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CHRISTIAN

DUGUAY

by ANDREW MCINTOSH

A few years ago, I attended a panel discussion on the state of Canadian cinema. At one point, amid a discussion of the lamentable commercial viability and anemic mass appeal of most English Canadian movies, someone asked panelist Steve Gravestock, director of Canadian programming at the Toronto International Film Festival, if TIFF would ever consider programming a film by Christian Duguay. The subtext leading the question was clear: Canadian filmmakers do make commercially viable films, Christian Duguay being case in point. So why have we never seen any of them at TIFF or other festivals alongside their more numerous American—not to mention European and Asian—counterparts?

It's a question that Duguay himself has pondered. Though he's made movies with some of the biggest stars in the business and earned 23 Emmy, 13 Gemini and six Golden Globe nominations for several television mini-series, he admits that "I wish I would've come up with a signature film that I could have taken to festivals. That's the only thing I've missed that I wish I could've done. Because when you go to festivals at least you know the people are there to respect the art, and it's not about how much it will do at the box office. It's about how the audience will appreciate the work."

The consummate professional, passionate and dedicated to his craft, Christian Duguay has risen from the ranks of direct-to-video action-adventure movies to become a sought-after director, gifted with a kinetic visual sensibility and a versatility fueled by a willingness to throw himself into his subjects.

Duguay grew up in Montreal, the son of a prominent, wealthy lawyer and a mother who worked for the Red Cross. Following his parents' divorce, Duguay was sent to boarding school from the age of 11 to 19, where he was always involved in the arts in one form or another, be it theatre, music or film. "Even when I was in boarding school I was always mounting shows," he says, speaking from the Paris set of his latest mini-series, a biopic of Coco Chanel starring Shirley MacLaine. "I knew right away I wanted to be in film. My father let me use his Super 8 camera and I loved doing that. Every time he'd put up the screen and show us some slides or some Super 8 film that he'd done I was always fascinated by that."

When he was 17, he attended Concordia University's student film festival, which proved to be a revelation for him. It was indeed possible to become a filmmaker. "Going from watching a very tiny screen with your Super 8 projector to suddenly having hundreds of people watching what you're doing...that's [what I wanted]. I was intrigued by both the artistic side and by the ability to communicate a vision to the masses."

Shortly after that he applied to the only CEGEP at the time that was offering audiovisual and cinema and then attended Sir George Williams College at Concordia, where he was a classmate of a director he would come to greatly admire, Jean-Claude Lauzon.

"It was a good year," he says. Duguay threw himself into the film school experience, learning as much as he could about every creative aspect of the craft and winning prizes along the way for cinematography, editing and direction. "I didn't want to be just a director," he explains. "I wanted to understand film, to understand cinematography. You've just got to be passionate and do it."

Indeed, after his first year at Concordia, Duguay's passion led him to hitchhike to Los Angeles, where he attended a forum at the American Film Institute with legendary cinematographer Sven Nykvist. "He offered with no resistance secrets that he had: why he does a combination, why he blends cooler temperature lights with warmer temperature lights, how he interpreted shadows—things that always fascinated me," Duguay explains. "I love photography. I love lighting. I love painting. I love laying my eyes on those details. That's one of the great pleasures of life. So once you hear somebody talking about it and you see how he operates, it opens a whole world for you."

Meanwhile, Duguay's practical education was also taking shape. Being the son of a powerful man combined with a passion for competitive horseback riding instilled in Duguay a drive to succeed, but he had to do so on his own terms. "That was the thing about my father. Everything he gave us was not to be taken for granted. We had to earn it." During his years at Concordia, Duguay worked in a building owned by his father, starting out as a janitor and gradually working his way up to administrator. When the building was sold he worked as a car jockey and cashier in a downtown parking lot. Paying for school, studying during the day and working on movies for free on the weekends, he learned very quickly how to succeed in business.

"One of the other big educations I had was with the producer-director Jack Zolov," he says. "A friend of mine at university said, 'Wow, you do everything. You do camera, you do editing. You'd be the perfect guy to go and do documentaries for Jack.'" Duguay enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with the veteran filmmaker for nearly six years, travelling the world and editing documentaries in Zolov's Westmount basement, while also working for free as a cinematographer for emerging Montreal directors such as Jeremiah Chechik.

"After my documentary years I really wanted to move more into the bigger world. I got noticed as a cameraman and DOP. I got brought in to do camera work for George Mihalka, then I got some gigs as a director of photography for a bunch of commercials. I did that for several years. And people would notice me, even agencies. They'd say, 'Well, why doesn't he direct? He's got so many ideas when he's on the set.' So I started to direct a few commercials, and right away Barbara Shrier, who's a producer in Quebec, was working on *William Tell*—this would be in 1986—and she said, 'Why don't you come over and direct and DOP second unit on *William Tell*!'"

Duguay's youthful enthusiasm and versatility combined with a love of horseback riding—a featured element of the show—and his skills as a steadicam operator allowed him to bring a degree of innovation to the series. While working for a year as second unit director and DOP, he did a workshop in Boston with veteran steadicam operator Ted Churchill, who reaffirmed Duguay's gifted eye for



*Human Trafficking*  
Christian Duguay  
(Canada/US, 2005)

*Hitler: The Rise of Evil*  
Christian Duguay  
(Canada/US, 2005)



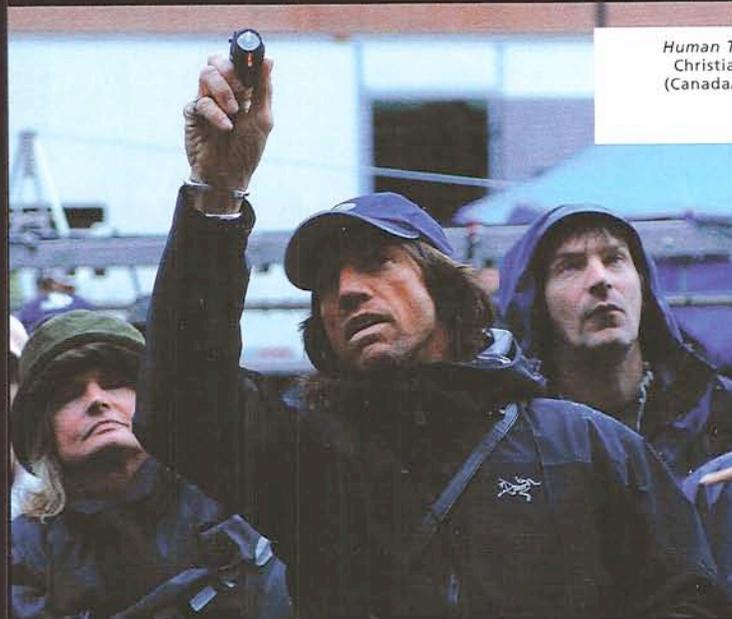
*The Adventures of William Tell*  
Christian Duguay  
(France/UK, 1986)



*Human Trafficking*  
Christian Duguay  
(Canada/US, 2005)



*Joan of Arc*  
Christian Duguay  
(Canada, 1999)



*Human Trafficking*  
Christian Duguay  
(Canada/US, 2005)

framing and composition. The producers of *William Tell* admired his contributions so much that he was promoted to main director of the series, a role he enjoyed for the next two years.

His reputation as an efficient director and a great visual stylist with a slick commercial sensibility only grew with a number of science-fiction and action-adventure movies that followed, such as *Scanners II* and *III* and *Live Wire*. The reputation proved in the long run to be both a blessing and a curse. "I was known to be a cameraman and to be quite physical and to do my own steadicam," Duguay says. "I've always operated my camera. Even the last few films I've done I've DOP'd also. So I was categorized as the action guy. I think visually [those films] were all interesting. But they didn't have the narrative drive or the emotional pulse that I managed to do on my minis."

Duguay's next big break came with the hit CBC TV movie *Million Dollar Babies*, the true story of the Dionne quintuplets, which won four Gemini Awards, including one for Best Direction in a Dramatic Program or Mini-Series. Duguay credits the film's producer for believing that he had what it took to do the story justice. "Bernie Zukerman really saw in me the potential as a director and allowed me through that film to show that I could do more sensitive, more serious subject matter, and not just be branded into action pieces. It showed that I could handle a period piece with some real emotional subtext, historical background and a social point of view and convey it all on screen with a certain maturity."

For Duguay, having a producer who is willing to let him explore his versatility and still play to his strengths makes all the difference. "When I worked with Bernie Zukerman or Ed Gernon or others who were able to support me and challenge me in other areas, I think I was framed in a better way than in independent movies about action where you have producers that are essentially just dealmakers and not real producers. [You have to] find allies to really help direct you or be your sounding board."

After his award-winning turn on *Million Dollar Babies*, Duguay returned to the action-adventure genre with a newfound affinity for story and character. His career continued on an upward trajectory as a result. "There's one film that almost propelled me and really changed my career," he says, "and it's still today the best film I've done, which was *The Assignment*. I think *Screamers* really got a lot of attention in the science fiction world. Everybody raved about it because it had some depth to it—it wasn't just about monsters. We did it for very little money. And from that, right away, the head of Triumph film, which was a satellite company of Columbia, had me read Dan Gordon's script for *The Assignment*. And it was exactly the type of film I knew how to do well."

An action-packed yarn about a US Naval officer and Carlos the Jackal look-alike recruited by an obsessed CIA agent in a plot to get the real Jackal assassinated, *The Assignment* rises above its direct-to-video lineage primarily through Duguay's slick visuals and his ability to do a lot with a little. The film opened a lot of studio doors for Duguay, who was signed to CAA [Creative Artists Agency] and then William Morris.

"I got really, really close to hitting the big time when I was at CAA and I was up for the James Bond film [*The World Is Not Enough*]. It went from 18 directors to two and it was between me [and Michael Apted].

"Those were the golden years, but they didn't turn golden because I ended up being on development deals on several projects at different studios." These included two \$100-million adventure films: *Pathfinder*, about an undercover CIA operative in Serbia during the war, and a fantasy film called *The Rime Lords*, both of which fell through.

"You go into turnaround after turnaround," he says. "You develop a movie and then another and another, and they never get made because they can't get the star. If you have a very strong agent that manages to give you

the right material and push you through, then it's a different ball game. Unfortunately I was with a big agency that had a lot of big clients, and I fell through the cracks."

Instead of making his contribution to the 007 canon, Duguay began carving out a highly successful niche for himself directing acclaimed mini-series for television, showing as much of a knack for historical spectacles (*Joan of Arc*, *Hitler: The Rise of Evil*) as for contemporary social drama (*Human Trafficking*). He enjoys the way the mini-series format "allows you to go a lot deeper than just telling a whole story in two hours, especially when they're biopics or historical epics. You can bring the audience into a world that used to exist and have them experience it through your protagonists, and not just skim on the surface. It's a challenge to bring that kind of depth. You could never do that in a two-hour movie."

He is currently considering doing a mini-series on *Ben Hur*, but is also developing two features, including one on Craig Kielburger, the 25-year-old founder of Free the Children and Member of the Order of Canada. "That's a fascinating story with a wonderful cause," Duguay says, "which is another type of subject matter that makes me tick."

"Once you gain more maturity you want to make movies that aren't just pure entertainment but that have other qualities to offer people as part of the experience. After doing *Human Trafficking*, I felt good, because I knew people had a different perception on the world."

A fictionalized social drama about the world of international sex trafficking, *Human Trafficking* won a Gemini Award for Best Dramatic Mini-Series and netted Duguay a DGC award for Outstanding Direction in a Television Movie or Mini-Series. It also marked Duguay's third collaboration with Donald Sutherland, one in a long list of many big name actors the director has worked with, often repeatedly, such as Peter O'Toole, Ben Kingsley, Robert Carlyle, Wesley Snipes, Pierce Brosnan and

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Shirley MacLaine.

Duguay takes great pride in his reputation as one of the hardest-working directors in the business, and in his ability to create an exciting, collaborative atmosphere on set that provides a fertile ground for his cast. "It starts with the material," he says. "I try to always immerse myself in it from the actors' perspective. It's really doing the director's homework to be prepared. If there's research you need to do about the actors you're going to work with, you've got to do it."

"People always ask me why I still do my own camera work. I couldn't direct from behind a combo. I've got to be there on the set—feel the pulse, feel the actors and be able to make changes in the moment and have a direct link to the actors. That's the primary reason I like to do the camera work; I get into that tunnel zone with them and we can create in the moment. You have to go go go and be there with them and capture physically what they do. That's probably the area that I cherish the most. Understanding the function of a scene and the state of the actor—their contribution to the scene and to the whole piece—allows me to really convey [the material] a lot better."

"That makes the actors secure, once they get on set and see that you have a command of the material. It's in the first few days that it all plays [out]. When they ask you a question you have to have an answer. If they challenge you on something and you're open to listening to them and really offer a solid point of view—if they feel you've really been there for them, thinking of every facet of why and how they should interpret a scene or delineate a character—that's how you get respect from them. But it plays at the very beginning. If you miss your boat you'll never get them back."

"It takes experience to get to that point," he says. "It takes years. I'm still learning, but I'm at a place now where finally I feel that I'm starting to have a good control of the elements that are offered to me as a director."

It's been a long circuitous route for Duguay, one that has seen its fair share of triumphs and disappointments. But the director is philosophical about his place in the industry and humble about all he has accomplished. "In television I am where I always wanted to be. It's as good as can be because all the big minis are offered to me. But I wanted to be in the same place in movies. My life could've turned a hundred different ways. I think I've been very fortunate to make a good living out of it and do movies that are really interesting, so I'm thankful to have had the chance."

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