

BETWEEN THE SOLITUDES

AN INTERVIEW WITH ABBEY JACK NEIDIK

Last fall, during the weeks following the hooplah and hysteria of the event now referred to as The Referendum (*vous vous souvenez?*) a Montreal-produced TV documentary called *Between the Solitudes* stirred a lot of media interest and public discussion. Made by the husband and wife team of Irene Angelico and Abbey Jack Neidik (she produced, he directed), written and hosted by *Gazette* columnist Josh Freed, *Solitudes* gives voice to Montreal's so-called "Anglo" community. Although this group, in the nineties less "Anglo" than a multi-ethnic sample of all the world's continents, feels attached to Quebec—especially Montreal—it is also fed up with the excesses of the province's nationalists.

For obvious reasons, many people are surprised to discover that *Between the Solitudes* was commissioned and partly financed by Radio-Québec, the government-owned television network. Just before the doc's RQ telecast in its original version (*Entre Solitudes*), and a few weeks later, after the English language version had aired nationally on the CBC's *Witness* series, I spoke to Abbey Neidik about his film.

We met at Beauty's, the city's popular bagels and lox hangout, and Salsa, a *tortilla* and *frijoles* joint on the Main. Given the doc's obvious affection for Montreal's diverse ethnic groups—and for the *plateau*, the neighbourhood where these restaurants are located—both places were logical venues for the following interview.

MA: Why do you think the reaction to the film was so enthusiastic?

AJN: I think *Between the Solitudes* blends humour and serious issues in a way that makes people listen. Irene and I wanted to make a film about the Anglo situation in Montreal without being aggressive and dogmatic. So we decided on a personalized approach and asked Josh to be the narrator and

by Maurie Alioff main character. He's funny, bright, and a bit of an eccentric. Josh turned out to be a perfect choice.

MA: Gerald LeBlanc, the nationalist journalist who was one of the most aggressive critics of Mordecai Richler's *New Yorker* piece on Quebec, also plays a prominent role.

AJN: We realized we couldn't make a film about the English experience in Montreal without having a French counterpart for Josh. In many ways, Anglo Montrealers define themselves in relation to the French, which is what makes us different from Albertans. Josh and Gerald battle back and forth in a never-ending argument that we all say we're tired of, but we always engage in passionately.

MA: The movie ends with Josh and Gerald still battling.

AJN: Their argument reflects a Canadian experience that doesn't necessarily have a resolution. Maybe it doesn't need one. Gerald and Josh are

friends, but they will always argue. It's an exciting, dynamic process. To put it on another level, whether we have a constitution or not is not what's most important. The main thing is to make things work on the streets.

MA: Do things work on the streets?

AJN: Definitely. On the street level in Montreal, the French are open and tolerant, and we get along fine. People in western Canada don't see what is wonderful about Quebec. They just see the headlines about Bill 178.

MA: What about the politicians, the hard-liners, and the media responsible for those headlines?

AJN: I think French Quebec is beginning to re-analyse itself, but it hasn't really addressed its own diversity yet. There's a social experiment going on here, and like all experiments, it involves a process. I'm optimistic because of my faith in the Québécois character. I hope that supernationalism is just a stage in Quebec's evolution toward a



Abbey Jack Neidik

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERTRAND CARRIÈRE

more universal attitude that enjoys the fact of cultures co-existing.

MA: How do French-speaking audiences react to the picture?

AJN: I am surprised at how many francophone Québécois are fed up with the ultra-nationalist, us-them, *pure laine* philosophy. In fact, that's been their predominant reaction.

Many agree with the film's message of tolerance. They sympathize with immigrants who feel that they are not part of Quebec society. They say they know people who believe in a narrow, homogenous society, and that they oppose it.

Others say they have never heard the Anglo point-of-view. When Josh's friend Frieda tells him she's moving to Vancouver, one person asked me in a meek voice, "She doesn't feel wanted here?" It was the first time he realized that a lot of Anglos were leaving because they feel Montreal is no longer their home.

MA: A young Québécoise filmmaker I know confirms your and your movie's optimism. She's tired of intolerance, of old guard nationalists who see "English" wickedness lurking everywhere. On the other hand, not long after *Between the Solitudes* appeared, a new study showed that over a certain period, bilingual people in Quebec earned lower salaries than unilingual francophones doing an equivalent job. The implication is that even if an Anglo speaks French, diligently watches Lise Payette's *téléromans*, and so on, he or she doesn't have the same prospects as a *pure laine* Québécois. Fears like this lead some viewers to believe that your film is too optimistic.

AJN: Some people do see it as not hard-hitting enough. A reporter in *The Globe and Mail* thought the film should have been tougher, and Josh should have committed himself more. On the other hand, a Quebec critic thought it was strident, too tough.

When Irene and Josh were on a phone-in radio show, the host said that *Between the Solitudes* made him incredibly sad, that it wasn't optimistic, that it came to a foregone conclusion there was no hope for the English-speaking community. On the same show, someone called in and said that the movie is incredibly positive and made them feel hopeful about Montreal and Quebec.

To me, the film operates more like a mirror than a window. It allows people to see their own shticks and prejudices. One of its strengths is that it provokes questioning.

MA: The film suggests that Montreal is an attractive place to live, and that cross-cultural relations work on a person-to-person level. I agree, but this isn't true for everyone. For example, I once heard an interview with a French-born civil servant, who said that after many years in Quebec, he has never been invited to lunch by his co-workers. Far more serious than petty social humiliation is the problem of young people who feel discriminated against in the workplace and are getting very pissed off.

AJN: Every English-speaking person we talked to felt that the Quebec government did not represent them, that they weren't equal members of

this society. Obviously, we could have yelled and screamed, "Look at all these injustices." But *The Gazette* has been doing that every day for umpteen years in article after article, and nothing changes.

It's only when you create an emotional bond that things happen. For instance, in *Song of Tibet*, which I co-produced with Anne Henderson and Kent Martin, it's not the facts about Chinese treatment of the Tibetans that gets to people. What they remember is the effect of the abuses on the people they are watching.

A filmmaker takes an audience along a story's emotional line. At the end of it, it's up to the audience to make up their own minds. In *Between the Solitudes*, I wanted to break down the myth of the Anglo enemy by putting the French audience into our shoes. I think we communicated more that way without skirting any issues.

MA: In the film, Josh Freed's odd couple relationship with Gerald LeBlanc reminds me of Bogart and Claude Rains in *Casablanca*. Josh is an established, accepted figure in the city's media milieu. Does this have anything to do with the avuncular benevolence of his approach?

AJN: I think Josh was true to who he is, and a documentary film has to be true to the person you're filming. If I had been filming Richler, it would be a different movie, maybe better, maybe worse. It's like the differences in performances when you have one actor rather than another playing a role.

You can make many possible films about Montreal, just as you can tell many love stories. To reduce it to one version is dangerous, and it has nothing to do with reality. *Between the Solitudes* is one tiny sliver of a very complicated problem. I'm proud of our version of the story. Other filmmakers can continue it.

MA: You shot from October 1991 to August 1992, following the changing seasons. Why?

AJN: Weather rules our psyches in Canada. During the long winter, people get into a kind of Ingmar Bergman, what's-the-purpose-of-life space. In spring, the juices start flowing, and in the fall, the roller coaster starts all over again. Weather is such an inherent part of living in Montreal, we had to portray the seasons—which created a lot of problems and really was a gamble.

MA: Throughout the movie, you keep cutting away to alluring images of Montreal.

AJN: We wanted to convey some of what makes this city so special to all Montrealers. After screening, many people said you could sense a real tenderness for Montreal. This was something I really wanted to get across.

MA: What is a Montrealer?

AJN: Someone who sticks up for the Canadians (laughs). You know, as kids, French Montrealers and English Montrealers from opposite sides of town both daydream about playing on the same team. It's an interesting metaphor, maybe for the whole country.

MA: You play hockey, don't you?

AJN: Yeah, about three times a week, always as centre.



*Above: Josh Freed,
Abbey Jack Neidik,
and Irene Angelico.
Left: on location,
in Montreal.*



MA: Not all Montrealers are into hockey.

AJN: Montreal is a street city. You go out, you meet neighbours. You sit in a café and analyze life, art, the latest film, whatever. All around you there are arguments, different languages. This creates a lot of energy because each language, each culture, brings its own particular drive.

MA: The same is true of Toronto.

AJN: Yes, but it doesn't have the French component. Here, there's always a creative tension between the English and the French. It makes you more aware. Everything's political.

MA: *Between the Solitudes* came close to being shown a week before the constitutional ref-

erendum in a CBC network/Radio-Québec simulcast that would have been a broadcasting first. Then the deal fell through. What happened?

AJN: Radio-Québec, after being very supportive in the making of the film, agreed to the simulcast. But someone—we don't know who, or whether this person was inside RQ or on the outside, asked, "Have you checked out the film on the Anglos? It might contravene the referendum laws."

Radio-Québec's lawyers screened the movie and concluded that, although it had nothing to do with the constitution, nothing to do with the referendum, it had a "oui feel" to it—whatever that is. So Radio-Québec decided to show it in the slot

where it was originally scheduled: after the referendum

MA: And the CBC?

AJN: We got a phone call from them after the film got up to the top levels of their hierarchy. They said that although they liked *Between the Solitudes*, it was “too no” for English Canada. They decided, also, to show it after the referendum.

MA: Not only did you lose the simulcast for your “yes-no” movie, you also lost a prime time, coast-to-coast telecast.

AJN: We did get a prime time telecast of *Entre Solitudes* on Radio-Québec and a national telecast on CBC at 11 p.m.—unfortunately the time slot the CBC has set aside for its *Witness* series. On prime time, we would have had a bigger audience. When people heard that the film was going to be shown so late on a Monday night, many figured the CBC had deemed it too controversial for a prime time slot.

MA: *Gazette* TV critic Mike Boone wrote that *Witness* is “unlikely to be witnessed by too many sentient Canadians.” You must have been disappointed.

AJN: Especially Irene because she worked so hard on all the negotiations. You know, we always thought of the film as a coming together of French and English, not a ‘look you guys, you’re real assholes, you shouldn’t be doing this to us.’ The simulcast would have been a perfect opportunity to do this—

and very elegantly—but once again, English Canada and French Canada had their own separate agendas.

I also find it frightening that someone somewhere makes choices like these. In places like the CBC and Radio-Québec, there are two types of people: those who use their jobs to do something positive, and others who see their jobs as ends in themselves. All they care about is, Don’t rock the boat as long as I stay in power. If anything is controversial, and you stick out your neck, you might get hurt. Why are there these restrictions? Often because of imagined fears. The hordes are going to take over, and there will be chaos. If the people have certain information, imagine what they will do. They must be curbed.

MA: Can your movie have an impact outside Canada?

AJN: I hope so. Irene, Josh and I wanted to make a film that would be a metaphor for all groups separated by language, religion, or nationality. It’s a film about bridges, tolerance, and above all about dialogue between peoples.

MA: What’s Canada’s problem?

AJN: (laughs) There’s something about the Canadian story that is not easy to define, or see in terms of cute little infobytes.

MA: We kind of care more about people than Americans, and we kind of have an ironic, understated sense of humour. What can you do with that?

AJN: Well, you won’t get to Las Vegas with it. □