

Realism, entertainment mark Laurier miniseries

By Angela Bianchi
Toronto Star Special

Not everyone can brag that he's slept in Wilfrid Laurier's bed but actor Albert Millaire can.

The 51-year-old Quebec actor stars as Canada's Father of Liberalism in CBC's four-part miniseries *Laurier*. The French-language version will be telecast on Radio-Canada tomorrow, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 8 nightly. An English version is planned for next year.

"I freaked when the producer told me the death scene would be shot in the actual bed Laurier died in," says the French-speaking Millaire. "Talk about getting into the spirit of things."

The veteran actor's uncanny resemblance to Canada's first Quebecois prime minister made him a shoo-in for the leading role in the \$7-million, 7½-hour historical docudrama that traces Laurier's political life from age 30 to his death at 77.

Fantastique role

"Parts like this don't come up too often, so when the producer George Carrier asked me if I'd be interested ... C'était fantastique! I really wanted to play Laurier," Millaire says.

Radio-Canada's mega-production, the first significant TV biography of Laurier, took 10 months to shoot across 90 locations in Canada, England, Italy and Switzerland. It involved a travelling troupe of dedicated writers, technicians, 300 actors, 2,000 extras and an array of 400 original costumes.

"Shooting in front of Buckingham Palace posed a bit of a security problem," says Millaire. He also went on to Rome to recreate Laurier's private meeting with Pope Leon XIII. "They discussed politics and religion," Millaire noted.

He then went to Venice and to Switzerland where Laurier, suffering from tuberculosis, had sought advice from a Swiss doctor.

"We focus on Laurier's political achievements but we also let out a few skeletons from Laurier's personal life," Millaire says.

"Although we don't directly accuse Laurier of adultery, we do bring up his scandalous love affair with his law partner's wife, Emilie Lavergne. We also allude to the possibility that Armand Lavergne might be Laurier's bastard son. I promise the



Uncanny resemblance: Actor Albert Millaire, right, was cast in the role of Wilfrid Laurier, left, because of his strong resemblance to Canada's first French-Canadian prime minister.

series is not only informative but also entertaining."

The mini-series two-hour opener Sunday concentrates on Laurier's early political career in the Quebec legislature and his subsequent election to the House of Commons.

We see Laurier, nicknamed the man with the silver tongue, verbally battle his clerical opponents in Quebec while attempting to solidify the Liberal party and his leadership in 1887. All the while he indulges in an ardent love affair with the genial Mme. Lavergne.

Eventually, Laurier becomes Canada's first French-Canadian prime minister and the film traces his fight for national unity and his conflicts with nationalist leader Henri Bourassa. The Boer War, reciprocity and the menace of Bourassa bedevil Laurier and lead to his bitter defeat in 1911 after 15 years in power.

"What amazed me was how the issues Laurier's government faced are still haunting us 100 years later," Millaire marvels.

"When we were filming the Manitoba school issue back in 1985, (Ontario Premier David) Peterson was then having problems resolving separate school funding in Ontario. Reciprocity (free trade) was also a major concern of Laurier's back in 1911 that brought down his government and today the Conservatives are faced with the same decision. History does repeat itself.

"We tried to recreate the peri-

od as accurately as possible," Carrier explains. "The political climate, the parliamentary customs and Laurier's life itself. We even went as far as getting Laurier's bed from his nephew."

Top Quebec actor

Millaire is a relative unknown to English audiences but the charming blue-eyed Montrealer is one of Quebec's foremost actors and directors.

Remembered best for his classical roles in *Figaro* and *Othello*, the 31-year stage and screen veteran has found a TV following playing in such Radio-Canada productions as *Blood Wedding*; the successful children's series, *le Courrier du Roy* in which he plays a Davey Crockett figure and Edgar Allan, detective.

Steadily employed since graduating from the Conservatoire d'art dramatique in 1956, Millaire was nominated for a 1986 ACTRA best actor award for his TV performance in *The Celestial Bicycle*. The drama details the journey of an actor who leaves the theatre on his bicycle and eventually winds up in a psychiatric hospital.

"I've been content to work in Canada," Millaire says.

Perfectly bilingual, Millaire has several projects in the works at the moment. First thing, though, is to help with an English version of *Laurier* which is likely to air next fall or in the spring of 1988.