

# JIM DONOVAN: CROSSING BORDERS

in conversation with...

I feel quite attached to my Canadian identity and value the differences that make us who we are. Film-making is an extension of this, and clearly there is a cultural value in nurturing and protecting stories and perspective. I can't imagine venturing further into the broader, international creative space without having first explored the nature of who I am, where I come from and what has meaning to me, and these things throw me back to my Canadian and Quebecois roots. Throughout my career I've felt fortunate to benefit from the support we receive from all the quarters of our society that recognize the value of true Canadian voices. It's something worth fighting for, for ourselves and for the future. — Jim Donovan

**Jim Donovan** is a unique individual in the DGC, a director who is just as comfortable working in French as in English. While many directors can function bilingually, few have been able to forge careers in a country that still has “two solitudes.” For Donovan, a director who has made music videos and commercials as well as television drama series, documentaries and feature films, it means that he’s platform-agnostic and happy to work in either language. A veteran cineaste, Donovan, a Montrealer now living in Toronto, has recently gone from directing “A Day in the Life,” an award-winning episode of *Flashpoint*, to making *Le Clan*, an SRC (Radio-Canada) six-part series set in the French-speaking Acadian area of New Brunswick. Should *Le Clan* hit big when it’s broadcast in the fall, Donovan is likely to be found deciding whether he should be working in English or French and what part of the country is best resourced to pay for his directorial services. —MARC GLASSMAN



Previous page:  
Camera cranes over  
crowd on the set of *Pure*  
(Jim Donovan, 2005).  
Photo: Chris Kralik.

This page, top to bottom:  
On the set of *Pure*  
(Jim Donovan, 2005).  
Photos: Chris Kralik.

**Montage:** Marc Glassman  
**Jim:** Jim Donovan

**Montage:** I'm really interested in *Le Clan*. It's a major TV series for Radio-Canada, and I'm wondering about the challenges that you faced. I can see that you're bilingual, and I'm wondering if you can talk to me about your challenges, linguistically but also directionally, in terms of handling a major production that's in French.

**Jim:** Well, in reality, my mother tongue, what we spoke at home, is French. And what I would speak in the street, the minute I would cross the door, was English. And that's been my life, from day one. I'm always amazed at how you just find the language that you need to find when you're working with artists and people. I was concerned that I wouldn't remember what to call a long shot or a medium shot in French. And of course, to add to that, we were shooting in Shediac, New Brunswick, for 80 per cent of our time, so you have all these Acadians on set. By the end of the shoot, the entire crew was speaking our own version of Chiac, which is a mix between English and French, so it was actually quite the adventure on the linguistic level.

**Montage:** Were you using a Quebecois team and crew or people from New Brunswick?

**Jim:** It was a healthy mix. I managed to get to work with my longtime collaborator, DP Jean-Pierre Gauthier, and the keys were predominantly from Montreal—my art director, the first AD, the producers and most of the actors. Part of the mandate was for us to blend and make use of the palette that exists in French-speaking New Brunswick, so we wound up getting some of the actors in that area, and also some of the crew. It was a new experience for me that way, to come into a region in such a way as I guess being an American coming to Montreal would feel like. There was a sense of mentorship, I think. A lot of the people we were working with, in some departments—they were learning a little bit as we were moving forward, which was cool.

**Montage:** Having worked a lot on sets in English, did you find that there was a difference in how your crew worked?

**Jim:** I would say there are profound differences in the processes that are at work here. To begin with, the Quebec model is very streamlined and intimate. There are fewer players and, of course, less money.

For *Le Clan*, the feeling I got, honestly, was like being on one of my independent films. You have this intimate relationship with the writers, the actors and the producers, which resembles the environment of making a film. So by the end of it—this was a six-episode run—it felt like making a six-hour movie. There's

a good chance we're going to do another run, and so you have that perspective of the entire story, which is a bit of a throwback to my roots as a filmmaker—having that *vue d'ensemble*, the entire landscape in front of you. It's a stretch of the creative muscle, there's no doubt about it, and it's a lot of responsibility.

**Montage:** Were you in fact one of the showrunners as well as the director?

**Jim:** I was very creatively involved, as was the writer, Joanne Arsenneau, who wrote on the hit Quebec cop show *19-2*. The producers, Cécile Chevrier, Marc Poulin and especially Joanne Forgues (who was acting as script editor), were close creative partners throughout and would be on set every day representing our writer, Joanne. So they were the *de facto* showrunners. However, I acted as what would be termed here a directing showrunner, like you see on shows such as *Orphan Black*. But in Quebec this concept is considered a director's job, and most shows are helmed by one director. So it's a different way of defining and labelling the work.

For me it began with casting, and it continued into every single creative decision—you're involved all the way. They look to you and they want to have not only your opinion but your leadership. There's a lot of value placed on that. For the first time in my television career, I was invited to go present the show to the execs at Radio-Canada. In fact, I was a little bit intimidated by presenting the entire show, and at a point when we didn't even have all of the scripts. They really value your take on tone, style, story.

**Montage:** That is very different.

**Jim:** Quite frankly, up until *Le Clan*, I had worked exclusively in the other system. For me, we are there to serve the process. We are there to provide creative leadership. But I did find it equally challenging to come into an episode of *Flashpoint* or *Cracked*, where you're given a story, a certain set of rules and a style that's established. There's a certain liberating quality to having just to think about directing, because then you're free to explore and you have to challenge yourself in a different way creatively. Constriction gives you an opportunity to dive deeper into the many other details that are your responsibility.

**Montage:** It sounds in a way as if there is a bit more of an acceptance of the director as a kind of auteur in Quebec. Is that your impression?

**Jim:** Perhaps. I'm going through editing right now, and it's no different than what I've experienced elsewhere in Canada, except that I'm involved in every single edit.

**Montage:** Well, that's major.

**Jim:** But what I mean is that there are notes coming from all of my creative partners and from the network, and we have to compose with that. It was the same during casting. It's a collaborative process—I guess the big difference is that you're there from the beginning to the end. You are made to feel responsible, and you have to accept that responsibility. You're the ring bearer, if this were *The Lord of the Rings*. You still need the fellowship to follow you on the quest to succeed, though....

**Montage:** Absolutely. So take me on the set then—

what was it like to be working on *Le Clan*? Here you are, with some crew that you knew, and some crew that I guess you were getting to know—what was it like; what were the challenges for you creatively?

**Jim:** Well, again, I was fortunate enough to be working with a DP with whom I had done two features before, and a television movie, so that was wonderful. I worked with the production designer, Dominique Desrochers, who I had known for many years. What was fun was that there were some new people who I didn't know and who I learned to appreciate. Mona Medawar, my script assistant, for example, had worked with Jean-Marc Vallée, and she was wonderful to work with. So was the costume designer here, Josée Castonguay.

**Montage:** How did you prepare for *Le Clan*?

**Jim:** I started thinking about references and, of course, before I got the job, I had prepared a six-page treatment that summarized my approach, and referenced other shows, films, photography and music. And I'd made a mood video that drew from things that I felt were important to talk about to Radio-Canada and to the producers.

I had to think about what the material meant to me; how would an audience connect to it; what are we developing? To give you an example, because this story takes place in New Brunswick, I started to explore Southern Gothic as a literary form, so of course *True Detective* came to mind, *Angel Heart* came to mind, and when you think about it, the Deep South includes New Orleans and the French reality of Louisiana, and there's a direct link to Acadia. So I moved forward on that idea.

I started thinking about something that I dubbed Shediac Gothic. For example, the first thing we did was hire my good friend and musician Simon Wayland, and we started looking into music and came up with a mashup between late-'90s trip hop like Portishead and something roots country like Johnny Cash or Ry Cooder—that kind of sound. We created a playlist, and I'd play that for the production designer and the location scout and say, "I want to find the grit in this place." I wanted to find a way to inhabit the series with this spirit of something that's different for a Quebec audience. And, of course, all of that led to images coming from the art department, so we started researching photographs with a certain colour style and palette, which then bled into the wardrobe and found its way into the cinematography.

Comparing it to making films, all my keys, all the people who were my right hand, my left hand, every finger on my hands—these people came back to me with ideas that echoed from the first ideas that I had come up with.

**Montage:** That sounds like a director's vision, Jim.

**Jim:** That's what directors do; we are like curators of reality. You've got this landscape now where content is all-pervasive. Everyone can have their own YouTube channel. My kids watch online user-generated content constantly; if they're bored, they'll just go and find some kind of content that interests them. In that kind of a context, if you don't have a specific voice, if you're not extremely present and refined with your creative choices, then you're basically making something that's beige and is going to get lost in the signal-to-noise ratio. So we have to be good—we have to be better than we've ever been. That's the spirit we have to have as directors.



This page: Donovan with crew on the set of the upcoming series *Le Clan*. Photos: Julie D'Amour Léger.



**Montage:** Can you tell me more about *Le Clan*? Why did you shoot in New Brunswick?

**Jim:** In *Le Clan*, a big part of the story happens in Acadia. It is the story of a guy in the witness-protection program who lives a double life. A part of the life he left behind, his criminal past, is in Shediac and around there. I don't know if you've ever spent any time down there, but the locals have such colourful accents, which I picked up on right away. I wanted to hear that, and many of the characters in the show speak with a Chiac accent, with an Acadian accent. Ultimately, it's fascinating, and it's a struggle. There are concerns about whether or not people will understand what they're saying. I kind of pushed in the direction of capturing that colour, that richness. If you see a show set in Louisiana, when the Cajuns speak there's a certain style to it. It's like when Drake raps on one of his songs, half the time maybe you'll get it and sometimes maybe you won't, but it all sounds beautiful to me.

We had a very small crew, and we made the decision very early on to go handheld for about 80 per cent of the show. We were running and gunning all the time. We actually surrendered the dolly fund to make ends meet. We've got a Steadicam available at all times, because my DP also operates [one], so we'll go to the tripod and the slider, but very simple gripping. We rarely put down tracks unless we absolutely have to; the only thing we haven't done is go on Rollerblades, but maybe we will. I'm extremely focused on the actors' performances. Every actor is truly invested in this show. There are guys who turned down films to do it—one of the leads, Pierre-Yves Cardinal, turned down a fairly major production in France to be with us and to do this part. He's one of the most colourful characters in the series. So every actor came to it extremely gung-ho, and it's so much fun. Of course, when I say we had a light crew, it's obviously up to professional standards.

We did a couple of action scenes on the first run last summer that were quite important. In certain cases I had my stunt coordinator come in from Montreal to choreograph, when there were things like combat or a car stunt. There are certain things you can't get around and that you really have to think through, but in general what I prefer for action right now is more organic. It has to be completely believable. Paul Greengrass comes to mind as an influence—you never doubt that it's real, and that's probably a lot of work. In this show, it's gritty realism, so you have to work hard to make sure it feels that way.

Not to be underestimated is the work of the actor in a show like this. It's very involved, technically, and we always wish we had three times more hours to shoot but in the middle of this sort of running-and-gunning, you do spend a lot of time going through it with the actor, making sure it does feel real, so it will feel plausible to an audience. You've got enough creative partners on set to make the technical aspects work and to make it visceral once you get in the

zone. It's crucial that the actors buy into the scenes and the overarching concept.

**Montage:** As much as we talk about action, there's mood, and there's dealing with characters. I was struck by "A Day in the Life," the award-winning show you did for *Flashpoint*, particularly the sequence where a guy is proposing to a woman he has been harassing and she knows that at any second he could possibly be taken out by the special police crew. The acting is incredibly intense, and it really worked for me. Am I right that that's a scene you're proud of?

**Jim:** Oh, absolutely. When the producers gave me that script and I read the scene, I was touched. I had gone through some things in my own life and somehow, the image of the guy on bended knee who is so in love with this person who just can't love him is so powerful—and he's proposing with a gun in his hand—that I knew we could make something powerful. Of course it begins with the script—you felt it on paper, you knew this was special. And it's motivating: when you see a good story, when you see something that just grabs you and you know that it's good, you feel compelled to bring it to life and just make it right. So that was the first thing. That particular episode has three storylines, and that last storyline—I mean, this was a Valentine's Day episode—was so profound. It had all sorts of layers to it. It was a lot of fun; I was really happy to get that.

**Montage:** Working with the actors on a scene like that, what do you bring to it, and what do they like?

**Jim:** I sit actors down as often and as much as I can, and the first thing I tell them is, "There will be no mistakes. There are no mistakes." And every actor, when I'm done a show, thanks me for telling them that, because it means that we can't go wrong. Whatever happens is going to happen for a reason—it came from somewhere and there is some truth to it. For me, in my way of doing things, there is no right and wrong. There can only be what's true to the idea that we're trying to accomplish here. Every serious actor brings that, and every serious director brings that to the table as well.

So you come in with your ideas, and they come in with their ideas. I used to come in with much more rigid notes about what I thought was the right way to do something, and the more the years went by, the more movies I made and the more experience I got, I finally realised that you have to come in with a good idea of what you see and what it means, and then you don't talk about that. You give people the space to create and steer them as best you can, and you are a butterfly catcher. You're running through a field of flowers, making all of the butterflies fly, and you're trying to catch as many as possible in the net.

**Montage:** Without damaging them, right? I guess that's the butterfly part—let it fly, but keep them alive. So I think that's where the metaphor really works, right?

**Jim:** You're not going to catch a butterfly with a hammer, so you can't beat people over the head with your genius vision of what this is and how it should be. But generally speaking, when you talk about that whole sequence in *Flashpoint* that we were discussing—it was truly collaborative, and we rehearsed details such as how he would hold the gun and present the ring. It's hard to remember exactly all

of the micro-details of how it happened, but I do know that I had notes on every single scene as I always do, but I don't necessarily always talk about them. I keep those to myself, and I'm interested in what everyone has to offer, from the actors to the props person to the scriptwriter to just about everybody. And that's the concept of the butterfly catcher: everyone's a butterfly.

But still, even though you want everyone's creativity, the truly tricky part is having to say no to possibly 90 per cent of everything and saying yes 10 per cent of the time. It's still extremely difficult to keep people motivated to come back with their ideas when you can't take every single idea. You do put yourself in that deciding position.

**Montage:** With *Le Clan*, there's a lead who has had two identities in his life, and part of the drama has to be him playing the duality of the two individuals that he has been—and, as you say, it's also a family story—so how do you work with an actor who has to play that role? You do have the advantage of working with the same actors over and over again, over a period of six episodes at this point, so how does that relationship develop—how do you work with them so that they're able to get into their characters in a deeper and more complex way as the episodes go along?

**Jim:** We began our relationship by doing rehearsals, and I insisted on getting as much time as I could possibly get. I had picked out scenes to workshop with them—of course you can't rehearse every single script, so you have to come up with a rehearsal plan. We did talk at length about the main character with Sebastien Ricard, who plays the lead, and who is an accomplished actor in Quebec but is not known in television, having done mostly features. He's an extremely organic guy—he works in much the same way as I do, so with him my dynamic is different than with Louis-Philippe Dandeneault, who is an extremely technical actor. He's got a lead part in *19-2*, on the French side. And Louis-Philippe brings a very specific thing to every scene. He's got ideas that are extremely well thought out, and they tend to be 99 per cent perfect—I've got almost nothing to give this guy. But, if I ask him to, he'll explore anything at all; he's open. And, ultimately, cultivating that openness is the key for this particular cast. Coming to set with ideas is important, but so is having their confidence and their trust.

It's such an organic process, and again the tricky thing for me as a director is to realise that every single actor has different needs, and you have to harmonize every single one of those needs. I learned this a lot on my feature *Trois Saisons*, where we basically improvised the dialogue in 80 per cent of the scenes because we had a script which was dialogue free, and it was a strategic decision to use improv to make the actors 100 per cent invested in the character. So with *Le Clan*, the character of Zach, who is played by a 12-year-old, Alex Ricard—the needs aren't the same as for Sebastien Ricard, who is a real-life musician in his late 30s, who is quite confident with improv, and who is used to riffing and working organically. And it's different for him than it is for Louis-Philippe Dandeneault, who is extremely confident and who comes to the role having done some work at home. So, your part to play, for me anyways, is that you have to own the story—which of course will have to be shorthand for you, and that has its own challenges—and you have to cultivate a set where people are feeling that you'll protect them, and that they are free to try things, because I think that's ultimately why we all do this. We're all like



On this page, top to bottom: Jills from the set of *Trois Saisons* (Jim Donovan, 2009). Photos: Kiran Ambwani. Opposite page: Donovan with actors on the set of *Cracked* (CBC). Photos: Stephen Scott.



children playing in a playground, let's be honest—not everyone has this job.

**Montage:** Let's go back 25 years ago—when did you graduate university? You went to Concordia, right?

**Jim:** Class of '89.

**Montage:** And had you decided already that you wanted to be a director? When did you decide that film was it for you?

**Jim:** I had already starting shooting little industrial shorts and whatnot to pay my rent while I was at Concordia, and I would have gladly been a sound engineer or a cinematographer or anything they would pay me for—I was looking for PA jobs—but I couldn't because I wasn't in any union and there were no openings. So at some point I got a job in a local TV station in Quebec City. It was in the middle of summer, and the guy liked my attitude, I guess, and he said, "Listen, why don't you take this local commercial and go into the editing room, because it needs to be recut. It's from last year and he's got a new phone number and it needs a new tagline, so just go record a voiceover and I'll give you 200 bucks." And that was it—I never looked back. I just started from something as banal as that, just gradually getting into commercials and music videos, which were pretty hot back then—just one thing after another. Gradually, I started making money doing international commercials, and winning some awards. Eventually, I started coming back to directing short films, because at some point I realised, "This is not what I really want to do. I want to be telling stories; I want to go back to making films."

**Montage:** You made a feature film when you were quite young called *Pure*. How did that come about?

**Jim:** *Pure* came out of the relationship with my producer Marcel Giroux. I was really into electronic music, and I approached Marcel with this idea to make a film about that scene. I also approached another friend of mine from Concordia, Eugene Garcia, who agreed to write the script with us. Somehow Marcel managed to convince Telefilm that it was a good idea to make a film like this. I think there's so much creativity in electronic music.

**Montage:** Was *Pure* made with a low budget? Did the experience of making *Pure* help you create *Trois Saisons*?

**Jim:** Yes, for *Pure*, we had a small budget; it was below a million, and of course we learned a lot. It did kind of set me up for *Trois Saisons*, because immediately afterwards I decided I wanted to make another independent feature, and this time around I wanted to be more involved in the writing. I started writing a project based on my own ideas and got a grant from Canada Council to develop a script. Also I

had met so many people who wanted to come back to work with me, including the DP and people at various levels of production that I had worked with on *Pure* or on commercials.

**Montage:** *Trois Saisons* has the feeling of real independent film, concerned with relationships and, as the title says, the passing of seasons. Why did you choose to make it?

**Jim:** I was inspired by the French *nouvelle vague*, the fact that those guys—Godard, Truffaut—would just make movies with a van and a couple of people and then go to Cannes and win awards with films that were completely different than anything that was being made anywhere else. And that was inspiring, to go back to that spirit of "Hey, we can do this—we don't necessarily need a lot of money, we just need to get some really good people together and a good idea." The budget for *Trois Saisons* was \$35,000. It's one of those credit-card movies made for nothing and pure passion.

**Montage:** It's very impressive. That must have been a very small crew.

**Jim:** Yeah, it was about 12 to 15 people, and some people were rotating because they had jobs—we couldn't pay anybody; it was all deferred. It was a great experience. The core group of people stayed together for the entire thing. We also shot over nine months, literally through the three seasons, so we would shoot 10, 12 days, over weekends, take a break, edit, rewrite and shoot another 12 days, take a break and finally in the spring of 2008, we finished. And then we edited. The way we looked at it was like shooting, let's say, six music videos—that's the way you had to look at it. Because it was hard, without any real money, to count on anything happening the way you thought it would.

You had to be flexible; you had to find original ways to convince people to do stuff. Closing down Ste. Catherine Street for a day in front of the Bay, for example: I think we spent 25 per cent of our entire budget on that one day of shooting. Otherwise, we were cooking spaghetti at home and bringing it to set for the crew meal. It was a tremendous learning experience, because that film turned out to be more successful than *Pure*, in terms of the critical response.

*Trois Saisons* won festival awards both here and internationally. And we were nominated for best picture at the Genies. That was a huge deal for us—we were up against *Polytechnique* and *Fifty Dead Men Walking*. We didn't win, but it was so gratifying for everybody that gave time for the film to see us up there.

**Montage:** In terms of that kind of filmmaking, obviously that must be very different from working for television—you may be working long hours, but I imagine that there's a fair bit of improvisation that has to happen, scene by scene, in a film like *Trois Saisons*.

**Jim:** Yeah. It was a very different film from anything I'd ever attempted. You know as well as I do that when you're shooting TV shows and you've got seven days to make an hour, you don't always have time to run a script change up the flagpole to see if everyone agrees. I was craving an experience where I could experiment a bit, and *Trois Saisons* became that film. I certainly learned a lot by the end about how to use improv—though I actually have used improv in television. I did so even on *Flashpoint*, the one that I won the CSA for.

I used improv in a scene that I thought was not working. I rolled the cameras and then told the actors, for example, to use swear words as much as they wanted, until they were ready, and then to stop using them and get into the text. And oddly enough, it freed them up. We would do an improv pre-scene, on camera. What I'm trying to say is that experience of doing some experimental work in *Trois Saisons* actually transferred at some point into my work in television, even though it's very limited. It's when you get stuck—it's good to have some tools to dig yourself out of a hole.



**Montage:** How do you see your role as a director evolving? What excites you most about your métier?

**Jim:** I am excited by the continuing prospect of developing story worlds from the ground up, working closely with core creative teams. Storytelling platforms are constantly evolving, yet we all get hooked by compelling stories, no matter what the form. Working on *Le Clan* has enriched my experience and fanned the flame that I hope will keep burning for years to come.

I think what nourishes me the most is the collaboration with artists from all quarters of our business. Currently, I seem to be able to build bridges between Quebec and the rest of Canada, and I've managed to connect several people across the country as a result of my background. Carrying forward, I would like to explore relationships further afield, a process that began when I moved to Toronto five years ago, and sought out new collaborations. Later this spring, *Le Clan* has been invited to compete in a *Séries Mania*, a television festival held in Paris, France. I can't wait to see who I will meet there!