



Photos courtesy of Alliance Atlantis Pictures

Denys Arcand's
STAR

**MEDIA
MANIA**

and the
**Beauty
of Beauty**

by Maurie Alioff

Jessica Paré

"Beauty is a beautiful girl" – Plato

DOM

Andy Warhol's everybody-will-get-their-15-minutes revelation has materialized on a scale that would have astounded the king of pop art. Ordinary people are acting out a rampant yearning to be glamorized and mythologized by eagerly submitting to reality TV's 24/7 camera surveillance.

Among the *Survivor* "castaways" and *Big Brother* "house guests," who provide spellbinding voyeurism for the millions who gawk at them, *Survivor*'s Jenna admits she craved the spotlight as much as the show's prize money. Her fellow castaway Sean, a successful neurologist, dreams about acting on *ER* and coming home to find the *National Enquirer* checking out his garbage. The most subtle of the new reality stars is *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?*'s Darva Conger. The lady who married an unbelievable creep on TV, and then got rid of him as fast as she could, says she's never chased after fame. Darva auditioned for *Millionaire* as a gag and posed naked for *Playboy* because she'd be a fool not to profit from the exploitation of her name she has no way of stopping.

The supermodel heroine of Denys Arcand's long-awaited new movie *Stardom* is like Ms. Conger in that her Warholian "Fifteen Moments" (the picture's original title) are an accident. Resembling the amiable, down-to-earth Arcand himself, Tina Menzhal (played by newcomer Jessica Paré) would be just as happy doing regular stuff like hanging out with friends and playing amateur hockey. Nevertheless, once a sports photographer's shot of her beautiful face catapults her into the media tornado, Tina holds on tight and rides it until her inevitable return to Kansas, which, in this Canadian movie, is actually Cornwall, Ont.

In Arcand's radiant masterpiece, *Jésus de Montréal*, the film's tragic hero is a devoted actor who resists the temptations of empty celebrity and dies for his purity. *Stardom*, as Arcand made clear when I interviewed him on a July afternoon not long after his 59th birthday, was designed as a more relaxed, genial kind of satire. Although we eventually realize that Tina has problems, she's a 21st-century, postmodern gal who isn't particularly conflicted about playing the fame game that serendipitously opens up to her. As we watch her transformation from female jock to haute couture supermodel, she comes across more like a poised athlete than *All About Eve*'s scheming Eve Harrington, or the kind of tortured, bitchy self-promoter Nicole Kidman played in Gus Van Sant's *To Die For*.

Pictures about female models are usually negative Cinderella stories that chart downward trajectories into spiritual decline. Julie Christie turns into a pampered princess in *Darling*, but she's soulless in her castle. Ex-fashion photographer Jerry

Schatzberg's 1970 directorial debut, *Puzzle of a Downfall Child*, shows Faye Dunaway grappling with the aftermath of a crack-up. And in *Gia*, Angelina Jolie's performance electrifies the story of real-life, wild-spirited Gia Carangi, who died of the AIDS virus she probably picked up by mainlining heroin.

While *Stardom*'s storyline recalls *Darling*'s, the film plays far more light-heartedly. It even bursts into irreverent slapstick in scenes like the one where a fur-coated Tina punches out an obnoxious animal-rights activist. From its first shot, Arcand's movie is a giddy whirl, vibrating with sensuous detail (Fellini's *Ginger and Fred* comes to mind) and closing on a tentatively happy ending. Perhaps, as the film implies, Tina's journey through mindless superficiality ultimately liberates her. Although we witness her transformation from a person into a commodity, we also see her become stronger, more self-controlled and womanly. In the movie's last, coming-of-age shot, she seems at peace with the world.

When I met with Arcand at Cinémaginaire, the Montreal company that co-produced *Stardom* with Robert Lantos's Serendipity Point Films, he confessed to not having any interest in shooting an outraged denunciation with a catastrophic denouement. Early in the game, he and co-writer Jacob Potashnik (racking up his first major credit) decided that they had the "stuff for comedy. With a serious touch, but certainly not tragedy. The characters don't have the depth necessary for it."

For ex-documentarian Arcand—whose typically meticulous research included seeing even the most obscure of model flicks—a movie like *Gia*, whatever its merits, inevitably degenerates into a cornball tearjerker. "It is a melodrama, which you want to avoid at all costs," Arcand told me, punctuating the comment with a characteristic gale of devilish laughter. "At least, I wanted to avoid it at all costs."

On the other hand, while Arcand escapes getting overly heavy in his charting of Tina's fairy-tale trajectory, he satirizes a world not entirely unlike *Jésus de Montréal*'s. Artificiality, insincerity and naked ambition reign. Everyone—from a small-town social climber (Dan Aykroyd), to an icy agent (Thomas Gibson of *Dharma and Greg* and Arcand's own *Love and Human Remains*), to a pretentious photographer (Charles Berling), to a hypocritical diplomat (Frank Langella echoing his role in the *Lolita* remake)—has a shtick. *Stardom* also needles ridiculously oily talk show hosts, airhead veejays, hysterical political activists and vicious fashion designers.

To communicate the picture's non-stop barrage of clichés, platitudes and media inanities ("Frigidity: blessing or curse?" wonders an idiotic TV presenter), Arcand and Potashnik



Jessica Paré with Thomas Gibson

deploy a novel and controversial device. With the exception of brief moments at the film's head and tail, most of the story is told as a series of media interviews and photo ops, as if Tina exists exclusively through the lenses of innumerable cameras.

Many scenes in *Stardom* are staged as parodies of talk TV, ranging from geeky small-town programs during the early stages of Tina's celebrity to a climactic moment with an Oprah-like network yenta. Arcand says he came up with this mediated-by-media approach after writing a conventional, absurdly lengthy screenplay that got nixed by producer Robert Lantos, who had triggered the venture when he told Arcand he wanted to collaborate with him.

Following a bout of post-rejection blues and a TV movie about homelessness (the ironically entitled *Joyeux Calvaire*), Arcand rethought the model project. A few years ago, the sleek clothes horses were unknown outside of the world of haute couture, readers of *Vogue* and fans of *Blow Up*. "There was no Cindy Crawford or Claudia Schiffer. Today, we are interested in these girls because of the media. I realized that it was the only valid point of view that would work on this subject."

During his years of research for *Stardom*, Arcand plunged deeply into the fashion milieu and how the media covers it. In Tokyo, for instance, his insatiable curiosity led him to ask one major agency why it "came to Calgary to get models. What does it mean in terms of Japanese aesthetics. Why do they want these tall, blonde girls?" And of course, Arcand lapped up all the lore about the girls who "don't make it, get abused, have a bad agent or start doing drugs."

Given the movie's form and content, *Stardom* is equally driven by the writer/director's fascination with television's hypnotic power. A background motif in *Love and Human Remains*, it goes full-tilt with *Stardom's* approximation of a TV addict's relentless channel surfing. "It was very interesting prior to the shooting to look at television for three months," Arcand recalled, "and really get down to how NBC shoots that kind of stuff, or how the BBC and the French do their shows." The complicated international shoot of the \$10-million-plus feature was "exhilarating, so much fun. Each morning was a new challenge in the sense we would say to each other: 'This morning, we are PBS,' and the next, 'We're MuchMusic. Get the hand-held camera and zoom at the ceiling.'"

Perceived as one of this country's most intellectual moviemakers, the Jesuit-educated, one-time history student scoffs at people who claim they have no time for the tube. "TV is like masturbation. Nobody wants to admit it, but everybody does it. If you appear on television, like I do once every four years when I have a film out, everybody has seen you. The show might have been broadcast at two o'clock in the morning on some obscure cable university channel in a course on theology, but they've seen it."

Arcand, who believes he does less tube time than the average Canadian (about five or six hours a day in his estimation), is an enthusiastic remote-control jockey. His love of jolting contrasts and surreal juxtapositions gets a workout while avoiding "any specific programs. I flip through tons of stuff. It's everything. It's miserable, it's brilliant, it's the work of genius."

Elaborating this idea in a movie is a tricky conceit to pull off. While some of *Stardom's* parodies and pastiches work brilliantly, others are laboured. More fundamentally, *Stardom* almost always approaches its characters through public images, masks and personae. That's why for Arcand, the biggest challenge was the scripting of the picture, not its filming. How do you dramatize important character revelations such as Tina's breakups with the men in her life and her most intimate moments? In one scene, she confronts her estranged father on the kind of low-brow chat show that snoops into people's lives. But obviously, Arcand and Potashnik couldn't play that card over and over again. "All through the scriptwriting process," Arcand remembered, "people were asking us, 'Will we love Tina, will she be real?' That was everybody's main concern. The readers at Telefilm, the producers, the co-producers."

One of the components that gives the movie its necessary subjectivity is the character of a presumably brilliant video *artiste*, played exuberantly by Robert Lepage in shades and a porkpie hat. Throughout *Stardom's* six-year time frame, Lepage's insightful hipster busily shoots a no-holds-barred, *Truth or Dare*-style documentary about Tina. Although you begin to wonder why he isn't being pressured to complete his doc and how he manages to show up during every crisis and embarrassment in Tina's life, or how come nobody smashes his camera, the Lepage character's black-and-white footage unveils Tina's private life.

STARDOM



The other choice that provides *Stardom* with emotional credibility is the casting of Jessica Paré as Tina. Three weeks before shooting began, with an actress Arcand considers very talented slotted to play his heroine, Paré showed up to audition for a minor role. Immediately, he and the casting director, who had shared a gruelling search for the right Tina in Canada and Los Angeles, knew they found their girl. "Jessica didn't have to play the role," says Arcand. "She was the character. So we had to buy back the contract of the other actress. It was very painful, and you hate yourself as a director, but what could I do?"

The moment Paré was cast, her life began to fuse with Tina's. "We jumped on Jessica and cut her hair. She had to skate every morning at six o'clock with an instructor and she had a personal trainer to lose some weight. We removed a mole from one of her cheeks. We capped her teeth." At the Cannes Film Festival, where *Stardom* was selected as the closing film, "There were all these people yelling in front of the Palais, and she was on my arm saying, 'Don't worry about it. I've been here before.'" Not only is the tall, strong-boned actress credible as a graceful runway darling who's also a jock with a knockout punch, she projects enough vulnerability to give the coolly ironic film emotional pull. "She was so real," that for people Arcand showed early cuts to, "the rest of what we were trying to say disappeared."

As the film's action unfolds, harsh reality seeps through the glitzy images of limousines and A-list parties. One of the forms reality takes is Tina's dad, an Eastern European immigrant whose sad personal history—a failed hockey career and abandonment of his family—are reminders of how bitter life can get. His wounded daughter confesses to the videomaker, "I'm walking around with a hole in my heart. Nobody sees it, and nobody gives a fuck about me." In this movie, stardom and its mirages are perceived as perfectly human and understandable evasions of despair.

Perhaps because of her unresolved rage with her father, Tina has a tendency to punch out the men in her life. And in the movie's funniest running gag, whenever one of her relationships fizzles out, her lover ends up a crazed and humiliated basket case. Tina's unwitting destructive power reminds Arcand of those antique cartoons of cars smashing into fire hydrants and workmen tumbling from scaffolds as some luscious babe clicks across the street, blithely unaware of the havoc she's unleashing.

The lover who takes the hardest fall is Dan Aykroyd's Barry Levine, a trendy restaurateur and would-be Don Juan. By the end of the movie, the facile poseur goes broke and out of his mind with unrequited love. In fact, dazzled by Tina's splendour, Barry is the conduit through which Arcand relays the movie's not-so-hidden agenda: his own amazement with the mystique of beauty.

Pointing out that a lovely face is just a random, meaningless gift "conferred on a woman by the gods without her asking for it, or meriting it," Arcand also subscribes to the idea that "Beauty is one of the absolutes in life. Plato said it. It's like justice. It's like absolute good. Or to quote Oscar Wilde, 'Beauty is...higher than genius, as it needs no explanation.' It is one of the great facts of the world, like sunlight. People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. To me, beauty is the wonder



From the top:
Paré, Charles Berling and Dan Aykroyd



of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances."

All through Arcand's life, "I was totally paralyzed in front of a gorgeous woman." For instance, at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, he found himself outside a church in the nearby village of Moujin, face-to-face with Jacqueline Bisset. "It was right out of a Renoir movie. She was sitting in a flowery dress and she was the most incredible creature that I had ever seen. She was the incarnation of beauty. It was like Botticelli's Venus coming out of the water. I didn't say a word to her. I just wanted to be allowed to look. Don't remove me from here. I won't say a word. I won't disturb anybody."

The very idea of Denys Arcand making a film in praise of physical beauty—however ironic his take on it might be—is surprising to those who still think of him as the *agent provocateur* whose *On est au coton*, a 1970 documentary about the textile industry, was shelved by the NFB for six years. According to Arcand, this perception of him as an angry, left-wing crusader is a distorted one. He wanted to make *On est au coton* because in politically charged 1960s Quebec he

was constantly "talking to people who were always referring to the workers. The workers. The workers are going to do this. If we are going to be independent, we have to make independence for the workers. I never knew any workers. My father was a river pilot. He was a man of the sea. And this is totally classless. So I said to myself, 'Okay, if I want to be intellectually rigorous, I've got to know about these people.'" Arcand's film investigation led him to an outlook that was "extremely pessimistic. There's no revolution coming. Forget about it. In fact, I got a lot of flak from very militant Quebecers at that time because of these conclusions."

Bored by Quebec/Canada's never-ending sovereignist/federalist squabbling, which he thinks ossified into a meaningless Punch and Judy show a long time ago, Arcand keeps his distance from political true believers with cures for the world's afflictions. "I'm a little tired of people who know what the worker wants; they know what Rwanda wants." At a crucial point in *Stardom*, the Robert LePage character says, "You might think Calvin Klein is shallow, but the guy never bombed Cambodia." For Arcand, "There's something to be said for superficiality. The world was never terribly hurt by superficial people, or by

people who were looking for beauty. We are hurt by people who believe they have the truth. They think they know what's good for you, and they know that communism will ultimately prevail, or religion, or whatever. I'm more worried about these people than Calvin Klein."

During an era of career-crazy filmmakers, the twice Oscar-nominated, multi-award-winning Denys Arcand is in no hurry to jump into the new project he has in mind. This past summer, as Alliance Atlantis revved up for *Stardom*'s North American debut as the Toronto International Film Festival's opening film, not to mention the picture's subsequent release, Arcand hung out at his country home. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with his *compagne*, *Stardom* producer (and Cinémaginaire co-founder) Denise Robert, and the little Chinese girl the couple adopted four years ago.

"I have a very happy personal life," Arcand told me. "I've never had children before, and at this age, it's very important for me." He has no "urge to shoot a film every year," to be a Woody Allen, who's "a machine to make films." "I'm not like that at all. I've got a life apart from filmmaking."

"Beauty is ... higher than genius, as it needs no explanation." Oscar Wilde

In any case, the Canadian moviemaking system is "not very conducive to being extraordinarily productive or creative." For one thing, when you approach the government funding agencies, "You have the impression you're bothering these people. 'It's complicated,' they say. 'And we don't have money.'" Nor is there much private investment available, and solid scripts are a rarity, which means he's got to commit to the voluminous, time-devouring research he needs for the writing process. As for forays into Hollywood, while he enjoyed certain American friends, Arcand observed that being represented by top agency CAA did not give him access to the best material. "There's a pecking order. Steven Spielberg is there, and Martin Scorsese and Barry Levinson. You're with Emir Kusturica and a couple of other oddballs, the exotica. Occasionally, they might think of you, you might get an offer. But in fact, I never got one."

Once Arcand, delighted about the Toronto gala, feels his way into a movie that he "really would enjoy doing," he will brace himself for the inevitable hurdles and frustrations. And as in his other pictures, he will approach the new subject with his usual intellectual honesty, wit, irreverence, reverence and, as he puts it, fascination with "life as we live it, and trying to somehow put it on the screen in a coherent way. That was all I ever wanted. Ever." *



Top left: Paré with Denys Arcand,
Top right: with Frank Langella
Left: Robert LePage