

by Kirwan Cox

In case you missed the party June 17th at the Poor Alex Theatre (or in case you were there but spent your time drinking, dancing, and making out under the seats) let me fill you in. I gave the party to celebrate the opening of the world's first Canadian content cinema. In the spirit of the moment I also resigned as director of the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre (better known as the coop).

The co-op is the foxhole from which I have been conducting guerilla warfare against (and sometimes with) the established film interests in this country to promote Canadian films. The experimental Canadian-content program at the Poor Alex this summer is my last volley from that foxhole (but don't worry, there are other crazies like Jim Murphy and Dave Tompkins loading up to take on the role of film underdog).

The world's first *Canadian-content cinema* is presently running six days each week in a small (146 seat) theatre with a 13 week program of films until September 17. The Poor Alex is better known for staging legitimate theatre and is well

located right off Bloor Street in downtown Toronto.

The idea of the theatre was to dedicate programming to a minority audience the same way successful magazines no longer aim to please everybody - but try for a particular audience. For example, the

Maple leaf stripped, Cox flew the coop

mass family magazines like *Look* and *Life* are dying if not dead while *Psychology Today*, *Playboy*, and especially business magazines (like the *Beet Farmers Journal*) flourish by aiming at a minority audience. In the case of *Playboy* that minority is almost half the population (the richer

half).

At the co-op we have always put ideology ahead of money on the theory that that is the best way to make money and serve the filmmakers' interests. We have been relatively successful this past year and our socialist ideology has increased income from sales and rentals nearly 400 per cent.

This means that there are enough people in Canada who want to see their own culture on film, and that they will support it if given a chance. There is an audience for every film ever made - the problem remains to find the audience. Hollywood has often overcome that problem by simply creating an audience through misleading advertising and then moving on when word of mouth hurts the box office.

We are showing some popular films like *Mon Oncle Antoine* and *A Married Couple* along with some films of very limited popular interest like *Snow's La Region Centrale* or *Markowitz's More Than One*. We especially wanted to show Québec films and our program includes a Lefebvre never seen in Toronto before (*Jusqu'au Coeur*), Jutra's first feature (*A Tout Prendre*), and the first English version showing of Pierre Perrault's *Un Pays Sans Bon Sens* among others. Other films which are getting their first public show-



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ing include Markson's **Breathing Together** and Kent's **Facade**.

Our programming includes a series of archive prints from the National Film Board's **Canada Carries On** series made during World War Two as shorts before each show. Some of these propaganda gems are the best examples of the Grierson thesis, and a few names on the credits like Lorne Green and Sydney Newman are still recognizable.

It is too soon to make any pronouncements about the results from this experiment. However, Markson's film **Breathing Together** did 80 per cent capacity business to open the series. It ran for one week quite strongly.

One disappointment so far has been the lack of interest from the media. This passivity is especially surprising since many articles are written decrying foreign cultural domination. One small review in the *Globe and Mail* on **Breathing Together** mentioned the series as "painfully Canadian". Hopefully this attitude will change. We are opening each film with the filmmaker present to talk to the audience. A number of Québec filmmakers are coming down from Montreal including Jean-Pierre Lefebvre and Gilles Carle.

Our major programming limitation was that films had to be in 16mm and Québec films had to have subtitles. This meant we couldn't get a number of things we wanted to like Peter Rowe's **Neon Palace** or Denys Arcand's **La Maudite Galette** (you say you haven't heard of these?). Our biggest problem was to finally decide what to use. There is so much to choose from.

Just to play it safe, however, we decided to schedule some fashionable midnight films to draw attention to the theatre including *Night of the Living Dead*, *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Fearless Vampire Killers* and the like. So far the Canadian films have been consistently outdrawing the flashy midnighters.

The moral: Find a small theatre and someone to help underwrite publicity costs (like a local arts council or guilt money from an American corporation—and start a Canadian content theatre in your town. You can write to the co-op or the Canadian Film Institute or the Canadian Film Development Corp. for programming suggestions and who knows, you might even make a lot of money being Canadian.

The new film policy part one was announced in a manner befitting handing the tablets to Moses atop a skyscraper in downtown Montreal. The setting was a

conference room at the International Civil Aviation Organization building (complete with translators and built-in microphones) packed with at least two hundred people from all aspects of the film industry. Most knew basically what was going to be said and presumably were present to ask questions (or to attend the cocktail party).

The Secretary of State walked in under the glare of bright lights (naturally the film policy was being filmed) and sat at a raised platform with his assistant Danielle Sauvage at his left hand and the CFDC's Michael Spencer at his right, Gratien Gelinas slightly to the side. The scene resembled a courtroom packed to hear the verdict on some highly publicized crime which many people present had helped perpetuate.

His speech is printed elsewhere in this issue, but I will say that there was some surprise when M. Pelletier mentioned the Toronto Film-makers' Co-op brief to point out how critical the present exhibition problem was.

Then came the question period and it soon became obvious what was interesting the film industry. The first questioner asked whether there was going to be a Canadian content quota. Pelletier indicated that was a provincial affair and also that theatres were private property (unlike the airwaves the CRTC regulates for the public interest), but he was obviously sympathetic to this solution for the present exhibition bottle-neck. He said that it would be up to the Advisory Commission to make recommendations and also would be up to the federal government to initiate negotiations with the provinces (which they may already have begun).

The next question was returned to time and time again and seemed to worry a few people in the audience. What was the power of the Advisory Commission and who was going to be on it from private industry? Pelletier said that it was strictly advisory as set up now because it may or may not work successfully. If it did work successfully then Pelletier implied it might well become a regulatory board with real power. This would require legislation, but he seemed to want the commission to develop in this direction ("it may at some time in the future become a statutory body if it functions properly").

Obviously no one has been chosen for the commission from private industry. Pelletier said that the commission would have the role of animation and supervision and would begin "in due time" — hopefully in the fall. People would be chosen to create a balance in the field of

interests and geography represented. The Under-Secretary of State would chair the commission.

Another question dealt with the paucity of independent Canadian films shown on the CBC and how point three of his speech would be enforced. Pelletier said that Statistics Canada would have the job of gathering and analyzing cultural data which up to now has simply been unavailable. He said he had been embarrassed that the Italians could tell him more about the Canadian film industry than he could find out in Canada. He added that a periodical report on the progress the CBC was making would be given the Advisory Commission at least every six months if not every three months.

There were a lot of sighs in the audience when the capital cost allowance was brought up. Pelletier said he had called up the finance minister over the weekend because he knew how important this question was to producers financing new productions. There was no new decision yet but the situation was being reviewed and a decision would be made in a matter of days or weeks.

Among other points brought up — the CFDC will be getting into the financing of television series and the Canadian-content cinema will encompass the National Theatre and be located in Hull where people could go "at almost any time of the day or night to see Canadian film".

Reporters from Ottawa kept asking Pelletier whether he was going to be Secretary of State if the government won the next election and he said in effect that he wouldn't be.

The film policy will next deal with distribution and exhibition which is really where the surprises may come. A Canadian content quota will have to be confronted one way or the other. Also, it seems that the present thinking of the government leans to creating "parallel systems" in both distribution and exhibition. As point four of his speech says "the CFDC will help the establishment of parallel distribution networks subsidized by the government". This idea follows closely the results of the recent questionnaire conducted among distributors in Canada for the Secretary of State.

My personal opinion is that film policy part one is definitely a step in the right direction and hopefully if it takes four years of government to make one step in the right direction, the second step should not be far behind (unless the election changes all that).

Governments by slow motion at least, makes progress (or mistakes) easy to see.