



Dr. Lucille

LARGER THAN LIFE

By Maurie Alioff

Lucille Teasdale, like many other bright young women growing up in Montreal during the 1950s, defied the strictures of a society run by a harshly oppressive church and a despotic government. She was an east-end girl who hung out in clubs, got intimate with men and read forbidden books. But Teasdale's rebellion went much further than a little Saturday night taboo-breaking. She was a rebel with a sense of purpose, a burning need to dignify the lives of the poor and vulnerable. Teasdale identified with the underclass so acutely that when she left her slum neighbourhood to study medicine she feared her identity might slip away; however, then she reaffirmed herself as "classless and unclassifiable."

Marina Orsini as
Lucille Teasdale in *Dr. Lucille*,
written by Rob Forsyth and
directed by George Mihalka.



ITAL LACOR

Dr. Lucille

Teasdale loved doctoring to the point that she thought it was a privilege, but she was frustrated that the medical establishment, in an era when women doctors were rare, blocked her goal of practising surgery. Her life changed radically when she met an Italian pediatrician, Piero Corti. A sports-car driving rich kid, Corti was also a humanitarian activist who dreamt of establishing a medical facility in rural Africa and turning it into a sophisticated hospital. "Why not join me," Piero asked Lucille, "and be a surgeon where no one will hold your gender against you?" After her initial resistance, Teasdale decided to give his offer a try. It didn't take long for her to fall in love with Corti, his cause and Africa.

When Piero chose Uganda to carry out his mission, it was a fertile, prosperous nation that Winston Churchill had called a "pearl." But Uganda's earthly paradise went straight to hell. To their horror, Teasdale and Corti watched it degenerate into a dirt-poor, civil-war-scarred country whose notorious leader, Idi Amin, engaged in genocidal persecution of designated ethnic groups. One of them was the Acholi, a tribe that populates the northern Gulu region where the couple struggled for years to build their hospital. To this day, the province of Gulu is a killing zone. "You make out your will when you go there," a Ugandan told me recently.

Despite the horrors rampaging around them, Lucille and Piero transformed a clinic run by missionaries into St. Mary's, a 500-bed facility generally considered one of the best medical centres in Africa; one that trained Ugandans to run the place themselves. Even Idi Amin was impressed. During a nerve-racking tour of the hospital, he wished that his army could be as efficiently managed.

Apart from its skillful handling of standard health problems, St. Mary's has functioned as a war hospital, treating the victims of bullets and land mines. There were times when Teasdale's surgery timetable was all amputations, one after the other, for hours on end. On top of that, the hospital was (and is) a refugee camp for people fleeing bloodthirsty marauders like the Lord's Resistance Army, a Christian sect run by an ex-faith healer. Every night, 10,000 to 12,000 Ugandans hide out in the sanctuary, hoping to evade not only death but kidnappings that end in sexual slavery.

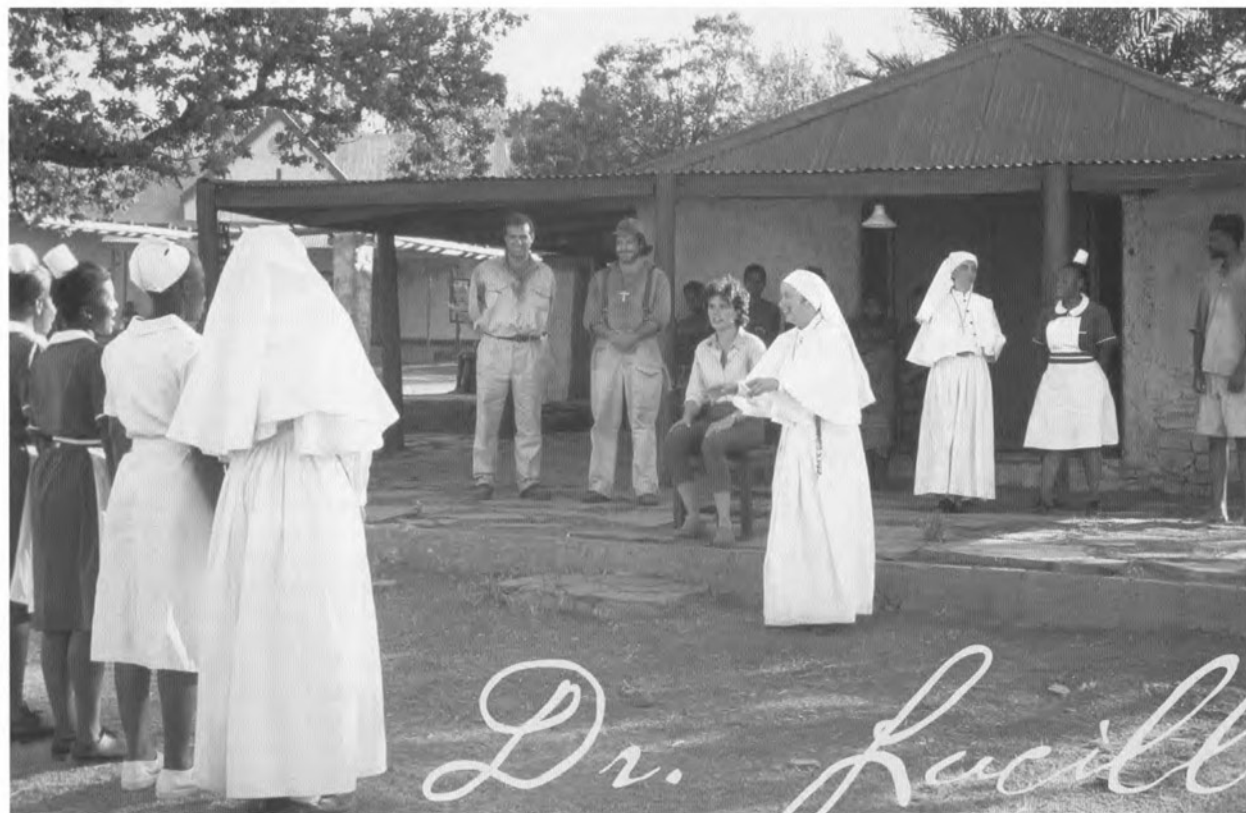
In the late 1970s, Teasdale's life took yet another drastic turn when she contracted HIV, probably after she cut herself on a patient's bones during an operation. A few years later, she became one of the first in the world to be diagnosed with AIDS and was told she had two years to live. But Teasdale ignored the prognosis and plowed ahead until her death in

1996. Weighing not much more than 70 pounds, she insisted "If I stop, I'll die."

Naturally, most Canadians have never heard of the woman. Even in Quebec, where this French-speaking Québécoise is better known, medical authorities once balked at treating her because she didn't have a health card. The situation is about to change, however, largely because of one woman's conviction that Lucille and Piero's story was too important to ignore. Francine Allaire is a Montreal filmmaker whose varied roles in the industry have ranged from starting up a distribution company with her husband, Jan Rofekamp, to her current position as a producer and development executive with Motion International, one of the country's biggest and most varied production operations. In 1994, she found her dream project when viewing a couple of TV newsmagazine segments about the doctor. "I just fell in love with this woman," says Allaire with her typical enthusiasm. "She was larger than life."

After meeting Teasdale and developing an instant rapport with her, Allaire approached producer Roger Frappier who wanted to make a four-hour mini-series in French. But packaging the series proved daunting and Frappier let his option on the material die. Once Motion International picked up the rights, André Picard, the firm's head of Canadian drama, unequivocally backed the venture because of his belief in its inherent merit and his faith in Allaire as a producer. At Motion, the project transmuted from a four-hour series in French to a MOW that would be one of the company's first in the English language. The switch was, of course, motivated by concerns about budgeting such an elaborate production and the limited marketability of French-language shows; moreover, the film would be more potent as a fundraiser for the hospital's foundation if it were in English.

Initially, Allaire was apprehensive about cutting material. She knew almost everything about Lucille's story and found it all mesmerizing. But, says Picard, "We wanted to have the means, the financial and production resources, to tell this story in its context—Africa—and in the environment of civil war and strife. You can't do that on a budget of \$800,000 or \$900,000 per hour." The budget for the 92-minute *Dr. Lucille* came in at \$4.6 million, probably one of the highest ever for a Canadian television film. A coproduction with South Africa's Ballistic Pictures, the movie was financed partly through pre-sales to CTV, Quebec's TVA network and the Italian RAI Uno. Picard believes that the decision to go with a television one-off turned out to be a viable creative choice, as well as making good financial sense. Compression allowed Motion's team "to focus on what was most evocative and eloquent."



The core team that guided the movie to completion in a surprisingly brief time frame of a year and a half (given a complicated African shoot), consisted of Allaire and Picard as executive producers with veteran filmmaker Claude Bonin producing and George Mihalka directing. The latter is responsible for several theatrical and TV hits, including *La Florida*, the sharp little comedy that took 1993's Golden Reel Award for the most profitable Canadian film.

Early in the development process, Allaire took writer Barbara Samuels' advice and brought in highly regarded Rob Forsyth (*Clearcut, Conquest*) to write the script. Serendipitously, Forsyth was about to take an ultimately inspiring trip to Africa when Allaire contacted him. Tragically, Forsyth discovered he had cancer while he was on the project and he died just before *Dr. Lucille* went into production.

After reading a biography by Michel Arsenault which was important source material for the film, George Mihalka felt inspired by Lucille and Piero but depressed by all the "hardship and desperation" in their story. "Then I read Rob's script," says the director, "and what I found was this incredible visual poetry which all of a sudden made the life that this woman lived so uplifting. With Rob's script, I was looking at the picture from the right end of the telescope. It was a movie about generosity of spirit, about dignity, about the nobility of the human animal. And the tribulations that God sent their

way became nothing but slight obstacles that one with great human spirit could surpass."

Forsyth's adept teleplay juggles this tale of struggle and adventure with a love story, Lucille's dramatic conflicts with herself, her painful separation from her daughter, Dominique, and the brutal history of modern Uganda. Neither cluttered nor frenetic, the script does a lot of linking and abridging to suggest the flow of events over a period of 30 years. Innumerable life-threatening moments are distilled into a couple of sequences. Taking a cue from Forsyth's work, and perhaps his views on fact-based drama [Ed's note: see following interview with Forsyth], the moviemakers aimed at what they call "emotional truth," rather than finicky verisimilitude. At the same time, while shooting in South Africa (Uganda would have been much too dangerous), they recreated Acholi culture and details of the hospital compound that impressed Piero Corti himself. "*Dr. Lucille* was not meant to be an attempt at strict docudrama," Mihalka emphasizes. And Piero, with whom the team always double-checked details, had no trouble grasping "the difference between documentary reality and dramatization."

To prep for the filming, Mihalka looked at *Gorillas in the Mist*

and some other pictures set in Africa. Then one day he stood on the savanna, "knowing full well that the same grassland that I was on stretches another 4,000 miles through the heartland of Africa. I said, 'I think I'll figure out where to put the camera.'" Not long after, Mihalka took his lead actors for a bus ride and a talk. "I watched the marvel on their faces as we went deeper and deeper into the true preserved wilderness," an uncommercialized, untouristed stretch of savanna, where "the power of nature manifests itself in a tangible fashion." If he could get what he saw, "we didn't need any more research. I didn't think we needed to do too many other illustrations."

Shooting 29 days in South Africa had a powerful impact on the people who created the film. The moviemakers stayed in Centurian, an anonymous "Pleasantville" of a suburb about an hour's drive and a millennium away from their principal locations: the wild-life preserve and an abandoned 19th-century hospital that housed a leprosy ward. Once out on the savanna, remembers Allaire, "There's a connection with the earth that brings you back thousands of years. It's very unconscious." Adds Mihalka, "I'm positive that there are certain 10 square inches of ground where we laid our feet where no human being has ever stood. On boulders, you'll see intact teeth and bones sticking out of the rock."

"It's slightly disorienting, in the sense you feel the pressure and the atmosphere of primordial Mother Africa. And yet you're dealing with high-tech equipment and someone's bitching that breakfast is not warm. You're trying to explain things in English through a translator to an Italian who speaks French better than he speaks English. It would be almost simultaneous translation between French and English, and then into Zulu and Soga. And on top of it, teaching Zulus and Sozas how to say these things in Acholi."

In its cast, *Dr. Lucille* features Quebec star Marina Orsini (Lucille), Italian leading man Massimo Ghini (Piero) and America's Lou Gossett Jr., who's character, David Mulera, is a fictional amalgam of various politically involved Ugandans the Cortis knew. Orsini, who was slated to meet Teasdale but never did, feels "honoured and flattered" to have portrayed her. "She was invincible. She was so driven by saving people. It was a way of living, a reason for living. People say, 'She must have gone through so many sacrifices, so much hardship.' But Lucille and Piero chose this life. They wanted it. It was what they were here for."

As for the acting challenge of developing a character from her 20s to her 60s, Orsini had taken it on before in the hit TV series, *Les Filles du Caleb*. "It's like sculpture," says the trilingual actress who has a Québécoise mother and an Italian father. "It's something you do one take at a time, one scene at a time with your director who's the exterior eye that guides you." Piero Corti served as another guide: "I spent a lot of time with him, asking questions and listening to him talk about Africa and their life. It was my way of being close to Lucille."

For the people involved in *Dr. Lucille*, it's not just a movie. It's a mission. For one thing, the picture will be used as a fundraising event for the hospital foundation, which is run by Piero and Dominique. Allaire, who has maintained close links to the Corti family, does volunteer work for St. Mary's and is looking forward to the screenings that will include a South African gala to be attended by former president, Nelson Mandela.

Dr. Lucille is an unabashedly heroic picture made in a country that rarely celebrates heroes outside of professional sports. When I told someone I was doing an article on the Lucille Teasdale film, she ho-hummed, "So, is Teasdale the Canadian Mother Teresa?" with a tone implying a been-there-seen-that kind of cloying sanctification. Let's face it: Y2K people identify more easily with ambiguous, violent heroes like the Bruce Willis character in *Pulp Fiction* than self-sacrificing do-gooders who risk their lives for others in some God-forsaken outpost. Bios of the good and humble often do result in antiseptic hagiography. In the case of *Dr. Lucille*, the production's number 1 rule was don't sanctify her. "I did not want this to be pedestrian or on-the-nose," says Francine Allaire. "You can't propose a hero who knows everything and never has downs."

Allaire, who knew Teasdale "quite intimately," points out that she was an often emotionally insecure, doubting woman who never thought of herself as saintly. Horrified by the bloodshed she witnessed, Lucille would ask Piero if they had been abandoned by God or whether He was laughing at them. Piero, a devout Roman Catholic (but not one who proselytizes), would comfort the love of his life by telling her, "It's not God. It's man who does that to man. God is not enjoying himself." Ugandans, Allaire knows, feared that the moviemakers would "Walt Disneyize Lucille, make her a white saint coming to save the poor little blacks. But now they understand it isn't our intention at all. We're showing a complex, flesh-and-blood woman. And we're not at all paternalistic or neocolonialistic toward the Africans."

Orsini with Massimo Ghini as Piero Corti.





Lou Gossett Jr., left, with Ghini and Orsini

Dr. Lucille

Dr. Lucille offers a realistic portrayal without doing a *Lawrence of Arabia* number. "Sometimes in Canada," says Mihalka, "we look for the weaknesses of our heroes. We decided, for better or for worse, to focus on the strengths, to celebrate Lucille's and Piero's greatness and their dignity. We didn't shy away from showing them arguing or the fact that not all the time were they blindly inspired by divine light. Au contraire. But at the same time, we are not there to examine the darker psychological motivations. We're there to examine the legacy, the love and the dedication to humanity that these people had." Mihalka adds that the couple had many other life choices. Lucille and Piero could have enjoyed a cute pediatric practice

in Outremont or in an affluent section of Rome. "To me, a heroic act is not heroic if you have no choice."

Motion International is preparing a documentary about Lucille Teasdale that complements the telefilm, filling in certain aspects of her life. CTV and TVA will schedule it close to the airdates of *Dr. Lucille*, which, at press time, is April 30 on CTV and next fall on TVA. On January 17, Canada Post issued a stamp dedicated to Teasdale. A thousand movie theatres across the country will screen a Heritage Minute about her and a permanent exhibition of her life story will open this August in Ottawa's World Pavilion.

Lucille (*almost a whisper*): I can take being abandoned by God. But not by you.

Piero (*soft*): God has not abandoned us. Look what He has allowed us to do here. (*He reaches up, pulls her into his lap.*) I think the woman who married me is not absolutely a pessimist.

Lucille: Call her tragically optimistic. (*Beat.*) In God's not very tidy world. (*She leans her head against him. He cradles her in his arms.*)