

Denis Villeneuve's

# Maelström



Much ado about

**By Cynthia Amsdem**

Photos courtesy of Odeon Films

The fish was a lock, right from the beginning. Narrator, Greek chorus and philosopher *poisson*, the fish is the centre point of Denis Villeneuve's aquatic opus, *Maelström*. But this character, such as it is, wasn't always a fish. Originally, it was conceptualized as a piece of meat. "A steak?" you say. "No, just meat," deadpans Villeneuve.



**A**t about this point, visions of Marlon Brando glide in, specifically Brando's request to play the role of Jor-El, Superman's father, as a voice issuing forth from a suitcase. But back to the entree with an attitude. "For a long time, I have wanted to make a film where the narration is made by someone who is dying, someone who is about to die and has only a few seconds to live. But there was a nightmare from a long time ago. It began with a young dog I had. He would bark at night and he'd give me nightmares. In the dream, his skin was peeling off and he was dead in my bathroom. It was a very peaceful nightmare, but it gave me this idea to have the narrator as a piece of meat from an animal that has been destroyed. I called it 'the Entity.'"

Villeneuve pauses to attend to his children before continuing, thereby establishing, in this journalist's mind, a domestic side to this man who dreams of talking beef. "The sea and the water element were growing stronger and stronger in the writing of *Maelström*. What I love about the fish was the idea of

most interviewers, which is mildly ironic because his friends had warned him against using this imagery during the early writing stages. Ultimately, that which caused the most people the most consternation is what gave audiences the greatest entrance to the story. Villeneuve understands and accepts that he runs the risk of having a beautiful, poetic film that no one understands. "Some scripts I wrote several years ago were too obscure, and I'm working to make them closer to life and easier to understand. But I think *Maelström* is pretty clear. It raises questions, yes, but from the emotional point of view. People don't feel frustrated because it is closer to emotion than a cerebral process." He pauses thoughtfully, then grins. "And to be honest, I would have been worried if nobody questioned the fish because I see this film as a dark comedy. A dark comedy that is not funny."

It has been suggested by one journalist that Villeneuve is divided in his intent. Part of his objective is to deliver a serious film

## a Fish

Marie-Josée Croze



continuity between several fishes instead of having one entity. For me, it was a kind of metaphor for all the storytellers from the beginning of mankind."

The fish (voiced by Pierre Lebeau) helps to tell the story which begins with an abortion. The mother not-to-be is Bibiane Champagne (Marie-Josée Croze), the self-absorbed daughter of a deceased fashion designer. Bibiane's decision to abort creates a vortex of angst that intensifies when she hits a fish monger while driving under the influence of alcohol and her own misery. Propelled by guilt, she stops thinking about herself for a few minutes and tracks her victim's body to the morgue where she meets his son, Evian (Jean-Nicholas Verrault). At this point, the plot shifts to an engaging relationship drama coupled with emotional catharsis.

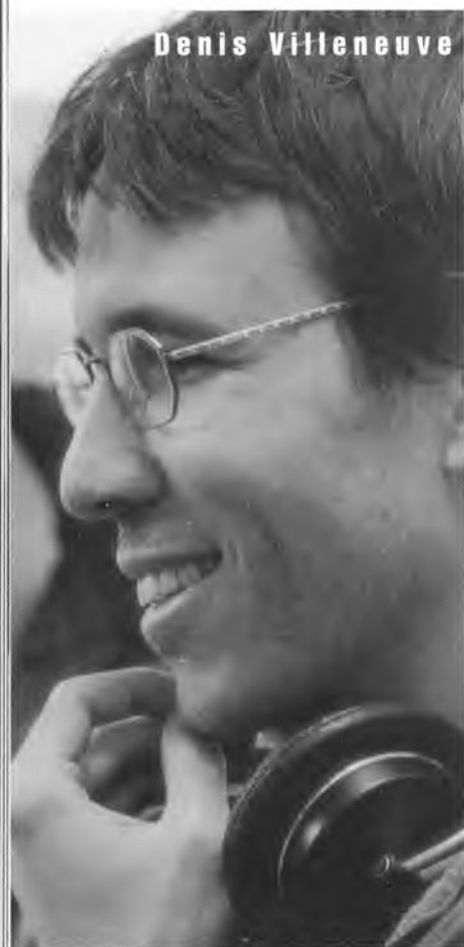
At this year's Toronto International Film Festival, Villeneuve discovered the fish was the hook that caught the attention of

while simultaneously giving him the chance to smirk at the audiences trying to cope with the images. If this is the case, his duplicity is not apparent. He appears quite genuine in his exploration of his fear of death and of other people. As a boyish, thirtysomething father of three, he says his fear of death has been mitigated somewhat by the presence of his children. Mind you, he's a boyish thirtysomething father of three with some severely whacked-out images he feels compelled to resolve – and he's doing his therapy on the big screen.

Perhaps the misinterpretation comes from the fact that this film is high comedy or perhaps "art comedy," which might be defined as humour that people don't get but it looks as if it should be funny. Villeneuve wrote the screenplay consciously using the mechanism of a comedy (presumably not a sitcom formula). "I worked with a friend of mine, a Quebec writer, and it was clear from the beginning that it would be a comedy that only two people would find funny. Him and me." The one per-

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son who stood four-square behind the entire concept of *Maelström* was Roger Frappier, Villeneuve's producer since *Cosmos* (1995). Villeneuve confides that Frappier is very pleased with the film's reception in Toronto. "He's done very powerful films, like *Jésus de Montréal*, *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Un zoo la nuit*. And this kind of film is very far away from his universe. But when he believes in someone and he believes there is a potential filmmaker there, he respects my universe and encourages me. He was a very strong defender of the fish."

Frappier is placing *Maelström* strategically on the festival circuit. Montreal's World Film Festival opened without Denys Arcand and Robert Lepage, and because nature had poured that vacuum, Villeneuve filled it in with *Maelström*. This earned him the Best Canadian Film Award, followed swiftly by a Special Jury Citation for Best Canadian Feature Film Award at the 2000 Toronto festival. These will go on his shelf next to the 1998 Golden Bayard Award for *Un 32 août sur terre* from the Namur International Festival, and the knowledge of being nominated for the Prix Jutra for the same film, plus a 1997 nomination for the Golden Bayard for *Cosmos*.

In every film festival there rises to the surface a trend or theme that appears in so many films it is impossible to ignore. At the 1998 Toronto festival, the keynote was fragmented time. Plots were split, narratives fractured, time splintered and shifted. There were more ensemble casts than star vehicles. The 1999 Toronto festival offered a cornucopia of identity films: sexual (*Boys Don't Cry*, *Happy, Texas*), political (*East-West*), cultural (*East is East*), religious (*Sunshine*). This year, it was water: *The Weight of Water*, *Marine Life*, *Suspicious River*, *Deeply*, *Sexy Beast*, *Desire*, *Possible Worlds* and *Maelström*.

Traditionally, water is very close to being the all-purpose symbol. It works to cleanse, to baptize, as a basic ingredient for primordial soup, as the River Styx dividing life and death. The Chinese consider water as the abode of the dragon and the source of all life. In India, this element is regarded as the preserver of life. Limitless and immortal, it is interpreted by modern psychologists as a symbol of the unconscious and the motivating female side of the personality. It also represents intuitive wisdom. Water is the universal congress of potentialities, the *fons et origo*, which precedes all form and all creation. For Villeneuve, "Water is about the relationship with the subconscious and fiction and the relationship with the beginning of life. It's the roots of the world."

There are major similarities in Villeneuve's features, such as car accidents. But he is very pointed about not wanting to address these obvious points. "When I look at myself working, I put too much censorship on myself and then there is no creativity. If I were to look at myself writing right now, I'd still be working on my first film. So for my first two films (*Un 32 août sur terre* and *Maelström*), I did it without self-analysis." The baby element (trying to conceive in *Un 32 août* and aborting in *Maelström*) is too difficult an explanation for him to resist. "Those two films were made when the woman in my life was pregnant all the time. The child theme was very close to me. I made three films and in all three of them, she was having babies. People made jokes that I was making a film and baby at the same time. But we have closed the factory right now. Still, I was surrounded by questions of childhood, and parents and responsibility and life."

As much as there is a denial of self-assessment, there is some degree of creative introspection present because Villeneuve is aware of the contradictory forces tugging at him as he considers new ideas. "I love film that is simple and close to life, but when I write, I have a natural tendency to

go in the fish direction." This split personality is consistent in his work: in *Un 32 août sur terre* there's a clash between nature and technology, between the urban and desert landscape, even between creating life and aborting it.

Villeneuve interrupts the listing of dichotomies abruptly. "You know, the thing is that I'm trying to find something and with those films I have the feeling that I'm in movement right now. When you are moving and you try to take a photograph of yourself, it's blurry because you're evolving a lot. In contradiction and paradox, you can find truth." Life, even the meaning of life, is something completely visual to this director. "Jean-Luc Godard once said, 'In cinema, the most important thing is to confront blurry ideas with clear images.' And the fish is about that - a clear image about my relationship with cinema, but I have to explore that relationship between storytelling and death."

The Montreal and Toronto festivals were opportunities where Villeneuve was called upon to explain himself and *Maelström*. This is not his favourite activity because he cannot do so with any real sense of assurance. "The scary thing about filmmaking is that you make a film because you have some ideas and you have some conceptual approach. And then you realize a few years later that the truth is somewhere else. I can now say *REW FFWD* and *Cosmos*, my first films, were impulses based on fear of others, and *Un 32 août sur terre* is still too new for me. I don't discover the true reason for making the film until three or four years after I have finished it." ●

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