

working the reception for the ambassador. She doesn't trust him, but when the killers come after her as well, she has no choice but to reluctantly take Shaw up on his offer of protection.

After a couple more very violent escapes from the Triad thugs, Julia and Shaw narrow their search for answers to a mole in the UN who is trying to sabotage the trade agreement. The final showdown takes place in the UN headquarters at night. Julia has discovered that Hooks is the mole, and Shaw's old partner, Bly, killed the ambassador and faked his own death. Shaw arrives in time to save Julia and force a showdown with Bly, whom he kills. A short time later Hooks is murdered by a Triad hit man. Shaw and Julia retire to the south of France, where Julia has always dreamed of visiting.

Thirty million dollars (and counting) worldwide at the box office for a Canadian film. It sounds like an oxymoron, but it's true and no one is paying attention. Producer Nicolas Clermont (*Bethune: The Making of a Hero, Eye of the Beholder*) and his independent Montreal production company, Filmline International, have scored a major hit with Wesley Snipes' *The Art of War*, which opened on 2,600 screens in Canada and the U.S.A. (the largest single opening for a Canadian feature, ever), and in its first week grossed over \$10 million, placing second on the Variety list for the first week of September, another Canadian record. In a country that places a high premium on original, even quirky, art-house features, which inevitably do poorly at the ticket window, the emergence of a genuine box-office success story — in other words, a film the general public actually wants to see — is such an anomaly as to be dismissed. It can't be Canadian you might say. Well, it is. *The Art of War* is Canadian from its producer (the aforementioned Clermont) on down. Its credits include director Christian Duguay, who has experience with this sort of thing (*The Assignment* and *Screamers*), cinematographer Pierre Gill (*Eldorado, Liste Noire*), music composer Normand Cobeil (*The Assignment, Les Boys* and *Les Boys II*), editor Michel Arcand (*Sunshine, Un zoo la nuit*) and co-stars Donald Sutherland and Maury Chaykin (who between them have more credits than can be possibly listed here). The point being that no matter what you think of *The Art of War* as a movie, dismissed by many critics as a standard action thriller in the James Bond mold, its success cannot be dismissed and it marks a significant shift in the paradigm that is Canadian cinema.

Many Canadian producers and directors no longer feel compelled to limit themselves to the straitjacket imposed upon them by festival programmers and critics who traditionally have stamped their blinkered vision of what a Canadian film should or should not be. Quebec directors such as Duguay, Yves Simoneau and Pierre Gang all have worked in English and on a large scale in features and MOWs. Even such cinematic cultural icons as Denys Arcand and Robert Lepage are now working in English to attract a larger audience. The trouble is that festival programmers and critics have not caught up and are still constrained by the belief that to be successful at the box office somehow means that the film isn't Canadian. It's a sellout to Hollywood values. Quite frankly, these people have become bores, and Canadian filmmakers are marking new ground whether film-festival programmers like it or not. And as for the critics, they just have to get their collective heads out of the sand.

The Art of War is considerably better than the previous Wesley Snipes/Wayne Beach vehicle, *Murder at 1600*, but not as good as typical James Bond fare. However, for what it is worth, the script

is coherent, if a bit dense, the action first-rate, and Maury Chaykin as the doughnut-dunking FBI agent lends his considerable talent for offbeat humour to the proceedings. Snipes is obviously looking for a character he can parlay into a franchise, and Neil Shaw might be it, although the complex machinations of the UN is not an ideal subject for xenophobic Americans. It's an entertaining waste of 100 minutes and the only Canadian film I have ever overheard discussed at the local watering hole. For the first time in memory, this reviewer caught fragments of a conversation that went something like this: "What did you do Friday night?" "Not much. I went to a movie." "Oh, what did you see?" "*The Art of War*," came the response. "How was it?" "Good. I enjoyed it." What else needs to be said? Is there anyone out there paying attention? ●

PAUL TOWNEND

STARDOM

2000 88m prod Alliance Atlantis, Serendipity Point Films, Cinémaginaire, Ciné b p Robert Lantos, Denise Roberts d Denys Arcand sc Denys Arcand, J. Jacob Potashnik ph Guy Dufaux ed Isabelle Dedieu pd Zöe Sakellariopoulou c Michel Robidas sr Claude La Haye, Marcel Pothier m François Dompierre with Jessica Paré, Dan Aykroyd, Robert Lepage, Charles Berling, Camilla Rutherford, Thomas Gibson, Frank Langella.

Tina Menzhal plays for the women's hockey team in Cornwall, Ont. At a team practice, a local photographer snaps some shots of her which he hopes to sell on the open market. They get into the hands of a local talent agent who sees the potential in Tina's fresh-faced beauty. She is called into the agency and given the full model "treatment." Tina is hired for her first

Jessica Paré, left, with Dan Aykroyd in Denys Arcand's *Stardom*



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commercial, to promote a local dairy product, where she meets fashion photographer Philippe Gascon. Gascon promotes her, and soon Tina has left the agency and is on her way to Paris and the big time.

There she has an unhappy experience with the pressures of fame and the fashion industry, and returns home to Cornwall where, by now, she is a local celebrity. She starts seeing a wealthy restaurateur, Barry Levine, who is married, and is introduced to the famous fashion photographer Bruce Taylor, who is also a documentary filmmaker. He wants to make a film about her life and starts to follow her around with his camera and small crew. Tina is picked up by a high-powered New York agent and her career starts to take off. She moves to New York and is followed by the restaurateur, who has become so infatuated that he leaves his wife and children to be with her. At a New York shoot for the fur industry, Tina is attacked by a spray can-wielding protester, whom she decks in true NHL style and puts the woman in hospital. The Canadian UN ambassador comes to her rescue and he, too, becomes infatuated with her. Tina moves from New York to Europe to the Caribbean, followed by Levine and Taylor, who records her every move on film.

Tina is assaulted by Levine, who has gone over the edge with his desire for her, and he is arrested. The photographer Gascon has nude pictures of her, which he tries to exploit, but his New York show is closed down by Tina's agent. He, too, is arrested when he is found to have kiddie porn on his computer files. Tina draws closer to the ambassador, who pays for her recoupment from Levine's assault. They marry, but Tina wants to work while the ambassador wants her to be his trophy bride. Some very public arguments erupt as Tina is stalked by paparazzi. The ambassador loses his composure and gives an inflammatory speech at the UN. He, too, is carried away. Tina returns to Cornwall, where she marries a local doctor and settles down.

From the famed director of *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Jésus de Montréal*, comes this slight satire on the television and fashion industries, and, by extension, the cult of female beauty. While the previous two films established Denys Arcand's reputation as a wicked satirist, a master of bourgeois angst and one of Canada's greatest cineastes, *Stardom* is a limp statement from a talent in decline. It's not that the film is bad – it isn't – it's just that Arcand's previous efforts raised the bar so high that this minor work is a major disappointment.

The films fundamental weakness lies in its subject matter. For Arcand, always considered one of Canada's most intelligent directors, to use his formidable skills to satirize the fashion industry is rather like taking a howitzer to blast a butterfly. Robert Altman, another director with a laser intellect, had similar problems with *Ready to Wear*. The industry is so ripe with foolishness, pretensions and self-loathing that nothing can be said or done to make it appear even more foolish. It seems like a waste of time even to try, and Arcand adds to his problems by what he obviously thought to be the solution to making a film about a subject matter so shallow. Everything about

Tina's rise to fame is mediated through a camera lens. This is the major conceit of the film and its major failing.

Stardom begins with a photograph of Tina (Jessica Paré) taken by an amateur. He later appears on a local cable station hawking his wares. This device is then repeated throughout the film. Tina is followed by a news crew as she becomes a model. She is seen through the lens of Philippe Gascon (Charles Berling), then interminably through the probing, documentary lens of Bruce Taylor (Robert Lepage). She appears numerous times on TV, from MuchMusic-style fashion clips to a heated discussion by French intellectuals. This mixture of visual styles goes on for the entire length of the film, but unfortunately runs out of steam at about the 60-minute mark. After that, it's merely repetition and you are just longing for one steady shot or a lengthy take.

The film is not without its moments of humour. When Tina knocks out the animal-rights protester, she then appears on TV with the ambassador (Frank Langella), who explains, straight-faced, that she is part aboriginal and therefore her actions where justified in a defence of her people's centuries-old right to practice hunting and trapping. Nor is it without true pathos. When Tina's long-estranged father shows up on an up-scale TV gab fest – in the style of the *Oprah* – he does so for the money, causing the distraught Tina to bolt mid-broadcast. Later she is caught by Taylor's camera crying with the pain of a child who has lost her father. These moments are not sustained, however, and one soon gets the impression there is not much to Tina. She glides through her changes in fortune without anything making much of an impression.

This blank slate is a deliberate distancing device that Arcand uses to explore the fascination some men have with female beauty. Arcand has said in an interview (*Take One* No. 29) that he is captivated and made weak in the presence of beauty, but in our politically correct times this is seen as a failing – the chauvinistic and impolite sin of "lookism." As a sardonic comment on this "sin," Arcand has only the most craven of the men talk to the camera about Tina in this manner. Gascon has his theories, but in the end he is only out to exploit Tina. A nerdy TV host quotes Plato – "beauty is a beautiful woman" – and allows that beautiful women form a subspecies of the human race. Tina literally drives her men wild with desire. The restaurateur (Dan Aykroyd), is carried out of a courtroom ranting when convicted of assaulting her, and the ambassador destroys his career with a funny, inflammatory speech at the UN after their marriage is brought to an abrupt end. It's passion over reason, Arcand seems to be saying, and beauty trumps brains any day of the week.

Part tomboy, part high-fashion model, newcomer Jessica Paré is perfect for the part of Tina. However, the men who lust after her – Berling, Aykroyd and Langella – are merely okay and only Thomas Gibson, as the super-cool New York agent, stands out. Arcand occasionally achieves some impressive directorial flourishes but he is severely constrained by his self-imposed limitation of imitating a string of dreadful TV talk shows. *Stardom*, I suspect, looked better on paper. ●

PAUL TOWNEND