

The view from the Centre

World class filmmaking, according to Sam,
Norman, Peter...

BY SAM KULA



Sam Kula



photos: Karen Hendrick

Some 15 years ago I returned to Canada to help establish a moving image and sound archive division for the National Archives. Adjusting to Ottawa after 15 years in London, Los Angeles and Washington was difficult enough, but adjusting to the changes that had taken place in the Canadian film industry during my absence was even more of a challenge. After the 'black hole' that represented the Canadian feature film industry between *Carry On Sergeant!* (1928) and *Drylanders* (1961), the films of the '60s – *Isabel* (Paul Almond, 1967), *Le Chat dans le sac* (Gilles Groulx, 1964), *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (Donald Owen, 1963), *Le Viol d'une jeune fille douce* (Gilles Carle, 1967), *Goin' Down the Road* (Donald Shebib, 1969) – were beginning to exemplify some of the characteristics of a national cinema. If there was still some confusion as to "who we were," the issue of a 'national identity' emerging as a sub-text, the films at least were rooted in a sense of place.

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In the year I returned, 1973, we produced *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Bar Salon*, *Bingo*, *Les Dernières fiançailles*, *The Hard Part Begins*, *The Heatwave Lasted Four Days*, *Il Était une fois dans l'Est*, *Monkeys in the Attic*, *Les Ordres*, *Wolfpen Principle* – and 67 other feature films. If the numbers proved deceptive – the vast majority vanished without a trace, unseen and unsung – the titles that stayed in the mind, it seemed to me, did reflect the national psyche, did begin to form a cinema that legitimately constituted an aspect of the national culture.

The subsequent excesses of the Capital Cost Allowance / 'Hollywood North' years are too

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painful to review, but as the great 'Northern Lights' retrospective at the Festival of Festivals demonstrated in 1984, we were developing a cadre of filmmakers who recognized, in the words of John Hofsess, "that there is no such thing as North American identity. If you are not Canadian, or American, you simply lack identity."

The 'identity' issue, however, can be a distracting factor in assessing Canadian film. Perhaps it is time we had a moratorium on the issue, and concerned ourselves with Canadian film as a cultural commodity in the world marketplace. Not only are the expectations of those who believe the cinema should somehow define Canadians for Canadians, and for the rest of the world, totally unrealistic, but they tend to magnify the tendency to apply standards to Canadian films that are more severe than those applied to foreign films.

No matter what the criteria for judgement, there have been many disappointments in recent years (leaving aside the projects, perhaps half the annual production, that offer no internal evidence as to why they were made); films that were obviously crafted with care and with some integrity, and yet failed to attract, ignite and/or hold the imagination of the public. The few popular and critical successes of the past two years – *Loyalties*, *Grey Fox*, *Pouvoir intime*, *Le Déclin de l'Empire américain*, *My American Cousin*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *The Kid Brother*, *Un Zoo la nuit*, *Family Viewing* – do, however, demonstrate that limited budgets, and locations that are unashamedly Canadian, and Canadian stories are not really obstacles to world markets. The number of such successes was, of course, small in relation to the total output, but then the number of critical and popular successes when expressed as a percentage of the total production of every national cinema is very small. What these films had in common is that they told stories, Canadian stories that were universal enough in theme, and told well enough that they garnered awards in film festivals around the world.

The establishment of the Canadian Centre for Advanced Film Studies, therefore, was not a response to a 'crisis' in the Canadian feature film industry. The genesis for the Centre was rather the recognition that the industry had matured to a point where an advanced training institute could contribute to developing the quality of Canadian feature films in much the same way as the Australian Film Institute in Sydney and the National Film and Television School in London

(Beaconsfield), to take two of many examples throughout the world, had contributed to the feature film industry in these countries. Specifically, the centre could build on traditional skills in documentary, in journalism, and help liberate the imagination of a new generation of filmmakers so they could explore the limitless possibilities of cinema.

Norman Jewison was familiar with the National Film and Television School in London, and the American Film Institute's Centre for Advanced Film Studies in Los Angeles, and he determined that it was time that Canada had a similar facility to train filmmakers in the narrative tradition. His wholehearted commitment to the project (the first grant to the Centre came from the Norman and Margaret Jewison Foundation) and his infectious enthusiasm carried the centre through a successful negotiation with the City of North York on a 19-year lease for Windfields (at \$ 2.00 per year for 12,000 square feet of house, 4 acres of ground complete with swimming pool, tennis court, orchard, rose garden, the stable and four cottages, the price was right!), to a commitment by Ontario's Ministry of Culture and Communications for \$1,000,000 over three years in support of operations (administered by the Ontario Film Development Corporation), and to an agreement with Employment and Immigration Canada, Innovations Program, for \$850,000 in general support for the centre over three years. The centre was incorporated in November 1986 and at the first fundraising event the federal minister of Communications announced a grant of \$200,000 to assist in the renovations at Windfields, the old E. P. Taylor estate in the City of North York, which was to become the Centre's home.

With support from the three levels of government in place the centre enunciated a two-year program in which 12 residents, as the trainees were styled, would train the first year and three would be invited back to develop a feature film project.

The objective in the first year program was to plan nine months (29 February – 30 November in 1988) that would balance theory and practice (roughly 18 weeks of each), so that the residents could participate in workshops on writing, on directing actors, on cinematography, on production design and on editing; in seminars on the creative producer, on film finance, on marketing and distribution; and encounters with dozens of writers, directors and producers whose experience and approach to feature



Photo: Harold Keisman

Slosh through the swimming pool, fight at the tennis court, suffocate at the stable and (gasp!) tear your stocking in the rose garden... at Windfields – Boot Camp for Filmmakers

filmmaking constituted one of the many 'voices' in cinema that they should hear during their training. The schedule that emerged also allowed time for three projects (10-minute dramatic films shot in 16mm and edited on videotape) carried out in teams of three with each resident assuming responsibility as writer, director or producer on at least one project. These are learning exercises in which the residents will be encouraged to experiment with all the elements that are available to a filmmaker to tell a story.

The intent, of course, is to try to prepare the residents for that traumatic moment when they find themselves responsible for a film crew, on the floor, with the meter ticking at \$10,000 per hour. Nothing the centre can do can fully prepare a director or a producer for that moment, but the hope is that the training will demonstrate the value of thorough preparation (if not rehearsal) and the ability to communicate effectively in a language that the crew, and the actors, can convert into action.

Nine months of training, no matter how intensive and rigorous it may be, will hardly result in the 'complete' filmmaker. The program can nurture genius (or inspiration!), it cannot

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generate it. It is not even sure it can identify it! However, the centre's overall objective is nothing less than the pursuit of excellence: a somewhat ill-defined target. In practical terms it means that to the residents' basic skills acquired over several years of experience, (the first group averaged 10 years in film or related media), and their natural gifts as storytellers, the Centre's program will, hopefully, add a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities in filmic discourse, a thorough awareness of the contribution of the cinematographer, the production designer, the

editor and the other crafts can make to a film, and a realistic perception of the financial, marketing and distribution strategies necessary to survive in the feature film industry in Canada.

One of the goals, therefore, is to 'graduate' filmmakers who are 'street smart' and well connected. The 12 in training will not only establish networks utilizing each other's contacts, but they will have the opportunity to expand their network to include key players in production and in the matrix of public agencies and private companies that finance feature film development and production in Canada. The centre will act as a meeting place for these and for dozens of other specialists ranging from electronic composers to completion guarantors. If nothing else, it should equip them to 'take a meeting' and hold their own.

The Centre's Selection Committee is chaired by Peter O'Brian (the process for the 1989 program is underway – contact Joan Finan, 2489 Bayview Avenue, North York, Ontario M2L 1A8), and his own career as a producer of first-time directors in 10 years, from *Me* in 1974 through *The Grey Fox*, 1980, to *My American Cousin* in 1984, is illustrative of the growing maturity and capabilities of Canadian

filmmakers. Building on our strong tradition in documentary, and the synthesis of documentary and drama that evolved in the early '70s (*Recommendation for Mercy*, *Insurance Man From Ingersoll*, *Drying Up the Streets*) and flourished in the early '80s, usually with the participation of the National Film Board (*The Masculine Mystique*, *Sitting in Limbo*, *Canada's Sweetheart*, *The Train of Dreams*), filmmakers have been able to avoid the apprenticeship exploitation of *Columbus of Sex*, *Foxy Lady* or *Cannibal Girls*, and the international horrors of *Prom Night* or *Humongous*.

If there is any unanimity on the weaknesses inherent in the documentary heritage they lie in the writing of screenplays and in the direction of actors. Improving writing skills is easier said than done. In the case of producers, the problem is really improving reading skills – the ability to recognize when a script is ready to shoot. If finding yourself on location with a large crew eating away at the budget and waiting to be told what to do is the ultimate challenge, going on location with a half-completed script really raises the odds against success. There is, of course, a place for improvisation, the bit of business inspired by the location, the extra exchange of dialogue that appears to be demanded by the reality of actually shooting a sequence, but if the basic structure is flawed there is very little even genius can do when the cameras are rolling. If the 'writing' itself can't be taught, as many claim, the centre hopes, at least, to establish the critical importance of rewriting if the script in hand is not ready.

Directing actors appears to be a skill that can be improved in a training program and the Centre hopes to tap the services of gifted workshop leaders who can sensitize the residents to the problem, explore the mysteries of casting, and improve the understanding and communication between director and actors.

The approach throughout the first-year program is pragmatic, and relates to preparing men and women of proven abilities to take on the artistic challenge and financial responsibility of feature film production. It does not relate to the kinds of films the residents will write, direct or produce. All residents must be Canadian citizens (or landed immigrants), and the Selection Committee determined that the residents selected for the inaugural program are highly motivated to make films in Canada, films that will reflect Canadian society and be suffused with a Canadian perspective on the human condition, the world at large.

The centre, however, does not expect the residents to wrap themselves in the flag and make 'Canadian' films. The most that can be expected is that the residents will have learned to define their own identity rather than do lip-synch to anthems from other lands. The hope is that their films will be so innovative and brilliant that they need not be stamped as "made in Canada" in order to establish Canadian films as that elusive quality known as "world-class."

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