

Les Portes Tournantes

("The Revolving Doors")

Canada / France : 1988 : dir. Francis Mankiewicz : Malofilm / L'Union Générale : 102 min
prod: : scr: Jacques Savoie & Francis Mankiewicz : dir.ph.: Thomas Vamos

François Méthé

Monique Spaziani; Gabriel Arcand; Miou Miou; Jacques Penot; Francoise Faucher; Jean-Louis Roux; Rémy Girard; Rita Lafontaine; Hubert Loiselle; Papa John Creach; Charles Reiner; Marcel Sabourin; Charlotte Laurier; Martin Faucher; Réal Houle; Stéphanie L'Abbé; Louise Mailhot; Jason McRae; Jean-Sébastien Potvin; Nicolas Prévost

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*Francois Méthé plays Antoine, a plot device for stitching the present day to the early life of his estranged grandmother. His role in the film is subsidiary but pivotal, and once again he offers audiences a distinct, **continental** definition of the sensibilities and capabilities of late childhood / early puberty, in marked contrast to the model we see from a thousand American films and sitcoms. Antoine is emotionally mature, modest and responsible. He does not display an enormous conceit of himself.*

Source for all stills: Bob 123's Boy Actors of Canada website

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A dying woman recalls her earlier life, marriage and musical ambitions. Slight but quite enjoyable bout of nostalgia, heavy on period charm. Scr: Jacques Savoie & Francis Mankiewicz."

"This lumbering tale of thwarted mother-love seems even more bereft of sense than sensibility." – Derek Malcolm, **Guardian**

Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide review:

"Nearing the end of her life, Céleste Beaumont (Spaziani) sends her diary to the grown-up son (Arcand) she has never seen, himself the father of a 12-year old boy, Antoine (Méthé), whose mother (Miou-Miou) lives apart from them. The diary tells how, in the 1920s, young Céleste became a piano accompanist for silent films. Leaving her job with the coming of talkies, she married wealthy Pierre Blaudelle (Penot), but when he was killed in World War II, she left her newborn son with her in-laws, went to New York, and became a jazz pianist.

The introverted Blaudelle is disturbed by the diary, but Antoine decides to go to New York and meet his grandmother. Shanghai-born Mankiewicz, a former Canadian TV cameraman and director, has made an unusual and charming feature that sends his protagonists and his audience through the revolving doors of time. There are joyous moments in the evocation of Céleste's early life and of the silent cinema, and a seductive, dream-like atmosphere permeates the film. The performances are good, too, but for all its virtues, the movie has a sketchy and superficial screenplay that leaves one vaguely dissatisfied."

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Cinema had recently celebrated the 70th anniversary of the switch to all-talking pictures. But this absorbing French-Canadian drama shows that the coming of sound meant the end of a unique form of entertainment, the silent movie, complete with its atmospheric piano accompaniment. As the pianist who leaves the dream palaces to find fame in the jazz joints of New York, Monique Spaziani gives an engaging performance, piling on the years for the bookend segments, in the latter of which she meets the grandson who has come to know her through her diary. Francis Mankiewicz directs neatly and there's a solid performance from French actress Miou-Miou.
*** "

Bob123's Boy Film Stars of Canada website review:

"A quiet painter, separated from his wife for a year, receives a suitcase in the mail from his mother, whom he hasn't seen since infancy. He believes she abandoned him to his wealthy, paternal grandparents. The suitcase contains mementos and a diary, a long letter to him, written over the years, with details of her youth, her first job as a pianist at a cinema, the coming of talkies, her marriage, and how he came to live with his grandparents. As he reads through the materials and her story comes to life, his son Antoine, who's about 10 or 12, tries to break through his father's silence and sorrow by taking matters into his own hands."

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Drama. An ageing pianist sends the diary of her life to her son. In French with English subtitles. *** "

Reading those two synopses one might well ignore this film altogether, but it has a relevance to the archive. Structured as a series of (overly nostalgic) flashbacks to the 1920s and the

dying days of silent cinema, these are knitted together by a present-day story in which sullen artist Madrigal (Gabriel Arcand) suddenly receives a parcel of notes and memorabilia from the mother who abandoned him as a baby. Arcand is separated from his wife and lives with his son Antoine (Francois Méthé), +/- 12, a pianist. Madrigal becomes increasingly withdrawn as he leafs through these unsolicited memoirs of his mother's early life, so Antoine seeks solace with his mother, a musical director in the pop world. Ultimately, concerned for his father's state, Antoine takes off alone for New York to find his father's estranged mother. In the present-day sequences of the film, the son, and not either of his parents, is the central character.

Madrigal's mother Céleste (Spaziani) grew up in a musical family of 12 children, and is plucked from the nest by a provincial cinema owner seeking a pianist to improvise accompaniment to the films he exhibits. He also has lecherous designs on the young Céleste, but that plot strand is left hanging in the air as soon as it's introduced. Céleste is courted by the son of a wealthy local family, a young man entirely devoid of personality. She grows so intoxicated by the allure and mystique of the movies that her own life becomes a fantasy projection of the screen – she dresses in flamboyant Hollywood costume and strikes Garbo and Gish poses for her mesmerised fiancé. Her movie queen airs (so the film has it) enthral the audiences at her cinema too, so that, with the arrival of **"THE JAZZ SINGER"**, her cinema-owner crows in triumph now he's at last able to dispense with her services. Heartbroken, she marries the vacuous but wealthy young man, and when attempts by his parents to wean her onto more refined musical aspirations – she does not know her Chopin from her Chaplin – fail, they connive to separate her from the child she is expecting. The war arrives, and her husband quickly joins up to escape his domineering mother, so that Céleste is forced to leave the baby, whom she has insisted on calling Madrigal, behind with his grandparents. She was never to see the child again.

These flashback episodes, which are the core of the film, are shot in a dazzling haze of soft focus, but fail completely to persuade as recreations of the late Twenties. So much of the story is simply implausible – provincial townsfolk (in Quebec or elsewhere) would more likely have resented this local girl with her grand movie queen airs than applaud her flamboyance. Céleste is shown to be such a strong-willed, independent woman that it doesn't ring true she would cede her baby to the hated mother-in-law so meekly, even were she fool enough to marry such an insipid spineless fellow in the first place. Mankiewicz allows the silent film clips which are glimpsed to seem charmingly antique and bereft of excitement, when his whole thesis rests on the narcotic spell the cinema wove upon Céleste and her audiences. He chose washed-out prints of **"THE GENERAL"** and **"SALLY OF THE SAWDUST"**, when he should at least have selected crisp, bold prints of genuinely thrilling silent cinema, if not reconstructed them himself.

Since the scenes flooding back of bygone days quite fail to convince, the present-day sequences with Antoine shuttling between his separated parents have no real purpose. And the present reflects the past all too obviously. When his father receives the parcel of memoirs from Céleste, Antoine is busily tape-recording a diary to his mother. He, like Céleste, is a pianist. His father, like Céleste's husband, is conveyed as weak, ineffectual and spiritless. When his father discovers that his own given name was Madrigal and decides to re-adopt it, the dialogue he has with his son over the name mirrors exactly the dialogue between Céleste and her husband when she first proposed it.

Francois Méthé's Antoine, like so many children in Canadian cinema, is refreshingly mature and psychologically perceptive. Although he confesses to being afraid at night sometimes in his father's yawning studio, tells his mother he wants to be a lesbian when he grows up, and dismisses himself as "too young" to comprehend his father's brooding resentment toward Céleste, he is in fact the emotional equal of his parents, and has the courage to take the resolution into his own hands. The film ends when (with implausible ease) he has tracked down the ageing Céleste to the New York jazz club she still haunts. As he emerges through

the revolving doors of central station, he catches a brief glimpse of the young Céleste arriving through those same doors forty years before. (Just in case you were wondering about that title.) Virtually the same motif for lapsed time had been used by Sergio Leone in "**ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA**" (84) – the 1930s Robert De Niro melting into the 1960s Robert De Niro at the gateway to the Big Apple.

A glib and facile film, steeped in synthetic nostalgia but with no real sense of its period, "**LES PORTES TOURNANTES**" is still to be commended for treating the boy with more respect than could be found in any comparable American (or British) title. Its sensibilities are unmistakably French, even if it pleases to forget that France had a vibrant and healthy silent cinema of its own. Francois Méthé was previously seen as Sebastien in "**LA DAME EN COULEURS**" (85). Nothing else is known of him.

For a more pleasing homage to early cinema, see "**NUOVO CINEMA PARADISO**" (88), and subject index under **GRANDPARENTS, MUSIC / YOUNG MUSICIANS** and **SILENT CINEMA**.