

expose Matthew's dark side, his brutality and womanizing. She's strictly a device, who disappears halfway through the film. Niko's adopted father (Kenneth Welsh) is also underdeveloped and plays like a stereotype, "rich and overprotective daddy." There is little resolution concerning his relationship with Niko, who seems bent on defying and rejecting him. Miraculously, at the end, her adoptive father and biological father appear to be friends. It is as if the emotional storm has simply ended. The orphans are no longer orphans, the afflicted, no longer afflicted. As Sister Sarah (Sarah Polley) repeats almost unemotionally, "God loves you, Neville, God loves you." Like all good Catholics, Neville is a passive receiver, rather than active seeker in his redemption.

Despite some of the weaknesses in the script, the performances are strong, often transcending character flaws. Directing actors is Virgo's strength and talent. Cummins (no relation) is a vulnerable, angry, intense, virile and passionate performer, making a "raging bull" appear human, sad,

remorseful and honourable. Cummins deserved his supporting actor Genie. Tate is equally moving and charismatic. His scenes with Niko are played with honesty and sensual ease. His moments of addiction desperation and longing for connection with his brother are subtle, expressive and truthful. Cox is elegant, intelligent and charming. She makes Niko believable and human. The supporting players are strong here as well, although Polley seems miscast as a worldly addict turned nun. This is not her fault. Sister Sarah is written as a symbol rather than a character.

Virgo's aesthetic is always distinct. His use of light, shadow, colour, tone and rhythm is smart, powerful, sensual and original. In *Love Come Down*, Virgo manages to compensate for story weaknesses with his talent with actors, his richly textured visuals and his unique cinematic vision. Virgo pulls out all the stops here: murder, secret births, jaded lovers, substance abuse, betrayal, sacrificial mothers, deathbed confessions and long-lost fathers. It's deliciously operatic.



KATHLEEN CUMMINS

15 FÉVRIER 1839

2001 115m prod ACPAV, p Bernadette Payeur, Marc Daigle, d/sc Pierre Falardeau, ph Alain Dostie, ed Claude Palardey, pd Jean-Baptiste Tard, c Mario Davignon, s Mathieu Beaudin, Serge Beauchemin, Hans Peter Strobl, mus Jean St-Jacques; with Luc Picard, Sylvie Drapeau, Frédéric Gilles, Jerry Snell, Julien Poulin

In the aftermath of the failed 1837-8 rebellion against England's rule over Quebec, 800 patriots are in the Prison de Montréal. The movie opens on February 14, 1839, the day when leader Marie Thomas Chevalier De Lormier and his comrade-in-arms, Swiss-born rebel Charles Hindelang are told they will hang in 24 hours.

The film portrays the last day in the lives of the two men as they interact with their fellow prisoners. Doomed, the patriots express their fears, discuss French-Canadian servitude (in ways that imply it continues today) and relentlessly insult their military guards ("You're shit," a rebel says in French to an uncomprehending *tête carrée*). Black comic relief is provided when a quack doctor gives the men a mechanical examination and prescribes a useless medication. A guilt-stricken young guard tries to apologize to De Lormier who turns his back on him. The patriots pass the time with games, singing, dancing and their irrepressible joie de vivre.

De Lormier's wife visits him and insists that "Life is what matters, not words." After the two make love, she is dragged away. Despite his love for his wife, De Lormier's resolve is strengthened; he won't grovel for his captors. During a discussion about non-French Canadians in Quebec, one of De Lormier's comrades proclaims, "I don't care if you're white, black, yellow or green. I just want to know if you're on our side. If you are, you're a brother. If you're not, I hate you."

A last-supper sequence features jokes, rousing songs and poetic talk about sex. A kind-hearted priest arrives in the prison to give the men last rites. The next day, as the condemned are led to the gallows, De Lormier clutches his wife's red handkerchief. When he dies, it falls to the hard icy ground on a Quebec winter day.



15 février 1839 time travels to the roots of Pierre Falardeau's chief passion in the movies and life. For the scrappy, unwaveringly grizzled *indépendantiste*, the 19th-century British colonization of French Canada shackled his people to a degrading subservience. Unless they wake up and get off their knees, they will perish.

In his previous films, Falardeau has looked at this urgent matter from multiple, overlapping angles. His 1990 film, *Le Party*, turned a hard-time penitentiary into a obvious metaphor for Quebec's political situation. *15 février 1839* literalizes the incarceration motif of *Le Party*, with its dank, claustrophobic Prison de Montréal setting. The inmates are guilty of no crime other than standing up for their identity. *15 février* also echoes the writer/director's 1994 film, *Octobre*, with the casting of Luc Picard as patriot leader, Chevalier De Lormier. In *Octobre*, Picard appeared as another brooding revolutionary during another crisis in Quebec history as one of the FLQ stalwarts who killed Pierre Laporte.

In addition to these links, the heroic figure of De Lormier embodies all the values that are betrayed by Elvis Graton, Falardeau's most famous creation. The cartoony Graton, a pro-Canada imbecile with an insatiable jones for late Elvis Presley and other consumer goods, was played in three shorts and two features by Julien Poulin, Falardeau's close friend and long-time collaborator. In an allusive bit of casting, Poulin sheds his Elvis persona to appear in *15 février* as a saintly, pro-rebellion priest.

15 février 1839 is Falardeau's dream project, the one obviously meant to be a mystical touchstone that illuminates his other

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REVIEWS continued

work. As was described in *Take One* no. 31, he fought long and hard to make the picture, aided by young people who raised money and protested against Telefilm Canada's refusal to back him (the agency eventually recanted). Is *15 février 1839* worth almost a decade of blood, sweat and tears? It's certainly not the masterpiece some *indépendantiste* viewers see in the film, but it's also not the insufferable, propagandistic dreck various English-language critics accuse it of being.

Shot in CinemaScope by ace director of photography Alain Dostie, the movie offers a vivid, often compelling picture of a colonized people's rage at their dispossession. The "goddamns" burned their houses, stole their land and savaged their sense of identity. Moreover, *15 février*'s modern dialogue, including plenty of *joual*, is one of several anachronisms that gives the picture raw immediacy and connects with its audience. (As I write, it has grossed over \$1 million, a shocker for those who predicted a box-office turkey.) And while the film sanctifies its dashing, romantic heroes, even flirting with religious nationalism, De Lormier and Hindelang are humanized: they are not sterile icons. As a call to arms, the movie puts some 1970s juice back into the cause after years of dry arguments about balance sheets and jurisdictions.

One of the picture's early lines, "Sometimes, a piss is better than a fuck," announces that Falardeau's patriots have bodies and emotions. When De Lormier gets the news about his execution, the scene gives us plenty of time to register his vulnerability and quiet terror. He's not John Wayne fearlessly going down at the Alamo, although his defiant conviction never wavers. The movie's emotional high point is the extended, very tender sequence in which Henriette (Sylvie Drapeau) visits De Lormier, and the two make love enveloped by the shadows of prison walls. In other words, Falardeau is about more than just sovereignist rants. After all, like Robert Wise's *I Want to Live*, and other excruciating death-row dramas, *15 février 1839* is as much about human beings confronting death as it is polemic.

An intelligent moviemaker with a serious devotion to craft, Falardeau also ranks as an original. Who else shoots rowdy, kitschy comedies, such as *Elvis Gratton*, that would crack up John Waters and then segues to grim dramas like *15 février 1839*? As for the visuals, the director had Rembrandt in mind when thinking out the movie's chiaroscuro lighting schemes and some of the images suggest Goya. One key moment echoes the *Pietà*. Throughout the movie, there are few wasted images or gestures. Except when he's getting carried away by a political speech, Falardeau aims at Hemingwayesque terseness and concentration.

The disquieting thing about *15 février 1839* derives from the picture's echoes of buzzwords and issues that are in the air presently, at the beginning of the 21st century. Falardeau's allusions imply that Quebec continues to strain under the yoke of a brutal conqueror, "as if nothing has changed," and the "English," as one character puts it, "can never be forgiven — even by God." Particularly distressing is the movie's diatribe about immigrants in an era when the ethnocentric statements of certain Quebec nationalists have irritated everyone from Anglo activists to liberal-minded sovereignists. Falardeau's dialogue about hating those who don't support the cause reflects what a 19th-century anti-colonial rebel might have said. But applied to the present, with obvious intention, "hate" is a very strong word for non-francophone Quebecers who reject the option of an independent Quebec.

Like the new premier of Quebec, Pierre Falardeau — the gangsta rapper, the Eminem of Quebec moviemakers — feels no obligation to tone down his indignation and contempt.



MAURIE ALIOFF