The Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival

Strong content, weak form

by Frank McGinn

The flesh was willing, but the spirit of the 3rd Atlantic Film & Video Festival was a little weak. As an event it lacked the intimacy and excitement which gave last year's festival the air of an extended family reunion. This year seemed somewhat perfunctory, as if the clan had gathered more from a sense of duty than from the desire to be there.

You could see it in the poor attendance at key, critical seminars; in the fact that proper directions were lacking when festival locations were changed; and in the dearly-missed absence of free-flowing libations. (Cash bars are a sordid intrusion at family reunions and film festivals.)

Riggio likely expressed it best when he said that last year the Atlantic Film and Video Festival had peaked, and this year it was leveling off.

But where the 2nd Atlantic Film & Video Festival represented the big break-out, the scene was shifted from relative obscurity into a platform to promote Nova Scotia's NFB. Suddenly there was a huge gap of mutual recognition. Atlantic filmmakers, who had known there was such a thing as an Atlantic film, had been looking for a venue to show their films, and Atlantic film makers who hadn't known there was such a thing as an Atlantic audience had been looking for a way to show theirs.

And vice-versa. Greetings were cordially exchanged, and for the rest of the week the two groups were rarely seen apart. Everyone said it couldn't last, and this year it looked like they were right. The bloom had faded, and there was a bit of a letdown.

But there's no denying they were there. It's just that the Atlantic film makers by and large abstained. I went to the festival to learn about the Atlantic film industry, and in that sense the Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival was a big success.

Mixed reviews were given that other requirement of the complete festival: the dialogue or exchange of ideas. Where the were the lively forums of stimulating discussion, and the raptur-like parries and thrusts of spirited public debate? Nowhere, that's there. And not entirely, for want of organized encouragement. Festival planners could have promoted the seminars more thor­oughly, but it was only through sheer coincidence that they were there. It's just that the Atlantic filmmakers were not as aggressive and make themselves heard.

Pay-TV is still an experimental field. We were reminded by one filmmaker that the pay channels themselves are still trying to find out what their audience wants. We heard a number of examples of exactly what it takes. It was an inspirational little pep talk, sorely needed.

The second important seminar, "Marketing - Script to Screen," was well attended and represented the zenith of dialogue for the festival. The panelists were Roman Melnyk, who buys independent films for the CBC; Robert Ver­nal, the NFB executive producer for "The Tin Flute and the Wars;" Robert Soares, president of Atlantic Films, and the CFDC's Robert Lownard. They were all excited about the federal government's Broadcast Fund, for which the CFDC is currently accepting applications. The man from Ottawa can make or guarantee loans for up to one-third of a film's expense, and is dedicated to making the airwaves more Cansa­dian. He represents a golden opportunity for the independent filmmaker, one which the panel was gleefully expounding until MacMillan reminded us not to forget that Campfire message, "We'll never forget to gather round the fire."

It's not the only path to glory, he pointed out, and listed other steps a beginner could take, including starting small and building up clout. Everyone agreed that you had to pay your dues and the discussion swung back to what, exactly, was meant by "Canadianization." Did that just mean producing Canadian copies of American trash, the audience wanted to know. The CBC's Entertainment seemed to be a case in point, being nothing new. It was claimed, rather than a Dallas North. Maybe so, replied Melnyk, but a lot of people liked it. This opened the floor to what people really want, and whether the filmmaker should give to them or just do what he likes. An interesting debate but unresolved through the ages, and it wasn't settled on this particular occasion either, although not for want of trying.

When I asked festival director Mike Riggio whether the festival was now an established event, he said it takes about five years for a festival to become an institution. The Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival was strong on content, but so short on excitement. Here's hoping that it lives to peak again.

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Festival highlights

The Jury:
Dr. Jackie Oland, president, Neptune Theatre Foundation, Halifax, and Chair, Film Festival Long Range Planning Committee, 0'Leary, N.S.; Patricia Patrice Thomas, editor, Canadian Film Digest Yearbook, Toronto;

Dr. Antonio Maillet, professor of film production, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England; and Richard L. D. Wilson, professor of film and video, University of Ballard, Seattle.

Ross Norwood, supervisor, Film Production, Province of Nova Scotia; and Patricia Fontaine, producer, Province of Nova Scotia; Robert McEwan, producer, Province of Nova Scotia; and Patricia Fontaine, producer, Province of Nova Scotia.

The Awards are given elsewhere in this issue. Here's a mini-review of the highlights.

MASSABIECLE
A half-hour Acadian drama of warmth and eccentric charm. Written and acted with a gentle freshness and verve, it is skillfully and ambiguously photographed. The whitest end-credits in many an age are guaran­tied to rivet viewers to their chairs. Should be sub-titled in English immediately and circulated throughout the country.

THE HOODED SEAL (Film)
The first-time footage of the hooded seal - the birth of a pup on the ice and the curious mating display by the male. He inflates his hood over his head, and then his red nasal septum to the proportions of a large balloon. A sensitive informative commentary coupled with good underwater photography add to the general appeal.

TIGHTEN THE TRACES, Haul in the reins (Video)
Robbie O'Neill assembled his one-man show from material to tell the story of his pilgrimage, his spiritual and physical journey, which he calls "The Journey of the Pilgrim." O'Neill re-creates the stage role - a tribute to a determined survivor who walked around his locality for over 25 years and made a living as a pedlar.

LES GAGES DE LA SURVIE - ANTONINE MAILLET (Video)
Winner of the PRIX Goncourt 1979, creator of La Saguine, authority on Acadian film, Maillet's excep­tionally powerful presence pervades this glimpse of her early life and progression to fame. Artful blend of photographs, archive material, art work and interviews. Illuminates this leading excep­tion of Acadian culture.

THE APARTMENT CONFLICT (Video)
A series of images of a girl in an apartment with a male/lesbian lover - she discourses in an incomprehensible language. The man leaves the apart­ment. The girl leaves through a window which gives a glimpse of a certain reality outside. Washed with cropped colour, this experiment elicits an eerie sense of foreboding.

The commercials yielded some fun - the delightfully animated Moose Campfire gently, but firmly conveyed it's message: "We'll never forget the camping message, while a merit award for humour went to Crap Out 8000. Yes, there really is a game of this name and a courageous film company look on that advertising challenge!

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