



● Miller Brittain: Self-portrait

ATLANTIC CINEMA: Portrait of a region

by Frank McGinn

Atlantic Canada needs an annual film festival because there is an industry here that would not otherwise be recognized. It would continue to exist, as it has for some years now, but it would not be *seen* to exist. This is an unpleasant state of affairs, as any Atlantic filmmaker (or Invisible Man) will tell you. It means that people tread on your toes and don't say they're sorry. This can lead to resentment. It also means that you can't check your appearance in the mirror before a big date. You have no way of determining whether you look great or have something hanging from your nose. This can lead to self-doubt. The purpose of the Atlantic Film Festival is to exorcise these regional demons. By displaying the best films of the region's best filmmakers, it hopes to win Atlantic Canada the honour of being taken seriously. And by bringing these films and filmmakers together, it hopes to promote a local sense of shared identity.

This year was the festival's second try. Last year it was held in St. John's, Nfld., and did not create a big stir. Halifax was a better choice: it has more media to focus attention and a larger, more voracious film audience. (There are only two alternative cinemas here: Dalhousie University's Film Theatre and The Wormwood Dog and Monkey Film Society, just sufficient to create an appetite for alternate cinema without being substantial enough to satisfy it.) The festival was well-publicised and comparatively well-attended. More film-goers than ever now know that, even though a film was produced in Atlantic Canada, it isn't necessary a documentary about fish. And more filmmakers than ever now know that they aren't alone in choosing to work in Atlantic Canada.

In other words, there were two festivals happening simultaneously. One was for the enlightenment of the local

film fan and one was for the enlightenment of the local filmmaker. They overlapped some but there was a basic difference of response. The film fan hadn't realized that there was an Atlantic film industry. That's because he never knew where he could go and see such films. Most of them were marketed internationally and stayed there. The local film fan came to the festival equipped only with the desire to learn.

And what he found were films that could hold their own at any festival. Some of these he liked a lot and some he liked less. The festival opener was one of the latter. *Threshold*, starring Donald Sutherland, was entirely out of order. The story of the world's first artificial heart implant, it was a poor choice for the festival's most prestigious slot for two reasons. First, it was a numb, lethargic movie. It had all the trappings of a documentary with none of the attendant, real-life excitement. Second, it had nothing to do with the region beyond the fact that Sutherland went to high school in Bridgewater, N.S. A far more appropriate opening number would have been Salter Productions' *Siege*. This is a grade-A grade-B movie filmed in Halifax by the Donovan brothers. Their stated intention was to make the kind of violent thriller for which there seems to be no end of a market, and they succeeded. Screened on the second evening by invitation only, *Siege* proved to be a tense, gripping adventure with genuine, Atlantic content. The tale is set unashamedly in Halifax and milks that historic city for all the murky atmosphere it possesses. Although everyone who saw it agreed that *Siege* would have been a far more appropriate kick-off than *Threshold*, it could only be shown privately because distribution rights were still being negotiated. But for the film fan, it was a real eye-opener: you can make real movies down here.

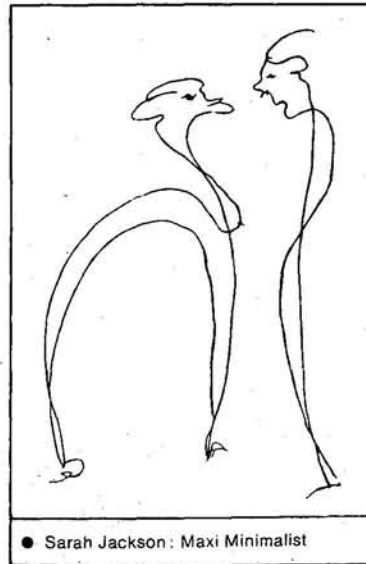
The festival continued to impress with the quality and variety of the entries. The feature film industry is not yet

extremely active, although *Siege* gives one hope that it soon will be. But experimental cinema is alive and well, as are documentary, educational and industrial films. The makers of all these were also in attendance, although with a different set of responses. First and foremost, the Atlantic filmmaker appreciated the rare chance to show his film or films before such a wide audience. This is not an opportunity which comes often, although the festival will change all that if it remains an annual event. Also, viewing the latest works of other Atlantic filmmakers reveals what standards the competition is setting. And, last but not least, the festival provided an opportunity for discussions with distributors and other filmmakers on the state of the business in Atlantic Canada.

The first of the discussion panels was called "Marketing Private Sector Films." Featured guests were three filmmakers and two distributors. The audience was comprised mainly of other filmmakers and the discussion was for their profes-

sional benefit. Conflicting advice was given them on how to best market one's film. Roman Melnyk, Independent Productions, CBC Toronto, agreed with Lawrence Carotta, Carotta Films Ltd., P.E.I., that you should research your market before you make your film. Know your market and talk to it, they recommend. Ramona MacDonald, Doomsday Studios Ltd., responded that she didn't believe in streamlining films. She maintained that originality should be the sole criterion of the independent filmmaker. If it's good, she said, it'll find its market. This led to an animated discussion on the merits of idealism versus the benefits of working within the system. One school of thought believed that, since Atlantic Canada is out of the mainstream anyway, you might as well go all the way out. If you're a renegade, act like a renegade, was its rallying call. The opposing view held that it's precisely because the region is so isolated that it can't afford to play the maverick. Bankers don't care about ideas, just financial details, was how they expressed it. As the arguments wore on, of course, each side came to accommodate more and more of the other's position. No idealistic filmmaker was so naive as to hold that financial matters are unimportant and no practical filmmaker was so cynical as to hold that originality was unnecessary. Discussion ended with both sides agreeing that Atlantic Canada had already laid the foundation of a fine film industry and it was up to them to make the world realize it. Ramona MacDonald summarized the general feeling when she said that, in this region, the quality of the films is way ahead of the reputation of the films.

The other major panel, held on the closing day of the festival, was supposed to be the wrap-up and definitive word. Titled "The Film and TV Industry in Atlantic Canada," it featured nine heavyweights from the National Film Board, the CBC and the national and regional pay-TV networks. They were there to



● Sarah Jackson: Maxi Minimalist

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Second Atlantic Film & Video Festival



CONGRATULATIONS!
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the second Atlantic Film
and Video Festival
Thanks to all participants,
volunteers and suppliers

FÉLICITATIONS!
aux gagnants du deuxième
Festival de film et de vidéo
de l'Atlantique
Merci à tous les participants,
les volontaires et les fournisseurs

AWARDS

BEST FILM: *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin, Charlottetown)
BEST DIRECTION: Kent Martin for *Miller Brittain*
BEST OVERALL ENTRY: *Miller Brittain*
BEST SOUND: *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg, Sackville, N.B.)
BEST EDITING (VIDEO): *In the Name of Jesus* (CBC-Newfoundland)
BEST EDITING (FILM): *Sarah Jackson* (Ramona Macdonald, Halifax)
BEST SCRIPT (VIDEO): *Star Reporter* (Cordell Wynne, Halifax)
BEST SCRIPT (FILM): *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg)
BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY IN FILM OR VIDEO: *River of Light* (Walter Delorey, Cape Breton)
BEST CHILDREN'S ANIMATION: *The Magic Carpet* (Torquil Colbo, St. John's)
MOST PROMISING FILM OR VIDEO MAKER: Prize shared by Peter Wood, James Casey, Brian Saunders, Chris White and Cathi Beattie, for *The Grave Quakes*, produced for Cable 5, Moncton
BEST INDEPENDENT VIDEO PRODUCTION: *Star Reporter* (Cordell Wynne)
BEST VIDEO PRODUCTION: *Christopher Pratt - His Art and his Poetry* (Charlotte O'Dea, Avalon Cable, St. John's)

CERTIFICATES

BEST DOCUMENTARY FILM: *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin)
BEST EDUCATIONAL FILM: *Patterning* (Marie Wadden, CBC-Newfoundland)
BEST EXPERIMENTAL FILM: *Transitions* (Barbara Sternberg)
BEST DOCUMENTARY/NEWS JOURNALISM (VIDEO): *In the Name of Jesus* (CBC - Newfoundland)
BEST EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO: *The Grave Quakes* (Brian Saunders, Peter Wood, James Casey, Chris White, Cathi Beattie, produced for Cable 5, Moncton)
BEST VARIETY/ENTERTAINMENT: *Dicky Goes to School* (Wayne Guzwell, CBC - Newfoundland)

HONORABLE MENTIONS

FOR SOUND EDITING: *River of Light* (Walter Delorey, Cape Breton)
FOR MOST PROMISING FILMMAKERS: Charles MacLellan and Eric Bagnell, for *Peter Paul*
FOR USE OF MUSIC: *Miller Brittain* (Kent Martin)
FOR VIDEO: *Où c'est que je m'en va asteur* (Betty Arseneault, Nicole Lejeune, Michelle Paulin for *Femmes en focus*, Bathurst)
FOR VIDEO: *Disconnection* (Michael Coyle, produced by Video Theatre, Halifax)

SPECIAL JURY AWARD FOR WIT: *Rock and Girl* (Arthur Makosinski, Fredericton)

COMMERCIALS

BEST COMMERCIAL: Trayton Adair Productions
HONORABLE MENTIONS: Caledon Advertising
Bruce Law and Associates, Halifax

tell a packed house of Atlantic filmmakers what the future held for them from the perspective of these various organizations but, as the best-laid plans will, this one went astray. Right from the moderator's opening remarks the panel was sabotaged by Tom Burger, who was sitting as representative from the Fish or Cut Bait Collective. He had specific grievances against the CBC and NFB who had apparently refused to support his collective in its efforts to produce films about the working man. Whenever one of their agents spoke, he denounced them for "the fascization (sic) of art." And he had general grievances against the other filmmakers, whom he accused of being "security cleared." His intent seemed to be to swing the discussion away from the future of the film industry in Atlantic Canada. He was partly successful. Few officials were able to withstand his heckling and the topic withered on the vine. By the time vigilantes in the audience had convinced Burger that it was in his best of interests to shut up for a while, it was too late to proceed with a nice, orderly chat. Their blood lust aroused by the fray, the audience began to attack the panel for the various, perceived failings of its various institu-

tions. Half of the independents wanted to know where was the CBC (or NFB, or pay-TV) when you needed it. They felt they weren't getting enough official support. The other half of the independents were disdainful of official support. They said they wouldn't take a grant if you paid them. It was all very eloquent but left the guests with little to say in response, so they didn't respond. The only concrete, helpful suggestions that emerged were from the pay-TV people, who promised boom times were a-coming for the Canadian independent filmmaker. They quoted CRTC regulations which state that 45 per cent of gross subscribers' revenues must be spent of Canadian production. It's a crapshoot, they said, but if pay-TV takes off, then so will the independents. Findlay MacDonald, head of the regional Star Channel, went so far as to say that the future of pay-TV was dependent on the future of the independent producer. "We have more money now than has ever been spent," he promised.

The forum, and the festival, ended shortly thereafter. Together they had established the identity of the Atlantic film industry.

It is a fighter. And it's hungry. ●

Coming together

The evening the awards were presented, a hundred people sat down for dinner together and realized that they constituted an Atlantic film industry. Never before had the filmmakers from the four Atlantic provinces come together to celebrate their filmmaking and to measure their growth and strength.

The progress since the 1976 Atlantic Film Week - the last occasion I had of screening a number of Atlantic films - is remarkable. Then, it looked as if the National Film Board regional office in Halifax would come to dominate filmmaking in the region. The film co-operatives were willing but their films were weak, and only three independent production companies were at work. In Newfoundland, Memorial University had cornered the market on educational films and videos dealing with social intervention.

Judging from the recent output, it is clear that the National Film Board's regionalization strategy has worked well in Atlantic Canada. Although the best over-all entry and best film, *Miller Brittain*, was an NFB production, the number of fine independent productions was important. The Atlantic Filmmakers Co-op and the New Brunswick Filmmakers Co-operative both entered accomplished films (*Transitions* and *Peter Paul*, respectively) and private production companies seemed to flourish, making sponsored films, documentaries and working in conjunction with the CBC/Radio-Canada and the NFB. Even rugged independents like Walter Delorey and Neal Livingston found it possible to live at the end of the world on Cape Breton Island and produce personal films of high technical caliber. But more on the films a bit later.

What was not often said during the festival, but which bears comment in this day of policy change, is that the NFB has helped make an industry possible without dominating it. The NFB has trained and encouraged talent, looking

the other way as independents come in the night to use editing tables and photocopyers. It has given generously of its experience, and has sent the occasional filmmaker to Montreal to learn a skill or complete a film. While taking credit for those films it has produced from day one, it has assisted numerous other films over which the independent filmmaker maintained control.

The Board, with its production offices in Halifax (English) and Moncton (French) and its outpost in Charlottetown is an easy target, and the brunt of several criticisms. Indeed, many of its own productions lack imagination and even focus. But when its insertion in a community causes the community to become alive with activity, and when that activity comes of age, then the National Film Board is most certainly fulfilling a vital function, and one which truly corresponds to its original mandate of fostering films by Canadians, for Canadians.

Some of the best films - including Kent Martin's *Miller Brittain* which won five awards - were films about artists. Martin had already shown considerable feeling for documentary form with *Moses Coady* in 1976, and his mastery has grown. Working from a script written by NFB regional head Barry Cowling, the film reconstructs the life and death of the Saint John, N.B. painter whose art was immense, difficult and often tortured. The artful script, the use of Brittain's paintings and the strong marriage of the camerawork and editing made the film an easy winner in the film category. A more pedestrian work, *Christopher Pratt - His Art and his Poetry*, was made by Charlotte O'Dea and produced by Avalon Cable in St. John's, winning best video production.

From Halifax, Doomsday Studios produced *Sarah Jackson* by Ramona Macdonald. In the film, artist Jackson explains her interest in working with new