

Film about anglos is an eye-opener, free of hysteria

Can you stand one more referendum story before we settle into the 10-year moratorium on any mention of the constitution?

Montreal film-makers Irene Angelico and Abbey Neidik collaborated with journalist Josh Freed to produce a documentary on Montreal's English-speaking community. Initially financed by Radio-Québec, the provincial TV network, the project eventually landed some CBC and National Film Board money for an English version of the film.



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Moving portrait

Cameras followed Freed around town talking to friends — La Presse columnist Gerald Leblanc, playwright Marianne Ackerman, Bicycle Bob Silverman — and ordinary civilians (playing street basketball in Point St. Charles, lining the route of the St. Patrick's Day parade). The documentary is a profoundly moving portrait of a wounded community in crisis.

Freed was born in Montreal and has lived here all his life. He knows the city well, loves it passionately, moves comfortably in both of Montreal's dominant linguistic milieus.

Entre Solitudes/Between the Solitudes is not an anguished cry of Richlerian rage. The tone is more elegiac than angry. Freed and the people he interviews — Montrealers who share his affection for this wacky burg — wonder whether Eng-

lish-speaking Montreal will survive the linguistic politics of Quebec.

A few weeks ago, Neidik, Angelico and Freed were looking forward to something that had never been attempted in Canadian television. Negotiations were well under way for an Oct. 20 simulcast: Entre Solitudes would be shown in French on Radio-Québec at the same time as a national telecast of Between the Solitudes on the CBC.

Then the suits got nervous about how the documentaries might sway referendum voters. And when executives at the networks finished their handwringing and deep thinking, telecast was put off until after Oct. 26.

Here's how the postponement came about:

Radio-Québec's lawyers — mindful of regulations requiring balanced coverage during the referendum campaign —

thought that by depicting an English-speaking community anxious to stay in Quebec and keep the province in Canada, Entre Solitudes might be construed as an incitement to vote Oui. The provincial network dropped its plans for a simulcast.

The CBC, on the other hand, had feared that Between the Solitudes' portrait of an embattled English minority inside Quebec would encourage Canadians outside the province — particularly in the West — to vote No. When Radio-Québec pulled the plug on a simulcast, the CBC shelved the documentary until after the vote.

You say it's a Oui show, I say a No show. Let's call the telecast off.

Parallel pre-emptions — for diametrically opposite reasons. Is that a rich metaphor for Canada or what?

"We've laughed about this through our tears," Angelico says.

"Our intention in the first place was to make a film that would contribute to the dialogue during the referendum campaign," she adds. "Now that the referendum has happened, though, and the vote is No I think the film will be more pertinent in the next while.

"I hope that it's a film about building bridges between the solitudes. That could be critical in the wake of the No vote. It has a more important purpose, in a way, than what we had conceived before.

"We need to talk, rather than to re-

treat into more polarized positions. I hope the film will help keep dialogue alive."

Angelico sees Entre Solitudes/Between the Solitudes as part of the healing process.

Viewers in urgent need of healing can see the French version of the documentary next week. Radio-Québec will air Entre Solitudes on Monday at 8 p.m. The CBC has not finalized its scheduling of Between the Solitudes, but the documentary will show up on the national network eventually, possibly in early December.

Tough and honest

Freed, Angelico and Neidik regret the telecast delay. But they also take pains to emphasize that the CBC likes the documentary and that during production the project was granted total creative freedom by Radio-Québec. The provincial TV network encouraged the anglo film-makers to make a tough, honest documentary about their community.

"Radio-Québec was good to work with," Freed says. "They've been smart, interesting, sensitive. And I think there's a certain amount of concern on their part about the anglo population. We're like the beluga whales of Quebec."

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