

## VOICES ON THE WATER

"Writers are funny animals. They need to get together and the moment they get together, they need to move apart. You know how hedgehogs are making love? Very carefully..."

Amos Oz (Israel)  
in *Voices on the Water*

The 1986 International Festival of Authors is enshrined in this documentary recently aired on TVOntario. It's an annual event at Toronto's Harbourfront which is now thought of, according to report, as "a sexy festival." And no doubt – when one sees Edna O'Brien (Ireland), resplendent in gold lamé, reading her work with wonderful cadence and spirit at intervals through the film, and a precociously charming Timothy Mo (U.K.) running down Booker prizewinner Kingsley Amis.

A bewildering array of literary talent is gathered together for readings, panel discussions, autograph sessions, and at seemingly endless receptions for noshes and chats with admirers, booksellers, publishers, and assorted glitterati. All this is judiciously recorded, and flagged throughout with portentous captions, starting with: "The Writers Arrive" (nothing like stating the obvious!).

However, "The Writers' Perform" gets us into the gritty stuff, and it is splendid. The polished stage presence of the authors is somewhat of a surprise. Margaret Drabble (U.K.) was an aspiring actress, and brings a modulated, clenched tension to her reading, while Timothy Mo (U.K.), aiming at *enfant terrible* status, is not convinced of the value of reading aloud and muses that a book is a private intercourse between reader and writer. "Language is a sword plunged into the brain," he declaims – the lad certainly knows how to dish out a quotable quote. And so on through some wonderful accents – Mary Lee Settle (southern U.S.A.) and Elizabeth Hardwick (Kentucky, U.S.A.) drawl and enthrall, Caryl Phillips (St. Kitts/England) combines the lilt of the islands with Cockney intonations, and Robertson Davies (Canada) is precise, clipped, and dryly entertaining.

"The Writers' Language" leads to Maishe Maponya (South Africa) who writes in a number of dialects for oral presentation, not just in theatres, but at weddings, funerals and other community events among his people. Disdaining the lectern, he strides about the stage with a hand-mike, gesturing and generating a moving passion. "The Writer Translated" affords us a glimpse of the process, as Amos Oz (Israel) discusses collaboration with his English translator, "...we work together as 'best enemies'".

And there's much more crammed into

## MINI REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson



• Michael Ondaatje and Alice Munro in *Voices on the Water*

this celebration of world literature. The festival really cossets its guests. A visit to Niagara Falls which, to a writer coming from an arid country, are fantastically impressive, plus the obligatory boat trip on The Maid of the Mist (here, unfortunately, the music track emits "Row, row, row, your boat..."). Then there are the excursions outside Toronto to the Six Nations Reserve, and a picnic lunch amid the flaming fall trees – and back to more readings and more exasperating titles: "The Writer Writes" (so what's new?), "The Writers' Politics" (well to the fore) and "The Writers' Celebrate" (drink up, for God's sake do!). But the readings continue to delight – Thomas Keneally (Australia) who writes historical novels; Joseph Skvorecky (Canada) whose books were banned in his native Czechoslovakia and he himself kept under constant surveillance; and especially Amira Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) attacking U.S. politics and culture with the hellfire of an evangelist.

Much more than a report of the proceedings, *Voices on the Water* captures a great deal of the drama and tension, plus a goodly portion of the playful fun that emanates from the readings, the interminglings, and the sub-text of this annual authors' festival in Toronto. Its organizer, Greg Gatenby, might well be forgiven for calling it the "Rolls Royce" of festivals, because this well-made documentary certainly conveys an air of quality and excitement – and with only a few little irritations in the process.

p./d./ed. Andrew Johnson exec.p. Les Harris cam. Richard Corbeil. Claude Gariépy. Robert Bergman. loc.sd.mixer Herb Langwasser. writers Jane French. Andrew Johnson narr. Shelagh Rogers 57 min col. 16mm/tape. availability: Open City Productions/Toronto. (416) 532-6892

### WHERE IS HERE?

*Saturday Night* magazine's 100th birthday is celebrated in this film. Though the magazine never made enough money, it became, according to the narration, "one of the most respected journals in the country." The anniversary issue is a costly gamble, and 21 writers have been commissioned to travel the country to try and answer what Canadians are reputed to ask – not, as one would imagine, "Who am I?" but, "Where is here?"

A selection of literary lights – Margaret Atwood, Robertson Davies, Antonine Maillet, Mordecai Richler – and assorted other editorial writers, are followed upon their various quests. The *Saturday Night* staff back in Toronto is glimpsed, at intervals, coping with the material, the photographs, the design work and also (the biggest headache of all) straining to reach the desired target of 100 pages of advertising, a crucial factor in the making or breaking of the issue.

There's the political correspondent, sent out west, who chooses to cover the rodeo and focuses on a good-looking young man who draws the toughest bull, and manages to ride him for the winning eight seconds. The *Saturday*

*Night* writer decides to laud the bull, which is photographed from all angles.

A business expert treks to the Arctic, and writes of failure – the government energy program zapped by falling oil prices, the rigs mothballed, and people with tremendous skills going home. The Inuit are left with outboard motors, boats and motor bikes, which help them in hunting; the writer is a realist and doesn't think his story will make a ripple.

Margaret Atwood drives eight hours north from Toronto to an area where she spent many summers as a child, to reminisce on 'The North'. Mordecai Richler sits in a bar – he will eulogize the people he drinks with when he goes into the country. Antonine Maillet returns home to Acadia to discover old stories of the settlements and fishing communities, accompanied by lovely views of a landscape which always include water. And then there's Robertson Davies declaring that Canada is to be viewed psychologically...

*Where is Here?* is one of a four-part series on Canada to be presented in the U.S. on the Public Broadcasting Service and in this country on the Global Television Network next spring. This film is self-contained and, to Canadians, might appear to be telling the obvious. But one can only wonder at what others outside this country will make of it – and us.

The 'peg' of the *Saturday Night* anniversary seemed good at the time, but is ironic in that, as noted at the end of the film, within six months the magazine was sold, the publisher replaced, and editor Robert Fulford resigned after his first meeting with the new owners.

The literary idea translates uneasily to film, and many questions spring to mind. How did the *Saturday Night* people choose the 21 writers and subjects, what sort of guidance were they given, why were there no young writers? Admirable though our established literary figures may be, they do present a heavy, settled, middle-aged and, inevitably, boring view of this country. What happened to humour and irreverence, where are the youthful shit-disturbers, the regional voices and accents, the reality of today in Canada?

The filmmaker appeared to have awful problems here with a rigid format and, although he tried desperately to bring it off, lots of beautiful Canadian visuals can't disguise the essentially stuffy quality of the literary content.

d. p. Sturla Gunnarsson writer/p. David MacFarlane dir. of photog. Len Gilday ed. Roger Mattiussi loc.sd. Brian Avery orig.mus. Jack Lenz narr. Cedric Smith add.photog. Doug Kiefer. John Walker. Kirk Tougas exec.p. Bill Nemin. David Roland Barry Howells sen.p. NFB Adam Symansky series.p. David Grubin 60 mins (approx.) col. 16mm A production of The National Film Board of Canada and WTSS Detroit, in association with the Global Television Network, the Public Broadcasting Service, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting

photo: Paul French

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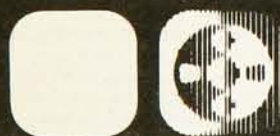
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