like numerous other French-Canadian moviemakers, he decided to shoot potentially exportable English-language features. The new Quebec film award might be named the Jutra, for the revered late director, but the current movie scene is really defined by crowd-pleasers like Louis Saia (*Les Boys I and II*) and Christian Duguay (TV's *Joan of Arc*), rather than burgeoning *artistes*. And hunky Roy Dupuis, who barely works in the province anymore, told an interviewer he'd like to shoot an auteur film just to prove they still exist. It might be symbolic that Pierre Perrault, the most staunchly purist of all Québécois filmmakers, recently passed on.

In this context, Léa Pool, one of Quebec's last widely recognized arthouse directors, has made a new film that is not only her most personal work to date, but also comes across as a salute to the 1960s heyday of auterism, especially the French *Nouvelle Vague*. Based on the writer/director's early adolescence in Switzerland and set in 1963, *Emporte-moi* is an inventory of New Wave tendencies. The movie displays a plot-light structure, abrupt mood swings, frisky non sequiturs and, above all, a restless young protagonist brought to life by a first-time performer.

During a long conversation in the Montreal offices of the movie's Canadian producer, Cité-Amérique, Pool told me that before the shoot, she and French DOP Jeanne Lapoirie watched a full slate of 1960s films, including everything directed by Truffaut and Godard. Reviewing all those movies, she must have confirmed to herself that for the make-or-break role of Hanna, the story's vulnerable and yet pugnacious heroine, she needed an actress who would be as vivid as Jean-Pierre Léaud in *The 400 Blows*. And in fact, one of the reasons to see *Emporte-moi* is its raw, unaffected performance by Karine Vanasse.



Karine Vanasse and Miki Manojlovic

When I spoke to Pool, she was still amazed by the well-adjusted Vanasse's ability to imagine herself in the skin of a troubled girl from a dysfunctional family. "She's from a completely different milieu. She loves her mother, she loves her father. Everybody loves each other. They have a big house, and she has no problems. I don't know where Karine took this experience from. You cannot play it; it must come from somewhere. You have to be in contact with something very personal."

Emporte-Moi opens on typically Léa Pool dream images of 13-year-old Hanna floating underwater. (The shots recall similar ones in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*, as do stylized details of the Mile End *quartier* of Montreal.) Back on the ground, the kid discovers her first menstrual blood, and is told by her grandmother (Monique Mercure), "That's what a woman is," a definition of self Hanna finds limiting. The rest of the movie tracks her quest for a more authentic notion of who she is.

In rapid strokes, Pool sets up the character of a melancholy, and yet high-spirited girl who has a lively relationship with her brother (Alexandre Mélineau) and a tormented one with her unhappy mother and father (Pascale Bussi eres and Miki Manojlovic). Mom is a French-Canadian Catholic, exhausted by her Jewish husband's bitter disappointment with his life as an alienated immigrant and thwarted artist. After long days in a fur coat manufacturing factory, she types his poetry as he recites it to her in an oppressive monotone. In the role, Bussi ere succeeds in stepping away from the gamines she often plays, while Manojlovic (the happily corrupt black marketeer of Emir Kusturica's *Underground*), comes through like many of Pool's morose and opaque male characters.

Maybe Hanna's father would have felt less angry if he had sampled Montreal's famous smoked meat, or picked up a

dozen bagels. But as written, directed and played with exclusively European inflections, the character appears to be the only Montreal Jew in 1963 who never heard of Schwartz's Delicatessen, even though it's in the neighbourhood where he lived. Then again, in films ranging from the breakthrough *La Femme de l'h otel* (1984) to *La Demoiselle sauvage* (1991) and *Mouvements du d esir* (1994), Pool's characters never do things like munch on a lean pastrami on rye with fries, or watch TV. They don't even seem to own televisions, although in her experimental student film, *Strass Caf e*, the main character keeps one around as a conceptual art piece.

Eric von Stroheim created a fantasy of Vienna in Hollywood. L ea Pool's Montreal, a city that she sees as both "ugly and completely seductive," often cutting away to atmospheric montages of it, rarely exhibits North American reference points. We're in a realm far closer to Zurich than New York. Pool told me that her three-year-old adopted daughter, Julia, once came home from daycare and asked her what a McDonald's was. "It's not that I don't want to take her to one, but it's not part of my consciousness. What doesn't penetrate my senses is not in my life. It isn't there." According to the director, *Emporte-Moi* closely paraphrases and geographically transposes situations she remembers from growing up in Lausanne and Geneva. The poverty, the unmarried parents, the ominous tensions, the father who "said he was a writer, but in fact, wrote nothing."

In one of the picture's more striking passages, Hanna is asked by a teacher to name her religion, and refusing to be intimidated, she responds matter-of-factly that she doesn't have one. "This was a very autobiographical sequence," Pool explained. "I didn't know what to say. I was not really Jewish because my mother was Catholic. And I was not Catholic because my father was Jewish." Even today, Pool resists being categorized. Although she's made several trips to Israel, where her father now lives, her Jewish roots are "a part of what I am, but not more."

The action in *Emporte-moi* reaches a juncture when Hanna's father insists on having her hair cut boyishly short, and by chance, she sees Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie*. Of all *Emporte-moi*'s New Wave allusions and flourishes, this is the one that resonates throughout the movie. Hanna gets unsettled and inspired by Godard's protagonist Nana, who is also on a tormented quest for liberation. And in the same way that Nana identifies with Falconetti, the actress who played Joan of Arc in Carl Dreyer's version of that teenage story, Hanna bonds with the screen image of Godard's one-time wife, muse and favourite actress, Anna Karina.

"I am amazed at how Jean-Luc Godard filmed this woman," Pool said. "You can feel that he loved her. I never saw this in any other of the films that I have seen." Hanna's infatuation with the dark-eyed, wistfully smiling Karina, who incidentally turns 58 this fall, is expressed by frequent *Mon Oncle d'Am erique*-style cutaways to *Vivre sa vie* and Nanaisms like "I forgot that I am responsible, but I am. And life is life." (Godard, whom Pool has met, demanded very little payment for the rights to the footage.) Under the spell of her idol, Hanna dances with moves that echo Karina's famous pool



Vanasse with Pascale Bussi eres: One of the reasons to see *Emporte-moi* is its raw, unaffected performance by Karine Vanasse.

hall jukebox choreography, the same playfully seductive moves imitated by Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. Near the end of the film, she tries and fails to imitate the Godard character's insouciant approach to prostitution.

Along the way to that climactic, wilfully self-destructive moment, Hanna develops crushes on two other females. (As Pool observes, there are very often configurations of three in her films.) One of the objects of fascination is a worldly, wise, cigarette-smoking teacher who suggests both Jeanne Moreau and Simone Signoret in the early 1960s, and is played by Nancy Huston, the Albertan writer who lives in Paris, works in French and collaborated on Pool's script. The other female is an eagerly lascivious schoolgirl Hanna meets at a teen party where kids slow dance and play spin-the-bottle. In a particularly lyrical sequence held together by dreamy dissolves, Hanna and Laura (Charlotte Christeler) spot each other across a crowded room and find themselves kissing in an alley.

In *La Femme de l'h tel*, *Anne Trister* (1986) and *A Corps perdu* (1988), Pool also touches on same-sex relationships. But she has a tendency to tease the viewer with situations and images of fetching unclad beauties while leaving the lovers' stories undeveloped. Although *Emporte-moi* was eagerly anticipated at last June's Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in San Francisco, and Pool's work is hot on underground video circuits, she doesn't want to be pigeon-holed as a lesbian filmmaker anymore than she wants to be defined as Catholic or Jewish. "It's more about the emotions, the feelings, what's going on inside yourself," Pool insisted, "than the expression of homosexuality. My films deal more with the question of identity than sexuality."

On top of that, L ea Pool is bored by the mundane, daily reality that ensnares lovers after the first rush of mutual attraction. "I'm more interested," she said, "in the process of falling in love, or being attracted to someone, than the result

of it, which is not the subject of creation for me." In Pool's movies, her people endlessly pace, walk and run as they search for fulfillment that either eludes them, or offers only momentary satisfaction. "I will always be interested in characters who are in movement, trying to find a place," she predicted. "This is my story. My father is Polish, my mother is Italian/Swiss, I'm living in Montreal with a Chinese daughter." In real life and on celluloid, Pool is fascinated by people who "have no frontiers—a dangerous, vertiginous state." Nevertheless, at the end of *Emporte-moi*, Hanna is given an old Bolex, and the film implies that the camera, and the images she will create with it, offer her at least some kind of equilibrium as she continues her dizzying journey.

Since L ea Pool immigrated to Canada in the 1970s, studied communications and pulled together the resources to make her first films, she has also relied on moviemaking to hold her world together. After *La Femme de l'h tel*, she decided she would commit herself to doing only personal work, even though she was broke at the time. "It was a big decision, but I didn't want to do commercials or TV. I decided I would work only in the films I wanted to make." These days, Pool has augmented her income by filming documentaries for TV, notably a prize winner about the writer Gabrielle Roy, with whom she strongly identifies. As for the career of *Emporte-moi*, the picture won a special ecumenical prize at the Berlin Film Festival, opened the Cannes' Forum, a networking event, got invited to several other fests, ran 18 weeks in Montreal, did well in Switzerland and sold to 15 countries.

At this point in her life, L ea Pool recalls of her past: "I could feel what I would like to be, and I could feel what people thought I was, but the two didn't match. It took a long, long time to put them together, and now I'm much closer to joining what people can see from the outside and the way I envision myself." ●