

Alberta awards its own

by Linda Kupecek

The 8th Annual Alberta Film and Television Awards were held February 12-14 in Edmonton. The annual event, sponsored by the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association (AMPIA) attracted 95 entries and a crowd of over 200 from Edmonton and Calgary.

The weekend's activities opened with a retrospective of early silent films shot in Alberta, with Charles Hofmann at the piano. (Mr. Hofmann, an anthropologist and film lecturer, played for silent films as a boy, and has served as Music Director for Film at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for five years.) The fare at the retrospective paralleled the offerings at the Film Awards: short promotional films outnumbering commercial features. The silent shorts shown included *Home of the Buffalo*, a 1920 travelogue, and *An Unselfish Love*, a ten-minute C.P.R. settlement film, shot in 1910 near Strathmore. The feature, *Back to God's Country* (1919) starred Nell Shipman, as Dolores, "the swimming girl of the Canadian wilds."

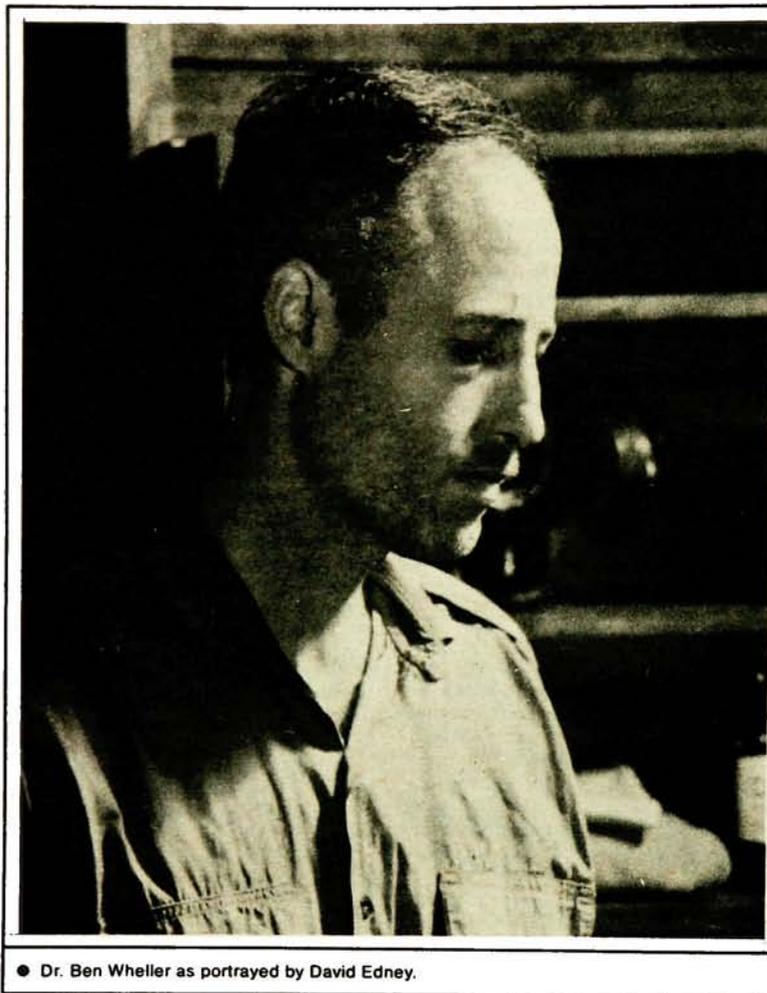
The Awards were presented Saturday, February 13, at a dinner/dance at the Four Seasons Hotel, organized by Awards Chairman Marke Slipp. Jury Chairman was Dr. Jerry Ezekiel, and the judges (who endured with grace a rigorous week of almost continuous screenings) were John Kennedy, Head of Television Drama, CBC, Toronto; cinematographer Richard Leiterman (*Motherlode*) and producer-director Philip Borsos (*The Grey Fox*).

A War Story, a feature-length documentary produced by the National Film Board, Northwest Production Studio, won several awards: Best Overall Production; Best Entertainment, Feature; Best Direction (Anne Wheeler); and Best Music (Maurice Marshall).

Genie Award winner Tom Peacocke (Best Actor, *Hounds of Notre Dame*, 1981) presented the Best Actor award with the comment, "My Genie was an award that came to Alberta, not to me." Another presenter, William Marsden, Director of the Film Development Office in Edmonton, and one of the founding members of AMPIA, commented, "There is no place in the world I would rather be tonight than with the AMPIA people."

The Jury Luncheon on Sunday allowed the entrants to discuss their work with the judges, which many felt was a rewarding exchange. Chairman Ezekiel claimed the positive overview and constructive criticism were a highlight of the weekend.

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● Dr. Ben Wheller as portrayed by David Edney.

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celebration, with audible sighs of relief that the dry spell of 1981 appears to have ended. Last year, a gloomy investment climate, grim economy, and industry strikes combined to limit film activity in Alberta, as elsewhere.

"The pressure of the economy is starting to be felt in the film (and tape) industry," commented Ron Brown of Century II. "But I think everybody's optimistic. We have things in the works

for the year." Century II completed several projects in 1981: a Klondike Days film; a film on international trade, *The Alberta Connection*; and *Generations*, a one-hour television drama to be released with pay-television. The company continues work on *The Edmonton Chronicles*, a five-part television series (or two-hour showcase). Other projects include a film on the handicapped; a one-and-one-half hour television drama;

and a television program on agriculture to star Fil Fraser.

Ron McCallum, of Thunder Road Studios in Calgary, comments, "We were frugal and kept our staff and overhead down." In 1981, Thunder Road's sound studio, film studio and motion picture lab were engaged in recordings, commercials, and film scores. "This year looks totally different. We have a very strong year coming up."

Cranston Gobbo, the general manager of William F. White which opened in Calgary in May 1981, says "Although the year was slow, we were very, very busy." The company is constructing a studio, offices and camera room in its facility. "To me, the big thing is that we survived 1981," says Michael Douglas of Douglas Film Group. Douglas is now producing and directing a five-part docu-drama series on safety and the young worker.

Meanwhile, Albert Karvonen of Karvonen Films Ltd., known for its extensive wildlife productions, has been busy with an Audubon lecture tour.

Doug Paulson of Videopack (and also the star of the CTV series *Thrill of a Lifetime*) comments, "We survived on sponsored industrials. It hasn't been easy, but repeat business and updating has helped." Paulson predicts a busy summer for Videopack, but laments the border restrictions regarding shooting in the U.S. "We are disappointed that the opportunity to use American sunshine is not afforded us, despite our long winter."

Of *Thrill of a Lifetime*, with ratings of nearly two million, star Paulson exudes "It's so great to be involved with a show on national television that isn't sponsored by the hinterland's who's who."

Hans Dys, of ITV, reports on two major series, *Stony Plain* and the popular SCTV. *Stony Plain* is set on a dude ranch, with 13 segments completed, and 11 more planned for next year. The series is distributed by Viacom. "We are anticipating very good foreign sales because of the big open skies of Alberta." Dys comments, "We were happy with the final results, but there were areas that we needed to improve, mainly, the stories." Dys anticipates syndication by the fall of 1982 with an ultimate goal of 24 segments a year.

SCTV will be moved to Toronto. "We own 50 per cent of SCTV," says Dys. "SCTV tied up two studios, so we couldn't do other projects." The series, now in its fifth year of production, is now seen all over North America on NBC and CBC.

"We are always looking for ideas," says Dys. "Co-productions are the big things as far as we are concerned."

Despite the rigours of 1981, Alberta filmmakers appear optimistic regarding 1982. The continuing ritual of the Film and Television Awards is a reminder of the constant growth of the industry, and an inspiration for the future. ●

Linda Kupecek, an Albertan actress who writes and broadcasts on film, is a member of the National Council of the ACTRA Performers' Guild.

REVIEWS

by Tom Crighton

This year's AMPIA Awards proved to be a three-horse race. *A War Story*, *Never Say Die* and *Inupiatun: In The Manner Of The Eskimo*, swept the majority of honours. Here are a few thoughts on these winning films.

A War Story

Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, North West Studio. Directed by Anne Wheeler. Running time: 81 minutes 50 seconds.

A War Story is an intensely emotional docu-drama. It's also a true story. In 1942, when Singapore fell to the Japanese, over 120,000 men were taken prisoner. One of them was Dr. Ben Wheeler. The good doctor was shipped to a mining camp on Formosa (Taiwan) where, for the next four years, he cared for his fellow P.O.W.'s under hellish conditions. The camp grew to hold 1,000 men, many of whom are alive today, thanks only to Dr. Wheeler's medical genius and devotion.

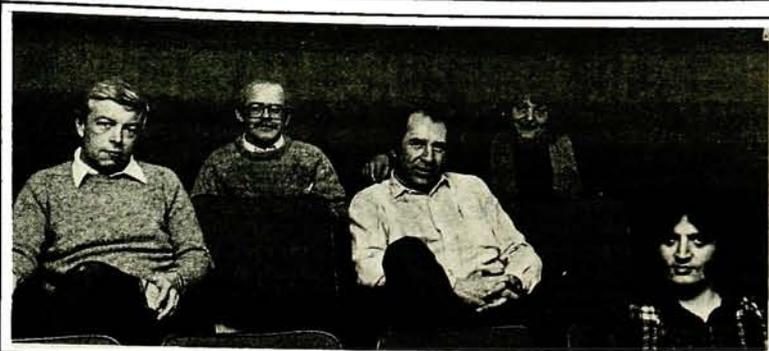
During those years, when death was a daily visitor, Dr. Wheeler kept a diary. This film is based on that diary. It tells of human endurance beyond belief, of starvation, torture and pain. But there is also hope, and an astonishing amount of love. *A War Story* is a powerful film because of the story it tells and the remarkable recollections of some of the survivors.

Dr. Wheeler died when his daughter Anne was 17. Anne Wheeler grew up to become an accomplished documentary filmmaker, (*Augusta, Teach Me To Dance*). This film is her tribute to her father.

A War Story was shot on three continents and is by any criteria a major production. The P.O.W. camp was meticulously reconstructed for the dramatic sequences and no resources were spared in finding archival stills and footage to compliment Dr. Wheeler's story.

All of this, of course, means money.

Tom Crighton is an Edmonton writer, film critic and broadcaster.



● Jurors Kennedy, Leiterman and Borsos, backed by Ezekiel and Slipp.

Being a National Film Board production, it's impossible to calculate exactly what the film cost, as so many of the expenditures are classed as 'inside costs'. I have been informed that the 'real cost' of the film was in the neighbourhood of \$650,000. If this is the case, that budget is not on the screen.

A War Story is a fairly straightforward documentary in terms of direction and cinematography. In many ways the story actually carries the film. In a case like this, every filmmaker on the block will tell you, 'For that kind of money, I could have done a lot more.' I believe for that kind of money, Anne Wheeler could have done a lot more.

Never Say Die

Produced by Filmwest Associates Ltd., Edmonton. Directed by Harvey Spak. Running time 30 minutes.

Never Say Die is a safety film aimed at roughnecks who work on onshore oil rigs. Doesn't sound too glamorous does it? This is not the type of property most producers would give a second thought. Little do they know. This film is a gold mine!

In 1973, the same producers made a similar film warning against the dangers of sour gas. Again, it sounds too industrial to be show biz. The film was called *Three Minutes To Live*. It cost less than \$40,000 to make. To date, *Three Minutes To Live* has grossed over \$500,000! *Never Say Die* is the son of *Three Minutes To Live*.

Filmwest's business manager George Christoff, (ex-Crawley Films) is confident that *Never Say Die* will do at least as well as *Three Minutes To Live*. This will mean a gross of around \$700,000 for a

film with a negative cost of \$96,000.

Films like this, made specifically for a target market, are difficult to evaluate unless one is part of the intended audience. *Never Say Die* transcends this problem, being an entertaining and often funny look at the roughneck's work habits.

The number one cause of accidents on oil rigs is lack of alertness... sleepwalking on the job. The film uses this as its basic premise and weaves around it an inspired yarn of supernatural proportions. This is the story of one roughneck who has been turned into a zombie by the deafening environment he works in and his own means of escape... drugs and booze. It enables us, and every oilworker, to see how a man can become a time bomb, a danger not only to himself but also to his fellow workers. It is a powerful indictment of complacency.

Part of the magical formula at work here is the fact that for a half-hour safety film, *Never Say Die* has the production value of a feature film. Vancouver-based John Thomas was hired as effects co-ordinator and no corners were cut in assembling the cast of eight to re-enact every roughneck's nightmare... death on the rig.

Never Say Die was a capital cost allowance project with the budget coming from a small private issue of units. Filmwest will sell prints around the world to oil and gas companies and petroleum associations.

The reason this short film is such a hot property is simply that every drilling rig in the world is virtually identical, and so are the dangers inherent in working on them. This in turn translates into guaranteed international distribution.

Never Say Die is a fine film which deserves all the financial success it will no doubt achieve. It is also a refreshing reminder that the film business is as much business as it is film.

Inupiatun: In The Manner Of The Eskimo

Produced by Cinetel Film Productions Ltd., Edmonton. Directed by Peter Haynes and Harold Tichenor. Running time 55 minutes.

This film is described by its makers as, 'The first film on McKenzie Delta Eskimos living on the land... and perhaps the last.' This is a sensationalistic statement, but it's probably true. *Inupiatun* is an endearing piece of work which avoids the banalities which are generally incumbent on this type of film.

At its best, it's reminiscent of Flaherty's opus of 1920, *Nanook of the North*; at its worst, it's as good as the pseudo-anthropological specials we see on American television. It is worth remembering though, that in 1982, Flaherty will get you nowhere.

The documentary was shot over the period of a year by a crew who lived with the Eskimos in nine different hunting and fishing camps. It successfully captures the spirit and soul of these unknown people in a fashion which is admirable in its objectivity... this film doesn't preach. The fact that the Eskimos have snowmobiles and rifles is never questioned. Nor should it be. In trying to depict the Eskimo way of life as accurately as possible, the film does lack what one might call 'Cheap hooks.'

In this respect, *Inupiatun* is perhaps a little too honest for its own good. The 'Year in the Life of...' format is difficult to pace. It often leads to sequences which some would call lyrical but most would call boring. Again, this is a result of the film's authenticity.

This is a valuable document, a film which informs without drawing conclusions. It is a rare opportunity to gain an insight of a lifestyle which is no doubt doomed.

It's no surprise that *Inupiatun* won the awards for best cinematography and best non-dramatic script. It's also no surprise it didn't win for best editing or best sound recording. These are two craft fields where this film is sadly lacking. If the producers had gone 'out-of-house' for these skills, they would have a better film on their hands.

Cinetel Productions raised the capital for *Inupiatun* under a capital cost allowance private issue of units. The budget was \$250,000. The film will hopefully recoup its cost through international television sales. ●

WINNERS

8th Annual Alberta Film and Television Awards

Best Overall Production
A War Story
National Film Board, Northwest Production Studio.

Best Documentary
Inupiatun - In the Manner of the Eskimo
Cinetel Film Productions

Best Educational
Speakeasy - Did I Say That?
ACCESS Alberta

Best Motivational
Never Say Die
Filmwest Associates

Best Promotional
I'm Just an Ordinary Me
ACCESS Alberta

Best Commercial
CIT-FM Rock Metropolis
Advision

Best Wildlife
High Country
Karvonen Films

Best Entertainment (short)
Person's Case
ACCESS Alberta

Best Entertainment (feature)
A War Story
National Film Board, Northwest Production Studio

Best News and Public Affairs
The Gay Straightjacket
CBC Edmonton

Best Musical Variety
Ray Charles in Concert
CITY

CRAFT CATEGORIES

Best Direction
Anne Wheeler
A War Story

Best Script - Dramatic
Donaleen Saul, Gerri Cook
Garage Gazette

Best Script - Non-Dramatic
Peter Haynes, Harold Tichenor
Inupiatun - In the Manner of the Eskimo

Best Cinematography
Swami Veet Parajayo, Trig Singer
Inupiatun - In the Manner of the Eskimo

Best Sound
Garrell Clark
Garage Gazette

Best Music
Maurice Marshall
A War Story

Best Editing
Michel Lalonde, Allan Stein, Swami Veet Parajayo
Never Say Die

Best Performance by an Actor
Frank Pelligrino
Never Say Die

Best Performance by an Actress
Carol Curties
Pieces of Anger

Best Performance by a Narrator
Jim Nunn
Alberta 2005-When the Well Runs Dry

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