

# Entre Solitudes

**French documentary puts anglos in the spotlight**

**By Philip Fine**

**E**arly this month, the French television network Radio Quebec will broadcast *Entre Solitudes*, a one hour documentary on Quebec anglophones, hosted by Montreal writer Josh Freed.

Freed, 43, is a Gazette columnist, freelance broadcast journalist and screenwriter who has garnered a reputation as an observer of the strange cultural practices of the shrinking English-speaking population.

“As we become closer and closer to an extinct species, we are becoming the beluga whales of the race,” the native Montrealer jokes, remarking on French-Quebec’s newly-found fascination for the anglophone. “They are curious, more and more, to hear about us. ‘Who are you? What are your customs and tribal rites?’”

Dispelling common stereotypes of anglophones as the privileged class is difficult, and Freed says he sees a challenge in getting the French to see the English with new eyes. In *Entre Solitudes*, part of the challenge comes by way of an ongoing and sometimes vicious debate between

Freed and Gerald Leblanc, a columnist for *La Presse*.

“He thinks

I want to go back to the days of anglo oppression,” says Freed, “but I’m as alienated from that as he is. But anglo-phones too have a caricature of francophones that goes back to the days of the crazed nationalist. Francophones are not all crazed nationalists.”

Both Josh Freed and producer/co-editor Irene Angelico agree that often Quebec’s cultural dynamic rests on a delicate balance of disagreement and mutual respect. In order to sustain a linguistic peace, they add, dialogue must continue. Like a microcosm of Montreal, *Entre Solitudes* shows not only those vicious debates between Freed and Leblanc but also a mutual admiration.

Freed sees English Montreal as a diverse and still substantial community (35% of the greater Montreal area). Included in the film are English interviews (with French subtitles) of people in their communities. Freed acts as a guide throughout the film, narrating in a French that he describes as “a collection of tiny mistakes.” The viewer is taken around the city, from a group of youths in Point St. Charles to a shopkeeper in N.D.G. to Freed, looking out of place, at the St. Jean Baptiste parade.

We later see that Freed is equally as uncomfortable at the Canada Day parade. This is an example of what Angelico sees as the dilemma upon which the film is founded.

“*Entre Solitudes* refers to the anglos of Quebec who are caught between the solitudes of French Quebec and English Canada,” she says. “Their allegiance is to the country and to the province but they are torn between both.”

Adds Freed: “When I’m in Montreal,



**Josh Freed:** Explains anglo customs and tribal rites to curious francophones.

I’m screaming at the French to make room for the anglophones. When I’m in the rest of Canada, I’m screaming at them to make room for French Quebecers.”

Angelico, who was born in Germany and raised in the U.S., moved to Quebec in the mid-’70s. She says she found herself sympathetic to French aspirations and was pleased to see the language laws changing.

“However, somewhere between (bills) 101 and 178 things changed — students not being able to speak English at recess and the (spray-painted) stop signs. It was not only these symbolic acts — there was also move to repress the rights of a significant minority.”

According to Angelico, the documentary, directed and co-edited by husband Abbey Neidik, tries to give those anglophones who have remained in Quebec and don’t want to leave a forum for their still-developing identity.

Pierre Charbonneau was president of the Radio Quebec jury that chose to award *Entre Solitudes* \$350,000 toward production. He is also producing the series to which the film belongs, seven prime-time documentaries entitled *Documentaires en vue*.

Charbonneau, for his part, says he disagrees with many of the film’s anglophones, especially those who continue to believe that Quebec nationalism is based on the English-as-enemy theory. But he says he didn’t let his political opinions get in the way of the filmmakers’ process.

“Our role was to give them a maximum freedom to explore their original aims. It’s normal that our opinions don’t mesh, but it gives something extremely interesting for francophones to think about. It allows these two major groups to come closer in understanding each other — to not base their knowledge on prejudice but rather on a true portrait.”

*Entre Solitudes* will be aired Nov. 2 at 8:00 pm on Radio-Québec. An English broadcast is tentatively scheduled for early January.