

Taking off

'Not a Love Story' in distribution

by Philip Szporer

You're a National Film Board distribution representative in Toronto or Ottawa, say, and you've got a problem. You're handling a film that everyone wants to see, and yet this very same film is banned by the Ontario Censor Board, forbidden public screening, forbidden even to be advertised. It can be shown in private screenings by invitation only. What's to be done?

For most NFB distribution representatives, the release of *Not a Love Story* nine months ago posed a major problem. In effect, they could barely devote time to any other project, so great was the pressure from people wanting to see the film. Still today, the public is flocking to a first viewing—at least where the film is available.

But in Ontario, the legal implications of the censor board's ruling forced distribution representatives to innovate. They now ask that people requesting the film for a private screening drop by and fill out an application, describing who they are, who is in charge of their organization, and how they intend to promote the film. This name, rank and serial number system was set up as a protective measure; many NFB employees in Ontario feared that any distribution representative there could be prosecuted if a group showing the film decided to advertise the screening.

The NFB is presently in contact with lawyers who represent it at the department of Justice in Ontario, and is planning to appeal the ruling of the censor board. Although a first appeal by the NFB before Christmas failed to overturn the judgment Bill Litwack, head of Distribution at the NFB, thinks "Now that the new Constitution is in place, there are any number of avenues we might take to try to get that ruling overturned. That is in the works now."

In the next few months, then, it might be possible to reverse that ruling and get the film shown publicly in Ontario. Until then, the distribution staff must be happy to hear that the Board will support them should any legal battle ensue over the film's distribution there. (Several had hesitated to handle it at the outset.) Says Litwack, "Obviously we would support our employees totally, although up until now, that has not been an issue. Luckily nothing has affected the status of any of the NFB staff."

While *Not a Love Story* has altered

the distribution representatives' sense of security and focus (in terms of distribution procedure), it is important—in view of the global release of the film (the film opened last month in New York, and in London)—to consider some of the options the film's success has placed clearly before the NFB. Will it now aim for a wider, more general audience with its films? If so, what outlets will the NFB choose for that exhibition? Are the outlets which currently exist adequate to reach the public or are more aggressive approaches in order?

Given the weight of the subject matter of the film, and the commentary which has surfaced subsequent to the film's initial release, the phenomenon of *Not a Love Story* has created an opportunity for the NFB's distribution division to confront the real issues it faces in the film market.

Because of its commitment to this difficult film, an incredible amount of pre-planning for its marketing was done. Special screenings were set up for religious groups, law enforcement officers, morality squads, and lawyers, in

order to solicit their interest and backing because, as Litwack admits, "we felt we might need their expressions of support."

NFB Marketing Chief Eric Cosgrove had wanted the test screenings because of the Board's "lack of experience with films of this sort, films which may come to the attention of the censor boards. We wanted to know more about whether or not the content, in spite of the intent of the film, would run afoul of the criminal code, the obscenity laws." This legal/market research was carried out throughout the country in 20 special screenings.

Audience reaction to the previews, attended by the various community groups and decision-makers mentioned above, plus women's groups and NFB staff, indicated that *Not a Love Story* was, in Cosgrove's words, "tough stuff," "hard to watch—not entertainment," but that a) there was nothing wrong with it; and b) it was time somebody made something on the subject.

If, during testing, the degree of support was heartening, the film hasn't always met with a great deal of enthu-

siasm. The Toronto film critics savaged the film when it premiered at the Toronto Festival of Festivals—a set of reactions NFB officials have found nowhere else in the U.S. or Canada. The festival period was unfortunate in many ways, but it did draw attention to the film.

The pre-planning management of the distribution of the film enabled those in the head office in Montreal to work closely with all the offices across the country. The experience of *Not a Love Story's* distribution has taught the NFB a lot; that is, it has shown that with the proper kind of preparation the NFB can prepare the terrain and really capitalize on the potential of a film.

The direct result of *Not a Love Story's* success has been to encourage those in distribution to do more pre-launch work; to try to prepare that target audience by identifying the public to be reached, and to use a variety of promotional means to inform those target markets about the film.

Still, when the Ontario ban was issued, the NFB reacted with surprise. Never before had the censors banned an NFB film. Although concerned about the possibility of censorship, the NFB had chosen to downplay the issue prior to the film's release. "To have critics and everybody pick up on the censorship thing would have detracted from the film itself," said Cosgrove. "But of course, what has happened in some interesting dynamic is that the ruling in Ontario has shown a great deal of light on the criteria used by the Ontario Censor

The censor board clearly considers the film to be pornographic, and, by failing to appreciate its 'protest qualities', is setting itself up as 'pro-pornography.' This is one point which cannot be ignored, says Sharon Moodie, a Montreal distribution representative.

"It let's 'adult entertainment' flourish, but it doesn't let people see there is another side. People have come to the screenings who have never thought about pornography... it has become a focus for solidarity. It's important for Ontarians to realize that you can have socially-responsible screenings. It may not be a great film, but it's an important film—too important to pass by."

Disappointment and frustration best express how the distribution people at the NFB feel about the way the ruling has come down. In mid-winter, Moodie said, "In Ontario people are being denied access to *Not a Love Story*. Perhaps 2 or 3,000 people have seen it over the course

The point of the film is to raise the question of what the images are; of pornography as political images within our society. The film is not about sex, it's about violence and power—women's bodies and sexuality as an expression of violence within our society. It raises the questions of what our society is—what the people want, what they're buying, what they're reduced to, and what they've come to. The isolation, the lack of affection, that sex is violent acts to peoples' bodies, not a celebration, affection and caring, feeling, and communication between people. This is the problem we have to cope with in Western society as a whole. It's... Western society—technological, industrial, capitalist—that has created this condition. And we're all living in it... That to me is what your movie's about.

— Amalie Rothschild, US filmmaker, speaking with Bonnie Sherr Klein, director of *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography*, and Anne Henderson, associate director and editor of the film, at the 7th Grierson Film Seminar, 1981.

Ms. Klein and Ms. Henderson agreed with this comment, and yet, Rothschild's response to *Not a Love Story* is one of the deeply-felt reactions which has surfaced after seeing this film.

To Bonnie Klein, the act of putting out the film was of great impor-

tance. In her words, the film could "draw women together of different languages," but whose experience of objectification was the same.

Even the graphic design for the film's posters and advertising involved producing something realistic and identifiable. According to Terry Richmond, NFB Specialized Markets Film Officer, three artists came up with images which would "speak strongly to women, and not alienate men." There was a need to "reflect the woman as wounded, yet strong." Chosen was a cubist drawing, not a pornographic image, but one suggestive of fragmentation: the body and soul spirit hurt or in pain.

At many of the public screenings, people have expressed the desire to have their children see the film, with parental guidance. According to Eric Cosgrove, the film will not be available for school screening. "Our policy is to ensure that the film doesn't scandalize youth, 'mess them up,' turn them off sex. The film was made out of frustration—this distortion of sex." But, one asks, isn't *Not a Love Story* a great, educational, instructive tool? He feels the subject has to be brought up with young audiences, but that this is not the film to do it. In his words, "the design of the film did not have young people in mind."

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Note: For the credits of *Not a Love Story* and reviews by Maurice Yacowar and Kate Jansen, see *Cinema Canada* No. 79, p. 36.

of the past months in little private screenings. What's that compared to over 30,000 people in Montreal alone? Over 65,000 have seen the film in a commercial cinema."

Recently, Ottawa representative Al Parsons commented, "I feel that the Film Board and the Ontario Censor Board share a common purpose... Unless people see the film, they won't help the cause."

Film Board features rarely succeed on the theatrical circuit, but the commercial engagements of *Not a Love Story* are breaking all previous attendance records. No one counted on the huge success of the film, given the difficulties of showing documentaries in a commercial situation.

Why has the film taken off? According to most of the people concerned, simply because there has never been anything like it. It is, in Cosgrove's words "investigative filmmaking into a taboo area."

Not a Love Story, as is widely known, was produced by Studio D of the NFB's English production branch. Founded in 1974, the studio comprises a network of women filmmakers working on the status of women in Canada, who attempt to utilize film as a consciousness-raiser. At Studio D, there was a concern that the film should be programmed - that out of the confusion after seeing the film, ancillary materials be furnished to help support the acquired learning of the audience.

At the beginning, director Bonnie Sherr Klein's film may have been intended as a discussion piece, a vehicle for women, to go from women's group to women's group. But no one foresaw how far-reaching the impact of the film would be, the extent to which men would be interested, and that it would open up people, and thus, be part of a healing process.

Initially, the strategy for the distribution of *Not a Love Story* was to reach as many people as possible but not through commercial theatres. If the response indicated theatrical potential, then it could be assessed province by province. NFB officials felt that if the film might cause problems in certain communities, it would not be worthwhile to open the film commercially in those communities. The NFB did not intend to cause problems in the community, and didn't want to taunt people.

It was finally the public demand which forced the distribution representatives to come up with alternative distribution strategies for *Not a Love Story*. In Montreal, advance screenings attracted 2,200 people to two shows on one night. In three provinces - Quebec, Manitoba, and Alberta - the distribution representatives couldn't meet the demand of people wanting to see the film, and it was released commercially. For an English-language National Film Board documentary, this was a rarity.

The situation is different in other parts of the country. Says Cosgrove, "Because we're dealing with community standards, we're extra-cautious, and we feel we can reach our objectives (in B.C. and the Atlantic provinces), with public screenings." (In NFB jargon, a "public screening" is a free-entry screening of a film in a church basement, a YMCA or other place where the public would have access.)

In Saskatchewan, however, a different kind of scenario has unfolded. Viewers in Saskatchewan are being denied public access to the film because of the provincial film classification board's refusal to

classify the film. The NFB can only offer the film to groups and individuals for private screenings. While the NFB is trying to figure out what it must do to have the film classified, the film has been in commercial release in Quebec, Alberta, and Manitoba for over seven months.

But what kind of audience had the NFB foreseen for the film? "From the outset you start thinking of audience from the studio's point of view," explained Cosgrove. "For a general adult audience, *Not a Love Story* is a powerful information tool. It is of prime interest to women, but it must be seen by men." The general strategy seemed to be to attract the concern of feminists in relation to the objectification of women: how women are portrayed in advertising with regard to the abuse of women. The target audiences were organized women's groups, and the legal, the religious and education communities. Then it was a matter of letting people know the film was around, what it was about and how important it was as a subject. Then, ways had to be devised to allow access to the film: theatrical, public, and invitational.

As a result of the distribution of *Not a Love Story*, access to the general public is foremost in the minds of the NFB marketing officials. They are trying to devise innovative ways to reach that audience. Originally, the NFB aimed for specialized audiences (community groups, special interest groups, generally people with some affiliation to a group). It was easier to circulate the films using specialized networks.

New emphasis is being made to move toward the general public, not at the expense of those specialized markets, but in addition to them.

The cultural role of the NFB in Canada involves having its many films seen by as many people as possible, but there has long been an ambivalence about using commercial circuits for its productions. Over the past two years, the NFB has put emphasis on its 'public exhibition program' in Canada, organizing screenings, and using the facilities of museums, universities, and film societies. Often the screenings are free of charge. Sometimes they are based on a repertory price scale, while occasionally a regular admission price is requested. But recounts Moodie, "A lot of energy and money is spent on a rental of a hall for a one-shot deal rather than a constant run."

Only now, propelled by the success of *Not a Love Story* are people at the NFB actively talking of a much wider distribution for their films. Invariably this comes up in discussion with the distribution representatives. "We are very fortunate to have found a commercial place for *Not a Love Story*, but we're in Quebec," says Moodie. "We're reaching people who would be less inclined to attend a public screening, simply because they're not part of those groups who organize the event. That we're reaching these people is really important as far as I see it. That is what is exciting about this particular film. Because of the notoriety of the film, and for good or bad, the overall effect is still positive. Hundreds of thousands will be seeing the film that wouldn't have normally seen it."

In the case of *Not a Love Story*, the film is provoking people and causing them to think, and many people probably do not like it, perhaps for those reasons. Says Moodie, "There is no doubt that it's an anti-pornography feminist film. That



● Linda Lee Tracey, a.k.a. Fonda Peters, explores the world of porn

is the power of the media of film - especially social documentaries like this. You can make the best social documentaries, but if people aren't seeing them, what's the point? Then you're essentially preaching to the converted. The public has to have access to us and if we had facilities, theatres across the country, it would be a lot better."

With the cooperation of the Cineplex chain, the NFB has begun to reach a wider audience. Cineplex couldn't have been better designed for NFB films, simply because the smallest theatre (in Montreal with a 69-seat theatre, and a 16mm screen), allows access to films which big theatres cannot handle. The success of *Not a Love Story* has encouraged the NFB to open several other films at Cineplex. Although none of these films have had anywhere near the success of *Not a Love Story*, showing documentaries in a theatrical context is an interesting initiative, and Litwack says the NFB will pursue these screenings with Cineplex and with other theatres which seem appropriate.

The NFB is also exploring the possibilities of reaching its public through television. Sandra Gathercole, former chairperson of the Council of Canadian Filmmakers and CRTC consultant, is of the opinion that the future of the NFB lies in television or, more generally, in electronic distribution systems.¹ Litwack agrees; the major way the NFB has reached the public through TV has been via the CBC. That is good for a number of films but the NFB now realizes that it must adapt to a television market - with cable, pay-TV, video-cassettes and the rest - in order to achieve maximum exposure. A study, "The Impact of New Development in the Subscription Television System in Canada upon Documentary Film at the NFB - A Comparison of the French and English Perspectives,"² prepared by Marie Brissette and Lori Stahlbrand of Concordia University, raises most of the salient issues concerning the Canadian film market system in the coming years.

Litwack explains that the Board's approach to that market will not be to produce for television, but rather to package existing films so that they can be seen on television.

This form of "narrowcasting" means "appealing to a smaller number of people, a more specialized audience; that is, two or three films put together to form a theme package, to get a message across. This would provide a more regular presence of the NFB on people's television screens," says Litwack.

Also on the horizon is a cost-recovery program, which will provide either partial or full-cost recovery. Right now, the library system provides NFB films for free. Says Litwack, "That has put us in a very difficult, no-win situation because

the better the films that production gives us, the better the promotional job that our distribution staff does, and, consequently, the more the demand. But we don't have enough money to supply the demand, to provide the prints in our offices, to provide the support material and the time of our staff, and that simply results in frustration, as most of our most popular films have a very large percentage of refusals through our library systems." Litwack does not foresee a system that would charge the high rentals that exist in the private sector. He simply would like people to get the films they want when they want them. By charging a small fee the NFB may be able to ensure that it can provide what people need, and also solve a major problem in terms of accessibility.

In conclusion, it is too easy to suggest that *Not a Love Story* sold itself. From the beginning, the marketing of the film has been handled with great care. When the distribution representatives first saw the film, they didn't know how the press or the public would react. "We wanted to make sure the film was promoted in a way that was consistent with the NFB image," says Litwack. What this meant was working so that people could not exploit the sexual content of the film - that the NFB not undercut the very serious message of the film by using inappropriate advertising. The NFB worked to make sure that the greatest number of people saw the film, but also, according to Litwack, to make sure that the audiences realized the film was not for everyone. Says Litwack, "We wanted to make sure that this film was not wrongly exploited the way other sexual material has been wrongly exploited."

The film has revealed that these are exciting times to be working in film distribution at the Board. But the experience with *Not a Love Story* has been enriching because of the risks taken at all levels at the NFB. Up until now there have not been enough Canadian films in the theatres. Hopefully, the production and distribution branches of the NFB have realized that there are films which are needed in the market, and that these films cannot be made without taking risks. We will see what the NFB will do with the management of English-language films, and if the Board is capable of bringing off further daring successes in the future. ●

1- Lyn Martin, "The NFB - Inventing Canada - Again?" *Cinema Canada* (September 1981), p. 32.

2- Marie Brissette and Lori Stahlbrand, "The Impact of New Developments in the Subscription Television System in Canada upon Documentary Film at the NFB - A Comparison of the French and English Perspectives," unpublished graduate paper, Concordia University, 1981.