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 maternity 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...
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 folk-song collector, Helen Creighton, followed by the screening of Martin Duckworth's well-meaning but soft-headed Return to Dresden, a curious inversion of history in which in the name of peace whiteswashes 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 overlap.

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 Scurry 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 endangered 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 trawlersmen 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.

Corell 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 hater. Shy and unsuasioning, 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 bonus sampler of the range of its films: A Link With the Future, an industrial promo about fibre optics by Louise Carota; Daring to Be Free, a music video by Karen Carota, Hérémégnifique, a 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 around the ineptitude of one of its chief investigators. Clearly influenced by Barney Millar and Taxi, Getting to Work has none of their comic charm, character development, consistency, humor, and subtlety. And it misses the satirical implications of welfare bureaucracy and social upsurge. Or avoids them as it is for far safer lame-brained TV homegenre.

Lightness and subtlety were, however, abundant in Phil Conn's Faustus Bidgood's film Lulu Keating, which was screened at the festival. Faustus Bidgood is only one of a number of independent films which have found themselves in this position (the most recent of which is Bill MacGillivray's Life Classes which wrapped on October 31st) as a result of ACTRA not having any mechanism for dealing with independent, low-budget productions. The economics of many local productions are such that to make it wildly impossible for ACTRA-scale wages and other conditions, ACTRA-scale wages to hundreds of extras in Faustus Bidgood, a film which did not even have proper funds to pay for actors (many of which films must either a) avoid employing ACTRA members; b) fly in the face of ACTRA regulations; or c) not get made at all.

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The politics of this year's award was such that by presenting an award to Andy Jones for his role in Faustus Bidgood's film, the festival was congratulating and giving its blessing to a production which had ignored ACTRA regulations. Feelings ran high and apparently ACTRA came within a hair's breadth of refusing to present the award at all. However, at the awards banquet John Fulton, vice-president of the Writers Guild of the local Branch Council, presented the award citing ACTRA's commitment to acknowledge excellence in the acting profession wherever it appeared. Striking a much more conciliatory attitude, he seemed to indicate that ACTRA's members have made some concessions to independent producers. How this might take place remains to be seen since ACTRA and Bill MacGillivray were unable to come to terms with respect to Life Classes.

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