

BOOK REVIEWS

Culture Statistics: Film Industry, 1978

(Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1981)
\$6.00, Catalogue No. 87-620

A statistic is like a mercenary employed by one side to stun the other during a battle of wits. Just about any of our favourite prejudices can be reinforced by the use of one dense computation. But of course a statistic is designed to educate, not intimidate.

Statistics Canada has been mobilizing the facts and figures dealing with our cultural industries since 1972. The primary intent of this program has been to provide legislators and cultural associations with some hard data which could be used to anchor their cultural policies and perceptions. Last winter the department published its first study which focuses attention exclusively on the filmmaker, producer and distributor.

The 69-page booklet with the ho-hum title is not just a web of interrelated analyses. Each little box, column and chart of figures is prefaced by a lucid commentary which sets the study in perspective, and then translates the digits into comprehensible prose. As Michael Durand, the statistician who wrote the report, noted: "Most people don't know how to use statistics. So, what we try to do is give them the flavour of a particular industry, and then bring them to a level of knowledge where they can ask themselves additional questions."

The overall analysis was structured under three broad categories: The Theatrical Film Market, The Distribution of Motion Picture Products, and Motion Picture Production. Within each general area, specific issues were examined.

One of the more salient observations made within the report is that the theatrical film market has diminished considerably since the introduction of television, and that this trend has continued. In 1952, Canadians attended 17 films a year; these days, four annual visits is *de rigueur*. In addition, the majority of hard-core viewers is concentrated in the university-educated, young adult category as opposed to being drawn from across the social spectrum. So far, the industry has been able to offset the effect of this shrinking market by charging higher admission prices; as the situation continues though, it does not augur well for the future.

In the area of film distribution, the figures indicate that large-scale productions are favoured by the public. For this reason, most of the earnings go to the few foreign distributors while Canadian firms scratch away at the balance — a mere 29 percent. The situation is similar for the television market, but is reversed in the non-theatrical area where Canadian firms handled 93 percent of the products and received 73 percent of the revenue.

For filmmakers, 81 percent of whom are part-timers, the report clarifies what is already common knowledge. In 1978 most companies were small-scale:

some 50 percent earned \$100,000 or less. Of the 7,816 film and video creations that people turned out that year, 51 percent were commercials for television. This area represents the single most important source of revenue within the profession.

In a rather sobering conclusion, the report suggests that, "pay television looms as a serious threat to the motion picture industry as it is now structured." Not only will it siphon off more of the audience, but it could also deflect advertising revenue away from the television networks.

Two noticeable shortcomings of the report are that it doesn't get beyond general averages, which may distress those who want to see the analysis distilled down to include specific operations, and very little cultural or qualitative data is in evidence.

But, as Durand pointed out: "The need for such information has to be expressed by the various users. It's nice to have all that knowledge floating around in an industry, but it needs to be co-ordinated and structured. We want to provide that service."

Statistics Canada is currently producing another report based on 1979's survey material; in the interim, a five-page bulletin is available for the curious.

Brendan Hawley ●

Fifty Years on Theatre Row,

by Ivan Ackery.
Hancock House, 1980, 253 pages, \$14.95.
(ISBN-0-88839-50-05).

Film exhibition has undergone a considerable metamorphosis over the last eighty years. The transition from carnival sideshow to nickelodeon to movie palace to the multiple theatre facility has occurred within the length of a single lifetime. Ivan Ackery's memoir *Fifty Years on Theatre Row* chronicles that development with a strong emphasis on the years he spent as the manager of one of Canada's great picture palaces.

Ackery worked for half a century in the film business, primarily in Vancouver. For over thirty years, he ran the Orpheum, a showplace for popular, family-oriented films. Although originally built to present both vaudeville and film, the latter medium soon became the main fare. However, the film program was nearly always augmented by 'added attractions' orchestrated by Ivan Ackery.

Actually, the book has more sombre beginnings than its show biz subject matter might indicate. After an often lonely childhood in Bristol, England, Ackery headed off to the Great War as an under-age recruit. Passages describing the horrific conditions of trench warfare place the subsequent reminiscences upon the airy world of entertainment in proper perspective. The 17-year-old kid lugging corpses through the mud of Vimy Ridge later becomes the madcap promoter of such schemes as having an usherette ride an elephant down the streets of Vancouver.

Fifty Years on Theatre Row is written in a flowing, conversational style that is often charming, but occasionally annoying. The very oral tone of the writing makes one feel as if Ackery is sitting down and recalling the past across a kitchen table. Thus the frequent exclamations of "Oh boy!" and "Whew!" seem to punctuate particularly fond memories.

However, the book is not intended to be only a historical documentation and shouldn't be too heavily faulted for its personal tone. There is, in fact, an incredibly rich body of information presented about the ways people have had fun over the last few decades. Anecdotes and factual tidbits are sprayed shotgun style across the page as Ackery shifts from one subject to another in rapid succession. While often confusing, the cumulative effect is to provide a vivid portrait of Vancouver's varied 'cultural' life. Everything from bookies, night-clubs, food and prostitution, to bootlegging, the automobile, radio, big bands, dance fads and roller coasters are touched upon.

Some of the Vancouver night spots of the thirties that Ackery recalls include the Commodore Supper Club and Nigger Jeannie's, the latter presided over by a black blues singer named Jeannie Flynn. The Narrows was a popular gambling casino where entertainers found work after the decline of vaudeville.

Ackery's greatest talent seems to have been expressed in his promotions for the films that played his theatre. Faced with the prospect of filling 2871 seats seven days a week, he resorted to all sorts of gimmicks to bring in the public. This was especially important when the film was a stinker.

Promotions frequently involved ties with stores, window displays and joint advertising campaigns. Ackery would take things a little further by placing free tickets in the store merchandise. On another occasion he offered \$10 to any woman who could sit through a midnight screening of the Canadian horror film *The Mask* in an emptied

theatre. Based on the description of the film itself, it sounds like she deserved the money.

When *King Kong* played, he had an usher dress up as a gorilla and climb all over the marquee while a spotlight dramatically pointed him out. Ethnic Soirées such as Chinese Nights and B.C. Indian Pow-Wows were common, as were magic shows, joke nights and sports competitions (ping pong, weight-lifting). While these devices seem a bit dated now, their attraction in pre-television Vancouver must have been very strong.

The Orpheum had been built in 1927 for a mixed vaudeville and film format. The change to an all-film program was never total as various acts or musical performances occasionally supplemented the film. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra (when he was one of the Hoboken Four) were among the many entertainers who played the Orpheum.

Every Tuesday for twelve years after the Second World War, the "Nabob Harmony House" radio show was sent across Canada. Music was also to be heard at various contests ranging from a mid-night amateur show to Elvis look-alike competitions in the late fifties. A rock 'n roll performance might accompany a Saturday matinee of the latest Gidget film.

The Orpheum's long link with music was recently cemented when it became the home of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. In the early 1970s it appeared that the theatre was going to fall victim to the modern trend of splitting a facility into smaller units. An enormous public outcry eventually led to the preservation and restoration of the magnificent theatre. There is no doubt that the ferocity of that concern was triggered in part by the strong and happy memories of the Orpheum felt by many Vancouver citizens. There couldn't be a better testimony to the power of Ackery's work as a creator of corny but colourful programs and promotions for over half a century.

Andrew Johnson ●



Sept. 16, Cinema V, 5560 Sherbrooke St. West, Evening.