

## OVERVIEW

Another voice is heard from the regional American cinema with *BELIZAIRE THE CAJUN*, a romantic adventure set in 1859 Louisiana. The title character, played by Armand Assante, must save a friend's life, win a woman's heart, out fox a crooked sheriff, stop the marauding vigilantes, expose the evil villain, and rescue the inheritance of three orphaned children, in a picture that blends suspense and humor.

The production was a study in contrasts.

Though *BELIZAIRE* was writer/director/co-producer Glen Pitre's first feature (he had previously directed short Cajun dialect docudramas starring his relatives), the picture also boasted the active support of many industry notables. Robert Redford's Sundance Institute provided development assistance and a completion bond. Robert Duvall served as Creative Consultant and played a cameo role.

The cast includes seasoned veterans like Armand Assante (*PRIVATE BENJAMIN*, *UNFAITHFULLY YOURS*), Michael Schoeffling (*SIXTEEN CANDLES*, *VISIONQUEST*), and Will Patton (*DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN*, *AFTER HOURS*), but also features in major roles locals who had never been in front of the camera before.

Though the budget was only \$900,000, the film has hundreds of costumed extras, a host of breathtaking locations, and made groundbreaking use of the new Super 35mm format.

## A CAJUN HERO

The last motion picture to have a Cajun hero was *EVANGELINE* in 1929, an early talkie that featured Delores Del Rio in the title role. Since then, the movies have given short shrift to the French/Canadian exiles who settled southern Louisiana in the 1760s. In the 1946 release, *THUNDER BAY*, Cajuns got in oil man Jimmy Stewart's way. In the more recent *SOUTHERN COMFORT*, they were portrayed as murderous swamp dwellers, a dramatic equivalent of the Viet Cong.

All that has changed with *BELIZAIRE THE CAJUN*. Conceived, financed, and produced by Louisianians, it gives the one and a half million Cajuns their first cinema hero in half a century. For non-Cajun movie-goers, it is an adventure through an exotic

landscape, spiced with romance, humor, and suspense.

Through Sundance, dozens of top name writers, directors, and technicians freely lent their input to help prepare for the shoot. The National Endowment for the Arts gave the production the largest grant it has ever given to a film.

The result of all these efforts is an exciting, accurate, and funny picture, set in a part of America the rest of this country has seen very little. *BELIZAIRE THE CAJUN*, though not afraid to be original, is an adventure that embraces the thrill of an old time Saturday at the movies.

## SYNOPSIS

An herbal doctor's love for another man's woman and his struggle to save a friend are part of an explosive chain of events that breaks the silence of the Louisiana frontier in this touching, often whimsical romantic adventure.

On a Louisiana bayou in the late 1850s, the first ride of a plantation owners' Vigilante committee brings a night of terror to many of the local peasants. Accused of being cattle thieves, hog nappers, and the like, they are ordered into exile, upon penalty of death.

Though considered a trouble maker and worthy of exile by many on the committee, the village healer, Belizaire Breaux (*ARMAND ASSANTE*) has been spared. His cousin, Hypolite Leger (*MICHAEL SCHOEFFLING*), has not. The wily Belizaire dedicates himself to saving Leger.

Belizaire first seeks help from Alida (*GAIL YOUNGS*), his former sweetheart but now the wife of the vigilante Matthew Perry (*WILL PATTON*). Torn between the two men and their two different worlds, Alida must deal with tragedy when Matthew is found murdered.

The vigilantes believe Leger the killer, and chase him through the woods and across the prairie. The manhunt climaxes in the green, waist-deep waters of a Louisiana swamp.

Belizaire's efforts to save his cousin are thwarted when he finds himself the scape-goat in a scheme to discredit the vigilantes. The Sheriff (LOULAN PITRE), playing both sides as he sees fit, enlists the dead man's evil brother-in-law, James Willoughby (STEPHEN McHATTIE), to help hang Belizaire for Matthew Perry's murder.

Escaping jail only to be thrown back in again, Belizaire is eventually marched to the gallows. A triple hanging turns into a three-ring circus as the healer makes a desperate bid to cure the gravest ill of all.

## GENESIS OF THE PRODUCTION

### ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Writer/director/co-producer Glen Pitre's work has always centered around his Cajun ancestry. Born in Cut Off, Louisiana in 1955, he first studied film on scholarship to Harvard. After graduating with honors he returned to Cut Off to found Cote Blanche Productions.

The company survived on documentaries, radio, multi-media productions, occasional hitches by Pitre on shrimp boats or in the offshore oil fields, and on 16mm Cajun French language docu-dramas. "Foreign TV, grants, and good shrimp hauls" financed these films, says Pitre

In 1981, two of these 'Cajun Movies' were touring southern Louisiana theatres. LA FIEVRE JAUNE (YELLOW FEVER) recreated a story handed down by Pitre's grandmother. It starred his family: mother, father, brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

HUIT PIASTRES ET DEMIE! (\$8.50!) featured two cousins, one 93 and the other 82. They had never buried the hatchet since being on opposite sides of the local shrimp war of 1938. As each told his side of the story, hundreds of their neighbors and relatives, supplying their own period boats, cars, and costumes, re-enacted yet a third version of what happened.

The two films together made a feature length package. As they toured the Cajun area theatres, Pitre went with them to tend the 16mm arc projectors that had to follow the films. Pitre

remembers:

"Before each show I would thank the people for coming, and on their way out I'd sell them caps, t-shirts, and posters in the lobby."

Cajun Movies drew record crowds at some theatres, as people who had never seen a film in their native tongue flocked to the movies. For at least one man, it was the first time he had ever been to a "talkie."

ACADIAN WALTZ, before that BELIZAIRE'S WALTZ, and now BELIZAIRE THE CAJUN: the idea for the film began at a party in 1981. In the four years it took to get to the screen, it went through a metamorphosis worthy of Cinderella.

#### THE IDEA FOR BELIZAIRE

While on the tour, in Lafayette, Louisiana, Pitre ran into an old friend, Richard Guidry, at a party. When the evening turned to storytelling, Guidry told a tale handed down in his family.

A 'traiteur', or treater, a Cajun faith- and herbal-healer, had once been arrested for the murder of a Vigilante. When later released, he moved in with the dead man's widow.

Pitre moved the story back, to before the Civil War, when the Vigilante committees of southwestern Louisiana were first formed. (See separate article on the Vigilantes.) Pitre wrote the first few drafts on the screenplay "on the road. I was touring my films in Canada, then France. I wrote it on trains, planes, and friends' kitchen tables."

The third draft of the script complete, plans were made a slightly more ambitious Cajun movie. On yet another 'show and tell', traveling with the films, to Houston this time, the organizer of the screening asked to read Pitre's script. He liked it so much, he sent it in as his nominee to the Sundance Institute.

#### SUNDANCE

Robert Redford founded the institute in 19-- to give a helping hand to promising young writers and directors working

outside of the Hollywood studio system. For 1983, five feature projects were chosen from over 450 nominees, two from New York, two from California, and one from Cut Off, Louisiana.

The first phase of the program was script development. Pitre further reworked his script under the guidance of veterans like Bill Witliffe (THE BLACK STALLION, COUNTRY), Tom Rickman (COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER, RIVER RAT), and Waldo Salt (MIDNIGHT COWBOY, COMING HOME).

Next came the June Laboratory, held at Redford's Sundance, tucked away in an idyllic mountain setting in Utah. Pitre remembers his arrival at Sundance:

"I was standing around, gawking at the mountains, when this blonde-haired fellow came up, starting shaking my hand, saying 'I really like your films.' When I realized it was Redford, I nearly panicked. I thought, 'I'm supposed to be telling him that.'"

At the June Lab, Pitre actually got a trial run for the shooting of his picture. Sundance provided a cast and video crew for him to shoot half the scenes in his script. Accompanying Pitre to the set were 'Resource People,' directors like Sidney Pollock (TOOTSIE), actors like Karl Malden.

"Six months before it would have been a dream to get to watch these people direct. Here they were watching ME direct. Giving me pointers. Letting me peek inside their bags of tricks."

The Sundance laboratory also encompassed more script work and one-on-one meetings with virtually every specialty involved in the production of a film. Editors, cameramen, production managers, film composers, distributors, and attorneys, all met with Pitre and his co-producer Allan Durand. Each gave advice from his or her area of expertise tailored to the production of BELIZAIRE.

## PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Actress Gail Youngs (RUMORS OF WAR, THE STONE BOY) had been cast by Sundance for the role of Alida, the woman torn between the hero Belizaire and a rich American plantation owner. Her work so impressed Pitre and Durand that they cast her on the spot. Her commitment held for the two years it took to get

shooting started.

Later Youngs' husband, Oscar-winner Robert Duvall, came on board as creative adviser to the producers. While down for the shoot he took on a cameo role as the preacher who buries his wife's movie husband in the film.

Soon after, Armand Assante agreed to the role of Belizaire. The key elements were in place and financing was ready to begin. The decision was made early to attempt to raise the money entirely in Louisiana, to keep the production home-grown.

On Pitre's first trip to see potential investors, tragedy struck as an oncoming car lost control and smashed head on into Pitre's.

"I had bruised ribs, 45 stitches across my eyebrows, I was a mess. It took my office three days to get up the nerve to tell me that 10 minutes after I'd left the people had called to cancel the meeting."

Wounds healed, and Pitre persevered. With the help of Durand, Executive Producer Jim Levert, Associate Producers Paul Hardy, George Graham, and Jacob Landry, the money was raised.

Investors included the usual doctors, lawyers, and businessmen, but also sugarcane farmers, crawfish processors, an elementary school teacher. Raising the money took fifteen months as it came in bit by bit. Very few of the investors had ever put money in a film before.

"I had been giving an investor presentation in this 150 year old plantation house to a group of about thirty. When I finished, the slides and all, this oil man on the front row turns to his wife and asks, 'A Cajun Robin Hood. What do you think?' She looks at him and deadpans, 'It got to beat those last three dry holes of yours.'"

The balance of the financing came from a \$50,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the federal agency that administers arts funding.

## THE SHOOT

It was the home-grown Cajun aspect of BELIZAIRE that built the community support, the labor-of-love enthusiasm, that allowed

the project to get off the ground.

Thousands of volunteer man-hours went into this low-budget epic. Everything from horses and buggies to entire restored villages were donated for the production's use. One rancher cut the plastic ear tags off two hundred head of his cattle so they could pass muster for the film, though he received no fee. Louisiana sugarcane farmers, crawfishermen, even two competing manufacturers of pepper sauce invested their money in the picture.

That same spirit extended to the out-of-towners. The principal cast traded in their usual Hollywood fees for union minimums. They came down early, to meet the people, learn the accent, pick up a bit of the local French.

Soon pre-production had begun, crew was being hired, sets were being built, arrangements made to borrow props and livestock. A few roles were cast in New York, but many of the choice parts went to Louisianians. Some had been in Pitre's earlier films, such as his father, who plays the Sheriff. Other were cast at open calls. On such casting session in Lafayette, Louisiana drew 2500 people.

"That stage of making a picture is funny. You've been dragging it along behind you for years, then whoosh. It's got a life of its own. You're hanging on for dear life. There are all these people, some of them you don't even know, working to make your dream come true."