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 Razutis 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 premises: 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 BC1V for a while, and made He's Not The Walking Kind about her...
wheelchair-bound brother. As for My American Cousin, a Toronto viewer 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 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,” Paizs explained. “I would have no problem 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.”

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. “When I peak,” people will imagine it’s my life.” I imagine it’s real.” Malcolm Zale 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.

The Tarmac features over 100 B.C. films, including a 1920s offering entitled Totem, produced by Gene Wood, 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 Laura Dale, Philip Keatley, and Peter Bryant), the week featured screenings of shorts from film coops across the country. A sampling of Philip Pach’s 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 ingeniously 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 exquisitely painful love 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. "When I peak," people will imagine it’s my life.” I imagine it’s real.” Malcolm Zale 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.

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 Francois Bouverie 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 Hofness 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 Ermannus 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
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 much of the humor for the rest of the movie.

Fensive 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 understudy to the producer, a situation more anarchical than our actual work... I don’t claim to be avant garde... I see some strong connection of the Erotic in Experimental Cinema, definitely not narrative, based on respect for the absolute, for holy dread, for the dread of the divine, but dismissed his argument as “relentless psychoanalysis.” 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 Mind.” 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 lectured 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 peasant 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 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 Farrell’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, semiotic analysis was
created by men," concluded Wieland, and should be rejected by "women, who are creating the next stage of evolution."

Petulant, stubborn Al Razutis thund-dered 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 pro-jector in the back would be running a film called Splice, straight into a bleach bath, while the emulsion would burn off and only the splices remain. "A mat-erial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the

reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

"What is the Reichian 'imago,'" asked the dummy, who spoke in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

"What is the Reichian 'imago,'" asked the dummy, who spoke in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.

The feminist avant garde kicks off and only the splices remain. "A mat-

ernial fact is that the avant garde cannot be repeated;" he gave this analogy as the reason for the destruction of his film. Sniffling in a snobbish voiced, almost continuous monologue, hardly letting Razutis get a sense of film theory. The American-Canadian Razutis, with his music and dialogue, and proceeded to put on a tape of Puccini 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.