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Welcoming the nice barbarian invaders

The Barbarian Invasions. Canada/France, 2003.
Written and directed by Denys Arcand. Starring Rémy Girard (Rémy), Stéphane Rousseau (Sébastien), Dorothee Berryman (Louise), Marie-Josée Croze (Nathalie).

by Henry Milner

As

I WRITE, DENYS ARCAND'S FILM *The Barbarian Invasions*, FRESH from its triumphant opening at the Toronto Film Festival, has been chosen as Canada's entry for the Oscars. In Quebec, it has been on screen since it captured honours at Cannes last spring (Marie-Josée Croze for best actress and Arcand for best script), but it has yet to open anywhere else in North America. So I offer Inroads readers a preview – as both invitation and caution.

First the invitation. Seeing *Invasions* was one of my most memorable film experiences in years. It is well directed, well photographed and well acted, bringing together a stellar cast of veterans (household names in Quebec) and relative newcomers. But it is more: one of the rare films that is at the same time immensely entertaining and consistently intelligent.

Arcand, historian turned filmmaker, here returns to the sure home ground of his famous *Decline of the American Empire*, taking

up 15 years later with the same gabby coterie of friends and lovers. This is most welcome since, after repeating his success with the masterful *Jesus of Montreal* three years after *Decline*, Arcand faltered with *Love and Human Remains* and again with *Stardom*. Indeed, *Invasions* is both funnier and far more effective as social commentary than *Decline*, which owed its reputation in good part to the then still shocking sexual amorality of its articulate protagonists.

The plot of *Invasions* is simple enough. Rémy, whom Louise divorced after being forced to confront his pathological infidelity (dramatically recounted in *Decline*), is now a greying boomer dying of cancer in a Montreal hospital. His only visitors, apart from Louise (and Marie, the volunteer determined to save his immortal soul, on whom he showers graphic descriptions of atrocities committed in the name of Catholicism over the centuries), are his current mistresses. They are pale shadows of the smart, confident women he bedded in the days of *Decline*.

Seeing Rémy's distress, the ever-caring Louise begs their successful son Sébastien to come home from London. Sébastien, who has been estranged from his father for years,

In Arcand's world, the man of action wins hands down over the man of ideas. The dying history professor, who complains bitterly at the outset that his son never reads a book, is completely won over by his son at the end.

reluctantly agrees. Fiancée in tow, cell phone and laptop in hand, he flies to Montreal and soon takes over. No sooner is he back than he begins to apply his skills, contacts and money to make Rémy's last weeks as comfortable as possible. In no time he has rounded up his father's old comrades and lovers. Next he tracks down drug addict Nathalie, daughter of the sexiest of the ex-mistresses, hires her to obtain the cocaine needed to ease his father's pain, and gets her into the hospital to regularly inject Rémy.

As in *Decline*, the characters talk passionately and intelligently about politics, phi-

losophy and history. Arcand succeeds in skewering the left-wing certainties of an earlier era – admittedly not that difficult a target. He makes the skewering easier by placing the action in a setting revealing the worst of the Quebec welfare state in the guise of the union thugs and venal bureaucrats who run the hospital. This portrayal did not endear Arcand to most letter writers to Quebec newspapers. But caricature can work when done well, and here Arcand makes us appreciate the comic elements of the inevitable confrontation between the interests and realities of those for whom a hospital is a place to be cured or die and those for whom it is a place to get ahead.

The real problem with the underlying message of the film lies elsewhere, in the portrayal of Sébastien and his world. Sébastien not only spares no expense or effort to make the last days of his father's life better but also, in passing, helps the beautiful Nathalie break free of her addiction. Yet he does not succumb to temptation when – in gratitude or love – she offers herself to him. He is determined to be faithful to his fiancée, never to abandon her or their future children as Rémy had abandoned his mother, his sister and him.

This is commendable, so commendable that we in the audience do not hesitate for a second to sympathize with Sébastien who does not hesitate for a second to use whatever means are needed to achieve his purpose. For every problem there is a simple solution, money: Sébastien has money to get Rémy into a private American diagnostic clinic, money to bribe corrupt hospital bureaucrats, money to pay off union thugs, money to buy drugs from the pushers. Since all of this is in a good cause, the well-being of family and friends, Sébastien never needs



The Barbarian Invasions is a welcome return to the gabby coterie of friends and lovers last seen in *The Decline of the American Empire*.



doubt the means to attain his ends. And despite initial misgivings, Rémy is soon swept along.

As an aging boomer and father of grown-up sons, I could not – despite myself – but be deeply touched, and be on the side of the clear and inevitable winner in this uneven contest between the decent and competent Sébastien and the highly flawed Rémy. In Arcand's world, the man of action wins hands down over the man of ideas. The dying history professor, who complains bitterly at the outset that his son never reads a book, is completely won over by his son at the end. And we too, won over to Sébastien as well, put out of our minds the fact that his principles amount to loyalty to one's loved ones and the hell with everything else.

Let me repeat. This is a film that I immensely enjoyed. And it was precisely because I enjoyed it so much that I left the theatre troubled by its implications.

Like Rémy I have learned that the "isms" of my youth were simplifications of a more complex reality. But I haven't abandoned the idea that there is a dimension in the good life that might be called social solidarity, or simply good citizenship. The central principle is that we make some effort to live in a way that most people would also be able to live if the society were structured as well as it could practically be. Moreover, living this

way is possible only if we know something about what a well structured society might look like. And that knowledge comes from books

about the world in which human beings live and have lived.

Sébastien cannot be bothered with books. He uses his sharp intelligence to gather the information needed to acquire material wealth and power, wealth and power he can and does use for the benefit of his friends and family. Not being concerned with the wider world, he has no need of the knowledge central to the lives of his father and his circle of friends. Given the choice, who wouldn't agree with Sébastien? Through his eyes, we see the mess his parents' generation made of not only their own lives but also those of their children like Nathalie – a mess left for those like Sébastien, the strongest among them, to clean up.

It is all neat and tidy – maybe a bit too neat and tidy. The title comes from a lecture delivered in the film in which the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11 is linked to the invading barbarians' destruction of the Roman Empire. Yet at some level, perhaps unconsciously and despite himself, Arcand the intellectual may be warning us of another successful invasion – by a generation of the most competent and decent barbarians. ■