Seven days in June
Banff Television Festival ’88
BY BOB REMINGTON

There is an absolutely devastating BBC documentary called *Fourteen Days in May* in which a British film crew follow a condemned black man through his final two weeks on death row in Mississippi. There are serious doubts as to the man’s guilt, but cleancut for a black convicted of raping a white woman and killing a law officer in Mississippi is about as remote as summer snow.

I paced the room as I watched life tick down for this young man, painfully wondering if the BBC crew had actually been allowed into the gas chamber itself. Fifteen minutes before he was to be executed, with his family around him in death’s waiting room, a member of the BBC film crew stepped out from behind the camera and said goodbye. We were spared the inhumanity, but not the agony. In 90 minutes we had come to know the man and his executioners, and we marked our feelings with tears.

The scene took place in early May during the selection committee process for the Banff Television Festival. Five of us had come to Banff to screen some 450 programs submitted as possible candidates for competition in the nine-year-old international TV program competition. Our job was to whittle the number of entries down for the final jury, forwarding our choices without recommendation. The ultimate decision on winners would be the jury’s alone.

A kind of tense camaraderie exists between the selection committee and the jury at a program competition like Banff. The committee has its favorites, which don’t always gel with the final choices of the jury. I felt *Fourteen Days in May* should have been a finalist for a major prize like “best of festival” or one of the so-called “special jury awards” for programs of exceptional merit.

Not only did *Fourteen Days in May* fail to make the list of contenders for a major prize, it did not even win its category. Such are the dilemmas in any program competition. Out of respect for the integrity of the process, you can only shrug your shoulders, offer to buy a jury member a refreshment at the bar, and proceed to demand answers while refraining from wringing his neck.

There was no quibbling, however, on the Grand Prize winner at Banff. Without sounding self-serving (well, perhaps just a bit self-serving) I picked *Baka: People of the Rain Forest*, as the best outstanding achievement award.

While it is true that American television tends to paint everything with broad strokes instead of employing subtleties, one wonders how an absolutely top-rate TV movie like ABC’s God Bless the Child or the eloquently written and charming *The Wonder Years* can come away emptyhanded. In the international effort to build dams against the rushing floodwaters of American culture, let’s hope the gates will remain open for at least a trickle of America’s best.

Despite this nagging concern, there’s no doubt that Banff is a first-class affair. The festival has come a long way from the days when Dinah Shore was given an Award of Excellence and CTV entered *This Week in the CFI* as a documentary. Today, the Banff festival is mercifully short on star appeal. People go to see, not to be seen. Peter Ustinov picked up this year’s Award of Excellence, and Soviet TV smoothie Vladimir Pozner wowed delegates with some perceptive comments about TV news East and West. But, for the most part, Banff remains an invigorating think-tank that stimulates the mind, not the ego.

There is also a fair amount of backroom commerce taking place at Banff, although it is not, nor will it ever be, a marketplace like MIP.

It was difficult to engage in any journalistic skullduggery at the festival this year, but not for lack of trying. Everyone I spoke with, including some closet critics of the festival in the past, said 1988 was one of the most productive business years at Banff.

Next year, its 10th anniversary, the Banff Television Festival can be excused for throwing itself a party.
Congratulations Ron

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