

## PASSION PLAY

**S**now is falling in the Quebec wilderness, and a gaunt figure stands hunched against the wind. His face weather-beaten, his long garments stained with the rigours of travel, he barely glances at the dozens of native Americans, with their painted faces and shaved heads aquiver with feathers, gesturing angrily in his direction. This potent aura of calm reticence, maintained without complaint while a blizzard rages around him, is the very essence of a Jesuit father named Laforgue, a man who set forth into unimaginable dangers, spiritual and physical, to convert the local Indian tribes in 1635, as told in Brian Moore's novel *Black Robe*. It is also the very essence of Lothaire Bluteau, the 33-year-old actor portraying this man confronting his guilt, and eventually reconciling his guilt, his duties and his destiny.

Those who saw Bluteau in Denys Arcand's *Jesus Of Montreal* will immediately recognise the man who packed an otherworldly intensity into his portrayal of an out-of-work actor hired to play Jesus in a revisionist Passion play. (For that, Bluteau won a Genie Award, the Canadian equivalent of an Oscar, for Best Actor, and the 1989 Cannes Jury Prize.)

It is this otherworldliness that makes him inhabit his 17th-century costume so naturally that the down anorak thrown over his shoulders seems incongruous. It is reinforced by the spell of the set; constructed in a clearing in a forest near Chicoutimi, Quebec, and deliberately designed to chill the spirits of any creature foolish enough to stumble upon a stockade of

**From Jesus Of Montreal to a Jesuit in the wilderness, actor Lothaire Bluteau is a young disciple with a mission. Karen Moline finds the method in his madness**



Blue collar, above. Bluteau in quiet contemplation as Jesuit father Laforgue in his new film *Black Robe*

fearless Iroquois in a raging snowstorm. He has been helped by the fact that Australian director Bruce (Driving Miss Daisy) Beresford has been shooting in sequence, covering Laforgue's odyssey from its summer beginning to its finale in the dead of winter—and Bluteau has become more haggard and dishevelled as the seasons progress.

This immersion in his role is typical of Bluteau, and the seemingly effortless incarnations are not the product of miracles but of meticulous preparation. 'I always end up in films where I have to find out something I don't know. It's the only way. If I get bored, I'm out. I have to learn,' he says in a voice that is charmingly accented—he is completely bilingual—yet hardly louder than a whisper. 'When I am doing the research, I can

spend months without saying a word because I'm always alone. I travel alone. But it's always so exciting, and you have to find new ways to prepare for a film like *Black Robe*.'

Work is just about the only aspect of himself that Bluteau is willing to talk about. A self-avowed loner, he doesn't mingle much with the crew between takes or at meals; in fact he rarely eats, which explains his nearly transparent thinness. He is likeable, polite, deeply involved in the film (and respected immensely for his work), yet at the same time content to exist in his remote world, an outsider, silent and tinged with melancholy. In his 14 years as an actor he has given but a handful of interviews. It's a process he tries to avoid.

'It's not that I'm really shy, but I am kind of reserved. It gets so boring doing interviews,' he explains, polite yet guarded, his eyes averted. His

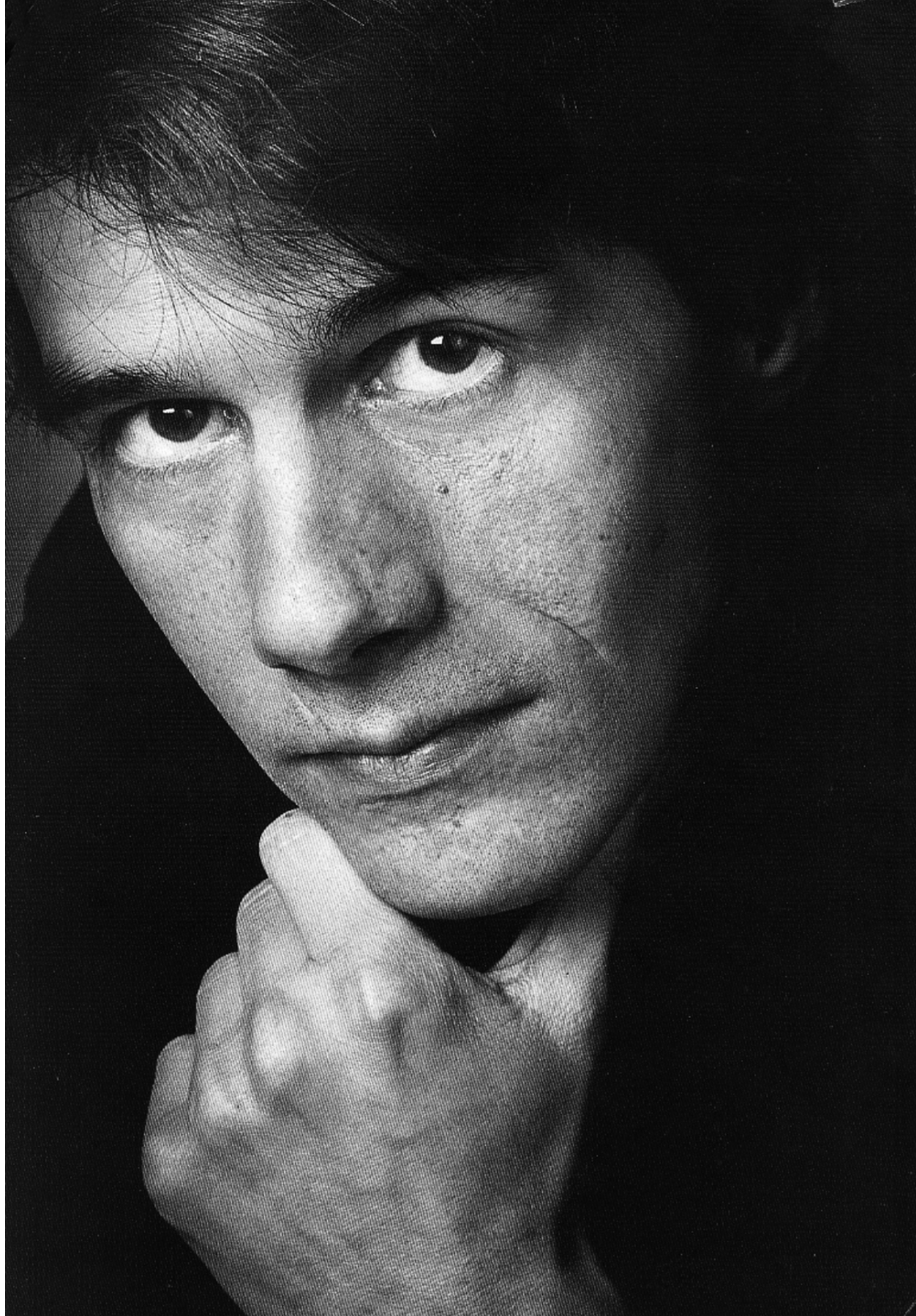
manner is so unassuming that it is impossible to be offended (and all the more possible to be amazed at the ferocious passion that infuses his work). 'If I don't like the first question, I'm walking out. You don't spend a year and a half working on something only to have a reporter stress the wrong things.'

'You see, there's always a surprise when you act—even when you see everything in the rushes every day. There's always something that was behind all of it, that we keep hidden and that's what pays. That's the image you're left with... and that's why it's so difficult to talk when you're actually doing it.'

Bluteau was born in Montreal. His father was in construction and work took him and his family all over the globe from the time Bluteau was three. He often had to leave schools three or four times a year, which has left in him a pattern of leaving projects that stifle or bore him. He abandoned medical studies to attend Montreal's Conservatory of Dramatic Arts until 1978, and then acted and was assistant director at Montreal's Quat'Sous Theatre. In 1982, he was awarded a Quebec government studio in New York and made that city his base for the next five years, appearing in off-Broadway plays, writing and making a rare television appearance in—of all things—an episode of *Miami Vice*. He thought he'd be able to give an edge to the killer he was hired to play, but he found the experience discouraging.

Returning to Montreal, he appeared in the films *Les Fous De Bassan*, *Bonjour* ▽

NIGEL PATRICKATZ



*Monsieur Gauguin and Mourir*, which he co-wrote. Over the years he has appeared in numerous Canadian television films, series and docu-dramas. And he received the kind of accolade most actors dream about when he appeared as a male prostitute in René-Daniel Dubois' *Being At Home With Claude* at London's King's Head Theatre in April 1990.

'One of the most dynamic and exciting theatre performances I have ever seen,' wrote Nicholas de Jongh in *The Guardian*. 'You are left

interviews or TV, so people know me but at the same time they don't know a lot about me. So they think, "Oh, I know that actor... what's his name." My name was more known than my face in Canada for a long time.' He shrugs, clearly unperturbed. 'I try to change my appearance each time.'

'Lothaire has a small reputation,' says *Black Robe* co-producer Sue Milliken, 'but he is one of the most riveting personalities I have ever seen on screen. When he's up there, that's where your eyes are.'

'They always try to typecast you,' Bluteau says, explaining the demanding, unusual roles he has chosen, 'and I don't work a lot for that reason. If I'm going to be bored there's all the chance in the world I'll bore the people watching. People always have more imagination than we

do, so we, as actors, have to leave an empty spot, leave intellectual and emotional switches, open doors in a film. I hate preaching, telling people this is the story. They know. They tell me. I get letters from all kinds of people.' He stops, and sighs. 'I don't know why they write to me. It's like you just met someone and suddenly you can confide in them because you know you won't see them again...'

For this nomadic actor, lining up projects is not an all-consuming priority. He writes and has directed and hopes to do so again. 'I started directing because I was offered some wonderful things that I didn't want to act in - I wanted to see the whole side.'

He is also planning to move back to New York, the only place he's ever felt truly at home. 'I haven't had a flat since I left New York in 1985. I move all the time. Not having a home,' he says, shrugging off his anorak to tackle the scene awaiting him as the priest confronting his demons, 'is not such a big thing.' □



Jesus Of Montreal, for which Bluteau won Canada's Genie Award for Best Actor

wondering at the sheer technique that brings Bluteau and the character he plays to such a spectacular physical pass. How can such signs and symptoms be fabricated? He won the *Time Out* 01 Readers' and Viewers' Award for his performance, and landed the role in *Black Robe*. 'I saw this fabulous actor with an incredible intensity and great concentration and that's all there was to it,' explains director Beresford. 'So I called up the producers because we'd been looking everywhere for someone to play Laforgue and told them they have the actor right there in Canada. And they said, "No, no good, he doesn't speak English". And I said, "But I saw him last night in the West End!"'

'I was frightened to death,' Bluteau says of the experience. 'But that people came along with no expectations, that people thought the character was me, well, that was great.' He laughs. 'I don't do

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