

Vancouver's National Film Week

Homegrown films and flaring egos

by George C. Koller

The beaming Communications Minister, flanked by Cabinet colleague Vancouver Centre MP Pat Carney and project organizer Peg Campbell, cut the ribbon to open the impressive,

modern film facility. "I am confident," said Marcel Masse that Friday, March 21, in his inaugurating remarks, "that the new Pacific Cine Centre, combining production, distribution, and exhibition facilities, will encourage many new filmmakers." A week later, veteran experimentalist Al Rzutis was "encouraged" to spray paint a red, avant garde slogan on the screening room's virgin-white wall.

Kicking off the activities of the new \$1.8 million Centre was National Film Week, a festival of Vancouver and Canadian films, jointly sponsored by the three organizations that share the prem-

ises: Cineworks Independent Filmmakers' Society, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West, and the Pacific Cinematheque. Sandy Wilson flew back from Toronto with her Genie awards for *My American Cousin* to star in the first seminar on the program, featuring directors and producers. Joining her on the panel were moderator Wayne Sterloff, fresh from Canada Post, now the Western coordinator for Telefilm Canada; Victoria-raised director Atom Egoyan (*Next of Kin*), Winnipeg filmmaker John Paizs (*Crime Wave*), and Paul Pope, president of the Newfoundland Film Coop.

Smiling triumphantly, Sandy Wilson sat smack in the centre of the podium, her stylishly unkempt blonde hair framing her glowing, girlish face. But it was a woman with experience who dominated the proceedings — after all, she's finally made it. Best screenplay, best direction, best actor and actress, best editing, and best picture! Not many Canadian filmmakers can boast of such a list of awards.

Among other fascinating facts, we learned that she had once directed a 16mm short called *Garbage*, edited news at BCTV for a while, and made *He's Not The Walking Kind* about her



• The dignitaries: Canada Council's George Armstrong, Hon. Marcel Masse, organizer Peg Campbell, Hon. Pat Carney, and city alderman Bruce Yorke

photo: Eileen Hoeter



• Popcorn power: *My American Cousin's* Sandy Wilson and organizer Pat Campbell

photo: Eileen Hoeter

George C. Koller, Cinema Canada's founding editor, lives in Vancouver.



• Supercalifragilisticexpialidosis: experimental film's Al Rzutis, right, with the Professor, dummy of film studies



• "Avant-garde spits in the face of institutions": Al Rzutis creating

photo: Chris Cameron

wheelchair-bound brother. As for *My American Cousin*, a Toronto interviewer asked her, "You spent years developing this project - was it more difficult as a woman or as a Canadian?" "What the hell do you answer to a question like that?" replied Sandy.

To a question from the audience as to why Canadians like Phil Borsos (*The Grey Fox*) are so anxious to heed Hollywood's call once they've made it, the panelists had a range of responses. Egoyan said that at this stage of his life he's comfortable making films here. "I don't have a dream of going to Hollywood," Paiz explained. "I imagine it's a tacky place... When I peak, people will remember me a couple of months longer, than if I peaked in the States." Wilson summed it up: "I wouldn't mind going down to L.A. for a little fun and a lot of money, but not if I lose my voice." For a Canadian director in Tinseltown, cultural laryngitis is a distinct possibility.

Noon screenings featured a historical look at early Vancouver and B.C. films, including a 1920's offering entitled *Canada's Pacific Gateway*. Allan King's 1956 documentary *Skidrow* was his directorial debut. Two CBC films made 25 years ago stood out for their excellence. *Totem*, produced by Gene Lawrence, chronicled the monumental creations in wood of the Haidas, and the efforts to save them from the ravages of weather and time. The haunting totem images and the photographic retelling of how the Haidas flourished after their first contacts with the white man - only to get wiped out by small pox - were

expertly captured by Kelly Duncan's cinematography, even in black and white. *Malcolm Lowry: The Forest Path* recounted how the famous author lived, worked, and drank in a shack on the beach at Dollarton, actually finishing *Under the Volcano* in B.C.

In addition to the Vancouver filmmakers honored with retrospective showings (Sandy Wilson, David Rimmer, Philip Borsos, Al Razutis, Larry Kent, Zale and Laara Dalen, Philip Keatley, and Peter Bryant), the week featured screenings of shorts from film coops across the country. A sampling turned up *Ranch: The Alan Wood Ranch Project* by Steven DeNure and Christopher Lowry from Cineworks, Vancouver. This half-hour film documents the work of British-born, local artist Wood, whose brightly painted fences, barns, corrals, and teepees transformed the Rocky Mountain Ranch in Alberta into a very large work of art. DeNure and Lowry go beyond standard documentation, however. Their cinematic effort, through the use of ingenious time-lapse photography, editing old cowboy film footage in a humorous way, and an evident sensitivity to the interplay of light and shadow, becomes an art work in itself.

Unfortunately, some of the films from Toronto's The Funnel, an exhibition space and production collective, were self-consciously striving to be "art." The selections presented by founding member Ross McLaren were technically amateurish for the most part, some of them shot in Super 8, and, what was more annoying, many had a "look how

clever I am" feel about them. Memorable were the excruciatingly painful *I on 22*, by Bob Brown and Cleo Mittlestadt, six minutes of ear-splitting soundtrack and bondage imagery; *The Ideal Artist* by Peter Gress, depicting a messy artist's loft, complete with naked artist, artistic paraphernalia, and a more than clever soundtrack; in *Sex Without Glasses* McLaren discovers rear projection, flying in his dreams, and how to eliminate the technical imperfections plaguing the other Funnel films.

Having its public premiere at National Film Week '86, *Spirit of the Kata* was directed by Sharon McGowan, and co-produced by the Pacific Studio and the Montreal Women's Studio of the National Film Board. It focuses on women practicing karate, and the lyrically forceful images confirm the fact that the martial arts are no longer an exclusive male domain. *Jacques et novembre* by Jean Beaudry and François Bouvier had its first B.C. showing opening night to the invitation-only crowd. Michael Dorland in *Cinema Canada* called it "a profound, life-asserting affirmation of artistic and cinematic integrity... a triumph." *Return to Departure*, produced and directed by Kirk Tougas, starts off in extreme close-up documenting the creation of a realist work of art. The innovative soundtrack is actually a sound portrait of the unseen artist. Eventually, the camera pulls back, and both the painting and the artist are revealed. "Watching the pigment dry" is part of the subtitle of this 83-minute film.

The B.C. Retrospectives section also

included Patricia Gruben's first feature, *Low Visibility*, and Jack Darcus' most recent feature, *Overnight*. The former stars Larry Lillo as Mr. Bones, an apparent amnesiac found wandering in the dead of winter by the side of the road in Manning Park. The film captures the painstakingly slow process of bringing this mute, half-brute back to reality in a research hospital, and the attempts of the staff to teach him how to communicate. Through the aid of a female psychic and other clues it becomes apparent that he was the victim of a plane crash. Ominous connections occur to the attentive viewer that make one realize that he was not so much a victim as the perpetrator of some unspeakably horrible violence. (Against a woman, naturally...)

Jack Darcus is a Vancouver painter who started making 16mm cinematic statements in the late '60s. *Proxy Hawks*, his second feature, was made for \$16,000 in 1971 and critic John Hofsess called it "one of the ten best Canadian features ever made." *Overnight*, his fifth feature, was shot last year in Toronto for considerably more money, and had its Western premiere just before the closing party at the Pacific Cine Centre. It is a hilarious spoof of the pretensions of filmmaking in general, and the foibles of "erotic" cinema in particular. Victor Ertmanus plays Scott, a middle-class innocent trying to make it as an actor. In his agent's office he encounters Gale Garnett as Del, a veteran of 10 skin quickies made for the logging camps. She gives "good fake," Del tells Scott, meaning she can

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simulate a loud and dramatic orgasm. Scott gets called in to the inner sanctum, where Alan Scarfe as an expatriate Czech director is holding his own in an argument with his crass Canadian producer about art versus expediency.

With the first few minutes of the film, Scott is ordered to drop his pants and much of the humor for the rest of **Overnight** is below the belt. But it's done in such an ingenious way, that nothing offensive or explicit is ever seen, the vital parts masked by props or camera angles. In an interesting twist, the veteran pornmakers become the enlightened saviors of humankind, while the hesitant Scott is guilt-ridden for even thinking of walking out. A big-time American producer bullies his way onto the set and dangles the golden carrot in front of the greedy Czech's eyes. Leaving the "dirty little movie" to the rest, the director runs after the American opportunity. "We might be dirty and little," says the understudy to the producer, "but we're Canadian." The audience dissolved in laughter and cheers.

But the true climax of National Film Week was not a movie about making pornography, nor Peg Campbell's sophisticated short **It's A Party**, nor the closing festivity, held at Carlos 'n Bud's. It occurred during a seminar entitled "Avant Garde Film Practices: Six Views," which took place very appropriately on Good Friday afternoon. Five quartz lights were aimed at the podium, three small motion-picture cameras were poised to record the action, and the hundred people in attendance were made to wait 17 minutes while organiz-

ers hurried around giving the auditorium a media, circus atmosphere. Programmer Maria Insell then gave a historical perspective of the term "avant garde" (originally a military term, first used in relation to art by Rousseau during the Enlightenment) and attempted to define it as art that is "relevant to society," "works that are ahead of their time," filled with "new and original ideas."

"Traditionally, the idea of the avant garde had denoted rebellion," continued Insell. "The purpose of this discussion is to feel the pulse of the avant garde in Canada."

Internationally renowned artist and filmmaker Michael Snow stepped up to the lectern, continuing the military analogy about the avant garde being "a group which goes ahead of the rest of the army," hoping that other artists and the public will follow "into enemy territory." But he negated the idea of the avant garde as a homogenous group. "I question whether I or we are leading in any way... a group move is inapplicable to my film practice. Compared to the mass audience for TV and industry films, the audience for the avant garde in film is practically non-existent. The criticism probably reaches more people than our actual work... I don't claim to be avant garde... I see some strong individuals... a situation more anarchical than hierarchical."

SPU film professor Patricia Gruben explored the relationship between narrative films and the avant garde, discovering something called "the new narrative" in the process. She was unable to

give a definition for it, even though she has been accused of practicing it. She cited Bruce Elder's call for a new cinema, definitely not narrative, based on a respect for the absolute, for holy values, for the call of the divine, but dismissed his argument as "relentless romanticism." Touching on psychoanalysis and semiotics in film criticism, Gruben asserted: "I'm not a theoretical filmmaker."

"Male artists are somewhat displaced by new narrative and its association with feminism," admitted the director of **Low Visibility** at the conclusion of her remarks.

Respected Vancouver filmmaker David Rimmer talked on "The Repression of the Erotic in Experimental Cinema or Safe Sex for the Literary Minded." He quoted Marcel Masse, "But of course in cinema the word must always come first," and firmly disagreed. "For me cinema begins with the image," affirmed Rimmer, and went on to describe a major problem with contemporary works in film and video - having to sit through long stretches of textual information, with absolutely no imagination in the visuals.

"Illustrated lectures masquerading as film," continued Rimmer, who lectures at Emily Carr, "fear of the naked image, of the erotic power of the visual. It is a puritanical denial of the image, an attempt to sanitize the image, it goes along with writing about film, to repress what's really happening. Cinema gives me visual pleasure - lots of filmmakers can't see, it's in their heads, not in their eyes. The beauty of the image is that it

cannot be explained... Cinema must be freed from its obsession with meaning and words." To illustrate, he showed a new video film, **As Seen On TV**, 14 minutes of pleasing images depicting smiling beauty queens, disturbing images of a peep show, and the repeated image of a man masturbating. Except for the dreaded black line that often shows up when you film the TV screen, the work was satisfying.

Two "distinguished guests" from Toronto, Joyce Wieland and Ross McLaren, decided to offer a joint presentation of their views in an unorthodox manner. With a bouquet of pink tulips on the table and the cameras whirring to capture the "event," Ross and Joyce traded quips about National Film Week ("You get so many more people when you speak than when you show your films..."), funding structures like the Canada Council ("They work on the binary system - you're either a one or a zero..."), or the David Rimmer film just shown ("Embarrassing images of women..."). Wieland, an accomplished experimental filmmaker and visual artist, had made a conventional narrative feature, **The Far Shore**, about artist Tom Thomson. She introduced the Funnel's McLaren as "an escape from the patriarchy," a term by which she means everything that's wrong with a male-dominated Ronald Reagan world.

Their attempt at humor was just self-conscious cleverness. Nevertheless, it helped balance the heavy emphasis on intellectual exploration that, except for Rimmer, plagued this panel. "Freudian psychological, semiological analysis was

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created by men," concluded Wieland, and should be rejected by "women, who are creating the next stage of evolution."

Petulant, stubborn Al Razutis thundered up to the podium: "Could we kill the house lights?" He explained that while he talked on an "unpopular topic (by today's estimation) - theory," a projector in the back would be running a film called *Splice*, straight into a bleach bath, where the emulsion would burn off and only the splices remain. "A material fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated," he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffing and huffing into the microphone, Razutis emphasized that the new Cine Centre is accountable to the Avant Garde, but neglected to mention whether the reverse was also true.

The Simon Fraser professor and legendary film personality pulled out a ventriloquist's dummy he called "the Professor," put on a tape of Puccini music and dialogue, and proceeded to discuss with his *alter ego* the finer points of film theory. The Lithuanian-American-Canadian Razutis, with his brusque mannerisms and penchant for psycho-drama, looked like a big kid playing with a doll - the avant garde filmmaker as stand-up comedian. "Did you mention my books and love of cinema?" asked the dummy, who spoke in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a word in. "The Professor" spouted nonsense "in the Reichian sense," about bodies of symbology, visual gestalt, salutary "imago," and effective

dynamism. As the Puccini opera reached a crescendo, the goateed, tousled-haired dummy experienced "libidinal frustration," and, to Razutis' negative response, delivered the best line of the day: "Come now, if you deny it you only confirm it and you know it."

Laying down his wooden "guest," Razutis berated his "somnambulist audience," and continued with what sounded like a manifesto: "The avant garde is not interested in ingratiating itself to curators, or audiences, or institutions. It does not kiss the hand of psychoanalysis. I don't think it panders to Expo's multi-channel installations. The feminist avant garde kicks psychoanalysis back to Hollywood in the '40s where it belongs." At this point, Razutis picked up a can of red spray paint and wrote "Avant garde" in large letters underneath the screen. "Spits in the face of institutional arts," he continued to scrawl, as the audience gasped at such unchallenged vandalism. "Deny, define, but you can't stop it," wrote the man, who a short while ago asserted that the avant garde does not repeat itself. His actions, however, were very reminiscent of 1968.

"If you choose to protest institutions, why this one, why not SPU where you teach?" asked Peg Campbell, on behalf of the Pacific Cine Centre, "I've resigned," was Razutis' terse comment. (He actually gave a year's notice, but it still got him off the hook.) "Why don't you spray paint the Art Gallery?" came a question from the audience. "SPU is an institution that has no graffiti, Emily Carr has no graffiti, the Pacific Cine

Centre does have graffiti. We're a different kind of institution," replied a Razutis-defender, also from the audience.

During the ensuing question and answer session, film theory and institutions were discussed some more, then moderator Maria Insell turned to Joyce Wieland:

"Joyce, I'm interested in how you went from experimental to narrative. You were influenced by Shirley Clarke..."

"No, no, no. If you don't know my personal history... but thank you for asking me a question... I've been sitting here and you're the first one to ask me a question... *The Far Shore* was my desire to communicate on a different level to a bigger public... Thank you again for asking..." (sarcastically).

Then, getting angry, Wieland continued:

"I've spent 35 years as an artist. My name was used with the Canada Council to get funding for this. Yet when I show my films there are only 10 people in the audience..."

Insell... "Well, I'm sorry, I can't take responsibility..."

Wieland: "Someone must take responsibility for this kind of shit... aware of having more women on this thing, and being considerate of women..."

In all fairness to the organizers, National Film Week was considerate of women. There were two special screenings on Myth and Reality in Women's Cinema, one on Women in West Coast Experimental Cinema, and six other programs were devoted to the works of

women filmmakers. The Avant Garde panel might only have had two women on it, but the editing and documentary seminars were dominated by women, and the panels during the week were moderated by women. (When I applied for the coordinator position of National Film Week, I was interviewed by three women, and they selected another woman, Margaret Aasen, to fill the position.) To be gender specific about it, as Al Razutis would say, the matriarchy is alive and well at the Pacific Cine Centre.

Militant feminist SPU professor Kaja Silverman shared my enthusiasm for National Film Week: "It was very well-organized, a lot of interesting films and people were brought in." A male university student to his girlfriend: "I think I'll join the avant garde, they seem like a fun bunch of people." An exasperated woman in jeans, after the spray painting, and flaring egos, and after the projector in the booth caught fire, asked: "Are the bars open today?"

Despite low attendance at some screenings (caused by funding bodies axing the publicity budget at the last minute), despite juvenile outbursts on some panels, despite the poor quality of some of the films, National Film Week was a great way to kick off the fabulous new film facility on Howe Street, just north of Davie. "People still don't know that we're here," complained Cari Green of Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West. Perhaps someone should spray paint "Pacific Cine Centre" in huge letters on the blank wall facing Davie and the parking lot.

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