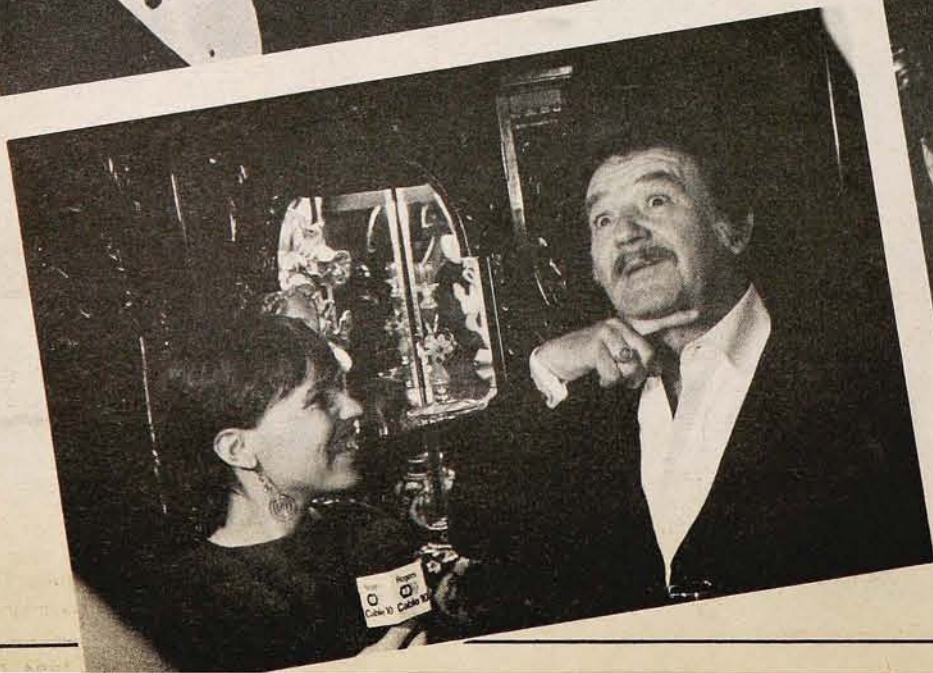


The eye of the beholder

A photographic essay

by John Paskievich





Winnipeg filmmaker John Paskievich wrote, directed and shot the Genie-winning he Ted 5

What follows are some notes on this year's Genie Awards, written in an attempt to understand just what it is about the ceremony, the Academy and the industry that added up to so flawed a show. That the show was bad indeed this year is hardly in question. Andra Sheffer, executive director of the Academy of Canadian Cinema was disappointed in it, and Jim Henshaw, head of the Genie Awards Committee for the ACC, thought it "stunk." He, however, was only confirming the opinion of many who were involved in the show but who asked not to be identified.

On the most basic level, the show was bad because the script was bashed off hurriedly, with no thought of the films the evening was meant to honor.

David Cole, who wrote the script, is a regular CBC freelancer and has done the Genies for three years now, with diminishing results. This year, he saw only one of the 14 films in question, and told Cinema Canada that he didn't need to see them to write his material. "My job was to write Louie's stuff" (Cole is script consultant to Louis del Grande's *Seeing Things*). Consequently, the show was peppered with jokes about the host, del Grande, the CBC and Toronto, none of which had much relevance to the film industry or the films.

"The Genie show is hard to write. Nothing springs to mind except negative things," explained Cole when asked why the process of filmmaking was not central to the script. And perhaps it was because Cole felt so negative and nonchalant that he didn't begin writing the show until a couple days before air. "Writing the show this year was like stealing money," he concluded. Amen.

The Genie show is produced by the CBC in co-operation with the Academy of Canadian cinema. The Academy itself is made up of 476 dues-paying members, all of whom work in the theatrical film industry. While the Academy has veto power over the choice of key creative people—producer, host, musicians—the CBC foots the bill for the show and so ultimately controls it. This year, as the ACC worried about flying in the presenters and getting the Genie statuettes ready, the show was put together by CBC producer Gary Plaxton.

There is no question that Plaxton, Henshaw and Sheffer worked closely together for months before the ceremony. Plaxton, who works principally in Quebec and whose variety credits are enviable, also found the show difficult to do. "The Genie show gives prizes to films no one has seen and to people nobody knows." This year, in his opinion, it proved impossible to rise above the material.

P.S.

The 1984 Genies

by Connie Tadros

Obviously, the selection of the host is critical to the tone of the evening, and there was consensus that the choice of Louis del Grande was a good one, and that the evening should be "entertaining." It was del Grande who insisted that Cole write the script, despite the fact that both the Academy and the CBC had decided on other writers.

As del Grande's relationship to the film industry is tenuous at best, and as he is a virtual unknown to the entire French-speaking industry, his material was written around his better-known, clumsy TV persona. There were pizza jokes, Michael Jackson jokes, Dynasty jokes and other typically Canadian barbs. Those few aimed at the film industry were put-downs of the sort, "Everyone in the audience shares something tonight. The evening's deductible." An embarrassed, anxious mood permeated the Royal Alexandria and the show.

There was neither time nor money for proper preparation, according to the organizers. Despite the Academy's request that a producer be assigned in September, the CBC did not budget for one to begin before December when Plaxton was named. This didn't provide for sufficient lead-time, and the Academy, with 42% of its own budget coming from government grants, was in no financial position to force the corporation's hand.

Plaxton only got access to the theatre four days before air, and was mainly concerned with the technical aspects of the ceremony during that time. There was no rehearsal to speak of. The presenters simply walked through the program that afternoon.

Although the presenters were given material by Cole, most of them chose not to use it. None of the scripts were in French, and only Marilyn Lightstone re-wrote hers bilingually. But the evening never got off the ground, and the presentations were as lack-luster as the rest of the show. The fact that the Pinsents' comedy routine, performed as it had been written, could actually be perceived as an error was proof of just how far gone the evening was. It's not easy to make Gordon Pinsent look awkward.

For better or worse, the evening belonged to Toronto. As one Québécois nominee summed up, "C'était du kétaïne sublime." Only 11% of the Academy are French-speaking Québécois, and it showed in an overall lack of sensitivity toward the French in the show, whether one centers on questions of language or style. Most damning, it showed in the prizes. Filmmakers from Quebec would never have overlooked Pierre Curzi to give the best actor prize to a newcomer

like Eric Fryer. And what can one conclude when a film like *Au clair de la lune* is omitted in the best picture category? Simply that the decisions will be dominated by the Toronto members of the Academy, who do not easily understand the art or grace which Quebec could bring to the proceedings.

What did come across strongly that evening was the antipathy between the feature film industry and the CBC. Plaxton and Cole speak of a certain "humourlessness" on the part of the Academy staff: "You would think they were giving away the Nobel prize."

Henshaw better articulated the problem when he recognized that two conflicting objectives worked against each other in conceiving of the ceremony. "CBC wants an entertaining, variety type show, and the Academy wants an award show to honor the industry."

In fact, the CBC must even feel a certain distain for the industry to have produced a show with so little feeling for the material at hand. Were there no good stories in the making of those 14 films? Were the presenters really "people no one knew"? Were there no jokes to be made except at the expense of the industry? The following week, the CBC programmed a show in celebration of itself, the ACTRA awards, and the mood was entirely different. Once the corporation was celebrating its own shows and the actors who worked in them, it was on safe, familiar ground and the atmosphere was supportive.

But perhaps the fault doesn't lie principally with the CBC. It may lie with the Academy, its make-up and the films it honors. Perhaps the films eligible were difficult to celebrate because they simply don't represent the film industry at its finest.

The Academy is the child of the tax-shelter years, founded by those producers who were ready to boycott the Canadian Film Awards Committee to wrest power and funding away from the organization which had honored Canadian films for 30 years. They rejected the democratic constitution of the committee, made up as it was by the guilds, unions, professional organizations and lobbies which had molded the film industry through the '60s and '70s. Those producers, seconded by others in Toronto who worked in theatrical features, wanted to make sure that their films would be honored, and chose to disregard all films other than those screened theatrically. In the first years, even theatrical shorts were ignored.

The result was that most of the people who worked in the film industry did not join the Academy, and many important filmmakers were not even eligible to

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join, having never worked in theatrical films.

When tax-shelter production was at a peak, it seemed normal, perhaps, to adopt the American formula of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and to conceive of an awards ceremony which aped the Oscars. But the difference of scale, of critical numbers, should have caused the organizers of the Academy to pause. This year, in the bizarre nominations and the even stranger winners, the inappropriateness of the choice of model becomes obvious.

Much has already been written about the nominations in the directors' category, where Ralph Thomas, Robin Phillips and Gilles Carle were overlooked despite the fact that their films were nominated in the best film category, and that Thomas' *Terry Fox Story* eventually won five awards. The simple fact is that of the 37 directors eligible to vote, about half of them did, and the resultant nominees were simply not the five strongest directors. The hypothesis was circulating that each director must have first voted for himself, and then the four weakest candidates. Though some thought this funny, the suggestion only underlines the problem: the Academy voting system, imported from the States, becomes a perversion in Canada where the numbers cannot support it. (Even ACTRA uses a jury system, albeit a jury system made up of ACTRA members.)

Since it has become a numbers game, the largest films get the most nominations because more people working on them belong to the Academy. Witness *Maria Chapdelaine* for Astral. And the opposite is also true. A small film like *Au clair de la lune*, without one crew or cast member belonging to the Academy, simply couldn't win, no matter what its merits.

But what of the "community" for which the Academy speaks? Where is the cohesion which should inform it and its awards ceremonies?

The producers may have caused the Academy to be founded, but producers are a querulous bunch of people at best. Over the last few years, the producers of theatrical features have wrecked their own sort of havoc on the structure of the film industry of Canada. In an effort to create a consensus they have organized and reorganized themselves into the Canadian Film and Television Association, the Canadian Association of Motion Picture Producers, Association of Canadian Movie Production Companies, the Producers Council of Canada, and now, finally, the Association of Canadian Film and Television Producers, whose first public stance is to call for the evisceration of the Canadian content regulations to facilitate the production of American movies in Canada. Only the Association des producteurs de films du Québec stands as a stable and coherent lobby — and most of its members do not produce theatrical features.

Is it any wonder, then, that Canada's best film this year was financed by Home Box Office, or that the highest grossing "Canadian" film was MGM's *Strange Brew*? There are 66 producers in the Academy, as opposed to 37 directors and 20 screenwriters. When the business of film seems to dominate the art, it is perhaps not surprising that the artistic community has so little sense of itself.

The Academy has built its house on the shifting sands of the theatrical film



industry, over which Canadians exercise less and less control. Even the Canadian Film Development Corp. has given up the dream, renamed itself Telefilm Canada and today encourages television production principally.

And ironically, if the largest "community" of filmmakers working on theatrical films is in Quebec, most of that community stands outside of the Academy structure. Last year, when the Genies seemed to be short on style, bringing the show to Montreal seemed a reasonable remedy. Serious consideration was given to the option by a committee of the Academy, formed for that purpose. This year, given the irrelevance of the show to the art of filmmaking, and considering the derision with which many Québécois reacted to the Genies, moving things to Montreal would seem impossible. Just as the Canadian Film Awards were jeopardized in 1973 when the Québécois directors boycotted the closing ceremony, so today many fear that the Academy would be undone by the refusal of the Quebec community to legitimize it. As Academy president Denis Héroux explained, in a non-sequitur worthy of note, "You don't move the Cannes festival to Montreal Why would you move the Genies?" Seen from Quebec, the whole show is just another foreign event.

The principal mandate given the Academy by its founders was to promote the Canadian theatrical film industry. The Academy has chosen to do so by attempting to honor its productions. Perhaps there is a basic antipathy between self-promotion on the one hand, and celebrating quality on the other. How else does one explain the inclusion of a clip (one long shot) from a Playboy film as a promo for editing technique in the middle of the Genie presentations? Like the Canada Can and Does campaign at Cannes several years ago, the promotion back-fires when the quality is insufficient to support it.

Still, every year, Canadians do win Oscars and other prizes which underline the excellence of Canadian productions. These films, however, often have no place in the Genie Awards because they are not screened theatrically in the previous year and so are not eligible for the competition.

The challenge before the Academy, therefore, is to bring itself into line with the main concerns of the majority of filmmakers in the country. In theory, this would mean to abandon the theatrical feature orientation and to broaden its scope to include those films which are now honored at the ceremonies given by the various professional organizations in their own, private events.

The Academy itself is certainly up to the job. In Andra Sheffer, Maria Topalovitch and Katherine Morrow, it is well served by women of energy, devotion and imagination. The question is not whether the staffers are ready, it's whether the members of the Academy can find a community of interest with the other filmmakers, so far excluded from the process, to make an organization which is genuinely proud of itself and its productions. When the Genie Awards honor the films which are indeed Canada's finest, the problems with the ceremony, the tone and the CBC will fall away and a sense of belonging, of community, and of confidence will at last infuse the proceedings.