



The Criterion Collection double-dvd set *The Red Balloon & Other Stories* by *Albert Lamorisse* is an August, 2024 LVCA donation to the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of its contents.

Key: *indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer

Disk One

- A. *Bim (Bim, the Little Donkey)* Tunisia released theatrically in 1951
black-and-white Original version: 54 minutes
Janus Films English narration copyright 1981: 25 minutes
live action feature drama
Société Française du Cinéma pour la jeunesse
Producer: Georges Derocles

11 of a possible 20 points *** = above-average film

Points:

- 1 Direction: Albert Lamorisse
- 1 Editing: Marity Cléris
- 1 Cinematography: André Costey and Guy Tabary
- 2 Lighting
- 0 Written by: Albert Lamorisse and Jacques Prévert
- 1 Music: Mohamed Iguerbouchen

Musical Direction: Alex Padou

1 Art Direction

2 Sound

Sound Recording: René Sarazin

Technical Consultant: Guy Potignat

1 Acting

1 Creativity

0 Ambience

11 total points

Cast: Jacques Prévert (narrator), Abdallah (j), Messaoud (j), others

***Bim* was Albert Lamorisse's maiden voyage as film director and it shows in hammy, inept acting by his amateur cast.**

Thematically, the film centers on freedom: Abdallah's freedom to own his own donkey, Bim's freedom from childish torture, Messaoud's freedom from the regimentation of palace life.

Plot and character development are secondary to photography. Thus the story line about a donkey seizure inspiring unlikely friendship crossing economic barriers is little more than an excuse for a series of chase sequences, some on land and one at sea. Dialogue is incidental rather than scripted. Props are childishly gigantic, adult characters mere stereotypes straight out of the *Arabian Nights*.

Islamic symbols are blatantly visible. Yet no attention is paid to religious devotion or ritual.

As for child actors, future caliph "Messaoud" could have taken instruction directly from the American *Our Gang* kids, overacting in an irritatingly stagey manner. "Abdallah" provides a more natural performance, if one less emotionally varied.

The plot concerns a pet donkey named Bim. It belongs to street waif Abdallah and one day attracts the attention of spoiled royal brat Messaoud. The latter enlists aid from palace guards to pull Bim away from its owner. Led to a new home in the local palace, he's subjected to demeaning and potentially injurious indignities. With support from a street gang of like-minded urchins and a borrowed camel, Abdallah manages to ascend the wall surrounding caliphate property and begins searching for Bim's new quarters while dodging security

personnel. Eventually he arrives at a pool enclosure where Messaoud is preparing to chop off the ears of his pet, just for fun. Sight of this threat impels a scream of terror from Abdallah. That outcry gives away his trespassing presence.

Since this is supposed to be a children's film, Messaoud is suddenly stricken by remorse. The tormentor drops his enormous shears and transfers watchfulness from Bim to Abdallah, the latter now being pursued awkwardly by two armed servants. At the center of these episodes is an ornamental pool into which Bim was pushed by Messaoud in an earlier bit of mischief. A table-turning soaking is paid out to the aggressor when an unhappy donkey backs him to poolside, forcing him to escape through a splashy withdrawal. Still later, a fleeing Abdallah swims across the same water followed by a bumbling duo of adults.

Quite irrationally, once Abdallah is finally caught by guardsmen they push him into a jail cell. For what purpose? Who knows?

Meanwhile, Bim breaks free of his tether and roams through palace grounds, stopping to break a piece of pottery while treating himself to some of the caliph's prepared lunch. This action enrages the potentate. He orders underlings to seize that intrusive botheration and take him to the royal butcher for final disposal the next morning.

Messaoud is sufficiently penitent to remove whitewash from the donkey before it gets removed from interior courts. Desiring total restitution for past misdeeds, the boy liberates Abdallah in the evening. Then he and Bim's former owner set out for the butcher shop together. Unfortunately for their intentions, two adult thieves precede them to that destination, helping themselves to a camel, mule, furs and Bim. They leave behind an obvious trail, allowing Messaoud, Abdallah, and a throng of juvenile sympathizers to easily track over the desert after them.

Availing themselves of a shoreline dhow, thieving rascals embark on what they believe to be an undisturbed rapid getaway. Incredibly enough, the pack of youngsters in pursuit commandeer two other boats and set sail likewise. When they overtake their target real fun begins.

Sound recording is quite excellent and lighting transparent throughout. Arabic music is generally descriptive, though occasionally overwrought. Editing is serviceable rather than dynamic. Surprisingly, camerawork is only adequate,

with scenes framed more functionally than expressively. Emotional impact is thereby toned down, perhaps of benefit for a children's film.

Adult acting is uniformly exaggerated and risible. However, kids may not realize that. With minimal dialogue restricted to interjections and barebones narration written and spoken by Jacques Prévert, *Bim* relies for its success on sensory imagery rather than acting or wit.

Overall, the film is acceptable fare for children ages seven to twelve, with the shortened English version preferable to the longer original language one.

B. *Crin blanc: le cheval sauvage (White Mane)* France 1953

black-and-white 39 minutes live action short drama

Films Montsouris Producer: Albert Lamorisse

Available in both French-language and English-language versions.

17 of a possible 20 points **1/2 = a minor classic**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Albert Lamorisse**
 - 2 Editing: Georges Alépée***
 - 2 Cinematography: Edmond Séchan***
 - 2 Still photography**
 - 2 Lighting**
 - 1 Scenario: Albert Lamorisse, adapted by Denys Colomb de Daunant**
 - 2 Music: Maurice Le Roux**
 - 2 Sound Steve Smith (English version)**
 - Sound editing: Régine Artarit***
 - Sound recording (English version): Paul Holly**
 - Sound mixing (English version): Andy Kris**
 - English narration writers: Jamie Forrest and Ryan Hollings**
 - English narrator: Peter Strauss French narrator: J. P. Grenier**
 - 1 Acting**
 - 2 Creativity**
- 17 total points**

Cast: Alain Emery (j) (Folco, the fisher boy), Laurent Roche (Folco's grandfather),

Pascal Lamorisse (j) (Folco's younger brother), Denys Colombe de Daunant (horse breeder), others

The still at the top of this file comes from *Crin blanc*.

By the time he worked on creating his second fiction film, *Crin blanc* (*White Mane*), Albert Lamorisse had a surer hand at the helm. On native soil rather than a Tunisian island, this devotee of horseback riding chose to create a kind of visual elegy to a favorite recreation. For a star, he chose one wild, white stallion. City boy Alain Emery of Marseilles was selected as lead human, fisher-boy Folco. In chief support were Laurent Roche as a very lax Grandfather, Pascal Lamorisse in the role of Folco's younger brother and Denys Colombe de Daunant as a horse breeder doubling as film villain.

Set in a marshy wilderness of southern France known as the Camargue, *White Mane* is concerned with friendship and freedom. Its titular hero's a white stallion accustomed to roaming freely through salty coastal lowlands near the mouth of the Rhone River.

Cowboys, headed by a crusty seasoned cynic, attempt to isolate and corral the hostile horse. They succeed in tricking it into captivity. Only to see the animal buck and break away through restraining wooden bars which too readily yield to its assault.

Folco follows the men to their ranch and witnesses White Mane's escape. He believes a gentler approach would produce better results.

Returning home with fish for a family lunch, the horse lover is greeted by a pet flamingo and his younger brother, played by the film director's son, Pascal. At approximately age three, Pascal made his film debut in *Crin Blanc*, where he can be observed investigating a turtle, hauling forage and copycatting Folco in he attempting to use a stone to drive a nail into a fence.

After eating their fishy midday meal, the family dozes off. Folco dreams of walking White Mane along the seashore. Awakening, he rows off into marshes to check on his trap set underneath a very low footbridge. It proves full of fish. These he dumps unceremoniously into the bottom of his boat. After spotting White Mane nearby, the fisher gets out of his boat and attempts to approach the untamed stallion. Alas! The horse retreats further into swampland.

Nearby are four horsemen diligently bent upon recovery of White Mane. Another chase develops. This time the stallion rises on back legs when his foe, the horse breeder, closes in. Defensively, the confronting horse lifts forelegs high, in the process dumping its rider onto the ground. As he raises himself to a standing position, Folco runs to meet him. He hands over a hat the man had lost earlier, then hears an enchanting declaration from disgusted horseman: "Whoever wants him can have him." Asking the speaker if he truly means it, Folco is assured the disgusted equestrian certainly does.

This makes him even more determined to make White Mane his very own. Later, as he appears to row homeward, he descries White Mane again and tries, unsuccessfully, to win him over. The horse refuses to let him come too close. Then Folco tosses what appears to be some kind of netting over its head. This upsets the stallion and off it dashes. Folco clings desperately to a suddenly visible rope that has emerged from nowhere, getting dragged pitilessly through brush, water and mud.

Winded at last, unable to shake off exhausted deadweight at rope's end, the unbridled horse slows to a complete halt.

Folco groggily arises. He staggers over to his dream mount and proceeds to touch, pet, and at length lead him off home.

Further separations and reunions comprise the remainder of the film. It concludes ambiguously with horse and boy awash in the Atlantic Ocean. They are both free at last, but at what price?

Crin blanc is a photographic masterpiece thanks to superb camerawork by Edmond Séchan and magnificently suspenseful chase editing by Georges Alépée. Sound and lighting, both impeccable, add further to a brilliant Mediterranean luster. Omnipresent whites – represented by Folco's clothing, his home, and a stallion herd roaming watery wastes – dazzle the eye. They also lend pristine purity to this boy and beast adventure saga, one which author René Guillot retells in a 1959 novel titled in English *The Wild White Stallion*.

Though Albert Lamorisse considered Alain Emery to be a stoic personality unable or unwilling to reveal internal emotions, no such evidence of detachment from his role appears onscreen. Indeed, Alain and Folco are perfectly matched in temperament and inclination. The director's misplaced criticism could more appropriately be directed at his own son, who never in his film career transformed himself into anything other than what he already was.

Recommended for every adult viewer, *Crin blanc* isn't suited to viewers under the age of sixteen due to extremely graphic equine battle scenes.

C. *Le ballon rouge (The Red Balloon)* France 1956 color 34 minutes
live action short fantasy Films Montsouris Producer: Albert Lamorisse

18 of a possible 20 points ****1/2 = a minor classic

Points:

- 2 Direction: Albert Lamorisse
 - 2 Editing: Pierre Gillette
 - 2 Cinematography: Edmond Séchan*
 - 2 Lighting
 - 1 Written by: Albert Lamorisse
Script Supervision: Reinie Bource
 - 2 Music: Maurice Leroux*
 - 2 Art Direction
 - 2 Sound: Pierre Vuillemin*
 - 1 Acting
 - 2 Creativity
- 18 total points

Cast: Pascal Lamorisse (j) (Pascal), Georges Sellier (a merchant), Vladimir Popov (a tenant), Paul Perey (probably the school principal), Rénee Marion (Pascal's mother), Sabine Lamorisse (j) (little girl with blue balloon), Renaud Séchan (a twin boy in red), David Séchan (the other twin boy in red), Michel Pezin, others

Le ballon rouge (The Red Balloon) is director Albert Lamorisse's short film masterpiece. Shot in the neighborhoods of Ménilmontant and Belleville, the movie proceeds on the basis of whimsy, not logic. It's a behaviorist lab experiment with the director providing intermittent planned stimuli and then recording improvised responses. A sort of neutral spectatorship prevails, with

Lamorisse's son, a not particularly emotive introvert, developing an imaginative friendship with the title character.

Pascal, at approximately age six, appears to be a loner. He's tardy for classes, completely self-centered, resourcefully possessive. As soon as he eyeballs an apparently abandoned balloon tied to a lamppost, he decides to climb up and take ownership. This travel delay causes him to run the risk of not reaching school before classes start. Especially since a tram conductor refuses to allow the awkwardly floating child's toy aboard. Pascal is thus forced to run through sparsely populated city streets with his round red companion in order to enter a school courtyard in timely fashion. He fails to do so and must resort to buzzing for entry, putting himself immediately on an administrative list of troublemakers.

The next day, when amiable balloon circumvents enforced exclusion by drifting into Pascal's classroom via lofty open window, general clamor results. Students are focused momentarily on interloping object. Only its removal restores order. To effectively sever bond between boy and toy, the school's principal locks up Pascal in his office, then journeys off to Town Hall on a business appointment. Unluckily for the man's self-esteem, a red plaything follows him, causing embarrassment further multiplied by futile endeavors to capture it. Returning around dismissal time, the flustered administrator, still escorted by trailing nuisance, has to be reminded by a concierge of Pascal's isolated detention. He then rather irritably unlocks intervening door and allows the youngster access again to freedom and ruby delight.

Home and church offer no more accommodating situations. Pascal's mother first excludes his playmate from entry to their apartment, then insists on her son's leaving his best and apparently only friend outside church. Horrors! Any sort of mischance might befall it.

In both cases, a crafty aerial globe finds alternative paths into forbidden territory, stymieing fussbudget adults. In an ecclesiastical situation at Église Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix de Ménilmontant a uniformed beadle insists upon departure from the premises of youth and parent as well as intrusive follower.

Later, as Pascal and bloodless partner explore a street market filled with antiques, the child becomes transfixed by a painting of some girl from a prior century his own age. Shortly thereafter, Pascal's actual sister, Sabine, shows up

for a cameo with blue balloon in tow. Both balloons and children engage in a meet-cute encounter.

While adults mostly find Pascal's buddy mildly troubling, ragamuffin boys from his neighborhood plot to deprive its owner of an attractive red showpiece. Not succeeding at first, they meet with better luck later, managing by sheer numbers to overwhelm Pascal's resistance. Their small victim makes an effort to at least liberate his prize, but the seemingly intelligent and loyal playmate disdains leaving him at the mercy of bullies.

About half the gang wish merely to play with it. The other half wield slingshots with menacingly destructive intent and throw stones at their unresisting target. Embodying Lamorisse's stated belief "life is cruel," they eventually puncture Pascal's inoffensive, vulnerable pal, with one gamin stomping on its unresisting "corpse" as a final coup de grace.

Here the film attains a moment of silent climax, with Pascal left miserably alone and friendless in grief. Yet there is more that follows, a conclusion both uplifting and dreamlike.

Maurice Leroux's music score retains a childlike frolicsomeness and simplicity that holds up quite well over time. It prevents an ever-present border of gloom from casting a pall over Paris through a combination of buoyancy and humorous gentle mockeries of adult intercessions.

Edmond Séchan once again supplies impressively acrobatic cinematography, working wonders in passageways with limited lighting potentials. According to Albert Lamorisse, only natural lighting was employed in the shoot. That's amazing when viewing the end product.

There's nothing inspired about the cast. It's comprised of, among others, two of the director's own children, twin nephews of the director of photography and local preadolescents from the Belleville and Ménilmontant districts of Paris. Their acting is satisfyingly appropriate, unforced, convincing. Yet not commanding. Lamorisse's screenplay, despite its Oscar® award, is comprised of a few commonplace fragments of dialogue, with no room available for character development or philosophical ruminations.

Far more exemplary are lighting and Pierre Vuillemin's lingeringly effective sound recording. A glance over reviews of the film by child spectators reveals these elements made, and continue to make, profound impressions on them.

The use of spectacularly enhanced red for the title protagonist, reinforced by an interior orange counterpart, was a notably inspired decision. It offsets subdued urban backgrounds, contrasting sharply by its vibrancy with relatively ancient cobblestones underfoot and shadowy flights of stairs squeezed between massive apartment buildings with heavily weathered, dark-hued walls.

Pierre Gillette's film editing left purposeful gaps between loosely connected anecdotal episodes, forcing audiences frequently to make whatever inferences they favored in lieu of merely receiving explicit cause-effect relationships. Since the director / screenwriter was by no means spiritually inclined, his film's only intended message was the significance of free imagination for human happiness. The movie's final scene should make that totally clear. Anyone seeking a religious spin to the drama should look elsewhere. For Albert Lamorisse was by no means a man of devout practice or inclination. The director's later misstep, *Fifi la plume (Circus Angel)*, will disillusion anyone who proposes some kind of spirituality, Christian or otherwise, lurks in subtexts of his oeuvre.

Le ballon rouge is offered here without any subtitles, possibly to dissuade child audiences in English-speaking countries from screening it. Or perhaps folks at Criterion felt addition of subtitles would make the picture less arty and therefore diminish its allure for adults. At any rate, *The Red Balloon* is a generously enriching experience for both adults and any child aged seven or older, one likely to remain for years as a cherished memory. Very highly recommended by Kino Ken.

D. *Le voyage en ballon (Stowaway in the Sky)* France / Spain 1960 color
85 minutes subtitled / narrated in English live action feature drama
Films Montsouris / Filmsonor Producer: Albert Lamorisse

17 of a possible 20 points ****1/2 = a minor classic

Points:

- 1 Direction: Albert Lamorisse
- 2 Editing: Albert Lamorisse
- 2 Cinematography: Maurice Fellous* and Guy Tabary*
- 2 Lighting

Special Visual Effects: Georges Iaconelli*

1 Screenplay: Albert Lamorisse

2 Music: Jean Prodromides*

Musical Direction: José Berghmans

2 Production Design: Pierre-Louis Thevenet

Artistic Advisor: Marthe de Fels

2 Sound: Pierre Vuillemin*

1 Acting

2 Creativity

Technical Advisors: Georges Goetz and Jérôme Géronimi

17 total points

Cast: André Gille (Grandfather), Maurice Baquet (Tou-Tou), Pascal Lamorisse (j) (Grandson), Charles Bayard, Jack Lemmon (narrator of English version), others

Between the theatrical release of *Le ballon rouge (The Red Balloon)* in 1956 and that of his first fiction feature drama *Le voyage en ballon (Stowaway in the Sky)* in 1960, Albert Lamorisse invented the classic board game of *Risk™*. It first appeared in his homeland in 1957. The game's title would serve as appropriate slogan for the rest of his career.

Armed with a novel creation called Helivision – a gyroscopic camera stabilizing system – Lamorisse set out to film from a bird's-eye view. Connecting helicopter to adjacent balloon, he and his crew flew over France and Spain capturing incredibly intimate shots of countryside below, then fashioning results into a dramatic adventure story.

This time, his son Pascal co-starred with actor André Gille and comic relief Maurice Baquet. The boy played a carefree stowaway aboard Grandfather's retro hot air balloon. Humor was mostly sight gags that worked well. These alternated with intensely dramatic shots of Alpine rockscapes, Mediterranean shorelines, a stag hunt conveniently underway below, and herds of wild pigs, cattle and horses rushing through the swampy Camargue. Several historic points of interest were included in what amounts to a children's tour of west central Europe.

Grandfather is bent on resurrecting balloon travel in the time-honored tradition of Jules Verne. Mechanics are briefly and simply explained in an

introductory Parisian apartment setting. Then the main players travel off, presumably by automobile, to Bethune, a suitably old-fashioned Normandy town. There they inflate a full-size version of their prototype miniature and, with considerable aid from local gendarmes, begin ascent into the sky. Grandson isn't supposed to be participating in the actual flight. He can't resist temptation, though. So he grabs hold of a trailing sandbag rope and begins hauling himself upwards, taking care to avoid rising above the basket's upper rim. Too late Grandfather discovers an unplanned supercargo attachment. He makes the best of a troubling situation by hauling Grandson headfirst into the basket with him.

The pair then follow a zigzagging course dependent on favorable winds. They observe in passing industrial, architectural and rustic landmarks of northern France. Arriving at Alpine foothills with no more serious incident than an unanticipated laundry pickup, they make a 180-degree swing and head back west to Paris, where a group of cheering financial backers await.

A panoramic series of shots highlight the Eiffel Tower, Place de la Concorde, Champs-Élysées, Arc de Triomphe and Notre-Dame Cathedral.

The airborne pair then glide west to a marriage celebration in Brittany, where a country lass enamored of showoff mechanic Tou-Tou is whisked off alone by a prematurely unanchored balloon. An ensuing chase by celebrants and Tou-Tou leads ultimately to Carnac's prehistoric burial stones, one of which serves usefully as a kind of capstan for winding the anchor rope of a runaway Montgolfier around.

Later on, a sightseeing twosome of kindred adventurers float over the Loire Valley's Château de Chenonceau with its lovely bridge designed by architect Philibert de l'Orme, befuddle hunters chasing a stag through woods and meadows and climactically drift over Mont Blanc in the Alps. Then their aircraft crashes, explodes and burns after touching ground roughly. This actual spontaneous event was not part of Lamorisse's prepared sketches.

Fortuitously, a replacement is available. The duo is soon off again after an embarrassing down-to-earth ride in a hay wagon. This time they're southbound to Mediterranean Provence, where they overpass a hill fortress and eat a satisfying breakfast aloft. The younger has a comic turn here as he brushes his teeth, then must determine carefully wind direction before spitting out residue.

A following scene finds the boy swimming while attached by rope around his waist to overdrifting gondola.

After a sideshow in which Tou-Tou inadvertently leads a bull to the aeronauts' target zone, an uninvited child traveler becomes sole navigator and pilot of his grandfather's invention. He relishes a rare opportunity of breezing solo through clouds, conducting unsupervised aerial surveillance of Camargue wildlife, then thrilling to wedged flight of flamingos over the eastern Atlantic shoreline.

Disaster two. Grandson loses control over his transport and is forced into frantically jumping out onto a small coastal island. Like Fosco in *Crin blanc* (*White Mane*) he ends confronting the sea, triumphantly alone in the natural world.

This time stunning cinematography is handled by Maurice Fellous and Guy Tabary in truly brilliant Eastmancolor. Aerial shots are magnificently lucid. Pierre Gillette's expert editing immerses viewers in often harrowing high-altitude experiences amid ridges, pinnacles, glaciers and cathedral spires. Lighting is usually optimal, with a plethora of detail in most scenes, even those captured during magic hours.

Jean Prodromides tacks on a music score full of contrasting featherweight and suspenseful themes, making for considerable variety of tone colors and moods. Pierre Vuillemin's sound recording expertise assures listeners maximum sonic impact of hisses, an explosion, forest fires, creaky bicycle gears, and bird cries.

Though no performers are charged with impassioned histrionics, all deliver agreeably unself-conscious characterizations, allowing scenery to dominate as it should and must. Pascal Lamorisse was obviously enjoying this outing more than the fantastical preceding one where he had to labor assiduously at prying audience attention from scene-stealing ruby sphere.

Bouncing back and forth between conventional child tagalong adventure and educational travelogue, Albert Lamorisse's screenplay delivers optimal entertainment value intertwined with sprinklings of history and science. It's not as scrupulously attentive to mechanical specifics as Jules Verne forerunners, *Five Weeks in a Balloon* and the introductory section of *Mysterious Island*. However, it compensates admirably for that shortcoming with a plenitude of gorgeous visual images.

The French-language subtitled version is preferable to the English narration by Jack Lemmon, which inserts some unduly mature audience material written by S. N. Behrman into a script which doesn't need any such distractions.

Le voyage en ballon is the most rewarding and optically awesome of Lamorisse's productions, one no film lover can afford to bypass. It's top quality viewing for all adults and every child aged nine or older.

E. *Fifi la plume (Circus Angel)* France 1964 black-and-white 75 minutes
subtitled / dubbed in English live action feature comedy
Films Montsouris Producer: Jean Velter

9 of a possible 20 points **1/2 = a mediocre (at best) movie

Points:

- 0 Direction: Albert Lamorisse
 - 1 Editing: Madeleine Gug
 - 2 Cinematography: Maurice Fellous and Pierre Petit
 - 2 Lighting
 - 0 Screenplay: Albert Lamorisse
 - 1 Music: Jean-Michel Defaye
 - 1 Art Direction: Claude Lamorisse and Misha de Potestad
Costume Design: Claude Lamorisse and Misha de Potestad
 - 2 Sound (English-language version): Peter Fernandez*, Paul Zydell* and
Jack Cooley*
 - 0 Acting
 - 0 Creativity
- 9 total points

Cast: Philippe Avron (Fifi), Mireille Nègre (equestrienne), Henri Lambert (lion tamer), Paule Noëlle (Marie-Noëlle de Montsouris), Michel Nastorg (Monsieur de Montsouris), Pierre Collet, Georges Guéret, Michel Thomass, Dominique Zardi (mobsters), Raoul Delfosse (ringmaster), Martine Sarcey (woman on the boat), Claude Evrard (man whose house is burglarized first), Michel de Ré (man on the boat), Max Montavon (Montsouris butler), Jeanne Pérez (the Breton), Raymonde Vattier (Madame de Montsouris),

Pierre Repp (the commissioner), Roger Trapp (the cyclist), others

Last and least significant of Albert Lamorisse's fiction films is a wretched flop titled *Fifi la plume (Circus Angel)*. An essay at lightweight comedy for adults, this completely whimsical slapstick sacrilege was shot in black-and-white with a cast of no-name actors.

Lead Philippe Avron plays Fifi, a second story man obsessed with stealing expensive timepieces. How he ordinarily disposes of them is never revealed. Nor is any information doled out about why Fifi chose a life of crime in the first place.

Interrupted during one such escapade by the homeowner's unexpected return, Fifi's escape route leads to a circus tent. Inside he assumes the role of a lion tamer's mugging partner.

Their audience is entertainingly bamboozled. Not the professional in the ring. His looming revenge on the intruder for show stealing gets postponed when a human birdman act ends in fatal disaster under the big top.

What to do about that? Why, of course. Let Fifi replace him. Just fasten angel wings to his shoulder, rig him up with hidden wires, let him fly around more or less gracefully.

Of course, unforeseen complications ensue. Fifi can't take his eyes off the circus's gorgeous equestrienne, earning himself murderous jealousy from her longtime wooer, the lion tamer. He's equally unable to forswear larcenous activity, especially now chance has thrown his way streamlined aerial equipment.

All of which leads to Lamorisse's usual race for survival scenes amid uncustomary slapstick chaos and set smashing. Fifi's unconvincing alibis for hypocritical, seductive and outright criminal misconduct grate against his posturing as an angelic messenger. Religious symbols are routinely mocked and overriding joie de vivre substituted for serious spirituality. Yet inconsequential ironic sermonizing leads nowhere beyond a concluding family scene as fully unbelievable as the silliness preceding it.

Absent a true story arc and possible engaging identification of viewers with actors, *Fifi la plume* sinks from abundant leaky misfires of both dialogue and stereotyped acting. Every character talks in the same incoherent, senseless manner. Actions conform to backgrounds with no regard for logic or motivation.

There's no evidence to suggest the production process was anything beyond simple transfer of storyboard movements to film. Having a main character who displays core traits of villainy rather than heroism doesn't help matters any. Only prospective vandals and looters are apt to sympathize with Fifi. As for his love interest and pugnacious adversary, these are comic book escapees lacking any emotional heft or shadings of personality.

On the plus side, sound, lighting and cinematography are exemplary. Music, while limited to simple reinforcement of prevailing ambience, is pleasantly unchallenging.

Madeleine Gug's editing does all it can to gloss over plot gaps and a pileup of inexplicable and frequently humorless absurdities. Dumbness by itself is not funny, as Lamorisse should certainly have known.

Costuming and art direction come courtesy of the director's wife, Claude, and one Misha de Potestad. Neither are prime candidates for a Production Design Hall of Fame. Their work unfortunately accentuates rather than hides the film's budgetary limitations.

Circus Angel is one Lamorisse film better left in obscurity. It's not recommended viewing for any audiences.

Of the Criterion Lamorisse's set bonus supplements the best are three short interviews on Disc One. Two zero in on the director being interviewed live about his purpose, themes and production devices. A third features commentary by Albert's son Pascal. It enlightens auditors about the five principal restored films from an inside participant's perspective. All three are informative and worthwhile. Less so is a fifty-minute documentary directed by Chloé Scialom. It focuses on Pascal Lamorisse's life and relationships with his father and with daughter Lysa. Including home movies with preschoolers cavorting au naturel and similar grainy trivialities of no special interest outside the Lamorisse family, this documentary is substandard and unworthy of appearing with other elements of this set. Pascal's twenty-four minute 2023 interview on Disc One is vastly more enlightening.

This Criterion Collection release also includes a twenty-six-page booklet. Its highlight is an essay on the director's life and work by David Cairns. Though perhaps overly respectful of its subject, especially when treating of his *Fifi la*

***plume* Hindenburg, it nonetheless contains much thoughtful information defining connections between director, environment, geography and influences.**