Bread and shoe polish

by Lois Siegel

If you're from Winnipeg and you haven't made a film before, it can be quite exciting to come to Montreal and make one under the auspices of the National Film Board of Canada where filmmakers you've heard about for years are working at your side.

And it's not everyday that two unknown guys like John Paskievich and Mike Mirus from the Prairies get their film chosen for the Short Film Competition of the Cannes International Film Festival. But if you are from Winnipeg you also know that this sequence of events couldn't have been as easy as it sounds. There must have been some Murphy's Law (whatever can go wrong, will) incidents incorporated in the process to make it real to life, "The success balances out with other things," explains Paskievich, director, writer and photographer.

And so it was with his film Ted Baryluk's Grocery, a sensitive, 10-minute, black-and-white production, composed entirely of stills, about his step-father's small grocery store in the North End of Winnipeg.

In 1977 Paskievich had an idea for a film, about 2000 photographs taken in and around the store, and some wild sound of conversations recorded in the grocery. He wanted to put together a mood piece. Mike Scott, an NFB producer in Winnipeg, was excited about the possibility of a film. Paskievich was sent to the NFB in Montreal where he appeared one day with three boxes of photos under his arm and walked into Tom Daly's office, apparently unannounced. "Could I interest you in these pictures?" he said earnestly.

Daly, luckily, liked the images, and he and John spent the rest of the afternoon looking through the photos, discussing ideas, and planning the film. Paskievich was sent back to Winnipeg to continue working on the film, and when he returned to Montreal a month later, the project was up and running.

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looking at them.

But that was only step one. It took four meetings with the program committee of the Board over a period of four years to get the project approved.

Paskievich, a photographer by profession, and Mike Mirus, a high school teacher who recorded the sound, kept trekking across country to Montreal with video examples of their ideas. Despite the fact that Daly, Scott, Colin Low, Robert Duncan, John Spotton and Wolf Koenig were all behind the NFB committee, which kept changing each year, was afraid to take the risk of supporting a strange project from an even stranger land.

Finally the Winnipeg Art Gallery applied to the Secretary of State for story-board money. And eventually, in May, 1981, the project was approved by the NFB, by one vote.

Paskievich had a vision and was persistent with it. Although the delay in shooting gave him more time to sharpen and develop his ideas, the one big loss was that Ted Baryluk died before the film was completed, and instead of Baryluk’s voice telling us his story, it is Paskievich’s.

When the film was finished, NFB distributors saw no theatrical potential in the film. They said it could only be of interest to primary schools in a series called “Knowing Your Neighborhood.”

Such is life...

Ted Baryluk’s grocery is a place where immigrants and the poor come to buy food and to chat. But the film is much more than a mere document of a neighborhood store. It’s unusual because it is composed entirely of still photographs which tell a story in sequence. And it is even more unusual because the sound, edited by Mike Mirus, seems to synchronize with everything happening on the screen. The sound is subtle and does not clutter or conflict with the image. And the images not only relate the events of one day in the life of this store and its inhabitants, but they are strong pictures in themselves, and each one could stand alone to tell its own personal tale.

Personal is the true description of this film. It has its own special sense of drama. We enter the life of Ted Baryluk and through voice-over are introduced to his perceptive philosophies.

As we see him open his store at 8 a.m. one morning, we are given a glimpse of his life, the concerns and conflicts he is feeling. In broken Ukrainian/English he tells us that he has run the store for 20