

She sells screen sales by the seashore

Fifth Annual Atlantic Film and Video Producers Conference

BY CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

As time passes and the fledgling film and video industry of the Atlantic region begins to find its footing, both within the region as a respectable endeavor, and within the country as a player in the nation's media game, one can see a gradual evolution of forms, processes, approaches, and all the other components of the motion picture industry. The Atlantic Festival Atlantique has taken the laurels as a showcase of productions from the region. The *Seventh Wave Seminar*, which took place last year in Wolfville, was an attempt to create a critical and academic forum for addressing some of the region's cinematic issues. Meanwhile, the Atlantic Film and Video Producers Conference has focused around a full spectrum of "production" issues and has come to be the yearly convention of those people interested in the business aspects of this emerging industry.

This year's conference - the fifth - hosted ably in Charlottetown once again by the Island Media Arts Co-op, was no exception to this rule and, in fact, illustrated just how seriously film producers in this region are approaching their work and how seriously their products are being taken elsewhere. The conference opened with a session moderated by Pat Ferns of Primedia acting as a surrogate "executive producer" trying to cut a deal with various producers/distributors as represented by Jon Pederson (Capitol Films), Leo Deveau (Flare of the Match Productions), Charlotte Harper (independent producer) and Carol Millett. This was followed by a talk by John Walker About *A Winter Tan*, the feature which he recently co-produced. Described by many participants as "inspirational", Walker's account set a kind of keynote theme which pervaded the conference.

That afternoon, Gordon Parsons of Wormwoods Dog and Monkey Cinema, an independent screen in Halifax, brought his deadpan expertise to the conference as moderator of a panel on distribution. Issues swirled as panel members and audience touched on independent theatrical distribution in the U.S.; television distribution in Great Britain; Channel 4 and the applicability of its approach in Canada; Canadian films reaching PBS's *American Playhouse*; new satellite ventures in the U.K. such as SkyChannel; pay-television in Canada and the problems with home video distribution. Panel members included André Bennett (Cinephile), Ismé Bennie (Paragon), Jeremy Boulton (ITV), Debbie Drisdell (Telefilm), John Pierson (Pierson & Assoc.) and



The Atlantic producers meet; coffee klatsch on the terrace at UPEI

Niki Scher (Eastern Educational TV Network).

Later in the day the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Atlantic (CFDA) hosted a meeting of producers, then followed with a showcase of recent productions it distributes. Screened were Gail Snedden's *My Shadow*, Fred Hollingshurst's *The Last Chinese Laundry*, Neal Livingston's *John Nesbitt - Sculptor*, Debbie McGee's *Little Mountain*, Dave Ward's *Retrieval*, Valerie LeBlanc's *Homecoming*, Nigel Markham's *Albert*, Jan Peacock's *Sirensong* and Cathy Busby and Melody Calvert's *Girls Just Want to Have Funds*.

On Saturday the conference continued with a session called *Drama Production: Development/Scriptwriting* moderated by NIFCO's (Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers' Coop) inimitable Paul Pope. Leading off was Robert Forsyth, an independent scriptwriter, who took aim at television with a tough and provocative address hitting hard at its mediocrity. "Television cruises the bland middle," said Forsyth. "It likes to do what already has been done. It has become nothing but a diversion in the home." He continued with a forceful address to writers to resist, at least in the first instance, the pressure of television which tries to

dictate what stories should be told and how. He acknowledged that compromises have to be made in the process of negotiating but urged writers not to come to the table already compromised.

Forsyth was a wolf in a flock of sheep (or perhaps a sheep amidst a flock of wolves?) on this panel which included Jim Burt, Peter Lower and John Kennedy - all of CBC - and Jamie Wynn of First Choice, all dyed-in-the-wool television executives. All declined to cross swords directly with Forsyth and retreated behind comments about developing "quality" productions and having a "vision." But behind these ritual genuflections lay the clear intention of television to play a heavy role in imposing its values and standards upon any productions that might pass through its doors. John Walker, also on the panel, advocated more variety and diversification in television programming.

The Saturday afternoon panel was called *Regional Film and Video Industry Development and Resources* and was chaired by AIFVA's (Atlantic Independent Film and Video Association) Barry Burley. The extensive panel included Ralph Holt (Telefilm), Sean Kiely (Academy of Canadian

Cinema and Television), Germaine Wong (NFB), Robin Jackson of Communications Canada, Michael MacDonald (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency [ACOA]), Saleen Ahmed (CBC), Alan Conter (Canada Council), Bonnie Baker (CFDA), Charlotte Harper (AIFVA), and John Fulton (ACTRA).

Undoubtedly the center of attention here, among all these regional players, was Mr. MacDonald and the newly created agency, ACOA. Forceful, brash, self-confident and showy, MacDonald (curiously enough an English professor at Mt. Allison University!) advanced a vision of aggressive entrepreneurship in Atlantic Canada. His agency was willing to help make opportunities for success-oriented ventures which would tackle the market head-on with a vision of Atlantic Canada as second to none. Deliberately provocative, he chided the conference organizers for not being sufficiently original in their planning (hence ACOA's decision not to contribute funding to it!) and obliquely disparaged the Canada Council for supporting productions directed at an artistic minority in the country. When Paul Pope jestingly referred to him as the "Chancellor of the Atlantic Provinces" he acknowledged the compliment but added that a chancellor was a figurehead position and that he would rather have more power.

Also of interest was John Fulton's address and his acknowledgement of the problems which have led producers to feel that dealing with ACTRA was akin to running an obstacle course. ACTRA's recent decision to allow deferrals (provided that the other unions such as NABET and IATSE do likewise - everyone cooks in the same pot) was greeted with some degree of interest.

A final panel on Sunday morning, entitled *Scriptwriting: Writing for TV*, was moderated by Tom Shoebridge of the Summer Institute of Film and Television and included Gerald Tripp (director and editor of *The Raccoons*) and Peter Lower and Martin Harbury (both of CBC).

All in all, this conference seemed to encapsulate the "industrial" approach to cinema and television which has emerged in the past few years and the eagerness with which the Atlantic region is ready to embrace this approach. John Fulton captured it succinctly when he defined actors/actresses as "small business people selling our talents in a market-driven economy." Move over John Gielgud - John Kenneth Galbraith is here!