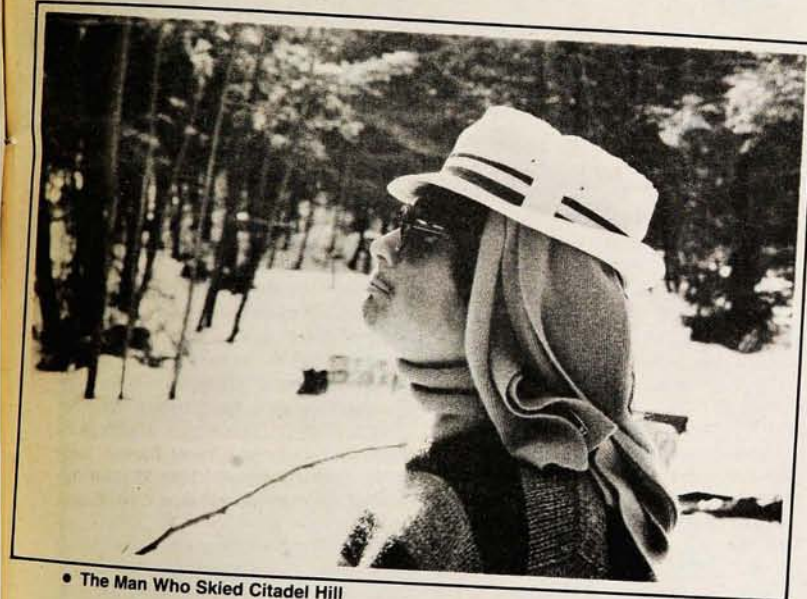


• Cheyenne



• The Man Who Skied Citadel Hill



• The Last Days of Okak

Atlantic Festival Atlantique

Still Searching After All These Years

by Christopher Majka

Attached to regiments of the Soviet Red Army, in the years of chaos that encompassed the First World War, the February Revolution, the October Revolution, the Allied Intervention, and the Civil War, were a number of young children. Born to local women in villages where the army was dug into positions for months, the paternity of these children was impossible to ascertain — every man in the regiment having been acquainted with the lady in question. They were taken on by the army and were known as “children of the regiment.” Like the children of the regiments, the Atlantic Film Festival (more recently incarnated as the Atlantic Festival Atlantique) has been marching beside the filmmakers trying to determine its parentage and find its place in the world.

Although still modest in scale the Atlantic Festival Atlantique, which took place this year from October 22nd to 25th, was in its second year, better organized, better presented and more diverse in scope. Over 80 productions were submitted to the festival and there were some 80 screenings in five locations over a period of three days. Having attended the festival (and its predecessor the Atlantic Film Festival) for the past five years now, I was struck this year at how many accomplished and well-produced films this region had to show. Even three or four years ago many productions from this area would have to carry qualifiers such as, “Sure the picture looks a bit ragged but it was done on no budget at all,” or, “Well, it’s true that it doesn’t really come together, but it’s the director’s first film and it certainly shows promise.”

This year’s festival makes it clear that there are now many filmmakers in the region who can produce a well-written, well-shot, competently conceived film or video with first rate production values. I was struck with productions such as *10 Days 58 Hours*, *Hello Angela*, *Hey Elvis*, *Le Tapis de Grande Pré*, *Return to Dresden*, *Rita MacNeil in Japan*, *Season on the Water*, *Starting Right Now*, *The Gol-*

ers, *The Lamplighter*, *The Last Day of Okak*, *Faustus Bidgood*, *Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler*, and *Whitecoat*. They ranged from documentaries, short dramas, experimental films, film fables, investigative journalism, historical dramas, natural science films, all the way through to features. All these productions, as well as many others, were solid contributions to film and video making in Canada. Although they each had their respective strengths and weaknesses, and were successful to greater or lesser degrees, none of them need to have any qualifiers or apologies. The injection of funds into this region over the past few years has given local producers the opportunity to bring film and video production here to a truly professional level.

Aside from the screenings, a number of other activities took place. The festival opened with a well-attended screening of *Faustus Bidgood* (see the November, 1986 issue of *Cinema Canada*) at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium. Anne Wheeler’s *Loyalties* and Leon Marr’s *Dancing in the Dark* were shown during the week. A historical retrospective screening took place which featured two splendid films: *Back to God’s Country* is a drama filmed by the Shipman Studios in 1919 in Ontario and New Brunswick. It is a tale of suspense and dastardly deeds featuring Wapi, Wonderdog of the North. It was shown blown up to 35mm and computer tinted with delightful live piano accompaniment. Also on the program was the 1931 classic, *The Viking*, the first feature ever to be shot in Newfoundland. The shoot ended tragically with the explosion of the ship on which the action takes place, resulting in the deaths of 17 people including the director.

My only continuing beef with the programming of the festival involves the lack of films from outside of the Atlantic region. It seems to me that a worthwhile and legitimate goal of the festival could be to invite select films and producers from outside the region to expose people here to what is happening in other areas and to promote industry contacts. The late Atlantic Film Festival did this with a certain degree of success in relation to New England and Iceland. I, for one, would like to see this

REVIEWS:

Atlantic Festival Atlantique

The major disappointment of the Atlantic festival Atlantique was the cancellation of Glen Walton's *Nova Scotia Song*, a musical documentary about the province's premier folklorist and folksong collector, Helen Creighton; followed by the screening of Martin Duckworth's well-meaning but softheaded *Return to Dresden*, a curious inversion of history which in the name of peace whitewashes the aggressor and turns the wartime Germans of Dresden into peace-loving victims of deluded Allied airmen. Somehow, while being on the side of the angels and inveighing against the horror of war, the film revises history and manages a betrayal of both sides.

If there were any general patterns to the random assortment of jury-selected films it was that the largest number were preoccupied with the sea and/or with community values, not surprising for a region preoccupied with those things. Newfoundland tended to dominate in the number of good films released during the past year, and the small Acadian film community based in Moncton presented several films of surprising energy, imagination and sophistication. Here follows a rundown of those films seen by a critic sprinting from one theatre to another and losing some reportedly very good movies and videos in the overlaps:

Brian Pollard's compilation film for the NFB, *Atlantic North*, was the first and most problematic of the documentaries dealing with the ocean. A series of short archival sequences, it seemed an almost careless sampling of found data. It had something of the quality of a random browse in an almanac on a tired afternoon; some of the information was interesting, some trivial and with precious little to hold it together other than the vaguely formulated theme of "the sea that binds us".

Much more coherent was Michael Mahoney's *A New World Below*, also for the NFB, an incisive and handsome study of North Atlantic research conducted by the Surrey and Bedford Oceanographic Institutes.

The Sea Raven, a "Nature of Things" segment by John Brett, spoke of the cormorants and traced their cycle from their arrival at their breeding colonies in the spring to the maturation of the young. A fine, informative film, it dealt with the seabirds as an en-

tradition continued as a way in which this region could reach out into the larger world.

Michael Jones, director of *Faustus Bidgood*, talked to local filmmakers in a session called "Faustus and Beyond" with the familiar issues of making deals and getting funding in the current climate of production in Canada. The panel featured Rudi Carter, head of independent programming for the CBC; Arthur Weinthal, vice-president of entertainment programming for CTV; Neil Court from the business affairs section of Telefilm but recently from Norstar - Cinecom; Phyllis Yaffe, head of The Fund created by First Choice; and Michael Donovan from Salter Street Productions serving as a moderator. Although the subject-matter is well-worn material for most producers, the session's candidness nevertheless had a certain charm. At one point someone was describing a particularly unscrupulous piece of marketing involving selling an utterly unwatchable film on the basis of a video showing the only five decent minutes in the production. A lone voice (heard more and more seldom these days) hesitantly interrupted to ask:

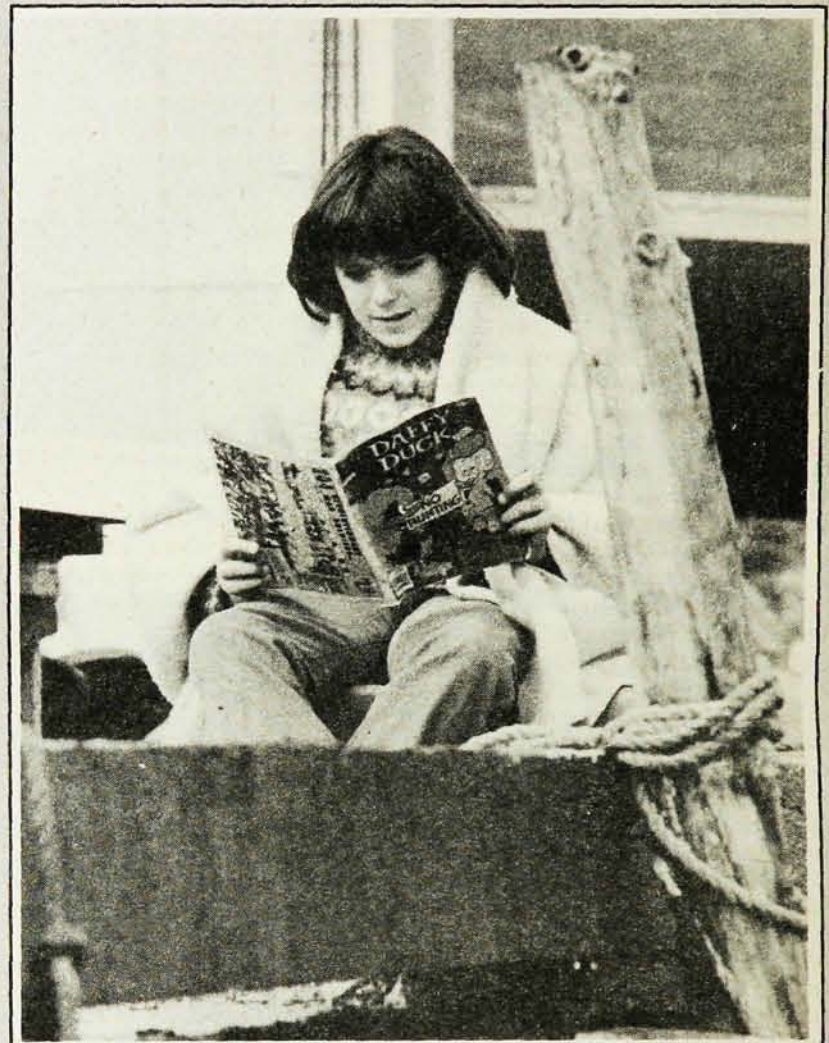
"But isn't that dishonest?"

"That's not dishonest - that's the nature of the business," came the snap reply. Well I guess but...

Despite the number and variety of good films and videos screened, one of the most disappointing aspects of the festival was the very poor attendance at screenings. Only a small handful of people attended most screenings. Most festival. Festival Director Brian Hannington was personally and professionally embarrassed by what he feels is the irresponsibility ("the lack of ability to respond", as he told me, carefully stressing each word) of Atlantic filmmakers in this respect. He is throwing down the gauntlet to producers. Says Hannington:

"Do filmmakers in this region really want this festival? I'm convinced that they need it, but do they want it? It's pretty well acknowledged throughout the country that producers in the Atlantic region have a special spirit and I'm challenging them to bring that spirit to the festival to see the work of their colleagues. Lots of people attended the parties but that's not the primary function of the festival and not the purpose of provincial and Telefilm funding."

In other respects the Festival has smoothed out many of the earlier wrinkles of its operation. Due to computerization of virtually all aspects, Hannington feels that the festival is organizationally complete. There are continuing shortages of funds but there is promise that by next year the festival



• Small, sweet *Seasons on the Water* by John Doyle

dangered species, scapegoats for man's predation of the fishing stocks.

After all of the anger, hysteria, indignation, and grandstanding over the Harp Seal harvest during the past few years, it was a pleasure to see Norman Lightfoot's *Whitecoat*, a visual knockout and a non-sentimental, dispassionate, objective documentary about the first weeks of life on the ice for whelping harp seal pups.

Objectivity does not necessarily preclude sympathy and the veteran Quebec filmmaker Georges Dufaux provided both in his portrait of several Newfoundland trawlermen and their families in the feature-length documentary, *10 Days 48 Hours*. Slow, often focusing on the seemingly inconsequential but finally telling detail, Dufaux's film tracks the offshore fisherman's cycle of 10 hard days at sea followed by 48 short hours at home. An intimate portrait of the fishermen and their families, Dufaux also intercuts footage taken on board ship and at home with scenes from the fish processing plant and community, and widens his story to effectively include the interdependence of

economies and culture. My only hesitation has to do with the NFB's ubiquitous visual house style which often tends to make reality - and in this case the trawlerman's frequently harsh reality - much too attractive.

Newfoundland fishing, this time inshore, also supplied the subject for John Doyle's children's drama, *Season on the Water*, a co-production of the NFB's Atlantic Studio and Cinefort Inc. A small sweet film about a fisherman's fear of taking his daughter out to sea and her desire to do just that, the movie manages to touch base on their values, the nature of work, Canadian geography, family life, sex roles, dealing with emotions and choosing a career without becoming muddled or losing its simplicity.

Cordell Wynne's *Hello Angela*, made as a DramaLab project, is a pleasant but, at times, self-conscious short comedy about the budding romance between a resolutely anti-technological writer and a computer hacker. Shy and unassuming, *Hello Angela* went beyond my limited tolerance for

whimsy, but the computer as Cupid was a nice conceit and the final moment when the machine showed grateful pleasure a satisfying touch.

Carota Films, a vigorous New Brunswick production house, offered a brief sampler of the range of its work: **A Link With the Future**, an industrial promo about fibre optics by Louise Carota; **Daring to be Free**, a music video by Karen Carota; Héréméngilde Chiasson's French-language narrative **Cap Lumière**; and a half-hour video **Getting to Work**, directed by Jack-Nixon Browne. I wish I had seen **Cap Lumière**, which was screened at the same time as **10 Days 48 Hours**. I later heard that it was quite good. Instead, and unfortunately, I saw the laugh-track-laden **Getting to Work**, the limp pilot for a deservedly nonexistent comedy series. Set in a Halifax Canada Manpower Centre, the segment revolved about the incompetent devices of its chief investigator. Clearly influenced by **Barney Miller** and **Taxi**, **Getting to Work** has none of their comic charm, characterization, consistency, lightness or subtlety. And it misses the satirical implications of welfare bureaucracy and social upset. Or avoids them as it opts for a safe and lame brained TV homogeneity.

Lightness and subtlety were, however, abundant in Phil Comeau's enchanting children's drama, **Le Tapis de Grand Pré**, filmed for the CBC French-language series, "Legende du monde". Telling the story of two time-traveling kids, Constant and his sister Rose-Marie, who find the missing 12 strands of wool that are needed to complete a famous Acadian tapestry, the film captures the wonder of a child's imagination. Sophisticated and charming, **Le Tapis de Grand Pré** mixes history, magic mailbags, villainous British officers, Christmas and high production values to produce what was arguably the best regional film of the festival.

Lulu Keating was considerably less successful with her short musical fantasy, **Starting Right Now**. Ostensibly an anti-smoking movie, its subject and its affecting oddball humour are betrayed by an awkward script and mise-en-scène and, with the exception of Jim McSwain and Mary Colin Chisholm, garish miscasting. Keating restored faith in her imagination and skill, however, with two Rita MacNeil films: an inventive music video called **Can't Hold On**, and a reportedly very capable documentary about MacNeil's trip to perform at Expo '85 in Japan, **Rita MacNeil in Japan**, co-directed with Chris Zimmer.

Dean Brousseau, who has been involved in nearly 50 videos and films during the past three years, slightly dominated the small "experimental" wing of the festival with his **Centre for Art Tapes Promo**, **Mother's Days**, and **Dinner**, the last being 16 minutes and 13 seconds in the life of a Thanksgiving dinner told in cran-



• Best regional film: **Le Tapis de Grand-Pré**

berry colours and derivative style. **Trinal Line**, a live action and scratch animation film by David Coole was not much more interesting. The first half of John Galloway's **Dream Voices-Day Voices**, a video that explores the relationship between the dream and working states, is poetically evocative, but the second half, a belaboured reference to Ecclesiastes, is somewhat pretentious. I preferred Ed Richie's quick irreverent parody, **Hey Elvis!**, some kind of pinnacle in the sleaze genre of pointless celebrity bio-documentary, and Jim McSwain's lovely, gentle and peaceful dream-journey, **Flower**. And I'm told that by missing Chuck Clark's **8 Frames per Second** I missed something worth seeing indeed.

I especially regret missing **Cap Lumière**, because Héréméngilde Chiasson's other film, **Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler**, a thoughtful and measured part-fictional, part-documentary consideration of Acadian literature, was both visually and structurally imaginative. It was also a lesson in how fresh the old New Wave techniques of Godard and Rivette can seem when handled by an intelligent and sensitive writer/director.

Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler examined an important aspect of the Acadian community. The CBC generated a film and two videos, **The Last Days of Okak**, **The Golvers**, and **Mumsuze**, each of which dealt in their own way with community. **The Last Days of Okak** is a well-wrought and moving film by Anne Budgell and Nigel Markham of the death of an Inuit village during the 1918-19 influenza epidemic. Built from photos, diaries and interviews with survivors, the movie documents the nightmare of the plague brought, ironically, by Moravian missionaries on the ship Harmony to the Moravian-evangelized Northern Labrador coast. The Inuit were decimated, faith was lost and Okak abandoned. **The Golvers**, produced by Roxanne Spicer, is from the local public affairs program, "Inquiry", and is a close look at the Nova Scotian clan caught up in a

scandal of incest and buggery. Most of the men and several of the women in this large, private and inbred family were convicted and investigators turned up evidence of a history of generations of sexual abuse of Goler children. "Inquiry" offered a reflective and restrained analysis of what could have been a sensational treatment of gothic mountain folks, searching for the source of the events in poverty, neglect and isolation. Almost as if to balance things, "Inquiry" also presented **Mumsuze**, celebrating the life of the matriarch of the Black Nova Scotian community of North Preston in her 102nd year. An account of Mumsuze's struggle against poverty, prejudice and loss, the video is an affirmation of faith and love and is in its simplicity and directness very effective.

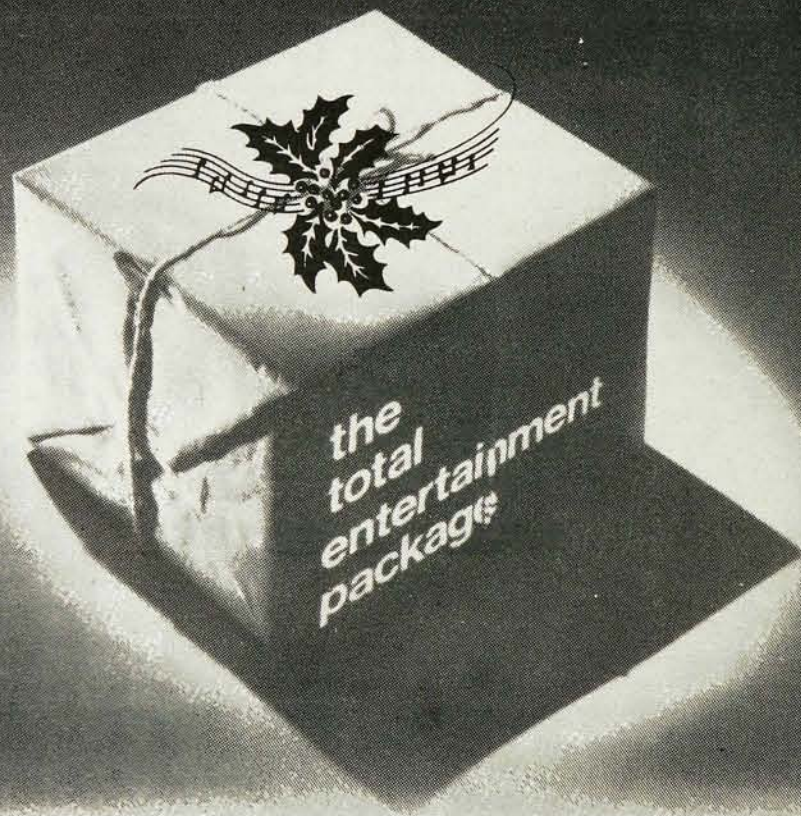
Awards: The Atlantic Film Festival is a non-competitive affair avoiding "Best Of..." and, instead, passing out recognition in the form of "Moonsnail Awards" of excellence to any film that achieves a standard of overall excellence or awards of merit for distinction in some aspect of filmmaking.

Seven films and videos won awards of excellence: **Le Tapis de Grand Pré**, **Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler**, **Drumming Up a Little Fun** (a rock video by Stephen Reynolds), a Ben's Ltd. television commercial (by Charlie Bishop), **The Golvers**, **The Last Days of Okak**, and **Whitecoat**.

Awards of merit were given to **A New World Down Below**, **Atlantic North**, **Cheyenne** (by Liz MacDougal and Andy Dowden), **Season on the Water**, **Rita MacNeil in Japan**, **Saturday** (by Ilkay Silk), **The Buzz on Bees** (a "Land and Sea" episode by Susan Young Mitton), **Your Municipal Government** (by Ray Whitley), **The Centre for Art Tapes Promo**, **The Solar Project** (Michael Barnes' cable-TV project to produce promotional videos for Halifax musicians), **Hello Angela**, **Cap Lumière**, **L'Avertissement** (by Anne-Marie Sirois), and **10 Days 48 Hours**.

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