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Dunlevy: Gilles Villeneuve biopic tells story of ‘the little punk from Berthierville who wanted to do something impossible’

Fast-paced film captures spirit and drive of Quebec Formula One champion.



Yan Lanouette Turgeon, left, director of the film Villeneuve: L'Ascension d'une légende, and actor Rémi Goulet, who plays Gilles Villeneuve in the film, photographed at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal on Monday, Nov. 2, 2026. (Tim Snow /



By **T'Cha Dunlevy**

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It has been a long road for Mélanie Villeneuve to come to terms with the death of her father, Quebec Formula One icon Gilles Villeneuve, who died on May 8, 1982, during a qualifying session for the Belgian Grand Prix at the age of 32. But she is closer than she has ever been, thanks in part to Yan Lanouette Turgeon's entertaining new biopic Villeneuve: L'ascension d'une légende (Villeneuve: The Rise of a Legend), in theatres Wednesday.

"It's been cathartic," she said of her involvement as executive producer on the film, for which she did everything from contributing research to helping find private funding to continue when the project was in danger of collapsing.

"I was nine years old when he died. I'm much more at peace now than even 10 years ago regarding my place in Gilles's life and my relationship with my dad. It's been a wonderful road, and a difficult road."

Mélanie experienced some tough years as she searched for meaning following the loss of her father. "The hardest was when I was very little," she said. "I went through a phase of despair when he died. You have to detach yourself — it's too painful for someone so young. In my teens, I was very angry he was gone. Then I got closer to him and had to detach again. It's been such an evolution."

Last year, she launched the Gilles Villeneuve Collection, an exclusive brand of apparel sold online and at a boutique, GV27, in Quebec City. Combined with the release of the film, it feels like everything is falling into alignment.

"I've been swimming in the ocean of Gilles for the past few years," Mélanie said. "I feel so close to him now."

Her desire to be involved in a movie about her father — who was recognized earlier this year as an official historic figure in Quebec — came from an urge to "awaken his importance in people's memory," she explained. "I wanted us to

talk about him more actively and to have more control over how people remember him.”

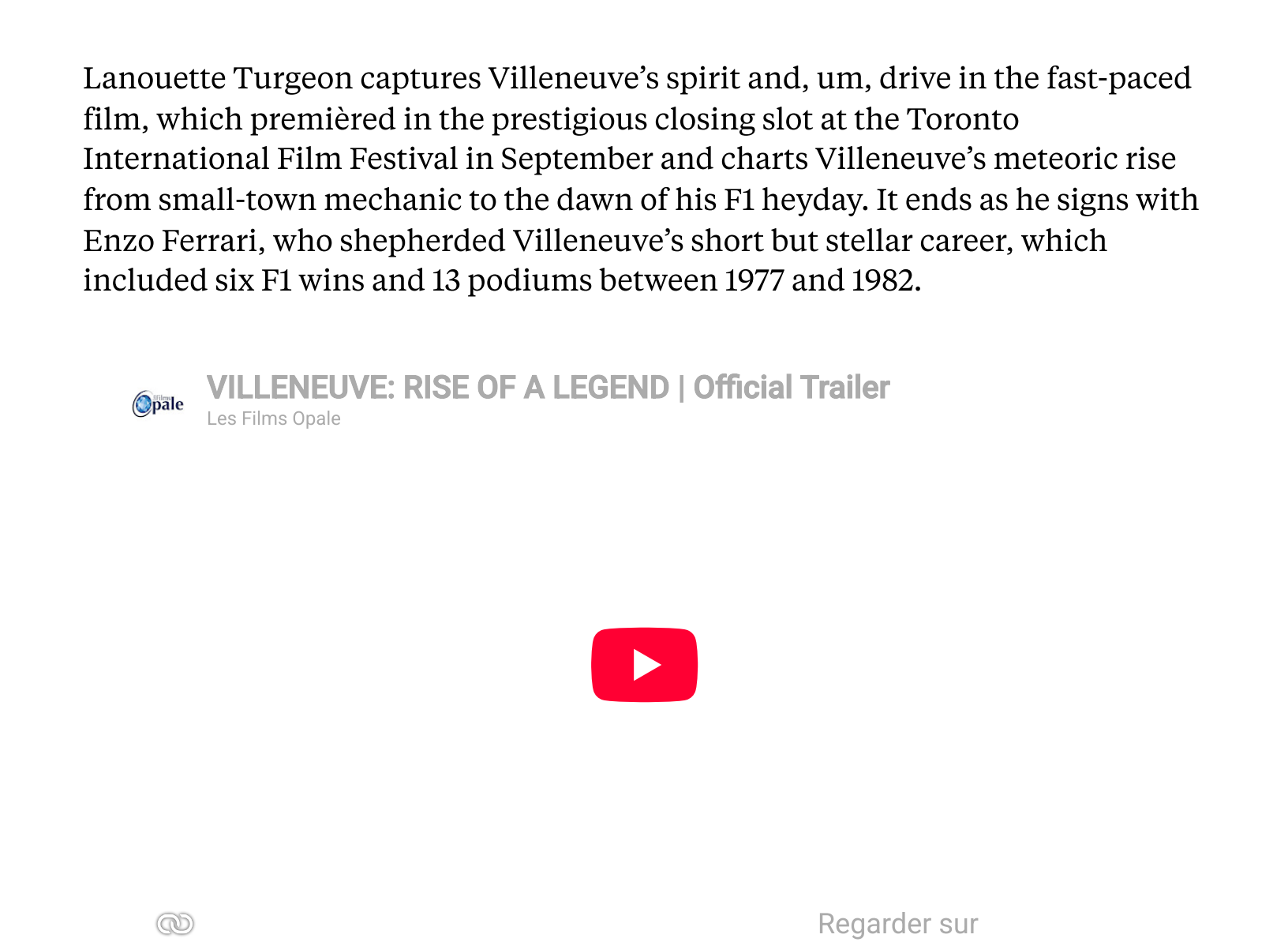


Mélanie Villeneuve, left, is hugged by then-MNA Caroline Proulx at a media conference announcing her father Gilles Villeneuve as an official Quebec historic figure, in Montreal on Friday, May 22, 2026. Evan Buhler / Montreal Gazette

Director Lanouette Turgeon was only seven when Villeneuve died, but he recalls the day clearly.

“We spent our summers at the cottage in Champlain, near Trois-Rivières,” he said. “Gilles was a legend around there. Our family had several houses next to one another, so news spread fast that Gilles had had an accident and was between life and death. I remember the reaction of my uncles and aunts, my mom and dad. I understood at that moment that we had just lost someone big.”

Lanouette Turgeon captures Villeneuve's spirit and, um, drive in the fast-paced film, which premièred in the prestigious closing slot at the Toronto International Film Festival in September and charts Villeneuve's meteoric rise from small-town mechanic to the dawn of his F1 heyday. It ends as he signs with Enzo Ferrari, who shepherded Villeneuve's short but stellar career, which included six F1 wins and 13 podiums between 1977 and 1982.



The $15.8-million production is among the most expensive Quebec films ever made. It was carried by producer Christian Larouche, who endured trials and tribulations — including the above-noted funding difficulties and a split with the film's co-writer and previous director Daniel Roby, who to that point had shot but a few winter scenes.

"I got a call from Christian Larouche, who showed me the script," Lanouette Turgeon said. "I fell in love with the character, the era, the races. I said I wanted to do an anti-F1 movie, with no technical fanciness. We needed to smell the garage. What I loved about Gilles, what charmed me the most — I knew his exploits as a driver, … but what I found beautiful was the story of the little punk from Berthierville who wanted to do something impossible, and all the people around him who allowed him to realize that dream; that moved me."

The movie brings us into the heat of the action, recreating Villeneuve's daring wins as a driver in Canadian snowmobile races and on the Formula Ford and Formula Atlantic circuits that eventually led him to the Grand Prix.

It paints a human portrait of Villeneuve, who came from humble beginnings, played trumpet and was a family man with a tight-knit circle of friends. Rémi Goulet offers an engaging performance in the title role, embodying Villeneuve's impish spirit, impulsive nature and single-minded pursuit of his passion for racing.

"He was a simple man, full of love, an obsessive man," Goulet told The Gazette. "He had a love of competition and of surpassing his own limits. I learned from him not to be afraid to say when I want something. Gilles was uncompromising. He never accepted less than what he felt he deserved, even if that could be seen as arrogant. As a society, it reflects a nice aspect of the Québécois who defend their culture and identity. Gilles, in his way, that's what he did."



Yan Lanouette Turgeon, left, director of the film Villeneuve: L'Ascension d'une légende, and actor Rémi Goulet, who plays Gilles Villeneuve in the film, photographed at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal on Monday, Nov. 2, 2026. Tim Snow / Montreal Gazette

A turning point in the film comes as Villeneuve is facing one of several financial crises of his own. Lacking a sponsor to be able to continue to race, he turns to Quebec businessman Gaston Parent (Villeneuve's future agent, played by Fabien Cloutier), who in turn calls on Quebecers of all stripes to help the young prodigy follow his destiny.

Montrealer Joe Cobden has a pivotal role as British race engineer and team manager Ray Wardell, who becomes a mentor to Villeneuve and a key figure in helping him reach the F1.

"It was an incredible and rare joy as an anglo actor in Quebec who has a terrible French accent to participate in a proper francophone blockbuster," Cobden said. "I couldn't ask for a better gig."

EDITOR'S PICKS



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Cobden has had a busy year, appearing in fellow Montrealer Michael Dowse's '70s film The Stunt Driver (starring Jay Baruchel), in Siân Heder's Being Heumann (starring Mark Ruffalo) and as Foghorn Leghorn in Dave Green's Looney Tunes movie Coyote vs. Acme.

He praised Lanouette Turgeon for imbuing the set with "a real sense of warmth — you can feel that warmth in the movie. It's a proper love letter and celebration of Villeneuve's determination. This is a movie that is flamboyantly earnest, and a nice antidote to the cynical times we're in."

AT A GLANCE

Villeneuve: The Rise of a Legend *opens Wednesday with English subtitles at Banque Scotia cinema, Cineplex Forum and Cineplex Kirkland.*