

OBITUARY

Denis Héroux: Montreal film guru brought Atlantic City to the screen

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Denis Héroux handles a piece of film at his Montreal film production company, Cinevideo, on May 11, 1978. Héroux died Friday, Dec. 11, 2015. CHUCK STOODY/THE CANADIAN PRESS

As the Quiet Revolution took hold of 1960s Quebec, University of Montreal students Denis Héroux, Denys Arcand, Marie-José Raymond and Stéphane Venne were inseparable. At that time of social and political liberation and tumult, their professors called them "The Musketeers." The ambitious friends presented a novel idea to university authorities: They proposed to make a film documenting the everyday reality of students.

Mr. Héroux, like his good friend Mr. Arcand, was a keen student of history, though he had no technical training in film. So Mr. Héroux asked legendary National Film Board cameraman Michel Brault to shoot the project. Later in life, Mr. Héroux liked to recount why he selected Mr. Brault. "I had read that he was the world's best cameraman, so I called NFB and asked him to work with us."

In that era, the documentary direct-cinema style was in vogue in Quebec, and Mr. Brault was one of its chief practitioners. The impulse of the undergraduate Mr. Héroux to reach out to Mr. Brault was an early example of his knack for seeking out talented collaborators, which would characterize Mr. Héroux's production career.

"Denis was a rassembleur. He knew how to bring people together," said University of Montreal film studies professor André Gaudreault about Mr. Héroux, who died of Lewy body dementia, a progressive neurodegenerative disease, in Montreal on Dec. 10. He was 75.

The finished product, a docudrama about student life called *Seul ou avec d'autres*, was invited to the 1963 Cannes Film Festival.

Mr. Héroux went on to become one of the most important filmmakers in Quebec and Canada. Over four decades, Mr. Héroux forged an international career that saw him involved as a director, producer, executive producer and distributor on productions that would garner awards and nominations in Cannes, Hollywood, London and Toronto. *Atlantic City*, *Quest for Fire*, *Les Plouffe* and *Black Robe* are among the productions that distinguished his remarkable career. Based in Montreal, he pioneered international co-production and was a founding partner of Alliance Entertainment, along with Robert Lantos and others. Mr. Héroux was a central figure among a handful of Montreal-based visionaries who received international acclaim for their work.

"Héroux was a pioneer," said Patrick Roy, president of distribution companies Entertainment One Films Canada and Les Films Séville. "He created the first wave of popular, commercial films in Quebec."

Denis Héroux was born in Montreal on July 15, 1940, into a lower-middle-class family. His parents were Laurent, a firefighter, and the former Marie-Ange Desmarais. Denis attended high school at Montreal's Collège André-Grasset before beginning his studies at the University of Montreal.

After the unlikely success of his student film, Mr. Héroux decided to keep making movies.

In addition, Mr. Héroux was an educator who joined the faculty at the University of Montreal in 2007 and energetically oversaw ambitious projects in film education. That was fitting enough.

"His greatest strength was to dare," said Danielle Ouimet, a prominent journalist and broadcaster who acted in some of Mr. Héroux's early films. When Mr. Héroux spotted her singing a pop song on a rainy day at Expo 67, in Montreal, he convinced her to audition for his film *Valérie*. Though she had never acted, Mr. Héroux explained that he needed an amateur to play the lead role, a somewhat reckless but intensely curious young woman determined to defy Quebec's traditional mores. Ms. Ouimet was initially shocked that the script called for nudity, but she eventually agreed to play the nude scenes as required.

"He was very respectful," she recalled, "Denis always said: 'Don't do anything you're uncomfortable with,' and I never did."

It was a low-budget, unglamorous acting debut for Ms. Ouimet, who did not imagine at the time she was helping transform Quebec cinema. Ms. Ouimet (who would later become a prominent journalist) became a star with the 1969 release of *Valérie*. The soft-core porn film – the first to be produced in the province – was a commercial sensation.

Valérie chronicled the path of a young woman who walked out of her religious school and into a series of very worldly experiences including dalliances with bikers, erotic dancing and prostitution. Predictably, the film provoked a strong negative reaction from the Catholic Church. Ms. Ouimet said her mother attended a mass where the priest urged his parishioners to boycott the film and said the actress portraying *Valérie* would go to hell. "She never went back to the church," Ms. Ouimet said.

"The controversy surrounding Valérie was more important than the film itself," explained Stéphane Plante, an online journalist with Quebecor in Montreal. "The film was released within 10 years of the Grande Noirceur [Great Darkness], the period when Premier Maurice Duplessis and the church ran everything in Quebec. In that context, the film was extremely audacious."

After the box-office success and buzz of Valérie, Mr. Héroux's career distinguished itself in both commercial and artistic realms. The same man who scandalized Quebec social conservatives with Valérie and its 1970 erotic follow-up L'Initiation went on to produce work by acclaimed Quebec filmmakers such as Mr. Arcand and Gilles Carle, as well as celebrated directors from France (Louis Malle and Claude Chabrol) and Australia (Bruce Beresford).

As a producer, he was attached to critically acclaimed films such as Les Plouffe, directed by Mr. Carle, and Le Crime d'Ovide Plouffe, directed by Mr. Arcand, his friend and former University of Montreal classmate.

Mr. Héroux's success in Quebec led him to think about production on an international scale. He and partner John Kemeny began to collaborate with producers abroad. Atlantic City, directed by Louis Malle and produced by Mr. Héroux, won the Lion d'Or at the 1980 Venice Film Festival.

The film featured Toronto media magnate Moses Znaimer in an acting role. "Somehow, Denis finessed Louis Malle and John Guare, Burt Lancaster and Susan Sarandon into an early major Canadian feature that received five Academy Award nominations. He was a magician that way!" Mr. Znaimer said. "He knew my secret, but didn't tell; that I wasn't an 'actor' but an innocent bystander whose look Louis liked and bingo! I was in their movie, even though I had only months before I launched CITY-TV."

In 1982, Quest for Fire, a Héroux production directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, was lauded in Canada, Europe and the United States. It won five Genie Awards while the French language version, La Guerre du feu, won the César (the French Oscar) for best film, best producer (Mr. Héroux) and best director (Mr. Annaud). In the United States, the film garnered the Golden Globe for best foreign language film.

By the mid-1980s, Mr. Héroux was living in Europe, with homes in London, Paris and the French Riviera.

In 1991, *Black Robe*, a Canadian-Australian historical drama about New France of which Mr. Héroux was an executive producer, won six Genie awards including best film and best director for Australian Bruce Beresford.

Mr. Héroux returned to Canada in 2006 and embarked on a new career at his alma mater. As Prof. Gaudreault recalled, Mr. Héroux returned to Canada just as the University of Montreal was seeking to wed theory with practice at its film school. Mr. Héroux "went above and beyond what was asked for" in his participation in the ambitious film education program, according to Prof. Gaudreault.

The filmmaker was instrumental in the development of two important initiatives. The first one, *Au coeur du cinéma québécois* (At the Heart of Quebec Cinema), was a student-produced talk show about movies that was often hosted by Mr. Héroux himself during its first four seasons. The show "was not ivory tower stuff," explained Mr. Plante, but rather an in-depth examination of production. "We're used to seeing the actors and sometimes the directors. But that program was exceptional in putting the people behind the camera, in front of the camera and making interesting TV out of it," Mr. Plante said. Claude Chamberlan, founder of Montreal's Festival du nouveau cinéma, considered the program Mr. Héroux's greatest achievement. "There are a lot of very intelligent people who make terrible TV hosts," Mr. Chamberlan said, "however, Mr. Héroux was great, with a soft-spoken style and the ability to listen and draw people out."

The other major initiative that Mr. Héroux championed is the Observatoire du cinéma au Québec, a film studies research institute dedicated to furthering the links between the industry and scholarly film studies. As with *Au coeur du cinéma québécois*, the Observatoire depended greatly on Mr. Héroux's vision, professional reputation, connections and fundraising acumen. "Perhaps it was a dream he had for a long time," before returning to Montreal, said Prof. Gaudreault of the projects at his alma mater that made an ideal end-of-career pursuit for Mr. Héroux.

Although their careers took divergent paths, Ms. Ouimet and Mr. Héroux remained friends for the rest of his life. "Of course, when we did Valérie, we just did it – we were young people living out an exciting fantasy," Ms. Ouimet recalled. She concluded that as the decades have passed, "I understand the depth and importance of what Denis started with Valérie."

She added: "Years after we made it, Denis finally told me that, in his mind, Valérie represented Quebec itself standing up to the church and relying on its natural resources."

When Mr. Roy was invited to be a guest on *Au coeur du cinéma québécois*, he had the opportunity to meet Mr. Héroux, a man 25 years his senior who was a legend of the industry. "To me he was un grand seigneur," Mr. Roy said. "He was extremely well cultivated, but easy to talk to and so generous with the students. The greatest lesson I learned from Denis was the importance of giving back," he said. "We are here for a brief moment. We have to think of the people who come after us in the industry."

Denis Héroux is leaves his life companion, Justine Héroux; son, Marc-Antoine; daughter, Fabienne; and brothers, Claude and Roger Héroux.