

ANDRÉ TURPIN

THINGS THAT COME

BY MAURIE ALIOFF



Images courtesy of Film Tonic

The youngish Montreal-based filmmakers who have risen to prominence over the past few years don't call themselves "new wave," "indie-spirited," "dogme-influenced" or any other tag that once promised fresh excitement and is now staler than an ashtray full of butts. Suspicious of antique film jargon, almost entirely male, they don't constitute a school, movement or wave. They are disparate individuals with the style, verve, and know-how it takes to pull off A-list status in the arts media, government-funding agencies and the inner sanctums of film festivals. While their relatively personal movies don't earn the box-office returns of popular Quebec hits like *Les Boys* or *Nuit des noces*, they attract a niche audience in tune with their often insouciant attitude and eagerness to play with the medium.

FROM THE DEEP

Compared to earlier generations of Quebec filmmakers, directors like Louis Bélanger, Manon Briand, Denis Chouinard, Philippe Falardeau, Arto Paragamian, Denis Villeneuve and André Turpin don't get hot and bothered by the collective identity issues that once fuelled Québécois cinema. Like twenty and thirtysomething indies everywhere, including English-speaking Canadians, these Montrealers often make self-regarding films about the kind of loft-dwelling, latté-guzzling people they know best. They're not visionaries who transmute their growing pains into one-of-a-kind dreamscapes. Which is not to say that all the new *vedettes* shoot films about cell-phone-packing young adults enduring an emotional crisis on the funky cool, rapidly upscaling Plateau Mont Royal. Denis Chouinard (*L'Ange de goudron*) and Louis Bélanger (*Post mortem*), for example, are more interested in troubled Algerian immigrants and depressed mortuary attendants who fall for beautiful corpses. Meanwhile, the low-profile Attila Bertalen (*Between the Moon and Montevideo*) and Isabelle Hayeur (*Les Siamois*) aim at anxiety-charged fantasy.

Of the entire new generation of filmmakers, the highest-profile are close personal friends and collaborators, Denis Villeneuve and André Turpin. A seriously experimental, risk-taking director of photography, Turpin shot Villeneuve's two features, *Maelström* (2000) and *Un 32 Août sur terre* (1998). Quebec's current *auteur-du-choix* also directed a segment for Roger Frappier's 1996 anthology film, *Cosmos*. In fact, the 35-year-old Turpin lit and filmed all the *Cosmos* shorts while directing one himself, *Jules et Fanny*, a Woody Allenesque comedy about a neurotic intellectual who tries to convince his ex-girlfriend into showing him her surgically enhanced breasts. Turpin's other cinematography credits include Jean-Philippe Duval's *Matroni et moi* (1999), Paragamian's *Because Why* (1993), and one-time *auteur-du-choix* Marc André Forcier's surrealistic, autobiographical *La Comtesse de Baton Rouge* (1997).

Turpin and Villeneuve both revel in rapidly edited, zig-zagging, nose-diving visuals with a cool, minimalist colour palette. Fond of aggressive realism yoked to a certain whimsical, comic surrealism, they sometimes make the same casting choices. Alexis Martin stars in *Un 32* and Turpin's *Cosmos* segment; David La Haye plays an imploding filmmaker in Villeneuve's contribution to *Cosmos* and stars as the screwed-up underwater photographer in Turpin's new movie, *Un Crabe dans la tête*.

Moreover, the writing-directing duo's primary ideas are often very similar. In *Maelström*, *Un 32 Août sur terre* and *Un Crabe dans la tête*, accidents trigger the storylines, and the main characters are slick, superficial people who deepen emotionally because of the trauma. *Zigrail* (1995), Turpin's debut feature, echoes Villeneuve's *Cosmos* segment, which is a study of caffeinated, hyper-adrenalized male energy veering out of control. And like the Pascale Bussièrès character in *Un 32*, *Zigrail*'s anti-hero thinks having a baby might be the cure for a rampaging fit of ontological insecurity. When I spoke to Turpin at the Toronto film festival, where *Un Crabe* opened the Perspective Canada section, he told me, "I don't know who influences who, but we've exchanged so much, and we've been to the cinema together so often, it's natural that common themes come out."

André Turpin



Un Crabe dans la tête



David La Haye and Pascale Desrochers: Turpin's hyperkinetic globe-trotting hero is much too self-absorbed for an adult relationship with a woman.

Born in Hull, in 1965, Turpin has been living in Montreal since his student days, a time when he dreamt about pursuing his fascination with astro and nuclear physics, both of which he still follows closely "in a very amateur way." The moviemaker's other youthful obsession was any kind of high-speed, acrobatic, even dangerous sport: gymnastics, free-style skiing, running, and snowboarding, a sport that he continues to enjoy. At the time of *Zigrail*, "I used to bungee jump a lot," he says, "and I also did all kinds of stupid stuff with my older brother," who plays a rich, coke-tooting thrill-lover in *Un Crabe*. "We pushed ourselves to extremes, doing stunts. I'm not really into those sports anymore. But I still like the idea of the experience that they can bring you."

At 19, as is the fate of many a filmmaker, André Turpin took an eye-opening class taught by an archetypal cinema prof who knew how to get across the thrills and chills of the movies. Studies of Godard, Truffaut and other kingpins of classic European filmmaking led to a new career dream that aroused what Turpin remembers as parental "depression and horror." Then he shot his first 8mm movie, which excited him even more than a dizzying run down a vertiginous ski trail. "There was the adrenaline that comes out of making films," he recalls, "and I still am addicted to it. You can plan, but you still have to react and reinvent under the pressure of time. That's very exhilarating." So moviemaking, for Turpin, is sport. "Absolutely," he laughs. "But it's much more complete because there are a lot of other factors."

Produced by the indie company Jeux d'Ombres, Turpin's first try at a feature, *Zigrail*, tracks a fictional André, played by another André (Charlebois), as he races around Europe in search of his pregnant girlfriend and ultimately himself. The film's road-tripping anti-hero wants to convince Sonia (Sonia Vigneault) to drop the idea of an abortion and join him in a life that's more stable and mature than the one they have been leading. If the mostly improvised film projects something interesting beyond its beer-drinking, joint-sucking attitude, it's in Turpin's bravura filmmaking. Acting as his own director of photography, he crammed the black-and-white picture with nervous pans and zooms, ultra-long takes alternating with jump cuts, extreme camera angles and changes in distance; a feeling of getting intimate with a subject then abruptly withdrawing. Shadowy pixilated inserts and jolting sound cuts crank up the mix.

Zigrail's stereotypically angst-ridden protagonist doesn't live up to the film's evocative imagery and bold juxtapositions. At one point, a bungee jump segues to Istanbul, which, like France, Greece, Italy, Romania, Croatia, and the film's other locales, might be *Zigrail*'s true subject. It's an existential travelogue about trying to navigate in mysterious places, despite fear and disorientation, and without a bungee enthusiast's umbilical link to safety.

An avid traveller who spent nights walking around the tangled streets of Istanbul with a camera on his shoulder, Turpin



La Haye and Charles-Armand Turpin

is less interested in the cultural experiences of trekking than the private ones. He's crazy about the way travel makes him feel "unstable and scared and free and everything is open. And then when you come back to a place, to a city and hotel room where you've been, you feel like you're at home, perceiving the place very differently. It's so great."

Not only do *Zigrail's* André and *Un Crabe's* Alex reflect Turpin, many critics have speculated that the character is the filmmaker's symbolic take on his generation, the one that used to be called X. "You take real stuff from your life, and the symbols spring out of them naturally," Turpin says. "But there's no conscious statement I'm making about my generation." At the same time, he agrees that the restless thrill-seeking and damaged relationships he depicts in his films have been widespread in his real-life circles. "But I don't know what comes out of what. Maybe because we're unsettled in our relationships, we're looking for thrills. Or another analysis would be that we are so bombarded with images, we develop an appetite for thrills, and that might be why our relationships are not working. I'm not sure which one is the cause, and which one is the effect."

With Alex, the principal character of *Un Crabe*, Turpin believes he has come up with a much more detached and mocking view of a hyperkinetic globe-trotter who is too self-absorbed for a truly adult relationship with a woman. Produced by Luc Dery and Joseph Hillel of Productions Qu4tre par Quatre, a company for which Turpin directs commercial spots, *Un Crabe* is the

outfit's second shot at moviemaking: it follows Philippe Falardeau's highly regarded *La Moitié gauche du frigo*, the Citytv Award-winner for best Canadian debut at last year's Toronto International Film Festival.

Turpin's new movie opens on a slickly handled underwater sequence. Alex drops into the Indian Ocean, snaps pictures of a shipwreck, and floats toward a mysterious encounter that so destabilizes him, he forces it out of his memory. While *Un Crabe dans la tête* seems to echo *Maelström's* aestheticized water fixation, the imagery actually derives from Turpin's scuba-diving experiences, which were, he insists, about a certain state of isolation, not the medium it happens in. During a plunge, "You cut your senses off because you're suspended. There's almost no gravity. There's no sound other than your breathing. If you dive at night, or you go deep enough, there's no light. There's no smell for sure, and the only thing you taste is the rubber in your mouth."

In this state, Turpin continues, "There's no possibility of communicating with anybody, so there's no possible social disease. You're alone with yourself. Sartre wrote that hell is others. I always thought that if you're just stuck with your own consciousness, that must be hell. Can you imagine being stuck with yourself with absolutely no exterior influence or perception?" As *Un Crabe* develops, Alex is propelled from amnesiac denial of his self-confrontation to third-act recognition of it. Water assumes its traditional meanings of death, resurrection and renewal. "Yes," says Turpin, "but it's not the water itself."

Un Crabe dans la tête



Alex (La Haye) in treatment.

It's the total isolation and the silence. It could have taken place in space."

Following the scary deep-sea incident – never fully revealed until the end of the picture – *Un Crabe* shifts tone and tilts toward comedy. On his way to a new assignment, Alex drops into Montreal for what is supposed to be a brief and innocuous stopover, which turns into a swirl of activity. He has an affair with a prickly film critic (Isabelle Blais) and a passionate encounter with the deaf lover (Chantal Giroux) of his best friend (Emmanuel Bilodeau). Alex also helps out a hysterical dope-dealer buddy (Pascale Desrochers) by making her deliveries, while trying to resist a crass marketing plan his agent (Vincent Bilodeau) has devised to promote a gallery show of highly personal photographs.

Un Crabe dans la tête is essentially a satirical romantic comedy about a womanizer with a pathological craving to be loved by everybody in sight. For Turpin, "Alex is a chameleon who endlessly changes his colours so that he can avoid confrontation and judgment. He needs to be accepted; he fears being hurt." The movie's sharply timed gags derive from its protagonist's often ludicrous, backfiring attempts to ingratiate himself. In one scene, he almost comes on to a girlfriend's mother, gushing that he loves knitting because he thinks that she does. La Haye's Alex comes across as a puppyish Don Juan, a nervous sweetheart of a seducer like Peter O'Toole's character in the 1960s comedy classic, *What's New Pussycat?*. But the cutie-pie happens to cause a lot of damage with his lies and deceptions, his unwillingness to grow up and let go of a self that at the deepest level of his consciousness, he knows is as atrophied as a rotting corpse.

The movie's title sounds like a real Québécois expression, as in "*Tabernacle, j'ai un crabe dans la tête*," but Turpin made up the epithet and offers a specific interpretation of its meaning. "You're conscious that you're acting in a weird way, and you

don't want to be this way. It's like a bug is eating your brain." Admitting that Alex is a caricature of himself 10 years ago, Turpin recalls, "I was not as grotesque, but it was bad. I had thousands of friends. I had love affairs all over the place. I just couldn't say no; I wanted to be loved by everybody."

In the picture's last third, Alex faces up to his sins and pries the monster loose. Likewise, Turpin says, "I've matured quite a bit. Today, I have a small circle of very good friends. I've been in a steady relationship for six years, and my girlfriend's going to have a baby. I still have problems, but I control them in a better than average way."

Like *Zigrail*, *Un Crabe* is loaded with eye-popping shots and big, airy locations where Turpin can rely on natural light and keep the camera whirling. At the same time, the pacing is less frenzied, the attitude toward the semi-autobiographical protagonist free of narcissism. "I can describe the character much more cynically," Turpin is pleased to say, "and I laugh at him, and trash him down." As for the movie's resolution, it's poised between cynicism and hope, which Turpin would like to "come out more in my next film. I think Quebec filmmakers are scared of hope because they're afraid of being laughed at, of being tacky. I wanted to finish on a note saying, 'it's not so bad. It could be worse.' I see this problem as being something we can cure, not something profoundly fundamental and tragic."

While André Turpin doesn't know much about Denis Villeneuve's next film, still in a very early stage of development, he's sure that he and his friend need to expand their horizons. Ambivalent about the generational identity problem slot he's been in, Turpin talks about the future with disarming frankness. Villeneuve's characters, he believes, "will evolve in the same way mine will. I know that we're both sick and tired of writing about childish, undecided people." **TAKE ONE**