

Locarno Film Review: 'My Internship in Canada'



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After earning career-high accolades for 'Monsieur Lazhar,' director Philippe Falardeau returns to comedy with this too-polite political satire.

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In Canada, the power to declare war lies squarely in the hands of the Cabinet. In “My Internship in Canada,” that responsibility falls to a single Member of Parliament who, owing to a deadlock between both sides, has the deciding vote but no clue as to handle the situation. It’s an amusing premise for what should have been a razor-sharp political

satire, a la Armando Iannucci's "In the Loop," although the protagonist here, a dopey MP from backwoods Prescott-Makadewa-Rapides-aux-Outardes, couldn't be farther out of the loop. Passing up the opportunity to make a sharp international commentary, director Philippe Falardeau (<http://variety.com/t/philippe-falardeau/>) ("Congorama," "Monsieur Lazhar") plays the dilemma for folksy, feel-good laughs, severely minimizing this Canuck comedy's export potential.

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"This film is based on events that have not yet happened," the opening titles impishly disclaim. For those living south of the border in the over-militarized United States, there's something irresistibly hilarious about trying to imagine Canada mobilized for war — the premise of 1995 John Candy flop "Canadian Bacon," directed by a pre-Oscar Michael Moore. Truth be told, Canada has been a valuable ally in recent conflicts, from Afghanistan to the Ukraine, though this film is totally ambiguous about what kind of international crisis might be brewing "over there" — clearly not anything so urgent that it would require immediate action.

Played by "Starbuck" star Patrick Huard (a Montreal actor with a likably dense screen persona), Steve Guibord launched his career on the hockey rink, though the aviophobe athlete threw in the towel when he realized just how much flying was involved (his fear of planes becomes a recurring joke, as well as an obvious obstacle to be overcome). Despite possessing no strong party affiliations and minimal aptitude for politics, Guibord went on to leverage his sports-hero popularity back home, winning his large-but-not-terribly-relevant district's seat as their elected Member of Parliament.

Now, Guibord does his job from a small office above a local lingerie shop, which is where a Haitian political science student named Sovereign Pascal (Irdens Exantus, who serves as the audience's proxy, but undermines the character's reliability by playing him as an overgracious, grinning lackey) arrives to interview for a job as Guibord's intern. From the look of things,

his new boss has never actually been faced with a major decision, so when the war question comes his way, he turns to his hawkish wife (Suzanne Clement) and dove daughter (Clemence Dufresne-Deslieres) to help him make up his mind.

How would Guibord vote if forced to make a choice? And what kind of politician doesn't have a position on whether to go to war? Rather than take a stand or research the issue, Guibord makes a hasty promise to let his constituents decide — clearly an evasive maneuver designed to shift the burden of actually doing his job to someone (or everyone) else. But holding town-hall meetings in his district's three main towns proves considerably more difficult than promised, considering that the Native population has set up a protest roadblock on the main highway north, coupled with the fact that he doesn't fly and therefore can't imagine any way around.

While the ill-defined war question looms without any real sense of urgency or suspense (if it doesn't matter to Guibord, why should it matter to us?), the empty-headed MP drives back and forth across his enormous northern district in his SUV, managing complaints from the local truckers union, tribal leaders, several small-potato politicians and a constituency that seems far more interested in addressing local problems than deciding whether to wage war abroad.

And where is Guibord's head in all of this? He's mostly concerned about squelching civil war in his own family, as whichever way he votes is sure to alienate one of the women in his life: his adoring daughter or his increasingly pushy wife, both of whose potential to sway his vote the movie never does enough to exploit. Guibord's conscience seems more upset about a visit to see the Prime Minister in Ottawa (another long drive), who attempts to buy his vote by offering Guibord a cushy cabinet seat — which evidently makes him the first politician in history to have an allergic reaction to politics, whereas his ambitious intern sees the potential he can make on world events and steps up to take charge.

Perhaps the radical difference between the U.S. and Canadian national personalities could explain the disconnect in sensibilities. Falardeau's idea

of a racy joke amounts to implying that the reason the tie vote exists in the first place is that a female MP has fallen comatose after a botched boob job. Despite its catchy patriotic-march theme and overall directorial polish, there's something nauseatingly last-century about the film's characterizations of women and people of color — although one could argue that given Guibord's ineptitude, the white guy is the butt of more jokes.

To apply a blanket generalization to a film that feels a bit too comfortable swaddling itself in stereotypes, the film's very Candianness works against it. Falardeau rejects the rapid-fire insults that have made Iannucci's satires ("Veep," "The Thick of It") so appealing in favor of civility and good manners, evidently misunderstanding that politeness is a prerequisite for politics. The mushiness that emerges feels more like "Welcome to Mooseport" than "All the President's Men": a smalltime comedy about a smalltime MP that begs the question, if absolute power corrupts absolutely, what effect does no power have?

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Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (Piazza Grande), Aug. 9, 2015. Running time: **108 MIN.** (Original title: "Guibord s'en va-t-en guerre")

Production

(Canada) A Les Films Christal presentation of a micro_scope production. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Luc Dery, Kim McCraw.

Crew

Directed, written by Philippe Falardeau. Camear (color, widescreen), Ronald Plante; editor (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/editors/>), Richard Comeau; music, Martin Leon; production designer, Andre-Line Beuparlant; costume designer, Sophie Lefebvre; sound, Claude La Haye, Sylvain Bellemare, Bernard Gariépy Strobl; visual effects supervisor, Alain Lachance; special effects, Louis Pedneault; line producer (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/>), Claude Paiement; associate producer, Elaine Hebert; assistant director, Eric Parenteau; casting, Lucie Robitaille.

With

Patrick Huard, Suzanne Clement, Irdens Exantus, Clemence Dufresne-Deslières, Sonia Cordeau, Paul Doucet, Jules Philip, Robin Aubert, Micheline Lanctot. (French, Creole, English dialogue)