

REVIEW

Review of René Richard Cyr's musical adaptation *Nos belles-sœurs*

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The problem inherent in transmediality (which, as a translator of poetry, I know all too well) is that natural tendency to compare the new work to – or rather judge it *against* – the original. Given the iconic, canonical, even cult status of Michel Tremblay's 1965 two-act play *Les Belles-sœurs*, this can really only be expected. Indeed, this inclination might be behind René Richard Cyr's subtle title change for his musical adaptation of Tremblay's stage play, using the possessive pronoun “*Nos*” in place of the collective definitive article “*Les*” (with the qualifier “*le film*,” although not part of the official title, being added to both the poster and DVD artwork of the film). In so doing, Cyr affirms that his adaptation Tremblay's original is just that, his own creation. That said, *Nos belles-sœurs* is a vibrant, strikingly beautiful tribute to what is perhaps Québec's most important stage play.

Any critic seeking to nitpick between the original play and Cyr's cinematic celebration would be hard-pressed to find someone who knows the source text as well as the filmmaker does. His stage adaptation of *Les Belles-sœurs* earned Cyr (and his collaborator Daniel Bélanger) the Félix Award for best stage direction in 2010. Likewise, Cyr has adapted various other Tremblay pieces to great acclaim, such as *Le Chant de Sainte Carmen de la Main* (2014), having also acted two decades earlier in a stage production of *Hosanna* (1991). His familiarity with Tremblay's Plateau Mont-Royal and his understanding of the working-class *joual* for which Tremblay's characters are noted is personal and intimate. Simply stated, no one is better situated to adapt *Les Belles-sœurs* for the big screen.

Turning to *Nos belles-sœurs*, in response to the drab, working class blandness of the 1960s Quiet Revolution, Cyr substitutes a veritable explosion of color – his palettes almost mirror the fantastic Eastman Kodak yellow, cyan and magenta of Jacques Demy's cinematic universe (his *Demy-monde* of the 1960s). Interior shots, costumes, wallpaper, rugs, fair scenes, etc., are all saturated with rich, lively color – particularly during the ensemble musical numbers. For all their whimsy, the nascent materialism and fatigue with the mundane quotidian of working-class life shine through, even in song and dance numbers. In short, abundant spectacle never overshadows substance.

As in the play, female characters are more fleshed out than their male counterparts and dominate the screen space. Québécoise actress and Denys Arcand muse Geneviève Schmidt plays a masterful Germaine Lauzon, capturing all the pathos of a caring mother and a housewife who dreams of more. Likewise, Jeanne Bellefeuille, who plays her starry-eyed daughter Linda Lauzon, is a revelation in this film. Anne-Élisabeth Bossé steals a late scene as Rose Ouimet, capturing all the bleakness of a 44-year-old housewife caught in a controlling marriage – and even singing in *joual*. And popular singer Véronic DiCaire was a brilliant casting choice to play Pierrette Guérin in the much-anthologized “night-club-as-hell” debate and the subsequent musical number in the night club.

Indeed, the changing of the cultural guard from the *Grande noirceur* religious nationalism and obscurantism of the 1950s to the social and sexual openness of the 1960s is portrayed with great aplomb. Across generations, as in the play, the polyphony and diversity of a Montreal in transition is maintained. With this in mind, *Nos belles-sœurs* is as valuable a film from a socio-historical standpoint as it is a worthy adaptation of a timeless literary classic.