The 1983 Genies:
Looking back upon tomorrow

by Connie Tadros

The 1983 Genie awards were the industry's swan song for the film boom that was. The five films in nomination for Best Picture had all been made in 1981, the last year for films pieced together with private investments. Several of them - The Grey Fox, Quest for Fire and Une journée en taxi - had production stories more dramatic than anything that got on the screen. These were the films that almost didn't get made, thought of as they were in an industry fast coming apart as investors scrambled off the ship. But if these films mark the end of Canada's tax-shelter production boom, they also point to the future and the divergent paths Canadian production will take.

The critics were unanimous in stating that this year's nominees were the best ever presented by the Academy to its members. In fact, it's more like a draw. In 1982, the Genies offered us The Year of the Director in which Ralph Thomas, Don Shebib, Gilles Carle, Eric Till and Allan King were responsible for the films which were honore.

There are a few anomalies. Both Jackie Burroughs and R.H. Thomson seemed uncomfortable with their awards for Best Supporting Actress and Actor, as well they should have been. She was in the wrong category, obviously having held the lead role next to Farnsworth in Grey Fox. As for Thomson, his was a career award, honoring his considerable work in interesting films like Tyler, Surfacing and Ticket to Heaven. Like Kate Lynch before him, who won for her role in Meatballs, he must have felt pleased with the recognition but sorry that it had come for an unsubstantial film like If You Could See What I Hear. The Best Supporting awards would have been just as appropriate for Clare Coulter for her unency portrayal of a social worker in By Design and for Wayne Bobson in The Grey Fox.

The question of Quebec Which does indirectly bring up the question of Quebec. And among the Quebecois, there is real and reasonable doubt as to whether their films are seen and understood by the members of the Academy. While the Academy boasts 600 paying members, the films were fine indeed, though this year surely Jean-Pierre Lebel's delicate Les fleurs sauvages should have replaced the lightweight Harry Tracy in the Best Motion Picture category.

The awards
It was reassuring to see most of the awards go to the right people. There is always a latent fear that the Academy voting system, asking the industry to vote for its own, will turn up bizarre, inappropriate choices.

Most gratifying of all was to see Peter O'Brian and Phil Borsos honored for The Grey Fox. Borsos, in graciously thanking the Canada Council for its support through years of making shorts and documentaries, underscored once again the exceptional help the Council does give young filmmakers. Help, incidental-ly, that is virtually unparalleled in most other countries.

O'Brian reflected the satisfaction of seeing a creative producer steal the thunder from those tax-shelter producers who have regrouped in the AGMCC and have made so much noise in recent years. O'Brian, and many of his CAMP producers, have been around longer than the Drabinskys, Cooper-Cohens, and Sians of this world. And though the latter have made their own important contributions to Canadian film, their association has sufficiently bad-mouthed other producers until it seemed that the O'Brians might not make it in the current climate. For those who remember titles like Me and Love at First Sight, the satisfaction was palpable.

There does seem to be in the Academy, a certain perversity about rejecting the opinions of others concerning our films. Did Quest for Fire, which beat out every other French film this year to win the Cesar for Best Film in France really not measure up to The Grey Fox? And did Les fleurs sauvages, which won the FIPRESCI award at Cannes, not even deserve to get in the running? As in 1981, when Les bons débarras won over Atlantic City for best picture, is there a hidden agenda on which it is written that the indigenous under-dog gets the benefit of the doubt when the votes are cast?

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Of the Best Original Song, let it suffice to say that if votes had been cast the evening of the Genies, when everyone had had a chance to hear Raoul Duguay singing "Le quêteux d'amour" from Les fleurs sauvages, Burton Cummings would have gone home empty-handed.

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members, with about 160 from Quebec, a head-count in that province shows francophones and anglophones about evenly split, and the two solitudes are every bit as estranged there as elsewhere. Gaffes over the years - like confusing Micheline Lanctot and Julie Vincent in Silent Screams in 1981, and omitting Les fleurs sauvages this year - have lead to paranoia. With seven nominations for Une journee en taxi, Robert Menard is clearly heard as he wonders what happened on the way to the Genies.

To some extent, the Quebecois are singularly off-handed in the way they approach these awards. Every year, they send French prints to Academy screenings without sub-titles; the National Film Board did so with Mourir à vue d’œil (Silent Scream) and Menard did it with Taxi. A film like The Great Chess Movie, which got rave reviews at the Toronto festival and might well have walked off with the prize this year in the documentary category, was entered by the NFB under its French title, Jouer sa vie. How many Academy members knew it was the same film?

The Academy has a board of directors of 21 people. Of that number, only one - Louise Carre - is a francophone, and she is an "honorary member." The rest seem absolutely insensitive to the need to respond to the French. Dave Thomas' joke about being unilingual - and the very fact that the host could not speak French - is one measure of the distance the Academy must still travel. Paul Höffert's effort to compensate, though brave, was so stressful for him that at the end of a long paragraph in French, he welcomed us all to the Junos instead of the Genies!

There was singular irony, lost on the Toronto crowd, in giving the only Quebec award to Elvis Gratton, a short about the bastardization of Quebec society. Although Julien Poulin's acceptance speech was funny for about three seconds and then swiftly deteriorated into an exercise in bad taste, a point was made. There is a political element to the goings-on at the Genies. The Academy can surely understand that the entire Genie exercise is not just a gathering of the clan to share in-jokes and old stories. It is the industry's once-a-year chance to do something about the consciousness of the people who watch the show at home, the people who are being offered a chance to see a Canadian film.

And how about the public?

To suggest that there was a real problem of "tone" this year would be to put things mildly, and the CBC must largely be held to account for this.

The evening before the ceremony, The Journal promoted a special in-depth look at the Genies. Earlier on The National, clips repeatedly urged us to stay-tuned-to-The-Journal-and-see-why-winning-a-Genie-doesn't-amount-to-a-hill-of-beans. When The Journal report was aired, it was deplorable. The Genies were used to make a point about the distribution of features in Canada. It was one of the worst examples of manipulative journalism I've seen in a while, and industry people who participated felt sorely used. Marcia Couelle, for instance, was interviewed on film for 45 minutes; she is an ardent supporter of the Genies ever since Les bons débarras won two years ago. The clip mentioned only that the film had not yet made its money back. Peter O'Brien and Jay Scott were also appalled by the editing done.
Congratulations — Félicitations!

The following is a complete list of the 1983 Genie Award winners in all categories:

Voici la liste des lauréats dans chacune des catégories:

Best Motion Picture
Meilleur film
THE GREY FOX — Peter O'Brian

Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role
Meilleure interprétation masculine dans un rôle principal
Donald Sutherland — THRESHOLD

Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role
Meilleure interprétation féminine dans un rôle principal
Rae Dawn Chong — QUEST FOR FIRE

Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role
Meilleure interprétation masculine dans un rôle secondaire
R.H. Thomson — IF YOU COULD SEE WHAT I HEAR

Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role
Meilleure interprétation féminine dans un rôle secondaire
Jackie Burroughs — THE GREY FOX

Best Performance by a Foreign Actor
Meilleur acteur étranger
Richard Farnsworth — THE GREY FOX

Best Performance by a Foreign Actress
Meilleure actrice étrangère
Glynnis O'Connor — MELANIE

Best Achievement in Art Direction
Meilleur directeur artistique
THE GREY FOX — Bill Brodie

Best Achievement in Costume Design
Meilleurs costumes
QUEST FOR FIRE — John Hay

Best Achievement in Cinematography
Meilleur directeur de la photographie
THRESHOLD — Michel Brault

Best Achievement in Direction
Meilleur réalisateur
THE GREY FOX — Phillip Borsos

Best Achievement in Film Editing
Meilleur monteur
QUEST FOR FIRE — Yves Langlois

Best Achievement in Sound Editing
Meilleur monteur — son
QUEST FOR FIRE — Ken Healey-Ray, Martin Ashbee, David Evans, Kevin Ward

Best Music Score
Meilleure musique
THE GREY FOX — Michael Conway Baker

Best Original Song
Meilleure chanson originale
MELANIE “Save My Soul” — Burton Cummings

Best Original Screenplay
Meilleur scénario original
THE GREY FOX — John Hunter

Best Screenplay Adapted from Another Medium
Meilleur scénario — adaptation d'un autre médium
MELANIE — Richard Paluck

Best Achievement in Overall Sound
Meilleur son d'ensemble
QUEST FOR FIRE — Ken Healey-Ray, Joe Grimaldi, Austin Grimaldi, Claude Hazanavicius, Don White

Best Theatrical Short
Meilleur court métrage
ELVIS GRATTON — Pierre Falaradeau, Julien Poulin

Best Theatrical Documentary
Meilleur documentaire
THE DEVIL AT YOUR HEELS — Bill Brind, Robert Fortier, Adam Symansky

The Academy's special annual award, the Air Canada Award, was presented to Fin Quinn for outstanding contributions to the business of filmmaking in Canada by Michel Fournier, Vice President, Public Affairs, Air Canada.

L’Académie du cinéma Canadien a également remis le Prix de l’industrie cinématographique canadienne d’Air Canada à Fin Quinn en reconnaissance de sa longue carrière au service des aspects techniques du septième art au Canada; le Prix d’Air Canada a été présenté à Fin Quinn par M. Michel Fournier, vice-président aux affaires publiques d’Air Canada.

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to their comments. As for Academy head Andrea Shaffer, she didn't even make it into the piece. Certainly, after listening to The Journal and hearing all the bad news about the Genies and the industry, the public would hardly feel tempted to stay tuned the following evening.

As for the actual Genie show, produced by the CBC. Its budget was swallowed up by cutting costs, the presentation was drab in comparison to the previous year's star-studded, production, and technical problems involving the synchronization of slides and sound persisted.

Bruce Malloch called the evening a "recession Genie," and it was. The house was not sold out, and fewer people were dressed to the hilt. Thomas got laughs from the audience by underlining the industry's fragility on the Americans. "I haven't seen this many people from the industry together since the morning flight from Los Angeles." The put-down joke got laughs from the audience, but I doubt whether the public tuning in had any idea why that was supposed to be funny. Thomas was a good, comic host, except for the fact that the situation in the industry is not really very funny at all.

What he and his humor did serve to point up was that the Genies are a very significant event in the life of the film industry, and not only in the sense that a nullable carbon-copy industry is predicated on the American experience. His jokes - "Don't worry; this won't be seen in L.A., and no reputations will be ruined" - make no sense unless this assumption of a carbon-copy industry is accepted, and Canadians' set role as Mark-Gruene type hampers corresponds to the image of itself. No wonder there seems to be a problem in reaching the Canadian public.

Dorothy couldn't resist comparing his evening at the Genies to the reception he got at the Cesars with Quoet for Fire. "The English Canadian public is simply disconnected to what's going on here," he commented, seeing no crowds of curious people standing by the doors of the theatre, indeed.

The Genie ceremony for the Canadian film community to touch the Canadian public. The staffs at the Academy are doing it well. The numbers and the attention they were able to drum up this year was impressive, and the organization can hardly be faulted. But it's up to the Canadian film industry to dress to the hilt. Thomas got laughs by underlining the lack of interest in the audience for the idea of a Genie award was an occasion for gratitude, and that only when the players take the awards seriously will the public also come to do so. He did more in three minutes to communicate a sense of pride and excitement in the idea of winning a Canadian award than did Dave Thomas in an entire evening of hosting.

So the real question is how does one organize a Genie ceremony that reaches out to the public and creates excitement?

For those who thought the films were the best ever this year, just wait. English production next year should include The Terry Fox Story, Videodrome and The War. Not to mention the lower-budgeted The Deserter and Thail's Uly. Baby. From Quebec will come American Chaldean, The Tin Flute (inevitably retitled For the Rest of Our Lives, Anc de la lune, Rien qu'unjeu, La vie de cirque which is on its way to the Directors Fortnight, Sanatine and Leonard Boulard). If the Academy and its members are truly ready to risk getting an appreciative public, then the show should be moved to Montreal next year. The crowds would be in the streets, and the local media coverage would be dazzling. Even the international press which the Academy might wish to fly in would be bowled-over by the enthusiasm of the province for its filmmakers and stars.

There is one change and that is the decision to present Canadian filmmakers as the dim reflection of their American counterparts.

Donald Sutherland, for one, understood the implications of the current situation. In his acceptance speech, and in his gracious presence at the press lunch, he knew that a point had to be made: that a Genie award was an occasion for gratitude, and that only when the players take the awards seriously will the public also come to do so. He did more in three minutes to communicate a sense of pride and excitement in the idea of winning a Canadian award than did Dave Thomas in an entire evening of hosting.

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