

7th annual Banff Television Festival

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

by John Timmins

Organizers of the 7th Annual Banff Television Festival were uneasy at the beginning of the week (May 21 to 31) – and with reason. But it wasn't because the Bow River, winding through the backyard of the Banff Park Lodge, was threatening to overflow its banks. Rather, their concern was whether this year's festival had outgrown its usefulness as an effective "working festival."

Like the Bow River, the number of delegates had also risen dramatically – to over 400. No fewer than 300 television programs were screened by a pre-selection committee and 173 programs representing 22 nations kept the jury busy for the greater part of two weeks of 15-hour days.

Yet by week's end, the river had found its level slightly above normal. And Festival Director, Jerry Ezekiel, was at last able to relax, declare the festival a success, and begin to reflect on what could be improved for next year. Chief among his concerns is the uniform complaint by all seven jury members of a near intolerable workload. The difficulty, as he sees it, is balancing the festival's reputation for thoroughness with the festival's growing popularity around the world.

"We are in a way victims of our own success," says Ezekiel. "The jury has too many programs and not enough time." The options are a larger jury, more time or both. The first option, he says, is difficult to secure in terms of who is available, the second option will cost. The festival might also consider being more selective in its initial screening process but this could raise the question of credibility and a preselection committee exceeding its mandate.

Both Ezekiel and Carrie Hunter, Executive Director of the Banff Television Foundation, insist that the \$900,000 festival must remain, in Hunter's words "small" and "honest," where programs in competition are judged solely on their own merits.

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• United we stand, divided we fall: Gordon Pinsent and Albert Millaire toast CBC/Radio-Canada's 50 years of broadcasting

"Whatever we do with the jury system we must maintain its integrity," says Hunter, "this is not the Prix Italia."

Another concern, albeit perennial, also has to do with the jury. The suggestion is that the number of competitive categories should be increased from the current 10 to more finely defined categories. These might include (pre- and post-pubescent) children's programs and cost effectiveness, the latter

category being suggested in a panel discussion by jurist Gyorgy Balo to which fellow jurist Jerry Kuehl replied that there is no true accounting method to find out, in terms of dollar-value, what a show costs.

As in the past, several programs which the jury found fit with difficulty in their assigned categories were awarded. These were *Anne of Green Gables* (Canada), *The Story of a*

Country Road (Bulgaria), *My Mother Married Wilbur Stump* (USA), *Zina* (England).

If one theme or persistent topic of discussion surfaced on all three levels of the festival (the conference, the competition, the marketplace) it was "co-production," says Ezekiel.

"The whole question of co-production was very much in the air this year. You had the public television thread (special tributes) and the marriage of public and private broadcasting."

Speaking as a business executive in the festival's marketplace, Louis-George Tétreault of Montreal's Productions SDA Limitée described the prevalence of the co-production theme this way: "The key word this year is co-production. It is not 'can I sell you my product?' it is, rather, 'let's do a production.'" As a result of a meeting at the festival with Télécip (France), Tétreault is looking at an unsigned deal to create two four-hour mini-series. A story treatment from Television Espanola, hailed as an outstanding competitor this year, is expected on Tétreault's desk in early August.

International cooperation, inter-agency cooperation, the relationship between independent producers and television networks, the theme of co-production surfaced again in comments by Arthur Weinthal, CTV Network vice-president, who said that the cost of producing has rendered the co-production a "marriage of necessity." Gene Lawrence, English programming director of TVO said he would like to reduce staff and pump 50 per cent of all new funds received into the private sector.

The theme also surfaced in the daily seminars. In one instance, a discussion on the topic led to near-fighting words. It was during a panel discussion chaired by Norman Horowitz of New York when Bruce Rider of Disney Channel, co-producers of *Danger Bay* and *The Edison Twins*, spoke about the introduction of a children's pay-TV in Canada. Noting that the introduction of the Family Channel, in which Disney would be a major partner, would result in more Canadian productions, he insisted that these programs would have to assure production values targetted at a U.S. audience.

David Simon, of the newly constituted Fox Television Network added insult to injury when he said that Fox, a contender for status as the fourth U.S. network, might have difficulty purchasing Canadian programs not as familiar to the U.S. audiences. Horowitz said that to break into the U.S. market, Canadians have to learn to deal with what he called the "most chauvinistic broadcasting country in the world."

On the following day, John McGreevy, the Toronto-based producer of the Peter Ustinov's *Russia* series, took a moment from a panel discussion, appropriately entitled Patriotism, Propaganda and Media Responsibility, to respond. He argued that Canadians are producing world-class products, that it would be foolish for anyone to adopt this American point of view and that if the Americans don't like what is being offered "that is their problem."

According to Hunter, the exchange was the high-water mark of the panel discussions held daily through the week. She says that however "energetic" Horowitz or "passionate" Laurier Lapierre, most panelists seemed to adopt a self-serving or patronizing posture. She was also sorry that both American neoconservative William F. Buckley and Soviet journalist Vladimir Posner declined her invitation to participate on the panels.

"What we needed was a real neo-conservative on the morning panel so good that no one would want to get up for coffee."

Market Simulation Workshops, in which producers were walked through the paces of putting together a deal, are what Hunter says, "we do best." The workshop moderator this year was Pat Ferns, President of the Banff Television Foundation. His advisors were Richard Price of Primetime (UK) and Jacques Dercourt of Télécap (France). Whether any of the simulated deals would result in the real thing this year - as was the case last year for Wendy Wacko producer of the *Strikers Mountain* series currently in development with CBC and CIC Australia - remains to be seen. Rock Demers, took to the simulated market his Christmas special, *Just A Little Bit More Love*, where he showed greater interest in getting pre-sales than investments from the American market. Demers has been returning to the festival since 1982 when he served on the jury. He says the festival should maintain the high quality of its competition and develop the prestige of 'The Rockie' award.

His criticism this year is that there were too many U.S. entries in competition and too few from East bloc countries.

On the domestic scene, Demers has observed the growing sophistication of Western Canadian industry executives as Canadian filmmaking traditions have begun to take hold.

Hunter agrees: "The Easterners have traditionally done better here (at the festival) but the Westerners are getting to a point where they have developed the knack of putting deals together."

Regardless of east-west distinctions, Canadian producers made a strong showing in international competition with three winning programs in the 10 finalist categories. The Best of Festival (Grand Prize) went two ways this year: to *The Final Offer*, winner of the social

TV: the triumph of timidity

The age-old battle of artistic or social integrity versus commercial viability has turned into a rout for integrity in the North American motion-picture industry in particular, says a group of young Canadian filmmakers whose individual films were featured in the Television Workshop at the 7th Annual Banff Television Festival (May 21-31).

The opportunity to show their work and respond to the criticism and praise of their peers did not go unappreciated by the group of seven filmmakers. However, the consensus among the group is that participation in a television festival is a small step towards overcoming the formidable obstacles that block the "non-aligned" filmmaker's chance of getting recognition.

The obstacles, they say, may be described as the programming inflexibility of the major TV networks in Canada and their reluctance to air non-aligned, low-budget films financed by various independent means. Programmers, they say, are afraid to be controversial and market-place considerations often act as a form of censorship.

"Being a non-aligned filmmaker can be a disillusioning experience," says Chester Pelkey, Saskatchewan producer-writer of *Classrooms and Caribou*. "There seems to be no room for us in Canadian cultural policy at a festival like this which has been coopted by the larger producers. If you look around, you will not find too many filmmakers."

Montrealer Sophie Bissonnette, producer-director of *Quel numéro?/What Number?: The Electronic Sweatshop* which in terms of logistics was the most ambitious of the workshop - 81 minutes on a budget of \$250,000 - is disappointed that the more controversial films are rarely shown at festivals because they exist on a different production level than the average festival film.

"This is ironic at the Banff Festival that purports to show extraordinary television," Bissonnette says.

Most agree that the non-aligned filmmaker has been "ghettoized" by what was referred to as the dominant ideology of both public and private broadcasters in Canada and the United States. European and British networks allow more time for non-aligned filmmakers, they say, adding

that there is no flexibility in North America.

As a case in point, Bissonnette indicates the sales of *The Electronic Sweatshop* to eight European countries - without the film ever having aired, to date, in Canada. The film deals with the impact of technological change on the individual's control of the job and subsequent health problems and job-loss.

"Form determines content," says Haligonian Bill McGillivray whose latest film *Linda Joy* aired on what he calls a "ghetto program" at 4 p.m. on a weekday afternoon.

"The networks have no time for the low budget non-aligned film. The films that I have sold have been sold for political reasons because they filled an agenda. They have not been bought for the right reasons and this sort of film is being seen less and less often."

Asked whether TVOntario purchases films for the right reasons, Gene Lawrence, head of English programming, says, TVO has "committed ourselves to more and more non-aligned and independent programming." Proof of this commitment, he says, was the recent TVO decision to air the 15-hour epic *Heimat* from West Germany.

"*Heimat* was much too tough for the other networks," says Lawrence.

"In five years I want to see less money in administration and more money going into productions and co-productions. The spectrum of production is not broad enough."

On this last point there is unanimous agreement among the group. Bissonnette says that both public and private broadcasters must respond to consumer demands for better programming, demands which are far more varied than the networks are flexible.

"It is sad and indicative that there is something wrong in our cultural policy when I can't make a living as a filmmaker. Ask yourself, where are all the young filmmakers?"

The seven filmmakers were selected from across Canada to participate in the Banff Television Festival by the Agency for Tele-Education in Canada (ATEC) in cooperation with TVOntario and the Banff Television Foundation fellowship program.

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and political documentary category, produced by the National Film Board and the CBC and to *Music Hall*, winner of the Limited Series competition, produced by Télécap for FR3 and Canal Plus. *The Nature of Things: Ducks in Danger*, produced by CBC, won a Rockie in the Outdoors and Wildlife documentary section. *Diane Dufresne: Follement Votre*, produced by Société Radio-Canada, is this year's winner in the Performance Special category.

Awards night was the black tie affair of the festival held at the Banff Springs Hotel. It was a hot night even without the presence of CBC television lights which, in the heat, caused the rapid disfiguration of a life-size ice sculpture in the foyer.

Sturla Gunnarsson, producer/director of *The Final Offer* received both Rockies with an eloquent but brief thank you as did Jacques Dercourt of Télécap. Gunnarsson said that he hopes the content of this film in which the Canadian arm of the United Auto Workers ignores the *diktats* of the American head-office office during negotiations with General Motors will stand as an inspiration for Canadian negotiations in on-going free trade talks with the United States.

Among the special awards was the Québec-Alberta award of excellence and its attendant \$5,000 cash prize presented this year to *Le Film d'Ariane*, directed by Josée Beaudet and produced by Denis Dupont. Lorne Greene, Canadian war correspondent-turned-actor, was recognized for his well-known contributions to radio and television with a special Rockie.

Although the Awards Night was the social event of the week, two semi-formal evenings were given over to tributes to West Germany's Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) for outstanding achievement and to CBC Radio-Canada for 50 years of public broadcasting.

Both evenings provided a suitable stage for chief executives and politicians. Representing WDR was Dr. Guenter Struve, WDR Program Director, who introduced 17 minutes of high-lights from award-winning programs by such film notables as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*); Wim Wenders, (*Paris, Texas*); Edgar Reitz, (*Heimat*); Wolfgang Petersen (*Das Boot*).

CBC president Pierre Juneau who took the honours during the CBC Radio-Canada tribute followed by an historical perspective on public broadcasting achievements by Minister of Communications Marcel Masse.

The minister had more to say before the week was out. A press conference was called to introduce a working group to study the non-theatrical sector of the film and video industry. National Film Board president François Macerola will co-chair the group with Merit Jensen from West End Productions in Winnipeg. Other group members are Cari Green from Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West (Vancouver), Les Modolo of Motion Pictures (Toronto), Aimée of Danis of Les Productions du Verseau (Montreal) and Bernie Hart of the Nova Scotia Board of Education. The group will study ways to increase the size of the education market for Canadian productions where there has been traditional dominance by mostly American films.

● The fest's president Pat Ferns, fest director Carrie Hunter and CBC prez Pierre Juneau

