

OBITUARY

Quebec TV star was a role model for victims of spousal violence

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Andrée Boucher, second from the left, had a breakthrough opportunity in the drama *Des Dames de Coeur*. CBC

Actor, writer, broadcaster and inspirational speaker Andrée Boucher, whose career spanned half a century and included major roles in French-language television dramas, as well as singing in cabarets and acting on Quebec's stages, died in Montreal on Sept. 30 at age 83. In the final act of her career, Ms. Boucher became a symbol of resilience for sufferers of domestic violence, physical disability and addiction.

Marie Juliette Andrée Danielle Boucher was born Sept. 19, 1938, in the Quebec village of Macamic in the northern Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, where her father ran a local hotel.

Her husband, actor and writer Jean-Pierre Bélanger, marvels at the life journey of a woman who came from, "a village with wooden sidewalks that was snowed in for most of the winter" and established an international career.

Ms. Boucher got her first performance experience in Macamic contributing to local church productions and occasionally singing for guests at her father's hotel.

In 1956 the precocious talent was cast in *Les Belles Histoires des pays d'en haut* one of the earliest Quebec television dramas in which she played the young beauty Artémise Baltour-Labranche. The producer chose her, according to Ms. Boucher, because she came from the Quebec frontier just like her character.

Les Belles Histoires became must-see TV in Quebec. "It was almost as important as going to Mass on Sunday," said retired journalist and union organizer Alain Cossette, who grew up in Central Quebec near Shawinigan, the hometown of Jean Chrétien. "My entire family, six of us children plus our parents, in front of a black-and-white television set with rabbit ear antennas. Everyone we knew was doing the same."

The program was "foundational, one of the most important shows in the history of Quebec television," said Brigitte Léveillé, head of dramatic production at Radio-Canada.

Les Belles Histoires was a realistic drama of family relations and romance set in a 19th-century Laurentian village. "It depicted a time of colonization, with land being cleared, men working extremely hard from dawn until evening and women staying at home raising many children," Mr. Cossette said. The show, which appealed to both rural and urban audiences in Quebec, ran for 14 years.

In the 1970s Ms. Boucher relocated to France to appear for two seasons in the historical drama *Schulmeister, l'espion de l'empereur*.

Ms. Boucher later met her future life partner in Atlanta while shooting an ad for Texaco.

“We left the set together and went to a nightclub and danced,” Mr. Bélanger said. “I remember the cocktails were called Purple Passion.” He was 10 years younger than Ms. Boucher. “She didn’t care about the age difference. She said, ‘I fell in love with the person, not his age.’”

In 1986, Ms. Boucher had another breakthrough opportunity. Screenwriter and producer Lise Payette and her writer daughter Sylvie imagined a role specifically for her in the drama *Des dames de coeur*.

The series and especially the character played by Ms. Boucher were perfect for the changing mores and times in Quebec, Ms. Léveillé said.

“Évelyne Lamontagne was a housewife in her 40s. She was not rebellious, but decided to seek new challenges for herself. She learns to drive ... she convinces her husband they should move from the suburbs to Montreal. As she blossoms, bit by bit her husband deteriorates, begins to drink and eventually becomes physically abusive.”

The series aired one of the first dramatic depictions of spousal abuse on Quebec television. It also starred female actors in their 40s and 50s. In an interview during production, Ms. Boucher said, “there’s a bit of Évelyne in all of us. All of us have problems with self-approval. At first she doesn’t know how to assert herself and she’s searching, but she’ll find out how. We’ve all passed through there.”

Ms. Boucher reprised her role in a sequel, *Un signe de feu*, from 1989 to 1991.

Ms. Boucher was already dealing with health issues at that point. She had injured a hip in an onstage fall during a play. Undeterred, Ms. Boucher kept on working until the discomfort became too much. Her injury and arthritis led to chronic pain and several operations. Ms. Boucher walked with a cane for many years.

“She suffered a great deal but was very courageous,” Mr. Bélanger said.

Ms. Payette added, “One day as we finished filming a scene, I surprised her behind a set massaging her hands in pain. As soon as she saw me, she gathered herself and smiled at me as if nothing was wrong. She never complained.”

Her portrayal of Évelyne Lamontagne became such a part of the Quebec imagination that the character was affectionately caricatured by Guy A. Lepage, a comedian and host of Radio-Canada's flagship talk show *Tout le monde en parle*. Dressed in character as Évelyne, Mr. Lepage would carry around a small coffee maker as a mock tribute to her standard invitation to have a coffee and chat.

“Lise Payette didn't like the bit much, but Andrée Boucher loved it,” Mr. Lepage said. “She was a woman of the world and a free spirit.” When Dunkin' Donuts asked Ms. Boucher and Mr. Lepage to appear in a commercial both dressed as Évelyne Lamontagne, they agreed.

Ms. Boucher took on a new challenge in the 1990s. She produced a two-volume autobiography *Quand je serai grande, je serai sage ...* (When I'm Big, I'll Be Wise ...) and *J'ai choisi la vie* (I Chose Life) at the urging of and with assistance from her husband. *Quand je serai grande* became a bestseller.

The autobiography acknowledged family hardship, her temporary dependence on the opioid Dilaudid and years of physical limitations. Ms. Boucher became a sought-after public speaker respected for her acting career and listened to avidly for dealing empathetically with challenges of self-realization, drug and alcohol dependence and domestic violence.

Ms. Payette believes Ms. Boucher became such an influential figure among Quebecers because “she played characters that marked Quebec. She played one of the first female characters afflicted by spousal violence that succeeded in getting out of that hell. Women recognized a lot in her.”

“She was a talented woman, deeply committed to her craft. She was very generous with others and eager to help. She was woman of great culture interested in cuisine, fashion, history, theatre and literature. She was passionate about everything.”

Ms. Boucher leaves her husband, Mr. Bélanger; sister, Marie-Josée Boucher; and brother, Jean-Louis Boucher.