

Little movie that thinks big

TALE OF CHANGING TIMES ON THE PLATEAU

Grocery store succumbs to the values of a less-friendly crowd that is hipper and richer

Roger Toupin, Épicier Variété

★★★★★

Documentary

Playing at: Ex-Centris until Jan. 8 in French with English subtitles.

Parents' Guide: for all, but of no interest to small children.

BERNARD PERUSSE
THE GAZETTE

When a local documentary gets thrown into the marketplace with the Christmas blockbusters, can it still find its audience? And does it help when the small film has big ideas?

Let's hope the spirit of the season draws a few fence-sitters away from big-budget disappointment to low-tech humanity. Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* is as unassuming as they come and its subject — the closing of a grocery store in the Plateau Mont-Royal — unsexy. But start scratching a bit and you'll soon find insights on a changing Montreal, a vanishing culture, rage against God, the perseverance of faith.

the saving grace of quiet service and the true nature of heroism.

Take that, Jack Nicholson.

Toupin, who inherited the 36-year-old business on Berri St. from his father in 1975, was born in the apartment above the store, which he still shares with his widowed mother. Although Toupin's one girlfriend was lost to cancer nine years ago, he remains relentlessly cheerful and welcoming to the store's daily visitors. As his mother's Alzheimer's disease leads her on a downward spiral and the store falls on hard times, Toupin faces tough changes.

Part of what makes Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* so compelling are the store regulars, who represent a bygone era: Monsieur Nadeau, the senior Toupin's lifelong friend and fellow violinist, who delights in helping around the store and still plays a mean fiddle, the heart-of-gold grinch Paul, who keeps the coffee machine busy when he's not on school-crossing duty and lottery-ticket obsessive Arthur.

Another character. Nestor. 65.

is a Duplessis orphan whose black-and-white theology is, understandably, darkened by childhood abuse. The fact that he so obviously loves the devout Roger provides one of the film's most fascinating contrasts and one of its most hopeful messages.

The changing face of the Plateau is front and centre, as the world inside the grocery store gives way to the less-friendly values of an encroaching population that is younger, hipper and richer. The scene in which store regular Réal and his wife surrender to the new order and say goodbye to the neighbours is a heartbreaker.

But the movie's sadness is deftly balanced by laughs. A scene focusing on Toupin's attempts to throw away some of his inventory is almost Chaplin-ish in its unplanned comic timing.

With athletes and pop stars constantly mentioned in polls of most-admired people, perhaps the biggest accomplishment of Roger Toupin, *Épicier Variété* is allowing us to take a long, hard look at one of the many people whose lives bear witness to a less flashy, quieter brand of heroism.

Don't let the opportunity pass you by.

bperusse@
thegazette.canwest.com



Roger Toupin in his store: saying farewell to a bygone era.

COURTESY OF CINÉMA LIBRE