

The four Canadian features going to Cannes are brave personal visions



Virgo; Lewis in *Rude* (left): the revolutionary sting of a Spike Lee—but without the dogma



PHIL SNE/CANAPRESS

RENEGADES ON THE RIVIERA

BY BRIAN D. JOHNSON

At the 1993 Cannes Film Festival, Quebec producer Denise Robert was having a drink with a friend one afternoon on the terrace of the Majestic Hotel, overlooking the French Riviera, when David Puttnam stopped by her table. Puttnam, the British producer of such Oscar-winning movies as *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *The Killing Fields* (1984), asked what she was up to. Robert said she was working on a first film by a young Quebec director. She doubted that his name—Robert Lepage—would mean anything to him. "My God, he's wonderful," said Puttnam, who was well aware of Lepage's reputation as a visionary of the stage. "I'm definitely interested." Not wasting any time, Robert met Puttnam in London the following week. He agreed to co-produce her movie. And this week, two years later, she is back at the Cannes Film Festival to unveil it: *The Confessional*, Lepage's feature debut, commands the May 18 opening night slot of the prestigious Directors' Fortnight program. And so the Cannes life cycle comes full circle, from the first flirtation of deal-making to the consummation of a world premiere.

For 12 days each spring, Cannes becomes the movie industry's busiest intersection of power, glamor and art. Now in its 48th year, the festival is also the world's largest annual media event, with 4,000 journalists attending. The bait for this year's feeding frenzy includes Sharon Stone, Emma Thompson, Harvey Keitel, Nicholas Cage, Catherine Deneuve, Diane Keaton, Dan Aykroyd and Johnny Depp, to name a few. But for all the glitz of its red-carpet galas and photo opportunities, Cannes serves primarily as a showcase for Hollywood's mean, lean competition—independently produced movies from around the world. Last year's grand prize winner was Quentin Tarantino's infamous *Pulp Fiction*. The same festival launched *Exotica*, which

won the International Critics' Prize and went on to become Canadian director Atom Egoyan's first North American hit.

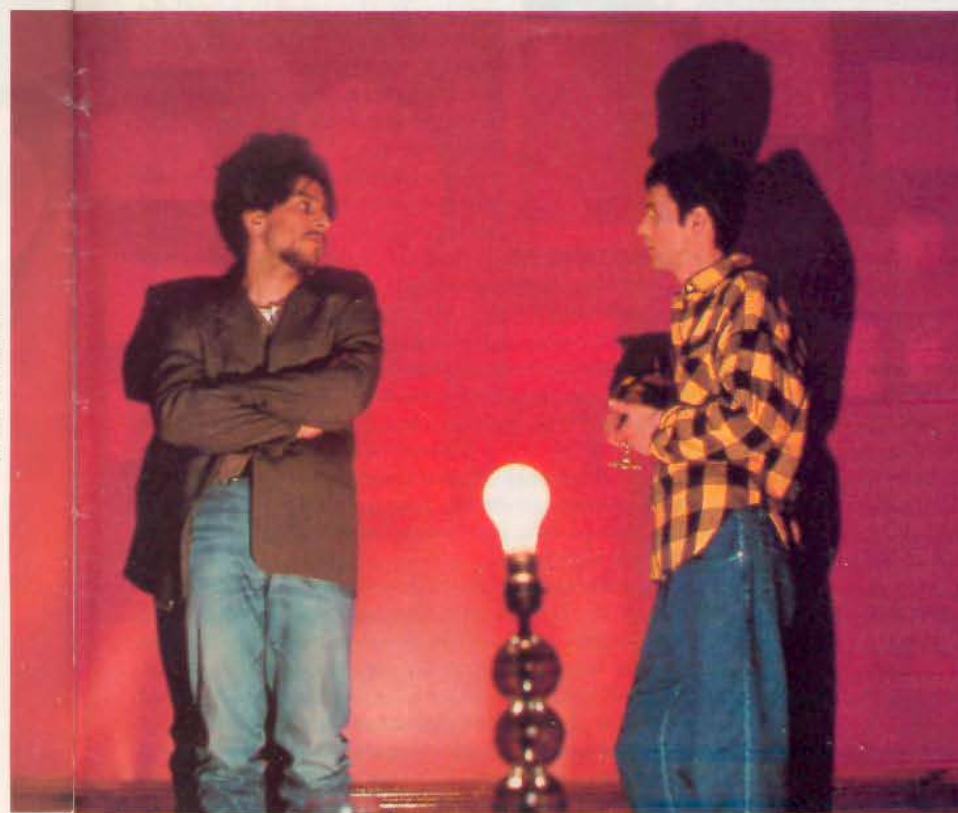
This year, there are no Canadian movies among the 24 features in official competition at Cannes. With four features in other prominent festival programs, however, the Canadian presence is unusually strong. The most hotly anticipated of them is Lepage's *The Confessional*, a psychological drama set against the backdrop of Alfred Hitchcock filming *I Confess* (1953) in Quebec City. But another Quebec director, Charles Binamé, has won a spot in the Directors' Fortnight for his second feature, *Eldorado*, a Generation X drama. Meanwhile, two films written and directed by Jamaican-Canadians based in Toronto have found a place in the Riviera sun: Clement Virgo's *Rude* is featured in *Un Certain Regard* (one of the prestige programs), and *Soul Survivor*, by Stephen Williams, opens the International French Critics' Week series.

All four Canadian films are personal works obsessed with identity and loss—stories of characters desperately trying to get back to their roots. And, by bizarre coincidence, three of the four movies (all except *The Confessional*) open with a scene of a deejay rapping into a microphone. Most remarkable, however, is that two young Jamaican-Canadians who are close friends can make simultaneous claims to being



J.P. DUMAS/PONOPRESE

Lepage; Goyette and Bluteau in *The Confessional* (right): the quest for the father



the first black film-maker to direct a Canadian feature. Their movies display some striking parallels. Both take place in Toronto public-housing projects, tell stories of Jamaican men struggling to protect their integrity from local gangsters, and end with classic reggae ballads of yearning and redemption. Yet Virgo, 28, and Williams, 29, direct in diametrically different styles. *Soul Survivor* is a straightforward, realistic drama about a young man's frustrated search for a father figure. *Rude* is boldly unconventional, a surreal weave of three separate tales spanning an Easter weekend.

Almost certain to make a splash in Cannes, *Rude* is one of the most provocative Canadian films ever made. Its three-ply narrative includes: an artist who tries to escape his drug-dealing past to fulfil his duties as a father; a closet homosexual boxer who becomes a guilt-ridden accomplice in a brutal incident of gay bashing; and a window dresser whose boyfriend has left her after she decided to have an abortion. Theatrical blackouts separate the scenes. And running through it all is an incendiary monologue by a deejay (Sharon Lewis) at a pirate radio station named Rude who talks a blue streak about sex, contraception and Armageddon.

Virgo directs with the revolutionary sting of a Spike Lee without the dogma; his dialogue displays the profane wit of a Quentin Tarantino with something to say. The images, meanwhile, are ripe with sensuality, whether dwelling on a knife slapping peanut butter on bread or a syringe squeezing heroin into an addict's neck. "I want the audience to have a visceral reaction to my film," the

director told *Maclean's* last week. "I want to take the audience out on a date and seduce them."

The son of a shoe-designer father and nurse's-aide mother, Virgo moved to Canada at age 11 and lived in Toronto public housing. After graduating from high school, he first applied his eye for color and texture to clothes. He worked as a window dresser and aspired to be a fashion mogul. But after a few years, he wrote the script for *Rude*, which won him a place at the Canadian Film Centre, the film school founded in Toronto by director Norman Jewison in 1986. He made an award-winning 1993 short called *Save My Lost Nigga Soul*. Then, on a budget of \$350,000 in cash (largely from government funding agencies) and another \$400,000 in deferred fees (payable from any profit), he shot *Rude*, one of three movies made this year under the auspices of a new program at the centre—which has become the first film school in the world to successfully produce its own feature films.

The threadbare budget forced Virgo to be creative. "You write a scene in a street and it becomes a scene in a stairwell," he laughs. "Things the Americans take for granted we just can't do—we can't shut down the Gardiner Expressway just to blow it up." In *Rude*, he detonates less tangible targets, the unholy trinity of racism, sexism and homophobia. And he portrays them so graphically that he worries some people might misinterpret him—in one scalding scene, a white gangster calls his black underling "an ugly f—ing ape... a chimp... a haircut posing as a black man." Virgo says he just hopes that the audience gets it. "In Cannes," he notes, "the French like to boo films sometimes."

Still, just going there is a dream come true for him and for Williams, another graduate of the Film Centre. Williams says that he is "thrilled that two black films are going to Cannes," but criticizes attempts to categorize black film-makers as if they have their own genre. "We're not sociologists," he says, "and there is no such thing as 'the black experience,' except for the media. My movie is a universal story of family, identity and spiritual direction."

Soul Survivor's hero is torn between compassion and ambition, and between two father figures. Tyrone—superbly played by the director's brother, Peter Williams—quits his job in a hair salon to work for a ruthless Jamaican money lender. And Tyrone's cousin, a Rastafarian reggae musician (David Smith), has fallen dangerously into debt. Williams drew on his own experience for some elements of the story. The son of a retired doctor and a mother who now works as an Ottawa civil servant, he grew up surrounded by political violence in Kingston, Jamaica. As teenagers, he and his brother were sent to school in England. Later, moving to Canada, he obtained a BA in English and philosophy at Queen's University, and then—like Tyrone—found himself living in a Toronto housing project and sweeping floors in a hair salon.

Williams, however, escaped the salon by training as a camera assistant and finding work on film sets. After spending a year at the Film Centre with Virgo and shooting his own award-winning short, *A Variation on the Key 2 Life*, he filmed *Soul Survivor* on a \$1.3-million budget. Now, his career is well under way. He has been asked to direct singer Jimmy Cliff in a sequel to the 1973 Jamaican classic, *The Harder They Come*. He is also a fanatical devotee of the late reggae star Bob Marley. And the director's big dream is to cast his brother, Peter (who resembles Marley), in the singer's life story. But a first feature, like a first novel, is often a writer's most personal work. Tyrone's father in *Soul Survivor*, a retired trade unionist weakened by alcoholism, was "for better or for worse, in-

spired by my real father," says Williams, whose parents are separated. "My father's an alcoholic, and it tore my family apart. But in the film, I tried to get beyond it to show that there was a man with ideals and principles who became horribly transformed by an oppressive culture."

A lost father also figures strongly in Lepage's movie. *The Confessional* is the story of two brothers, played by Lothaire Bluteau and Patrick Goyette, who reunite at their father's funeral. Goyette's character is adopted, and he is determined to find his biological father. Flashbacks trace the mystery of his birth back to 1952, and to a priest hearing a distraught confession from a pregnant teenager in a church that has been taken over by a film crew shooting Hitchcock's *I Confess*. "The quest of the father is in every Quebec film," said Lepage, 37, in an interview last week. "I sort of fought it, but you can't get away from it. It's also the search for identity."

While Lepage was writing the first draft of his script in 1993, his own father was dying of cancer. "Of course, it had a very large influence on the script," he says. "We're always in a kind of *Hamlet* situation when a father dies. Family relationships, the role of your older brother

Bussi res; Peter Williams and Tyrone Benskin Smith (right): end-of-the-millennium anxiety in Montreal, and a Toronto man torn between compassion and ambition



—everything takes on new meaning." Lepage himself has an adopted brother and sister. And his father worked as taxi driver in Quebec City during the filming of *I Confess*. *The Confessional* features a cabbie who drives Hitchcock around, but his father never had that opportunity, says Lepage. Despite the whiff of autobiography, the director stresses that his movie is fiction. "It's not really a thriller," he says, "but it's quite Hitchcockian, intentionally so." The filming was haunted with "twilight-zone coincidences," he adds. One involved shooting a scene in a strip club. "The bar owner asked if we wanted to use one of the 'confessionals.' That's what they call the little cubicles where the dancers perform for the customers in private. And they had these little archways that resembled the doors of the confessional in the church where we were shooting."

As a stage director, Lepage is known for his visual imagination. "People told me moving to film would be a natural thing," he says, "because my plays are structured like films. But I seem to have brought my own style to it. Theatre is a more vertical art. The stage is a vertical place with traps in the floor and flies above your head. You tell stories in a metaphorical way. Film is more horizontal, the art of panning. You tell stories from left to right. The difference with this film is that it has a certain verticality—there are a lot of metaphors,

one on top of the other." Although Lepage has worked as a screen actor, he was surprised by the solitary nature of film-making. "There's a huge crew," he says, "but you're very alone. You become extremely obsessed with who you are and what you want to say. You spend a lot of time in the editing room."

With *Eldorado*, fellow Quebec director Charles Binam  has tried to revolutionize the rigid and cumbersome ritual of making dramatic features. Although he wrote the plot, *Eldorado's* dialogue was entirely improvised by the actors, and he shot the whole movie with a skeletal crew using fast film and natural light—an approach that is almost unheard of for a director shooting a big-screen movie in 35 mm. *Eldorado's* young cast spent two months learning their characters, but not their lines. Instead, they would learn to improvise—in scenes unrelated



to the story—until the cameras rolled. For Binam , 45, the technique takes him back to his origins as a documentary maker. More recently, he directed Quebec TV's award-winning hit mini-series, *Blanche*, a period drama starring *Eldorado's* Pascale Bussi res. "Coming out of that," Binam  says, "I wanted to talk about our period. We live in a world of solitude and demobilization. When I was in my 20s, we believed in something. Today, the students don't seem to believe in anything."

A box-office hit in Quebec, *Eldorado* intercuts stories of six young characters adrift in a Montreal summer.

The movie bears some resemblance to *Rude*. Again, the mood is end-of-the-millennium anxiety, with a sense of erotic urgency. And at its heart is an iconoclastic deejay with a dirty mouth. But unlike the sultry poetess in *Rude*, the deejay in *Eldorado* is a nihilistic jerk, a shock jock in the mold of Howard Stern. Rather than heartbeat reggae, its music is the spiritually vacant, goose-step pulse of techno-rave. And the movie's Gen-X wanderers have no roots to get back to. They include a deranged parakeet-owner (Pascale Montpetit) who gabs to her analyst, a dispirited barmaid (Macha Limonchik) who submits to unprotected sex in a public washroom with a stranger, and a roller-blading thief (Bussi res) who lost her cellist boyfriend on a train track in a lopsided suicide pact.

Eldorado's desolation row of lost souls—along with the dispossessed characters of *The Confessional*, *Rude* and *Soul Survivor*—will briefly find a home in the Cannes circus, Babylon on the Riviera. Getting attention at the world's largest film festival is hard. But as gossip buzzes up and down the fabled Croisette each day, jaded festival-goers are still looking for that rarest of commodities, a surprise that sneaks around the hype—a movie that is like nothing they have seen before. And among this year's renegade Canadian offerings, they might just find it. □

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