

# WATER *and* FIRE

Robert Favreau's

## *Les* MUSES ORPHELINES

By Isa Tousignant



Slowly thawing from the minus 32 degree snow fest we'd both just emerged from, Robert Favreau and I made our way through the corridors of Film Tonic amid buzzing business people and beeping fax machines. We found our way to the boardroom, a large corporate-style room dominated by an oval table, where a Post-it judiciously placed on the door read "*Réservé: Entrevue.*" We sat down, commiserating about our frozen fingers, but just as I opened my mouth in an attempt to formulate my first question, another head stuck in the door. "Salut Robert!" enthused a woman, barging in to shake his hand. This is the general behaviour toward the filmmaker around here: genuine, elated enthusiasm. I gather Favreau lives outside the city and his appearances are rather rare treats; but most of all, I conclude that Favreau is, undoubtedly, the man of the hour. *Les Muses orphelines*, his third feature film after *Portion d'éternité* in 1989 and *Nelligan* in 1991, was nominated for four Genies this year. He's doing well and the smile on his face shows it.

*Les Muses orphelines* isn't Favreau's first claim to fame, though. *Portion d'éternité*, his first fiction after a considerable stretch in documentary, was awarded at a variety of festivals. *Nelligan* was also well-received, and *L'Ombre de l'épervier*, a television series for which he directed six out of 13 episodes, was rewarded with 14 nominations and five wins at the 1998 Gemini Awards. What *Les Muses* is, however, is Favreau's first adaptation. Based on a

play by Michel Marc Bouchard, a Québécois playwright of international acclaim, the film tells the story of the Tanguay orphans, who, 20 years earlier, had suffered the tragic death of their father and sudden abandonment by their mother. Now adults, the three estranged sisters (played in the film by Marina Orsini, Céline Bonnier and Fanny Mallette) are reunited in their isolated house on a hill by the youngest among them, Isabelle, the strange, sheltered, "slow" one who has never been privy to the truth. In order to protect her, or simply to avoid revisiting their own shame and heartache, the others have told her their mother (Louise Portal) is dead, not in Spain with her lover. But Isabelle isn't as daft as she seems. This little one, in fact, has a plan and proceeds, by baroque, conspiratorial means of entanglement and misinformation to heal her broken clan.

The grandeur of the narrative is only one of the challenges Favreau had to face in adapting the play, but it is what attracted him to the project in the first place. In order to translate the emotional wealth of the work from theatrical to filmic, Favreau developed a parallel geographic, historical and emotional space. He opted for invocation rather than reproduction, if you will, in an attempt to avoid the pitfall of theatricality. This prompted him to refuse to write his own script, or let Bouchard himself (who had already written a few screenplays) man the project. He needed someone with distance, someone who appreciated the intricate *mélange* of the tragic and the comic in



Fanny Mallette as Isabelle

the text but wouldn't pussyfoot around the necessary modifications. He found Gilles Desjardins, a talented third party.

Favreau favoured the use of close-ups and subjective camera work, codes of intimacy that are singularly cinematic, and chose to work in Cinemascope to generate a sense of both emotional proximity and spatial expanse. He contemporized the setting from the 1960s to the present to add emotional potency. Certainly, he worked hard at it. Whether or not Favreau was entirely successful in avoiding the pitfall of theatricality remains, nonetheless, debatable. Some of the acting – though excellent in its intensity and in its abandonment – is brash, larger than life and dramatic. The narrative leaps, too, are grand, and at first impression edge toward the unpalatable. But after digestion, and a conversation with the highly personable, kind and intelligent filmmaker, the oddities become more charming than jarring. Favreau's love for the play, for his actors, for the pleasure of a juicy metaphor, is infectious.



Director Robert Favreau

*What attracted you to Michel Marc Bouchard's play?*

It was really the first emotional contact. I stumbled into the play and I came out of it astonished. I had cried and I had laughed. I had been reunited with atmospheres from my childhood. Smells from my childhood had reappeared. It had been ages since a play had moved me to that extent. And so a few weeks later, when I was heading a course on directing actors, I was talking about the play to an actor who had seen it and he asked me, "Did you notice how cinematic it was?"

*In what sense?*

The level of realism, for one. And the presence, through the dialogue, of things off-screen like the village, for example. But the text is just full of twists and turns. Every time we think we've grasped what's going on, then poof, another element comes in. I felt I needed to go back to see the play again. But that time, rather than being struck by how cinematic it was, I was struck by the fact that it was the second time that I'd seen it and I was just as moved. That's when I knew it was speaking to me. And that's basically how I work. Without knowing exactly what draws me into a text or a subject, if it touches me, I dig deeper.

*Did Bouchard accept your proposal right away?*

Well, I was encouraged because the first time I'd been to see the play I'd gone to see him back stage with the actors, and we'd spontaneously struck up a conversation because he'd liked *Nelligan*. There was already an affinity, a certain common ground. But when I approached him a few weeks later with the film project in mind, well there were six of us. Five other filmmakers had also suggested an adaptation. So, although he liked my work, his choice was dependent on how I compared with the others, how I wanted to adapt the text and all that. So I set out to find a producer and a screenwriter.

*Why did you choose to work with Gilles Desjardins rather than adapt the text yourself?*

I don't know. I was afraid. I'm personally attracted to comedies, the kind of comedy that addresses the mind. However, there's also a side to me – not in life, but as a director – that's more sombre, more dramatic. And so I was afraid that as a screenwriter I would destroy or not do justice to the equilibrium of tragedy and comedy that had first attracted me to the work. I didn't want Michel Marc to do the script either, even though he's worked on quite a few screenplays, because I was afraid he wouldn't take enough distance from his text to break



**Marina Orsini, Céline Bonnier and Fanny Mallette as the Tanguay sisters.**

the barrier of the play's tight-knit environment, and thus free the original text of its theatrical dimension. That turned out well because he didn't want to do it either for the same reason.

*How closely did you stick to the physical environment of the play?*

Pretty closely, except for some important modifications. Michel Marc took us to Lac-St-Jean to introduce us to his territory. We visited St-Ludger-de-Milot, which is a real town, where the play is based. A determining factor, though, was that when he came to show us the house that inspired him, standing in the middle of nowhere, it didn't exist anymore. It had burned down. He showed us around the area and a few other physical elements took on significance: the village sawmill, for example, which we fell upon by chance. We were given a tour. It's a super-modern sawmill, with huge mechanical saws controlled by computers. This is a mill that produces enough wood to build something like 50,000 houses a year, but there are only 20 workers in it. Everything is mechanized. The big Alcan dam impressed me too. So the first thing that struck me was that this house in the middle of nowhere – a symbol belonging to 1950s or 1960s Quebec – was surrounded by a Quebec well into the year 2000. It quickly became evident to us that it was in our best interest to modernize the setting from the play's 1964 date – the story with the parents having taken place in 1944 – to the present.

*It's funny you mention the theme of the dam, because it's something that recurs in your work isn't it? It's a central element in the imagery of *Portion d'éternité* as well.*

You caught me! Yes, the threat of water. Actually, I personally love water. One of the banes of my present existence is that my life doesn't allow for me to live in real nature. I am truly comfortable on a waterfront. Every summer vacation when I was young was spent at my cousins', who lived in the West by the ocean. It was my definition of paradise. Since then I've always been on a quest for that paradise, and so I find bits of it in *Portion* and *Les Muses*. Even *L'Ombre de l'épervier* takes place on the water. It represents paradise, but also vertigo, the downward spiral and danger.

*And fire?*

Well, as soon as we'd decided to contemporize the play, a number of problems arose, including problems of equivalence. For

example, in the play, the father, Lucien Tanguay, died by committing suicide in Dieppe during the Second World War. So how were we going to make him die? When we visited Lac-St-Jean with Michel Marc in early May four years ago, there were tons of forest fires in the area. It was May, winter had only just ended, but it was 35 degrees during those four days. The whole of Lac-St-Jean was like a match. Even in Gaspé, where I lived at the time, there had been so many fires up the whole of the north coast that every morning there was a quarter-inch thick of soot on my car. Even though the fire was 100 kilometres away, the wind brought the soot up to me. These were all symbols that floated into my mind, which I didn't really think about

at the time. But then we started looking for an equivalence for the father's narrative, and it just happened that that was the summer of the famous great fire in Parent, in the Parc de la Véranderie, where the villagers were literally surrounded by a ring of fire. It looked for a while like the entire village would have to be evacuated by helicopter. So from there, the entire metaphor – the equivalence regarding the father, the hero dad, the brave firefighter who dies tragically – was constructed. It also enabled another essential transformation, regarding the play the village children put on in honour of the father. It was originally an Easter play. We felt that was an extremely dated reference, which belonged to a Quebec of the 1960s. So the idea was that if the village had suffered a great tragedy and the Tanguay dad had become a hero, then 20 years later they would want to commemorate it. So all the elements fell into place from the starting point of that great fire. And obviously, if we wanted tension to exist between the elements, we had to oppose fire to water. We had fire. We had water. We had electricity and we had the danger of both. This is where our interest in the dam and the sawmill came into play. And all this tied in so perfectly with the characters, who are all outlandish in their way and aren't creatures of nuance and subtlety. They're excessive. They want to destroy, break down, throw oil on the fire.

*Speaking of characters – and you spoke at the beginning of an actor's studio you had hosted – what kind of work do you do with the actors you direct?*

My greatest interest, as a director, is working with the actors. The casting, auditioning and directing is my territory, and everyone who works with me knows it. For *Les Muses*, we did three weeks of rehearsals, the four actors and me. I cherish this time. My goal is always to go too far then come back later. You have to let yourself go, explore, embarrass yourself, do too much, hurt yourself. It's unbelievable what walls that breaks down, especially when you know that all you've got to do is reel yourself back in a little. And it's the time to do it, before the rest of the crew shows up and clocks in. For the actors, it was a rare opportunity to get this sort of exercise in cinema. It stimulated them extremely and it glued them together. What it brought me is a final breach with the theatrical aspect of the work. I made them move in space, interact, intertwine; I developed a really physical, active style for them. Because regardless of all our hard work, our modifications and Gilles Desjardins' great screenplay, the theatricality was a bugger to expunge. ●