

a personal history

by Patrick Lee

The Toronto Film Makers Co-op was dissolved in October 15th, 1978. The previous year had been a long struggle for survival. The Co-op had entered 1978 deeply in debt, and without a coordinator. The executive elected April 1978 tried to come to terms with our creditors and to arrange emergency financing to keep us afloat. We did our best; in August of this year we had a meeting with our major creditors and the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council, our major source of funds in the past. A tentative agreement was worked out. We hoped it would allow us five years to reorganize the Co-op and pay back our debts. Unfortunately, we could not come to terms with our former landlord or Wintario; the sums we owed to either were beyond our ability to pay. Unhappily we were forced to dissolve the Co-op

R. Bruce Elder and Patrick Lee



Sandra Gathercole and Jerry McNabb standing between the cinematographers Michel Brault (left) and Richard Leiterman

Following are two accounts of the Co-op, one a personal history by Patrick Lee, the other an analysis of the factors which led to the Co-op's demise by Bruce Elder. The two authors worked on the Co-op executive for the last several months and feel too close to the recent events to write objectively about them.

Patrick Lee is a film editor and film director. He produced two of his own films as a member of the Toronto Film Makers Co-op. He served on the executive from 1971 to 1972 and from 1974 to 1978. He is currently working on a film about the Co-op and would appreciate any comments or corrections on his article from members. The article which follows is based on his recollections of the Co-op's history and makes no claim to accuracy or completeness. Apologies are offered for any omissions, inaccuracies or hurt feelings.

Bruce Elder is an independent filmmaker and was a founding member of the Toronto Film Makers Co-op. His films have received a number of awards and honours, both in Canada and internationally, including an Etrog for Best Experimental Film in 1976, the last year that category was included in the Canadian Film Awards.

In 1971, I returned to Toronto after spending two years in England at the London Film School. I got a job as the co-ordinator of a festival of Canadian student films, part of "Renaissance '71," a Canadian university arts festival held in Toronto. Despite its title, the festival was stillborn because of lack of publicity. The film festival, however, showed about 150 films and brought together a number of people working in low-budget independent filmmaking. There were a few workshops as part of the festival, and at one of these Jim Murphy (who was then selling the newspaper *Guerilla* on the streets, and is now working in film distribution) came up to Sandra Gathercole and me and asked why there wasn't a film co-op in Toronto. Before coming to Toronto, Jim had attended many screenings at Millenium in New York. His idea was to start a similar low cost production co-op. Inspired by this suggestion, Sandra and I drew up a one sheet flyer printed in strident black on yellow. I have forgotten its exact wording, but in

general it exhorted filmmakers and others interested to meet at the offices of the Canadian Film Makers Distribution Centre in room 204 at Rochdale College. Sandra, who had worked on publicity for Cinecity and the Factory Theatre, got the meeting mentioned in Sid Adilman's column and on CHUM FM. I had a sizeable mailing list of filmmakers left from the festival and the sheet was sent out to them.

The Canadian Film Makers Distribution Centre had been set up by young filmmakers, among them Iain Ewing and Bob Fothergill. It had been in existence for about two years and was concerned only with distributing independent films. The centre's success in distribution made it clear that Toronto needed a production co-op.

About fifty people showed up at the first meeting, and we had to move it to the Rochdale library. I explained the basic idea that Sandra, Jim and I had had in calling the meeting and opened the floor for a discussion which went on for the next two years.

Looking back, it's easy to see how the temper of the times affected us. Participatory democracy was the most popular form of decision-making. Everyone had his say, at length, and often when the last had spoken the first was ready to talk again. Chairing those early meetings was a trying task. "Negative" opinions, no matter how realistic, were ill received. "Positive" or simply humorous ones would always go down well. The political bias of the members was markedly anti-establishment, if not revolutionary. I remember a long debate on whether or not we should be a strictly Marxist film co-op. The fact that most of us were students or recent graduates, and that almost none of us were above the poverty line added fuel to these sentiments. Much of our time was spent debating either extremely abstract questions, like the political controversy described above, or such mundane issues as whether we should buy a squawk box or have a member build one. The intensity of debate on questions large and small was equally fanatical.

The thing that stands out in my memory is that the future problems of the Co-op were so remarkably absent at that time. We debated long and hard about drawing up a constitution, but we never thought about its possible use if the Co-op were to disband. We received almost no funds from the government or any other source. Although there was ignorance or disdain for what we were trying to do on the part of some people, the Co-op was a success. People came every week, at least twenty, often thirty or more to talk and debate. After the first meeting we passed the hat and raised \$50.00 for future mailings. The CFMDC let us use a desk in their office, and we installed our own phone. After a few months we appointed a co-ordinator (Stuart Rosenberg) at the ridiculous salary of \$25 per week. He manned the office and kept the coffee going. The office became a drop-in centre for filmmakers. Two of the first members, Keith Lock and Jim Anderson, used borrowed equipment to put together a simple editing room. Bolex's and other film gear were brought and traded, rented and lent by word of mouth and notices posted on the notice-board. Announcements and articles appeared in our small, irregular but feisty newsletter, *Rushes*. Workshops

were started on an informal and low cost basis so that members could learn from one another and from experts like Richard Leiterman and Jock Brandeis. Evening screenings were held regularly to raise money, and once we bought an old Bell and Howell, films would be shown at the drop of a film can.

In short, the place was alive. You could stay there for a day and meet Michael Snow, Murray Markowitz or Mike Hirsch; Linda Beath, Michael Spencer, or Stan Brakhage; Jeremy Watney, David Peebles or Walter LaCosta.

There is more than a touch of nostalgia in this look at the past but there is also a point to be made: this life was what was important about the Co-op to me and to many others. Most of the people I've worked with on my own films, I met through the Co-op. It was a place that stood for something. You knew that if someone was a member, he or she was a low-budget, independent filmmaker. Many of us worked in the world of commercial film production as well, or hoped to, but the Co-op's sphere was what is sometimes called personal cinema.

There was from the beginning a feeling that the name Co-op implied that there would be co-operative film production. My own experience with that form of film production is that it is good in theory but difficult in practice. The Co-op did make a number of co-operative productions but the majority of films associated with it were in effect co-productions. The Co-op acted as a meeting place, office and post-production centre. It gave a discount on film processing. Crews were made up from Co-op members. However, in the end films were produced by one or two people. My feeling is that this was an efficient way of making films and as close to a true co-operative production as you would come in Toronto.

So far I have described how the Co-op worked in practice for its first three or four years. We were governed by an elected executive of ten members and a co-ordinator was employed to run the day-to-day operations. I have left out one enormously important influence on us: the government. Just about the time the Co-op got going, the first of a number of make-work programs was started: Opportunities For Youth,

to be followed by Local Initiatives Projects. They employed large numbers of people, had a high publicity profile, and most importantly, they came to a definite end. The government would not be left with a budding business demanding future financing.

The Co-op entered the OFY application process with gusto. Our attitude to the proposals required was basically "What should we say to get the most money." Our attitude to the budgets required was: "If we need five thousand, let's ask for ten." When we got money, our accounting was loose. Money was always spent on legitimate projects, but because it usually arrived late and in lump sums, money from one grant would cover expenditures made on another project. Eventually our accounting got better, but the underlying attitude never went away. Our "unorthodox" accounting did not come in for severe criticism because other OFY projects were even less organized than ours, and because most of our projects were successful. Besides making films, the Co-op helped the CFMDC host a summer-long festival of little shown Canadian films at the Poor Alex, in 1973.

Two of our members, George Csaba Koller and Agi Ibranyi-Kiss revived *Cinema Canada* at this time. The relationship of the three organizations, *Cinema Canada*, the CFMDC and the Co-op was very close in this period. Jerry McNabb was the Co-op's co-ordinator and was on the board of the CFMDC. As each organization grew, so did the others. The Co-op expanded its workshop program and became a useful half-way house for film school graduates trying to get a foothold in the film business.

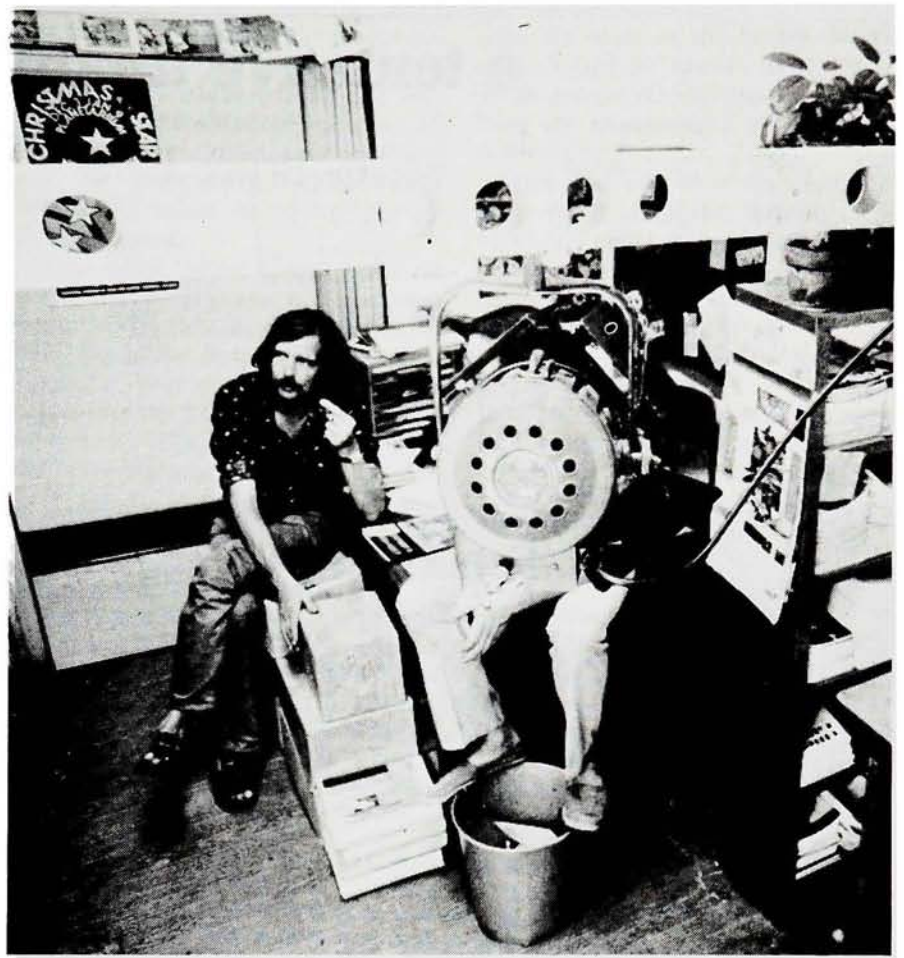
Because of these successes, and because, in my opinion, our grantsmanship became better and better, we started to get more money from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council. In 1974 we had a surplus at the end of the fiscal year and were able to buy some editing equipment and set up two small editing rooms. By this time we had left Rochdale – with regret, as they had been good to us – and were sharing space at 406 Jarvis Street with the CFMDC. This period was the high point of the Co-op, I think. We had many films working through the Co-op, for example *Rameau's Nephew...* by Michael Snow,

Dreamland by Kirwan Cox, **Nuclear Energy...** by Allan Goldstein, **Everything, Everywhere, Again, Alive** by Keith Lock, and many more. About 100 films were produced in association with the Co-op in this period. The two editing rooms were in constant use — they were a bargain at five dollars a day. Workshops, taught by members, were well attended each year. Our payroll totalled about \$7,000 and our rent about \$5,000 at this time.

To go into the problems of the next few years is depressing. It would be nice to be able to say that one person or policy was responsible for the collapse that followed, but that would be an oversimplification. Despite spending 4 years on the executive, the last spent solely trying to sort out the financial mess we ended up in, I still don't know why and how it happened.

I will simply try to review the facts as I saw them. First of all, we no longer had regular meetings; most of the issues we had argued about so hotly seemed settled. Co-operatives production was still discussed and attempted, but the direction the Co-op would take seemed fairly clear. We were a resource centre for low-budget independent filmmakers and a stepping stone for people trying to get into film production.

Sandra Gathercole had taken over as co-ordinator and had supervised the move from Rochdale to Jarvis Street. When Sandra resigned, to work with the Council of Canadian Film Makers, Bill Boyle was chosen as co-ordinator. The policies he followed in the next four years involved expansion of the Co-op in all areas. The workshops were expanded and the fees to attend them steeply raised. We moved from 406 Jarvis to a similar house next door, and then to much larger premises on Portland Street. Much new editing and sound equipment was acquired. Bill felt, as did most of the executive of the Co-op, that the Co-op should try to be self-sufficient; we needed to reduce our dependence on government grants. I believed that this should be done by reducing salaries and overhead. Bill on the other hand, thought that expansion of the Co-op would attract money from filmmakers. The filmmaking scene in Toronto now included several small production companies, made up of one or two filmmakers producing films



Frederik Manter in the days when the Co-op and Cinema Canada co-habited

for television or the NFB. The Co-op was adapted more and more to suit their needs. This led to a loss of support from the original core of members, the personal filmmakers.

Most of the policy-making of the Co-op was now initiated by Bill. The employees of the Co-op included a financial co-ordinator, a part-time secretary and a technical assistant. Some people on the executive argued against the expansion but there was no serious opposition to Bill's policies. They were successful; the building on Portland Street was renovated, there was new equipment. Above all, the grants were ever larger. General meetings now took place once a year. The 1977 meeting was held at the Chelsea Inn at no small expense. About 20 out of 200 paid members attended.

Unfortunately, the same deficit financing I described earlier was still practised, now with better bookkeeping and larger amounts. Money from one grant would be used to cover deficits from the last budget. The more

the budget expanded, the bigger the deficit grew. Finally things fell apart this year. Therein lies another story.

I intended this to be a personal history. I've tried to be unbiased, but inevitably things are presented as I saw them, as a participant. My feeling is that the Co-op ran on people. If they were there, the place worked. There were conflicts and friction, but things happened. When the Co-op became more commercial and professional, less "Mickey Mouse," when it became a bit like a small Film House, it lost the energy it used to have.

It may be that times have changed and there is no longer a place for what the Co-op was. A lawyer I talked to last year suggested that any idealistic, non-profit organization has a definite limited life span. I'm sure that there is still a need for the kind of place the Co-op used to be. I think that a similar organization will spring up in Toronto. I hope that the people who set it up will learn from the saga of the Toronto Film Makers Co-op.