The Challenger: An Industrial Romance


Although it was probably not Montreal director Stephen Low's conscious intention with The Challenger: An Industrial Romance, he has succeeded in making a film which proudly lives up to the National Film Board's original mandate to produce films which instill in Canadians a sense of pride in belonging to Canada. But The Challenger accomplishes this sincerely, without affectation and with only subtle propaganda. The film tells a Canadian success story — a gamble which paid off — and goes a long way toward relieving what Canadair chief Fred Kearns calls the inherent Canadian inferiority complex.

The Challenger is a documentary which explores Canadair's great corporate gamble to be number one in the executive jet market. With unwavering optimism and faith, the company embarked upon an industrial adventure which could either pull them back from the brink of insolvency or become "the most embarrassing industrial turkey in Canadian history."

The Challenger executive jet was a $200 million investment which eventually proved to be "the greatest idea ever built with Canadian dollars." Developed from an original idea conceived by Bill Lear of Lear Jet fame, the Challenger promised to fly faster on less fuel and be more comfortable than any of its competitors. The remarkable thing about the Challenger is that in spite of the fact that it was a mere idea on paper for many years, it nevertheless sold faster than the extant jets of its competitors.

Low conceived the idea of making a film about the Challenger after the project was well underway at Canadair. With a guarantee of the firm's full cooperation, he sold the NFB on the idea. The film took two years to shoot and another six months in the editing. Low conceded that the proximity of the Canadair plant to the hangar, awaiting its debut into the world, as it finally rolls out sleek and shining into the sunshine and the fanfare of trumpets and a cheering crowd, the camera dollies after it. We then have an outside shot of its nose emerging from the hangar, a high angle of its entire body, then some close-ups. The editing generates a feeling of excited curiosity and exhilarating discovery.

The film's heroes are there to welcome the Challenger's unveiling: Jean Chrétien, then Minister of Industry, Trade and Commerce who had the optimistic foresight to convince the Federal Government to loan millions to the project; Canadair President Fred Kearns, the calm and powerful ex-Spitfire flyer who pushed the idea from conception to birth; Harry Halton, the company's chief design engineer who gambled with his own life as he supervised the complicated construction while confined to a wheelchair. These three men along with the American super-salesman Barry Smith, who executed a brilliant and effective sales campaign of "humble arrogance," are, aside from the Challenger itself, the film's central characters.

Low both wrote and narrated the script. It is a well-written script, but the narration, beginning in a somewhat low-keyed monotone, detracts from the exciting content. However, the unemphatic narration does add a personal and sincere touch.

The Challenger was recently awarded the Silver Award at the San Francisco Film Festival and was voted Best of Category winner in Commercial Sales and Public Relations.

Lyn Martin