The Canadian Student Film Festival

In a world surfeited with film festivals of every size and purpose, I think there were four this year of significance to people interested in Canadian films. The most important for Canadian features was Cannes (which is in France and tough for most of us to get to). If you missed that, then there is the Canadian Film Awards where these films, commercial shorts, and a few late arrivals can be seen. This is the best Canadian film festival in this country though its pre-selection system remains notorious and next year there may be no Quebec films.

Filmexpo in Ottawa became very important this year because of its retrospective of 20 years of CBC production. Perhaps the CBC will broadcast this retrospective for those of us who didn’t see it in Ottawa. The fourth event is the Canadian Student Film Festival held for the fifth year at Sir George Williams University in Montreal during the last week of September. This festival fills a huge void in the center of all these Canadian festivals, but is not actually a student festival. Anybody who ever attended a Canadian high school or university can enter. A few of the entrants were in their forties.

Though it may be a misnomer, the Canadian Student Film Festival is indispensable. The Famous Players prize money figures strongly in the dreams of many young filmmakers across the country. This amounts to $10,000 this year ranging from $1,000 for top prize down to $250 (a reduction from last year when the top prize was $1,500).

Aside from giving talented people money, the Sir George event increasingly offers its small audience some of the best work in Canadian cinema shown anywhere. The overall quality of films exhibited at this event has increased immensely since it began. Most of the winners of the first two years would not win in the competition of the last two years. This strength is not limited to student films. The fact Slipstream won so heavily at the Canadian Film Awards indicates that the bottom films are no longer obviously at the bottom.

This qualitative development was also underscored by organiser Serge Losique and jury president Frank Capra. Capra has seen a lot of student competitions, he said, and put this competition at the top in terms of overall quality.

Aside from the questionable student-ness of the festival, I thought the lack of an experimental category placed some films in unfair competition with others — especially in the scenario and documentary categories. Another problem was the positioning of the films in the festival program since that alone often changes the reaction to a film. This was done haphazardly.

Thirty-six films in 16mm made the final competition. The jury was headed by Hollywood great Frank Capra who seems to be making a revival in personal appearances. He was at Cannes at a special screening of one of his early films and showed some of his work at Sir George. He is an impressive stocky man who was a master at his trade over forty years ago — before some of the parents of many of the filmmakers he was judging were born. His main criticism was that too many films overly depended on canned music.

The rest of the jury included docu-
The last prize went to a very long and tedious documentary by Jonathan Oldroyd from Vancouver called Sandon of the Silvery Slocan. Sandon is a B.C. ghost town sitting on top of a stream. It began interestingly enough, but then trailed off into interminable shots.

I like two films which were put in the documentary category and didn’t win. The first is Lorne Marin’s Rhapsody on a Theme from a House Movie. I got very drunk that night with Marin and told him he came very close to a great film — but hadn’t gone somewhere at the very end. The structure of the film had ended dictating to the filmmaker. The film is a series of travelling fades down a block through which time disappears as the people and the other transients come and go. Only the houses are intransient. One of the best films at the festival.

The other was Norman Zlotkin’s Surreal. This film was made with an Ontario Arts Council grant. It is a series of shots of water and a beach ricocheting off polished metal reflectors. The filmmaker creates many time/space illusions and plays a game with the reality on the screen. I think he wins — but the jury didn’t think so.

The animation category was obvious and the three most competent animation films won. Michèle Danvoye and Nicole Robert won top prize with Québec-Love. This was a political cut-out animation piece set to Robert Charlebois. This animation told the story of the song — which generally was about how Québec was getting ripped off. The film is done with a sardonic sense of humor and got the strongest audience reaction.

Third prize was won by Jean-Michel Labrosse’s Au Pays des Microbes. This film was sponsored by Opportunities for Youth and along with Québec-Love was also one of the high points of the festival. It show a live person confronting animated spots and the whole thing is synchronized in the best McLaren tradition. Extremely well done.

Second prize went to Boarding House by Ken Stammick and Neil McInnes of Winnipeg. The animation was very detailed and beautiful. The work required to do this film beggars the imagination. However, it was a bad film. The surreal story was generally confused and confusing. I don’t think they succeeded at what they wanted to do, but the jury couldn’t overlook their talent.

The Norman McLaren prize for best film of the festival went to Christopher Aikenhead’s Ivory Founts. Aikenhead is an alumnus of the Ontario Arts Council’s film apprentice program who is now studying at Simon Fraser. Ivory Founts was a funnier and more sophisticated filmmaker-making-a-film film than any other I have seen. This type of approach seems mandatory at student film festivals. I was uncomfortable that he won the top prize, but his film worked. He put into it just about every clichéd image of the filmmaker imaginable. It was a fun film.