

# Introduction to the Film

Presentation by Yves Gélinas at the Joshua Slocum Centennial Dinner, June 27 1998

It is a great honor for me,  
at this occasion of the celebration of the Slocum centennial,  
to be invited to present to you my personal contribution  
to the art of sailing a small boat single-handed around the world.

A few years ago, I was in Saint-Malo, in France. I had spent five years  
cruising from the East Coast to the West Indies,  
to the coast of Cornwall and the Baltic on my Alberg 30 *Jean-du-Sud*.  
and time had come for me to sail back to Québec, where I came from.

So I sailed from Saint-Malo to Gaspé, in Québec, but the wrong way around the world:  
instead of heading west across the Atlantic, as I came out of the English Channel,  
I turned south. At the latitude of the Cape of Good Hope, I headed east,  
sailed across the Indian Ocean, south of Australia, crossed the Pacific Ocean  
and after rounding Cape Horn, finally turned North until I reached Gaspé,  
in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, sailing 28,000 miles in 282 days.

I had planned to do this non-stop, but I was capsized and dismantled in the Pacific Ocean  
and had to stop for repairs.

I imagine that the first comment that would come to mind  
about such an adventure, could be: what was it that made a person  
- until then apparently in good mental health -  
want to make such a big detour alone, on such a small boat?

I could answer that it is the fault of Joshua Slocum  
who gave such a bad example to four generations of sailors.

I could add that I had done some single-handed sailing before  
and found that I had never been so much at peace with myself  
as when I was alone on my boat, on the ocean.

I have been cruising under sail for 30 years now  
I learned to sail on the river and Gulf of St. Lawrence  
on other people's yachts before I purchased *Jean-du-Sud*.

There were no sailing schools, then, so I had to learn by making mistakes.  
Fortunately, I was lucky and those mistakes were without consequence  
(anyway, it was on other people's boats!).

I eventually plugged the holes in my sailing education  
by reading avidly all the books about cruising under sail  
that I could get my nose in  
- including, of course *Sailing Alone Around the World* -.

I purchased *Jean-du-Sud* in 1973. It is an Alberg 30, hull no. 399,  
built of glassfibre at Whitby Boat Works, on the shore of lake Ontario.

A six month cruise to the West Indies and back,  
the following winter, had made me want to leave again.  
But that time, I wanted to leave for good.

I was working in filmmaking, and realized that  
if I wanted to achieve something important,  
I must be totally devoted to this art, I must concentrate on it.  
But all I had in my mind was that urge to go to sea.

I realized that if I stayed, I would be condemned to settle for quasi-mediocrity.

I had also read many books about spirituality and they all agreed on this point:  
*" In order to increase one's level of consciousness and live in the Here and Now,  
one must free oneself from one's desires. "*

I saw that the only way I could ever get rid of that strong desire  
would be to make it come true!

I was trying to save money in order to leave, but the more money I earned,  
the more expensive it was to earn  
and at the end of each year, I ended up almost as broke.

In June '75, I finally became a "Full-time Cruising Yachtsman"!  
Other people could have said "Sail Bum " !  
I got rid of all my belongings that did not fit inside the boat  
and moved aboard *Jean-du-Sud*.

I had decided to carry out this experiment:  
Since I had almost no money, the only way I could leave  
was to find out what I could do without.  
I had the main ingredients : a boat, two anchors, a dinghy;  
They were not totally paid for,  
but I persuaded myself it would be left at my disposal  
for as long as I needed them.  
For the rest, I figured I could manage.

So I headed back to the West Indies  
and had a go at the charter business for two seasons,  
in order to survive and even pay some money back to the bank.

Then I sailed across the Atlantic to be closer to my two daughters  
who had moved to Sweden with their Swedish mother.

In fact, I can say that the conscious story of that long voyage started in July '78.

I had sailed *Jean-du-Sud* to Sweden to explore with my two daughters  
the coast of their new country.

I was writing an article that described the course I had followed with *Jean-du-Sud*,  
under the propitious eye of a Magick-Bird  
and that strange relationship that had developed between the three of us  
(*Jean-du-Sud*, the Magick-Bird and myself).

At the conclusion of the article,  
even before I had formed the words in my head,  
that line wrote itself :  
" *And I now hear him talk of the Long Voyage...* "

What? You mean: Sail around the world South of the Great Capes, non-stop, alone?  
Listen to reason: this would be like climbing Mount Everest!

Of course, I know, *Jean-du-Sud* is a good sea boat, built very strongly.  
In five years, I have learnt that I can trust him (yes, my boat is French: it is a "he").  
And I know he did not go to sea only to have a go at the charter business  
or even be a sailing tourist: he needs something more consistent to put under his keel.

But think about it for a moment: with only four tons displacement,  
he would be the smallest yacht ever to sail that route!

In those latitudes, there is no more land.  
The seas can be enormous: they fetch the whole way around the world!

I would need to prepare myself and my boat impeccably if I want to survive.  
If I consciously neglect the slightest detail,  
I will spend the whole voyage repeating to myself: "I should have..."  
and I will never be able to live in the "Here and Now",  
which is the object of this whole exercise.

First, I would have to replace the mast :  
playing around Cape Horn with a yacht this size,  
I can be sure I will get knocked over, sooner or later  
and the original Alberg 30 spar was not designed to stand through a capsized.

Then, strengthen the hull and coachroof,  
build four watertight bulkheads, to make my boat virtually unsinkable,  
pull out the old "Atomic Four" engine to make room for stores and spares.

And there is still a great deal of work to do on the design  
of that super self-steering system I have been dreaming of, these last years,  
that will look better, perform better than all other on the market.

I need new sails: I would not sail far in the Southern Ocean  
with the original sails of the boat.

All that would be a great deal of work and require a lot of money!  
And I considered myself lucky if what I had lasted till the end of summer.  
In the fall, I would need to find a job.

So I had forbidden myself to even dream about this crazy project  
and I had left Sweden and headed South  
without even knowing where I would spend the winter.

Luckily, a letter from a friend, Michel Chabiland,  
caught up with me in Germany, on my way South.  
Michel offered me a job in his boatyard.

I had met him the previous fall and we had quickly become fast friends.  
He ran a yard near St. Malo, on the Rance River  
where *Jean-du-Sud* had spent the winter.

In the spring, he had generously placed at my disposal his yard's resources,  
in order to refit *Jean-du-Sud* before I sailed to Sweden.

And it was during a stopover  
in this beautiful anchorage of the Channel Islands, the Isles of Chausey,  
the last before I would reach St. Malo and start to work,  
that this crazy dream suddenly appeared possible :

I saw that the Magick-Bird was offering me the facility  
to prepare *Jean-du-Sud* for this great challenge.

I could use Michel's yard to make my boat so strong  
that the seas off Cape Horn would not scare him.

And I knew I could count on Michel's generosity and also on his competence  
to help me solve the many technical problems I was bound to meet.

So I moored *Jean-du-Sud* near St. Malo and learned a new trade.  
For the first time in my life, I was working with my hands

and I remember writing this note :  
"I have been earning my living for twenty years, but I learned how to work at forty!"

That first autumn, I could only work on planning the project.  
I did not have any money, so I thought:  
it is simple, all I have to do is shoot a film as I sail,  
this is what I was doing before I went sailing.  
And the money I find to make the film can also pay the expenses of the voyage.

That was extremely naive:  
I quickly found that it is hard enough to finance a feature-length film.  
But try to convince people to invest in a film shot single-handed  
while you also sail an Alberg 30 to Cape Horn!

In spite of the interest shown right away  
by the French network of Radio-Canada,  
if a friend who was a sailor and a cinematographer  
at the National Film Board of Canada  
had not insisted so strongly that they lend me some equipment,  
I would have left without a camera.

Finally, thanks to the financial help of a network of radio stations  
who sponsored the voyage  
and the collaboration of a ham operator,  
Pierre Décarie, VE2KD, who picked up the reports  
transmitted every day by radio from *Jean-du-Sud*  
and relayed them by phone patch to the station for broadcasting,  
thanks also to the Ciné-Groupe people,  
who assumed the risk of producing the film, I could leave reasonably well equipped.

With hindsight, I realize I had to have a great deal of faith to tackle such a project.

In fact, consciously, I had decided to conduct this experiment:  
I had read in a book I felt I could trust that if you are deeply convinced  
from the top of your consciousness that you must do a thing,  
it becomes automatically possible and you should find the means  
that will help you make it happen.

Provided, of course, that you do your own share impeccably.

At Findhorn, they used to call this "the Law of Manifestation"  
others invoke the Providence.

But I prefer to express this same reality in a less serious, if not more poetic way  
and call it "the Magick-Bird".

This way, I can use as a reminder a little bird, woven from a Magick coconut palm hanging from the hand-rail, inside the cabin.

When I had left, five years earlier, I had put it to a test and must admit that until then, its performance had been more than adequate: I had never run out of the essential, I was even able to have my two daughters with me on the boat, every summer.

So I decided to start from this axiom and give it the benefit of the doubt.

From that moment until the day I left, there was not a single day I did not ask myself: "What can I do to-day most efficiently in order to materialize this project?"

As soon as I considered the problem as a whole, taking into account the size of the project and the little means I had, I felt discouraged and was tempted to quit.

So I made an effort not to anticipate, to face the problems only when they needed a solution and tried to solve them one by one, the best I could.

I thought I would need two years, but it was three years before I could leave. Three years, during which every morning, I asked myself this question : "What can I do to-day, most efficiently..."

And if you ask me what this long voyage taught me most important, I will answer : it is precisely this attitude that became, with time, a habit.

As a conclusion, I would like to read a letter I wrote my two daughters before I left.

You will easily understand that it was essential to me that I express my deepest motivation as honestly as I could do it to the two people on earth that I loved the most.

*Annikki and Julika Gélinas  
Uppsala, Sweden*

*St. Malo, April 13 1980*

*Yesterday was your birthday, my dear Annikki, and I often thought about you.*

*Many times during the evening, I went topside to try to see, up in the sky, the lovely constellation of the Dolphin. I finally had to go to bed without seeing it: the Dolphin is a summer constellation and even late at night, it was still too low and the horizon was*

*cloudy. I told myself that I should have given you a group of stars that can be seen on your birthday, but I comforted myself at the thought that the Dolphin is a lovely constellation, even if it is not very bright. As soon as I discovered it in the sky, I thought that you would like it because you are always joyous and playful like a dolphin. I can still remember the day I saw you for the first time, the day of your birth, thirteen years ago yesterday, you were already smiling!*

*But I could see, high in the sky, the lovely Northern Crown, with the Pearl in its middle, and right away I had before my eyes the charming smile of my own little pearl, my dear Julika.*

*For quite some time, I have wanted to tell you the reasons that pushed me to undertake this long voyage, but I realize that it is very difficult. It is easy to find reasons, but none of them seems to me more important than the others. Finally, I had to admit it is beyond reason. If I go, it is because I feel deeply inside myself that I must do it. It is a dream I have had for a long time and my good fortune - or better, the Magick-Bird - made the circumstances favorable even though I did not plan it consciously.*

*Of course, I must mention my interest in sailing. Sailing became for me a way of life and I try to do it as best I can. The success or the failure of such a voyage depends almost entirely on the amount of energy I put into its preparation and execution. If I want to do it non-stop, I must have foreseen even the smallest detail. I try, of course, to take advantage of the experience of those who sailed those waters before me: they are my guides. But I try to steer away from the mistakes they could not avoid, and to add to the sum of this knowledge, the fruit of my own experience and talent. Maybe that way, if the Magic-Bird wants it to be, can I contribute to improve the art of sailing a small boat across the oceans.*

*And if I chose to sail non-stop, it is also because this is the only way I can sail around the world without missing a single summer with you : if I leave in August, after spending June and July with you, I will be back, if all goes well, in April or May, soon enough to spend an other summer with my loved ones.*

*When I left Montréal, five years ago, to go sailing with Jean-du-Sud and the Magick-Bird, I was looking for a way of life that would be closer to what I wanted, deep inside me. It seemed more important to me to work at getting peace of mind, than at earning and spending money. After five years of this way of life, I could experience all the good it did me and I feel that eight or nine months of solitude could allow me to consolidate what I have already acquired, and progress even further. It happens that some people feel the need to be alone, at some point in their life, either to go through some difficult step of their spiritual evolution, or to give themselves the liberty of progressing more easily.*

*This is what I have felt these last years and it is, I believe, my deepest motivation.*

*"When you have long skirted vast expanses stretching to the stars, beyond the stars, you come back with different eyes ". It may be that I am also looking for that different vision that Bernard Moitessier found deep inside himself.*

*Moitessier also wrote: "In the high latitudes of the Southern Ocean, one is in the hand of God ". I prefer to say in the hand of the Magick-Bird. We have lived together for so long, the Magick-Bird and myself, that I feel He will do all He can to guide me through. You can even help Him to help me. Anyone can do it and the more love there is, the better it works.*

*Sir Francis Chichester, a great British sailor, did a single-handed circumnavigation on this same route, with a boat very difficult to handle. His wife, who loved him very much, had organized a group of people who prayed for him, while he was at sea. And he wrote that this had helped him a lot, in his difficult moments.*

*But to get the same result, you don't have to recite prayers. All you do is quieten your mind and your heart, and right away, you are on the wavelength of the Magick-Bird.*

*Who knows, I may be at that moment fighting against bad weather and I will feel that I am no longer alone, that others, somewhere, are sending me their love, and this new energy will help me overcome my fear or my fatigue, reminding me that the Magick-Bird is looking after me.*

*And if it did happen that, as the song after which I named my boat says, "Jean-du-Sud found his ultimate storm", I hope that you will not be sorry for me. I will try to do the great passage without fear or regret, and my last thoughts will go to you. You may not see me, but I will be fortunate enough to make my nest very close to you, deep inside your heart, and help you from the inside with the Magick-Bird, for the rest of your life.*

*A bientôt, my sweet Annikki*

*A bientôt, my tender Julika*

*Papa Yves*