The Toronto retrospective

The courage & the glory

by Gail Henley

The Retrospective – that is how it quickly became nicknamed – just as quickly became the only real event of the 9th Annual Festival of Festivals in Toronto: a giant celebration, whose purpose, value and success proved all the cynics wrong.

It was the largest attempt at Canadian cinema, anytime, anywhere. There were over 290 Canadian films (111 features and 148 shorts) screened in 10 days: every day the film audience had a choice of over 12 Canadian programs somewhere in Festival village. With traditionally only 25 of total screen time in the cinemas across the country screening Canadian movies, the Retrospective gave audiences the rare opportunity to go to a cinema to see their own "foreign" movies. For them, the Retrospective was an enjoyable overall look at Canadian cinema from the very beginning to 1984. For filmmakers, the 9th Annual Festival of Festivals was a time not only to look at the history and tradition of Canadian films but to assess where they stood in relation to that tradition. It was the first time in Canadian film history that the film community collectively could pause to reflect on what has shaped the landscape. For some, it was jubilation at being found again: for others a dialectic on where we've been and where we're going: for most, a renewed sense of hope and optimism. The legacy of the Retrospective could be that it clarified the past to make the future more perceptible.

First of all, what became abundantly clear right from the beginning is that Canadian film is as diverse as the country itself, and therein lies probably the kernel of a new realization of film in Canada. For too long there has been an attempt to find a homogeneous entity that would define our films and perhaps ourselves. However, the sheer mass of styles available within our tradition defies the concept of a single homogenous centre, of the definitive Canadian film. As a result, programmers Piers Handling, coordinator of the Retrospective, and programmers Peter Harcourt, Kay Armatage, and Bruce Elder chose to put together different programs that presented the range of strengths of Canadian film.

Despite this diversity, the programmers wanted to highlight the major accomplishments of Canadian cinema and thus the focal point of the Retrospective became a pantheon of the best films ever made in Canada. Selected in poll of over 300 film critics, national and international, teachers and industry professionals, the Ten Best, in order, were: Mon Oncle Antoine; Goin' Down the Road; Les Bons Debarras; The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz; The Grey Fox; Les Ordres; J.A. Martin photographer; Pour la Suite du monde; Nobody Waved Good-bye; and La Vraie Nature de Bernadette. One of the obvious conclusions from the Ten Best (excepting the documentary, Pour la Suite du monde and the high-budget Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz) is that eight of the 10 films are low-budget, personal films. This high ratio justifies the low-budget personal film as the glory of Canadian cinema. A related conclusion, drawn from the top 25 films, reveals that the "major player" behind each of these films was none other than a filmmaker: and so it was that auteurs such as Claude Jutra, Gilles Carle, Don Owen, Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Denys Arcand, Francis Mankeivicz, Michel Brault, Jean Beaudin, Pierre Perrault, Don Shebib, Philip Bonsor, and Michael Snow were the real stars of the Festival.

The filmmakers were feted: their films, in re-struck prints, were shown to full houses: and a tour, sponsored by Labatt's, will take both filmmakers and films to all the major centres across Canada from October through December. Afterwards, an international tour will take the Ten Best to major centres in the U.S. and Europe.

Filmmakers introducing their films has become standard Festival of Festivals format, a special practice that has personalized the Festival and delighted the audiences. In introducing La Vraie Nature de Bernadette, Gilles Carle besides Bernadette in the Ten Best, his films included in the Retrospective were Red and La Tête de Normande St-Ongen, spoke intensely on the film business past and present. "La Vraie Nature de Bernadette was made 15 years ago. We had such freedom working outside the regulations. I'm hoping that freedom will come back. That would be the greatest thing."

For Gilles Carle, the Retrospective reignited the passionate argument over the future orientation of Canadian cinema that has long been on-going between filmmakers and government funding bodies. "The politics of Telefilm Canada are no good," says Carle. "They favour producers. There will be $35 million in the next four years for producing films and only one million of that will go to script-writing. But writing and authorship is where it all starts."

Carle feels particularly well placed to re-open the discussion since his feature films were among the first to reflect contemporary Canadian cinema. "We started something, referring to the Quebecois features of the '60s and that was cut short by the tax-sheltering policy. We started something again in the '70s and that is now being cut short by the new policy of big movies made for television. They think that television will save the cinema. I believe the contrary: television will push censorship into film."

Paul Almond, filmmaker, this films included in the Retrospective were Isabel and Act of the Heart believes the Retrospective contributed in a very important way to the discussion.

"The Retrospective let us see very clearly what a distinctive voice was speaking out through motion pictures in the late '60s, early '70s. Our films were as good as Australian cinema, as any European cinema: they offered a wide, rich experience for the film-going public. Those were the 'good years' everybody talks about. Then there was the change at the CFDC: the men who could get the most money could hire the best directors and best actors and make the most commercial movies: ironically they made the worst dogs. At that time a film that was made with any reference to Canada was the kiss of death. There
was a long period of five to six years
where everyone was trying to make
American films.

"The Retrospective, however, has
helped us rediscover that powerful
voice of our film culture. Now we are at
the point of a clash of visions – out of
this, in the future, will come a good
synthesis. The clash occurs between the
avoided intent to provide television fare
for Canadians, and the intention of the
Broadcast strategy which wanted to
provide a more substantial
Canadian voice to Canadians and to the rest of
the world. And therein lies the clash of
ideologies. In the Retrospective, we've
been witnessing one hundred
distinctive Canadian features; we're looking at
a cultural Canadian monument. But
what is happening to the Canadian
distributor or the Canadian filmmaker
today? They are being dictated to by
network programmers wanting to put
all their money to prime-time television.

Rene Malo, independent film distributor,
and executive producer of Sonatine
(which was screened in the Perspective
Canada program) and a guest panelist at
the Trade Forum on the subject of
Canadian distribution, added fuel to the
discussion with his remarks from the
podium. He stands squarely in
sympathy with the low-budget personal
filmmaker. "No great films have come out of
series television, no matter how what
country in the world. It's the independ­
dent filmmaker who makes the films
that make the culture. Truffaut – that's
who you remember.

"An immense and powerful ideological
battle is being waged," says Paul
Almond, "and it is the struggle for the
cultural life of motion pictures in this
country. Peter Pearson, director of
Programs for Telefilm Canada and overseer
of the multi-million dollar Broadcast
Fund; and filmmaker – his films in­clud­ed in the Retrospective were Snowbirds
and Paperback Hero is the key man who is responsible for how this
will be resolved. Will the discussion be
resolved in the birth of a new era – or
will this simply mark a nice industrial
boom and nothing of any meaning will
spring from it?"

Yet Almond, as virtually all the
filmmakers buoyed by the success of the
Retrospective, feels optimistic: "The
one single overriding view of our
cinema is that most of the cheap hustlers
have disappeared. Filmmakers will re ­
surface because there will be no one to
make the films. And I think that people
like Peter Pearson are genuinely
wrestling with this point. The Retro­sppective is bound to have had some
impact on the Broadcast Fund."

There is considerable international
precedent for the situation to be re­
solved positively. "All of the more im­
portant films in Italy have come out of
Italian television funding, even Fellini,"
says Almond. "How could Fellini spend
$5 million on a film that everyone knows
will lose $3 million if it wasn't for Italian
television? And yet Italy, the nation, still
comes out ahead – the world's perspec­tive of Italy is altered by its filmmakers.
Likewise, the German New Wave was
brought about by the participation of
German television. Televison does not
necessarily hamper the independent
filmmaker – it doesn't have to – it's just
that it does right here in Canada, right
now. It's always the same answer from
the CBC. We'd love to show your pic­ture, but we don't have the money. It's
the same answer for any motion picture, and
yet they'll tie up vast amounts of
money in a mini-series. At the film
festival there were wonderful films
from Italy, France, England, or Germany
funded by their television. But in
Canada, it hasn't happened."

Larry Kent, filmmaker, (his films in­clud­ed in the Retrospective were The
Bitter Ash, When Tomorrow Dies, High
and Sweet Substitute) is one of the
filmmakers who have been labelled part of
the lost generation from the '60s which
resurfaced with the Retrospective. "Televi­sion does not want to make feature
films, that's not what it wants to do," says Kent. "The message I got from the
Trade Forum is it wants to do North
American material. They're not
interested in the filmmakers; they moved
immediately to the producers and now
have moved to the broadcasters. It was
deliberate. They're not interested in us.
If you compare it to the theatre, what
counts to them is the theatrical company,
i.e., the people who run the theatres,
ot the playwrights."

For Kent, the Retrospective was a
wonderful event, not only because of its
size but because of the regenerative
enthusiasm and hunger of the audience
to rediscover or discover Canadian films.
Audiences came in large numbers
to see the films," say Kent, "to see
films about themselves and they were
delighted. It gave them a fresh aware­ness and nationalist pride in our own
culture. Only the government and Tele­
film seem to be the ones not interested
in Canadian films."

Don Owen, filmmaker, besides
Nobody Waved Good-bye, one of the
Ten Best, his recent film Unfinished
Business was in the Perspective
Canada program) is equally troubled by the
television emphasis in current film pro­duction. "Telefilm is only one third of
the money, the other third is CBC.
CBC has to accept the proposal. Now all
the scripts have to go through the drama
department and that is problematic.
Independent production should be
completely different from the sensi­bility of the drama department. One is
aware, if you're selling to CBC, that
you're getting a certain sensibility of
how the script will be judged. It's a little
bit like having Colonel Sanders safe­
guarding the chickens."

Says Carle, "Television will cut off
90% of the subject as a filmmaker
would like to explore. To make film you
have to be more violent, more sensual,
you need more depth, you have to go with
marginal people – TV does not
allow you to go with marginal film, TV
chooses the subjects for you. We'll all
end up making Walt Disney-type movies,
because if you want the right to say
something dangerous, it's this right that
will be cut off. It is the system I'm
against – it kills authorship, kills the­
trical movies, kills independent
distribution. Now it will be decided in Par­lia­ment how films are to be made in
Canada."

As to underscore this serious
situation, the Festival screened two recent
National Film Board films, Democracy
on Trial: the Morgentaler Affair and
Abortion from North and South in the Perspective
Canada program. Democracy on Trial: the Morgentaler Affair was made as a pilot for the
CBC, Morgentaler was in some landmark court battles. The CBC was
wildly excited by the series initially and
invested $50,000 to get it off the ground.
But when The Morgentaler Affair was
completed, the CBC withdrew its sup­port and cancelled the series. They saw
the film as too controversial and exer­
business gets started, and when the country looks back, they’ll see how good these film directors were and that they’ll take their place in Canadian film history.”

The question could also be rephrased. Had these filmmakers been French-Canadian, would they have fared any better than the English Canadians? No one can avoid noticing, of the Ten Best, six are French-language films, and that seven of the top ten films were shot in Quebec. “One reason there are so many indigenous Quebec movies is because of the Societe generale du cinema,” says Don Owen. “That is not the same with Ontario and this begins immediate attention. One-third of the population of this country is in Ontario, and all the Ontario Government Film Office does make a big pitch to bring American films to shoot in Ontario. The Ontario Government must get in and have a film fund that equates the Societe’s aid-plan. Set up an Ontario Film Fund for films that reflect indigenous filmmaking. Ontario films help give a strong sense of what this part of Canada is. There is a unique culture here. Internationally people have a real sense of a place called Quebec, but not Ontario. In Nobody Waved Good-bye (shot regionally in Ontario) you could feel the difference. We need more impetus and support in that direction. Jean Pierre Lefebvre’s films all had money from the Societe and could not have been made without that support. In Ontario, the producers have the power, and they want the big bucks and deals in Hollywood, and they have the script re-written and tell you how to make the film, and who the director should be. Filmmakers are not a power in Ontario.”

“Telefilm has a lot of contempt for its artists,” says Gilles Carle. “First thing they want you to do is join forces with foreigners — because they love Americans. What about the girl from Killaloe who has an idea? Writers and artists are forgotten people in this field. Sitting at the Trade Forum is like sitting for four hours in the bank. I’m ashamed. I’m disgusted. So many people, supposedly so brilliant, always talking about money, and government people talking with money. That’s a tough job. The government’s job is to create culture. Artists are the blood of a society. There are so many good ideas that should be made into films. So many movies made that never should have been made — and you wonder why there was no filter. And on top of that, these neo-evangelists of neo-capitalism are not telling the truth. They want to steal the money. But who has seen a return on their money here? They just want you to feel guilty. Leopold Z was broadcast 32 times and they tell me my films don’t make money. No return here. Everybody lies. Distributors lie. Producers lie. Nobody tells the truth.”

“It stinks here and you can’t smell it.” Perhaps it is fitting that this was a filmic comment. In a cameo satire on commercial filmmaking in the avant-garde film Illuminated Texts by Bruce Elder, a fat producer sits in a chair, holding a hammer and a set-square, and with a deadpan expression answers questions about his upcoming film. The part is played sumptuously by James D. Smith, also a filmmaker whose film included in the Retrospective was Thirty-six short films in the Experimental program. He explains that he uses rats in his film, and when questioned why, responds, “Because they’re available.” When asked what the story is based upon he responds: “On a very good
idea, but I don’t like to give the idea away.” His greatest ambition is to keep the film moving, and he says he will make every attempt to keep it mobile. He goes on to say that if the story isn’t satisfactory he’ll have it rewritten. A very funny scene and cutting to the point.

However, except for this extant piece, experimental filmmakers do not engage the discussion on this level. Their debate with Canadian cinema will just as much proceed on a much more theoretical plane. Whereas the low-budget feature filmmakers argue that realistic cinema is important, it is clear that the art of the avant-garde exists to extend the boundaries or change what exists. This is what will keep film practicing.

“There isn’t anything wrong with having a small audience. I have an audience but I know a lot of people who are good and can’t be seen. My own view is that there are real masterpieces and it’s too bad more people don’t see it. And it has to do with money: a commercial industry built up for it,” says Snow.

However, there is a strong avant-garde cinema in Canada, and the Canada Council is doing a good job of promoting film or the film business or in any way introduce the film before the screening. She did, however, stay to watch her film. At the end of the film the applause was extremely hearty, and I still held on to the ecstatic moment, the Festival helped her forget that she was a minority-in-a-minority in a minority cinema.

And yet isolated work continues in this country, and filmmakers work against one, two or three opponents. The low-budget, indigenous Canadian feature On is in the same minority situation against the dominant Hollywood illusionists as is the Canadian avant-garde cinema – only the latter are screened avant-garde cinema in Canadian orthodoxy. The avant-garde exists to extend the boundaries or change what exists. This is what will keep film practicing.

“Most films don’t like the term avant-garde because they are so used to the states of mind that prepare them for narrative fiction film which stands or falls on the suspension of disbelief – they can’t handle a state of mind that doesn’t fall into that. One of the problems is overcoming the reactions built on habit,” says Snow.

In Illuminated Texts Bruce Elder elucidates the argument for avant-garde cinema versus the traditional, dominant illusionism. It is a highly accomplished film which Michael Snow says is vitally interesting for its polyphonic aspect. “In a narrative movie your attention is controlled,” explains Elder, “As soon as you ask yourself what’s going to happen next, the film answers, so you almost feel in control, but you’re not. In Illuminated Texts, paradoxically you don’t feel in control, you’re always aware there’s more than you can grasp, you’re in exile from the film’s whole, but you can make up a movie for yourself. The different channels of information let you make your own movie out of it – you can listen to the sound-effects and music, you can listen to the narrative, you can watch the images, you can read the titles. You can do a couple of them at the same time, so you go back to the movie you see a new movie. That allows viewers a freedom they never get in a narrative movie.”

Films included in the Retrospective were A B in Ontario and Sailboat; Bat Life and Diet in North America; Reason for the Winter; and Snow. "La Region centrale is the one and only film that with a single frame is the most demonstrates the excellence of Canadian cinematographic production. The first recipient of that award was La Feme de l’hotel by filmmaker Lea Pool. The jury – which included filmmaker Allan King (his films in the Retrospective were A Married Couple and Running Away Backwards) – was unanimous in its choice for the Toronto City Award, selecting Pool’s film because it stood out for its distinguished cinematography, its superbly coordinated design, its deeply moving performances and its extraordinary coherence of vision and theme. Pool recalls that for years judges which read the script while she was seeking financing told her, “This is not a film.” But filmmakers never give up and jury change. Eventually there was a jury (at the Societe generale du cinema) that liked the script and Lea Pool was on her way.

“My point of view is that there was a large public for this film,” says Pool, “but what is ironic is that distributors and producers don’t want to know there is a large public for this kind of film. We can prepare this public the way we did for violence or we can prepare this public that expresses concern and beauty. If everyone has violence in them, so too they must have love in them, and we have to find the public.”

“Mostly that’s why the Retrospective was embraced so enthusiastically by so many people. It showed that this is not a one-genre film country. It showed that there’s a lot of openness and varied and if the past was that way, so too can the future be. It vindicated the cultural lobbyists, and those small groups of people who argued that if there were more access to films, there would be the audience.

However what is significant is that as Festival audiences become more used to seeing Canadian films, they will have to be satisfied in each succeeding Festival. The Festival planners, under the unfailing direction of Wayne Clarkson, have anticipated this and the new program created this year, Perspectives can be a continuing program in the Festival.

In succeeding years, the Perspectives Canada program will be the device used to feature the diversity and the quality of the films made in the 12-month period before the Festival and from which will be highlighted the best in Canada. To add prestige to this important program the 9th Annual Festival marked the establishment of a new award, the Perspectiva Award which will be given to the film that most demonstrates the excellence of Canadian cinematographic production. The first recipient of that award was La Feme de l’hotel by filmmaker Lea Pool. The jury – which included filmmaker Allan King (his films in the Retrospective were A Married Couple and Running Away Backwards) – was unanimous in its choice for the Toronto City Award, selecting Pool’s film because it stood out for its distinguished cinematography, its superbly coordinated design, its deeply moving performances and its extraordinary coherence of vision and theme. Pool recalls that for years judges which read the script while she was seeking financing told her, “This is not a film.” But filmmakers never give up and jury change. Eventually there was a jury (at the Societe generale du cinema) that liked the script and Lea Pool was on her way.

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Vernalization required for the screening of The Far Shore, but was still too devastated to speak and refused to stand up and comment on the avant-garde Canadian cinema. Although occasionally threatening, the future is fairly predictable: as long as there’s a Canada Council, there’ll be a Canadian avant-garde. Toronto is particularly fortunate to have The Funnel (a 100-seat theatre on King Street East) has been in existence since 1972 that shows these films. (There are only three other such formal small theatres which screen avant-garde cinema in Canada, so people can make up a movie for yourself. The different channels of information let you make your own movie out of it – you can listen to the sound-effects and music, you can listen to the narrative, you can watch the images, you can read the titles. You can do a couple of them at the same time, so you go back to the movie you see a new movie. That allows viewers a freedom they never get in a narrative movie.”

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