


to market, to market

Short films still provide the economic bread and butter for the vast majority of Canadian filmmakers. Gray Kyles, in the following review of the Distribution and Marketing Seminar for Short Films held last March in Vancouver, tells what one should consider if planning to take a short film to market.



by Gray Kyles

Although the feature film industry in Canada has been growing at an impressive rate in recent years it has perhaps received more attention than it deserves. There have been countless conferences, seminars and position papers about almost every aspect of the production, distribution and marketing of features and most filmmakers in Canada have been told at some time how to make a feature and what to do with it.

Yet the vast majority of Canadian filmmakers still earn their bread and butter in the short film industry and there has been very little said about the economic viability and possibilities of that medium. Countless short films are produced every year which are rarely

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seen and fail to return their investment because their makers were poorly equipped to arrange distribution and sales.

In an effort to provide to filmmakers the much needed information about the marketability of short films, the British Columbia Film Industry Association sponsored a Distribution and Marketing Seminar for Short Films last March. The three day seminar was held in the Devonshire Hotel in Vancouver and attracted approximately 150 filmmakers, students, technicians and other interested parties. Prominent short filmmakers, distributors, buyers and government representatives took part as guest speakers and panelists and short films from British Columbia, the rest of Canada and the United States were screened each evening.

If there was any single message of the seminar it was to know what the

market is before you produce a film. Almost every speaker stressed the importance of market research when planning a film. Your twelve minute short on jogging may be great but if there are already four jogging films on the market you're dead. Film buyers don't necessarily look for the best, they often look for the first.

Libraries and school boards are the major film purchasers in Canada. Tes Taconis, the executive director of the Canadian Filmmaker's Distribution Centre, said that most of her sales were to schools and libraries in Ontario. She was also putting together packages of films for sale or rental to art galleries and museums.

Kirk Tougas of the Pacific Cinematheque Pacifique concurred with Taconis that schools were a good market for short films. But he warned that filmmakers were always at the mercy

of social trends and economic conditions. "At the moment there is a movement to return to the basics in education," he said, "and that means that certain films that were popular a few years ago were out of vogue now." And he added that when budgets are tight, film tends to be a low priority for most school libraries.

Tom Howe, a representative from one of Canada's largest non-theatrical distributors, International Tele-Film Enterprises, stated that the highest a filmmaker can hope for in Canada is about 150 to 200 prints, and that is rare. Although it is possible to recoup a film's cost in Canada alone, Howe suggested that filmmakers try for as wide a market as possible. He estimated that a really good film could sell four or five hundred prints in the U.S. over a period of two or three years and that extra revenue could be picked up through rentals.

Someone who did not agree with Howe was Robert McDonald of Learning Corporation of America. He puts no limit on the number of prints a film can sell but he stressed perhaps more emphatically than anyone else that market research was the most important element in a film's distribution. His company deals almost exclusively with schools in the United States and Canada, and he looks for films that will fill certain specific needs for school curriculums.

"Good, entertaining children's movies with a light moral are what's selling," he said during a panel discussion on the final day of the seminar. "If a film has a good story, is new and original and incorporates good production values, I'll look at it. Otherwise forget it." McDonald stated that he won't touch a film that he thinks can't sell at least 175 prints a year. He also advised filmmakers to budget no higher than two thousand dollars a minute if they ever want to see a return on their investment.

Leo Dratfield of Films Inc. told the seminar participants that they should try to shoot at a ratio of five hundred to one thousand dollars a minute. He agreed that good children's films are what is needed right now but he warned against repetition. "The first always attracts the most attention," he said.

One of the most interesting aspects of the seminar was comparing the va-

rious techniques used by the different distributors. McDonald stunned the crowd when he mentioned that he usually distributes over 100 preview prints for each film he handles. It soon became apparent why he only handles films that will sell extremely well; he has to return the incredible costs he mounts up when marketing his product.

Dratfield and Films Inc. don't go to such extremes but the still put out a number of preview prints and prepare learning guides, flyers and the like. International Tele-Film distributes only in Canada but it will help filmmakers get American distribution. According to Tom Howe the company regularly gives its newer and more promising acquisitions a strong sales push and usually sees impressive results.

One of the most attractive elements of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre is that it is a non-exclusive distributor. This means that a filmmaker can place his or her film with the Distribution Centre but can also distribute through other channels. And the Centre offers a 70-30 percentage deal in the filmmakers favor which was the best of any of the major distributors represented at the seminar. Learning Corporation only offered filmmakers 10-17 percent of any revenues but McDonald cautioned producers to look at results more than at percentages. Seventeen per cent of 500 prints sold is a lot more than 70 percent of 50 sales.

But distributors weren't the only speakers at the seminar, although they were probably the most interesting to the majority of filmmakers in attendance. Representatives from the CBC, CFDC, the Metropolitan Library of Toronto, the NFB, the Provincial Film Office and the American Public Broadcasting Service also took part in the program. Lyell Shields explained the various ways in which the CFDC may become involved in television production and Bill Sheehan of the regional CBC and Merv Stone the manager of program purchasing for the network, took the usual and rather tiresome heat that network representatives usually face at these affairs.

Sheehan told filmmakers that they should come to see him before they shoot any films that they hope to sell to T.V. rather than after they have

shot them. That way he can give them an indication of whether or not their ideas are things that the CBC is looking for before they spend the time and money on the film.

Toronto lawyer W.E. Hinkson opened the seminar with some pointers on what legal principles to be aware of when preparing a project and Raj Cheganti of the University of Alberta gave a presentation on the necessity of carrying out scientific market research before embarking on a major production. Pen Densham and Phil Borsos spoke on the Filmmakers Perspective and Densham especially provided the participants with some good advice for how to get a film project off the ground. Ron Keeler, the west coast booker for Odeon gave an entertaining talk on theatrical exhibition and basically told filmmakers that for short films theatrical distribution was really only the icing on the cake, few shorts ever make a profit by going the theatrical route.

By the third day of the seminar most of the participants were a lot wiser than they had been. Everyone was talking about their next project, a children's film no doubt, and most were planning their market surveys to see just what was needed in the way of short films. Most of the filmmakers appreciated the information that was made available during the three days and many remarked that they were now more aware of the difficulties and realities of marketing short films. And most people appreciated the opportunity to meet with others in the industry and with major distributors, television buyers etc.

The seminar was well organised and ran smoothly thanks to the work of co-ordinator Peter Bryant, production secretary Deborah McLachlin and moderators Keith Cutler and Pattie Robertson. Each evenings screenings were arranged by Claudette Laurencelle to give the seminar participants an opportunity to see recent works produced locally, nationally and in the United States. The success of the seminar should encourage British Columbia Film Industry Association to produce others on different topics and should encourage other organisations across Canada to do the same.

And oh yes, watch for all of those kids' films coming from B.C. next year!