

# Small store contained immense story

## Documentary Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* bears touching witness to the end of an era

BERNARD PERUSSE  
THE GAZETTE

Director Benoit Pilon is still basking in the warmth of the 15-minute standing ovation bestowed upon his documentary film Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété*, when it opened the Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal last month.

"I was so happy and moved," he said. "There was so much emotion in that room, which



ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE  
Benoit Pilon lived across the street from the Toupin's store.

shows that the film responds to a need – a need for this kind of exchange about life."

Life in the world of Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* is strictly from a bygone era – a time when regulars dropped by Toupin's grocery-variety store in the Plateau Mont-Royal, poured themselves a coffee, had chats that could go on for hours, and generally found a sense of community that didn't really exist in the outside world. Pilon's film is a witness to the end of that era.

At the documentary's centre is Toupin, a decidedly unglamorous but affecting man who not only makes his regulars feel welcome, but manages to care full-time for his widowed mother, Maria, who is suffering from Alzheimer disease and with whom he shares the apartment above the store. Toupin lost his one true love, Francine, to breast cancer nine years before the film takes up his story.

Toupin's life of quiet loss, sacrifice and compassion never seems to dull his cheerful demeanour.

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Instead, he adopts a c'est-la-vie, whaddya-gonna-do resolve and retains a faith in God that seems to carry him through.

"For me, Roger Toupin is almost a modern-day saint," Pilon said. "There is heroism in him, and it's a kind that's trivialized, maybe even ignored in our society. We don't really want to hear about people with those kinds of values, or who do this type of work. Yet what's really amazing is that people who see the movie are moved to tears by Roger.

"There's an ambivalence in human nature. We insist on personal gain and a life filled with feelings, sensations and pleasure. But the human thread still has a base of compassion and interest in the other person's welfare – and that base always takes second place in our era," he said. "This movie puts the focus back on people who put those values first."

The seeds of the film were sown when Pilon moved into the Plateau area in 1998 and noticed a strange, anachronistic store across the street. The director was particularly taken with the store's owner, who sometimes sat outside with his mother and played harmonica as the two watched people pass by. When Pilon noticed patrons of Duluth St. restaurants doing a double take on their way past the store and peering inside, he knew there was a magical time-warp quality about the whole experience.

Informal conversations with Toupin and some of his customers only strengthened Pilon's conviction. "I felt like I was entering a different time and space through Roger – the one that Michel Tremblay's characters live in," he said. So one day, Pilon popped the question: could he bring a cameraman and a sound man over to try something out? Surprised but intrigued, Toupin agreed.

It took only one on-camera session for Pilon to decide it was a go. "Roger started speaking to us about his girlfriend and talked about how she appeared to him after she died. His mother was brought in later, Roger gave her a candy and they sat together on the bench – and this was all the first day we turned on the camera," Pilon said.

Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* is about more than just a man shutting down his grocery store, Pilon

acknowledged. The contrast between regular visitor Nestor, a Duplessis orphan who makes no secret of his anger with God, and Toupin with his unwavering faith provides one of the movie's many dramatic subtexts. And their friendship is clearly a strong one.

"What I find interesting is that Roger's grocery store allows those two extremes to meet and respect each other. People have often said that traditional society was rigid, but maybe it wasn't as rigid as that – people accept each other as they are, and I found that beautiful," Pilon said.

Changing values, a different Montreal and a disappearing culture are also among the issues beneath the movie's surface. "For me, it was culture shock, value shock. To have a place like Roger's in our own back yard was good for me. It forced me to rethink things. As these little spots disappear, the urban fabric gets more homogeneous. Everyone has the same lifestyle, the same goals."

Two years of on-and-off filming ended last year. By then, personal and financial circumstances had forced Toupin to close the store and move to an apartment in the Villeray district. His mother was in a home and he was visiting her and feeding her daily.

That's where the documentary leaves off, but the epilogue seems almost too perfect: Toupin's daily visits to the long-term care centre where his mother lives got longer, and he is now a full-time volunteer there.

Pilon acknowledged that Toupin is only one of countless people who live lives of quiet service and low-key heroism. "I'm interested in the people who somehow represent something big, but are never seen," Pilon said. "They're more interesting to me than the obvious 'winner' types who never seem to question anything."

**Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété***, in French with English subtitles, opens Friday at the Cinéma Parallèle, Ex-Centris Complex, 3536 St. Laurent Blvd. and runs daily at 3:10 and 7:15 p.m. until Jan. 8. Matinees only on Dec. 24 and 31. For further details, phone (514) 847-2206 or go online to [www.ex-centris.com](http://www.ex-centris.com)



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Inside Roger Toupin's store, regulars find a place of community. Before filming ended, though, circumstances had forced Toupin to close it.