



# FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS:

## Happy Days

## Beware

## Again

Chris Gallagher's Undivided Attention

tion into an instant performance piece. But if viewers looked carefully at the sides of the screen and paid attention to what was left of the soundtrack, it became apparent that, in many ways, the programmers' enthusiasm was justified. Canadian producers and the venerable institutions with whom they collaborate are churning out a diverse and professional product. If such comparisons are at all valid, we are finally in the same league as, say, the Dutch, the Australians or the Yugoslavs. This might not seem like much. But think of what it would have sounded like 10 years ago.

The other innovation in Canadian cinema is that it gets distributed. International sales are impressive enough. But as the Festival closed, all three of the Canadian gala films – *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing, Too Outrageous!* and *Night Zoo* – actually opened in Toronto Cineplexes.

All this success was reflected in the Festival's Trade Forum. There, Canadian panelists were no longer junior members. The money talk as a whole shared the table with a series of discussions on the creative process and another on script development. Perhaps this was a way of saying that the money, Michael Wilson willing, is there. Let's talk about quality.

The films themselves demonstrated that the more experienced directors had already figured this out. Clarke Mackey came to the Festival with *Taking Care*, a film he'd wanted to make for a long time. In keeping alive the questions raised by the Susan Nelles case, *Taking Care* does what docu-dramas are supposed to do: it grabs the social agenda before the social agenda grabs us. Jacqueline Levittr's *Eva: Guerillera* grabs for the same ring.

Yves Simoneau, having proven himself last year with *Pouvoir intime*, also did the film he wanted to make. His adaptation of Anne Hébert's *Les Fous de bassan* is a textbook case of lush cinematography acting as analogue to the poetry of a literary source. Mireille Dansereau's adaptation of Marie-Claire Blais' *Le sourd dans la ville* shared the same strategy. If Francis Mankiewicz's gangster film, *And Then You Die* did not have unremitting 35mm pyrotechnics, it did provide its director with the luxury of working with R.H. Thompson and Kenneth Welsh at their devilish best.

The new prosperity also gave us Don Shebib's *The Climb*, an epic version of the director's personal agenda. Above the clouds, in a world free of psychological analyses and sexual politics, the Shebibian man was free to mould himself through the largest-scale physical act. He might well be joined there by Alex, the sperm count avenger of Giles Walker's *The Last Straw*.

What hadn't changed in our institutionally sponsored cinema is the obsession with institutions themselves. Laura Sky's *To Hurt and To Heal* redefines real time by keeping a camera on a couple describing the struggle for the life, and then the dignified death, of their

other than the films themselves. Piers Handling, in his new role as programme director, brought together a more than unwieldy selection. The only set of films that actually worked as a programme was the collected work of Pedro Almodovar. Spaniards, it seems, had forgotten the essential role of surrealist deprivation in the formation of its national character. Almodovar was only too happy to remind them, as he reminded the very appreciative Festival audiences in Toronto.

Otherwise, it was hit and miss. For that critical archery, the Eastern Horizons retrospective provided a target as large as Asia (though it helped if you appreciated melodrama). Penelope Houston's "Buried Treasures" programme worked to round-out an understanding of the several *auteurs* whose obscure works she chose. And there was, scattered throughout the listing of the Contemporary World Cinema and Documentary Programmes, a small, unannounced collection of Soviet *glasnost* films.

Armed with a catalogue that described with equal enthusiasm 238 gems being shown eight at a time, Festival audiences might be forgiven for selecting Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride* as this year's Labatt's Classic Film. After a hard

day's shopping, most people simply want to relax. The press did a little better in giving the Critics Award to another gala film, Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Night Zoo* (so far only the title has been remade in English).

An international jury of programmers, administrators and filmmakers presented \$ 25,000 to Atom Egoyan on behalf of the City of Toronto and City-TV. Set in an urban landscape numbed by television, Egoyan's *Family Viewing* seemed a logical choice. The jury also saw fit to create a special award to honour the year's best Canadian documentary. The prize went to Kay Armatage for her film on Joyce Wieland, *Artist on Fire*.

Armatage, Handling and Geoff Pevere had already earned their reward by programming the Festival's fourth "Perspective Canada". At each screening, one of the programmers reminded us how hard it had been to pare down this year's crop to the 50 films that appeared in the Perspective. Repeatedly, we were told to look around at the theatre in which we sat. It had been filled by a Canadian film. And that film, we were assured, exceeded even its catalogue description.

What was really there? First impressions were that 16mm film in a commercial cinema is still prone to transforma-

### by Seth Feldman

This was the year that the Festival of Festivals was determined to stop living in interesting times. For those history buffs who remember the battle with Montreal over attendance figures, the Festival quietly made sure that there were more than enough lineups to go around. Nor were any of the lines concocting names for a new executive director. Those who were complaining about the closing of the Festival's two largest theatres were answered by none other than Garth Drabinsky. By 1989, the Festival could have a new theatre complex designed along the lines of the set-up at Cannes. Even the censors cooperated. They went so far as to hint at a permanent exemption for Festival screenings.

In the face of all this oppressive goodwill, audiences had little to talk about

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newborn child. She, like Mackey, then asks some questions about the health-care system.

In contrast, John N. Smith's **Train of Dreams**, is too kind to the institution it studies. There was a real audience let-down when the juvenile correctional system got through to the quintessentially unlikable youth portrayed by non-actor Jason St. Amour. A show of hands would have preferred the young man's headlining a public flogging. However, the effort Smith puts into defining whatever it is the NFB's Alternative Drama Department thinks it's doing partially compensates for the dramatic let-down of a semi-happy ending.

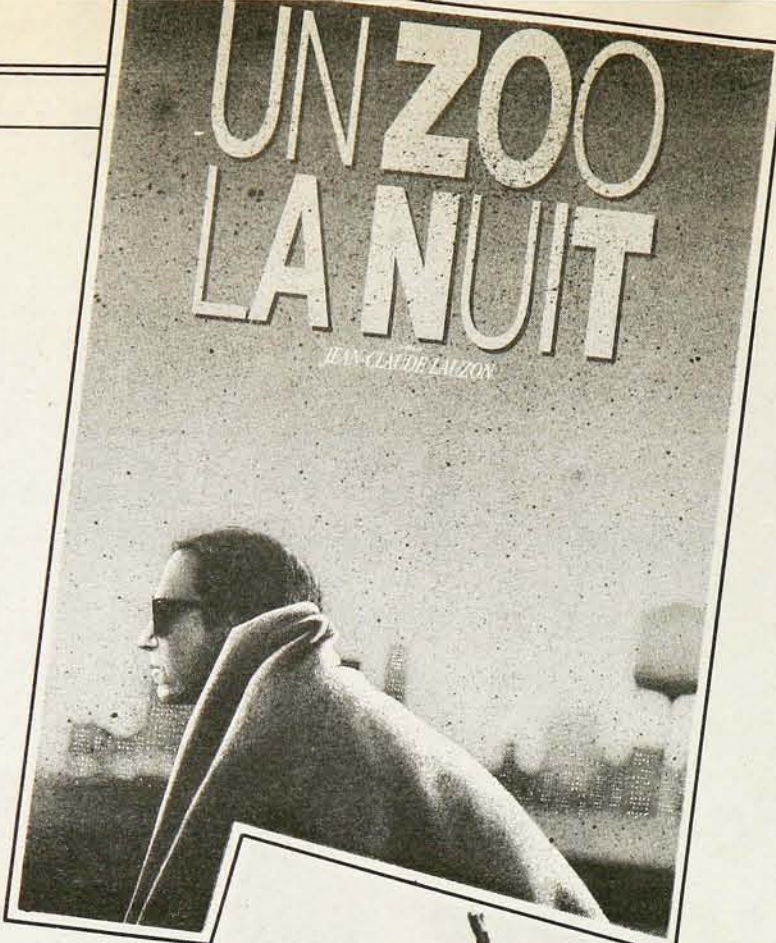
The effort that Brenda Longfellow puts into redefining the institutions of history and the documentary needs no such qualification. **Our Marilyn** was the most intriguing Canadian documentary of the Festival simply because it asked what it was doing. Endlessly reprocessing archival footage of Marilyn Bell and Marilyn Monroe, the film fused documentary consciousness and avant-garde technique in a nationalist, feminist, personal consideration of image-making.

Maurice Bulbulian does a slightly less formalist job on image-making in his **Dancing Around the Table**. Yet his re-editing of the candid moments of Canada's perpetual native rights conferences sets a tone that is every bit as surreal as **Our Marilyn**. And then, just as we are amused at the thought that some second-rate experimental playwright has been scripting the making of the Constitution, Alanis Obomsawin's **Poundmaker's Lodge** presents the heartrending testimony of native victims of this black humour. Mary Jane Gomes and Emil Kolompar provide similar accounts by Newfoundland fishermen in their nicely crafted **Finest Kind**.

Another sort of testimony came in films speaking to what was the single most recurrent concern after our traditional obsession with institutions — this year Canadian filmmakers want to talk about art. At a Festival characterized by the absence of spontaneous protest meetings (is everybody really that happy?), it is tempting to say that the issues normally discussed in these get-togethers were being played out on the screen. Who gets to make art in this society? What sort of production should be valued? What do we do with it once it's made?

The spectrum of that on-screen discussion ranged from a rather traditional view of the artist as child of inspiration to a hard-nosed and somewhat melancholy look at reality. Patricia Rozema's **I've Heard the Mermaids Singing**, the work chosen as the Festival's opening night gala, was very much of the first variety. Rozema is rough on the intellectualizing and commercializing of artistic expression. The Toronto gallery scene is caricatured as a hotbed of superficiality. The alternative to this decadence — blank, glowing canvases over which much fuss is made — are pure beyond thought and commerce.

Saul Rubinek in *Taking Care*



Alfred Laliberté, sculpteur

Blank too is Polly, Rozema's definition of the true creator. Polly is a feminization of all those pointless people whom Robert Fothergill (seconds after the creation of the CFDC) described in "Cowards, Bullies and Clowns: The Dream Life of a Younger Brother." She is also a photographer whose snaps of everyday life may or may not be masterpieces. Rozema never bothers to settle this point because the important thing about Polly is that she makes us feel good.

**Mermaids** is exactly the film Polly would have made. The dream sequences are pretty, intuitive and conceived without any great regard for either the structure of dreams or the 90 years of their depiction in cinema. The film's art world and the lesbian relationship depicted are watched at a distance — as if by a bemused child. Adults behaving as adults are left to their own devices.

If **Mermaids** recalls the fuzzy self-depreciation endemic to the first generation of English Canadian features, Dick Benner's **Too Outrageous!** asks us to wonder why we would ever want to try anything else. As he was 10 years ago, Benner's Craig Russell is so talented it hurts. But as an artist, he can only keep performing if he avoids thinking about what he does or any way organizing his career. Hollis McLaren, everyone's favourite Laingian goddess, can only keep writing if she doesn't get published. In a film that is ostensibly about self-discovery, the point is that nobody should even think about changing. Even the gay community continues to dress like **Scorpio Rising**. After a fling in Toronto where the gay community tends to dress like all the other dullards — the gang decides to go home to New York and give failure one more chance.

Kay Armatage's **Artist on Fire** is a kind of documentary incarnation of **Mermaids** and **Too Outrageous**. Granted, the film's subject, Joyce Wieland, is no waif; nor does she voluntarily flirt with failure. Yet Wieland's career as we see it here is shaped by a slightly defensive whimsy that would delight Polly and Craig Russell. She identifies art, Canada and feminism through a weaving (often literally) of the most humble icons. She teeters on the edge of the cute.

The film itself identifies completely with Wieland's aesthetic. Having carefully interviewed the eight people closest to the artist, Armatage cuts their reasoned commentary into tiny, incomplete phrases. For most of the film, the phrases are woven together as an anonymous voice-over covering a seemingly random presentation of the artist's *oeuvre*. **Artist on Fire** tells us that if you want to organize Wieland's work or even your thoughts about it, then you've missed the artist's point. To quote Rozema's description of Polly, the film is a celebration of the "organizationally impaired."

The five directors of **A Winter Tan** — Jackie Burroughs, Louise Clark, John Frizzell, John Walker and Aerlyn Weissman — have a very different idea of



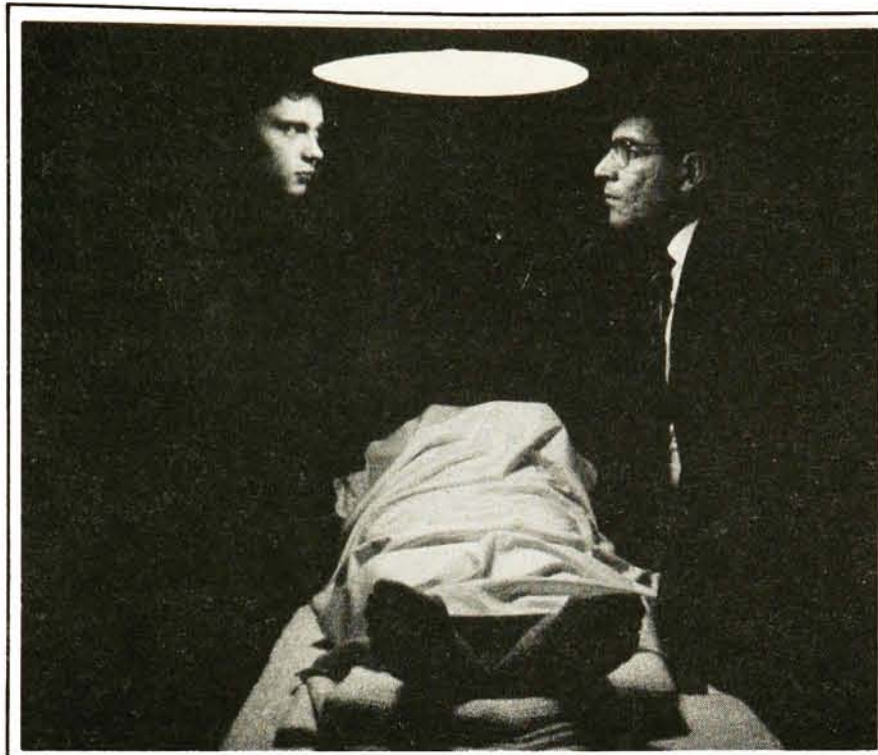
what an artist does: The artist suffers, in what should have been the fourth Canadian gala. Burroughs, at the pinnacle of her talent, simultaneously enacts and declaims the orgiastically witty last letters of Maryse Holders, a woman gone to Mexico to live her "masterpiece." Throughout, there is the knowledge that the reward for doing a post-feminist **Under the Volcano** will be delivered posthumously – if at all.

The artists within and behind **A Winter Tan** pursue their calling because it is there. The same obsessive need to create is present in Bachar Chbib's **Seductio**. For Burroughs' atavistic Mexico, **Seductio** substitutes the woods themselves. Instead of one woman driven to self-destruction, he gives us a menagerie of creators, all of whom relate their angst in performance and reflection. The on-screen filmmakers are also defined through performance. For them, there is no passivity in just watching.

This is in direct opposition to the point of Atom Egoyan's **Family Viewing**. For Egoyan, watching and recording are at the root of passivity. They drain everything around them. While nobody in **Family Viewing** calls him or herself an artist, the most villainous character – a video equipment dealer – runs amuck with his image-making technology. For villain and filmmaker, the camera is the great moral pacifier.

The paradox this offers to a filmmaker is evident in all of Egoyan's deadpan narratives. As his many post-modernist imitators would agree, Egoyan seems to be telling us that the correct technique for the film actor is to speak as if he were quoting the outtakes. The cameraman shoots and the editor edits so as to achieve a torrent of indifference. And the audience to whom this is addressed is to be regarded like the old ladies in **Family Viewing**'s retirement slum. They watch while waiting to die.

If **Family Viewing** is the eye of the existential hurricane in which Burroughs and Chbib chose to swirl, then Julius, the talentless musician in Robert Frank and Rudy Wurlitzer's **Candy Mountain**, is just a guy trying to make it rain. As he pursues "the legendary guitar maker" Elmore Silk through increasingly dismal Maritime landscapes, Julius meets others who are as devoid of spirit



• Atom Egoyan's **Family Viewing**

as himself. Together they postulate the perfect craftsman as the repository of the knowledge that will redeem them and/or make the land fertile again.

From Frank and Wurlitzer, the answer is "nothing doing." The artist offers no solutions, disappears when questioned. Neither the protagonist nor the audience deserve to know very much about or from him. In this elusiveness, **Candy Mountain** is very much a still photographer's film. Characters step into it, get their pictures taken and go away. The single most pressing question is the absence not only of the artist but, eventually, of everyone with whom the protagonist comes in contact.

Jean Pierre Lefebvre's **Alfred Laliberté, sculpteur** is also designed around an absence. Laliberté produced 1,400 works, including monuments that seem to fill every public niche in Quebec. Yet, as it dips in and out of fictional reenactment, self-reflexive footage and even a bit of straight documentary, the film finds the sculptor to be a stranger to the culture he served. This is particularly troublesome to Lefebvre who defines all his protagonists against the totality of Quebec's ethos. Conversely, the mystery of Laliberté's disappearance from the contemporary consciousness is, like the mystery of Elmore

Silk's whereabouts, a reflection on those who are doing the searching.

In contrast, William MacGillivray's **Life Classes** has no time to chase a missing artist. It is MacGillivray's Mary, the artist herself, who is chasing something like salvation. But, unlike Julius or Polly, Mary is willing to work for that redemption.

"Work," in a word, is MacGillivray's definition of the artist's calling. He has little patience with the idea of talent and inspiration. As Mary inches her way from painting by numbers to her one-woman show, MacGillivray also heaps a fair amount of scorn on conceptual and abstract art. By the end of the film, the vulnerable small-town girl has earned her right to confront the camera, both as character and as (superb) actress, Jacinta Cormier. Tracking away from Cormier's image made at the premiere of a film called **Life Classes**, MacGillivray assures us that his art too is the product of work.

**World Drums** by Niv Fichman shares this definition. Like all of the Rhombus media performance films, it is centered around the moment when work becomes art. As it documents the staging of a 200-piece international percussion event at Expo 86, the film declares that we can understand entertainment while we are being entertained. When the per-

cussion performance takes place, we realize that it is very much like Fichman's film. Both must be felt as the product of talent, craft and organizational skills blended into a presentation that is more than the sum of its parts.

If Fichman takes a position directly opposite to Rozema's conception of the artist, Sturla Gunnarson's **Where is Here?** is not a bad summary of the lessons to be learned from the entire discussion. Besides having the worst title in the Festival, the film boasts its most off-putting synopsis: prominent Canadian writers discuss Canada's identity while preparing the centennial issue of **Saturday Night**. Despite these handicaps, **Where is Here?** provides a consuming depiction of intelligent people discovering just how much trouble this country is in. Going further, it parallels that individual despair with a crisis in the means of expressing it. The boardroom heroes of **Saturday Night** magazine may succeed in producing their finest issue. But as editors and staff clink champagne glasses, a somber voice-over reminds us what has happened since. At **Saturday Night**, this was the last victory for serious artists and commentators, since then pushed out of their life's work.

One door opens, another slams. As a footnote to a footnote on this year's **Perspective Canada**, it is worth noting the relative silence of the most artistic, and the most fragile cinematic pursuit. It was a bad year for experimental cinema. Outside the **Perspective**, the Festival was fit to reject Stan Brakhage's **Love Sacrifice**, not only the year's finest achievement in experimental cinema but the finest human achievement containing sprocket holes. Within the **Perspective**, small gems were tacked onto features. Robert Cowan's **Night Streamers**. Ed Ackerman and Colin Morton's **Primitive Too Taa** and Dan Sokolowski's **Picture/Frame** had come and gone before the last cretin sat down with his bloody popcorn. There was one session of works by relatively well-known experimental filmmakers. There was a screening of Chris Gallagher's feature-length **Undivided Attention**. Beyond these efforts, avant-garde filmmaking was represented only by the realization that some artists will do no better in the new, fat, Canadian cinema than they did in leaner times.

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