
sour grapes at stratford

by Natalie Edwards

Success, annoyance and censorship were all present at Stratford this year. And so was Natalie Edwards who tells us about it.

Friends who didn't go ask, "How was Stratford this year?" and before I can answer, continue smugly, "Not so hot, eh!"

Ignoring the sour grapes syndrome, I try to be honest about my impressions of my fourth consecutive visit to the Stratford Film Festival.

First I tell them that I loved Karoly Makk's **Catsplay**, an exquisite work, a superlative film, and part of a long but successful Hungarian evening that included Sandor's **Football in the Good Old Days** and Rozza's **Dreaming Youth**. And then I rave for a while about my second Zanussi film **The Balance**; this subtle, sensitive study of a couple was brought in as a replacement for Welles' **F for Fake** when the Iranian backers objected to it premiering here, and for me at least, proved great compensation for the disappointment.

Then I remind my listeners that unless they belong to something like the Toronto Film Society (which scheduled it this season) the Festival offered a rare and valuable chance to see Kobayashi's renowned **Kaseki**, an intense, deep observation of a man's comprehension of mortality.

But I do not dwell on the attractive but awkward opening film, Lamont Johnson's **Visit to a Chief's Son**, despite its fascinating African footage, nor do I praise the faddy, empty closing presentation of Lester's **Royal Flash**, a decidedly commercial Boys Own. Even for Frankenheimer's **Impossible Object**, a film dredged up by Gerald Pratley's remarkable memory-bank from the vaults of United Artists' tax write-offs, and given a rare screening, my fascination was chiefly attributable to curiosity and the pleasure of later listening to the intelligent and agreeable Mr. F. in person as he delivered an astonishingly accurate appraisal of this work the next day.

Brother Can You Spare a Dime? created an intriguing relationship between fictionalized and semi-factual interpretations of history, intermingling politics-as-drama (FDR speaking) and drama-as-reality (Jimmy Cagney reacting to the speech in a movie). But a film that is about to hit the circuit anyway is not much of a special festival treat to boast about to the stay-at-homes.

So instead I mutter of the mellow beauties of Peter Hall's **Akenfield**, despite its occasionally incomprehensible dialects, and the novelty of the Australian film **Between Wars**, though it could hardly be called successful, and of the interesting little movies like Trevelyan's documentary of a most unusual British family, **The Moon and the Sledgehammer**, and the British Film Institute feature about a young and enterprising East Indian in England, **A Private Enterprise**, the kind of film we in Canada should be making. But I can hardly sound all excited and thrilled.



Harold Lloyd, an irresistible combination of the best of Douglas Fairbanks, Buster Keaton and Peter Sellers, was shown to advantage in 14 afternoon films.

At last I begin exuberantly to discuss the joys of rediscovering, or rather, discovering, Harold Lloyd. For although we think we know something of Lloyd and his daredevil antics (look Maw, no net) it wasn't until I saw this fine series of 14 of his movies, reissued by Time-Life films, that the brilliance of his performance, the subtlety of his characterizations, the all-round inspiring masterfulness of Harold Lloyd made him my (current) favorite film comedian – an incredible combination of Douglas Fairbanks, Peter Sellers and Buster Keaton: the perfect Dream of the Bourgeois Man.

Actually Stratford's Eleventh Season (September 13-20) was in some terms more successful than ever. There were more journalists, there were bigger crowds at the morning coffee seminar sessions (a solid 150 for instance for the group of Canadian filmmakers) and there were many more week-long memberships sold.



Mariken Van Niemeghen. It was her seduction and rape that exposed the ignorance and insensitivity of the Ontario Censor Board.

Brother Can You Spare a Dime? by Philippe Mora as well as Alvin Goldstein's film **The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg** added a serious note from the United States to the Festival.



Catsplay by Karoly Makk



Football of the Good Old Days by Pal Sandor

Nevertheless, few could get really excited over the selection of films, and many were disgruntled, not to say peevish and annoyed, over their censorship, feeling that Stratford and the prestigious Mr. Pratley ought to have had the strength and determination to refuse to allow Don Sims, the new Ontario Censor Board Scissor Man, to get away with inflicting infantile cuts on festival material.

Director Jos Stelling and photographer Ernest Bresser were present from the Netherlands for the whole week, during which their film **Mariken Van Nieumeghen**, though mutilated by senseless cuts, was shown. Made over a ten year period with the participation of a whole village, and influenced by Bosch and Breughel, this stunning recreation of plague-ridden times is a morality play based on the well-known Dutch heroine Mariken, and her seduction by the devil. Two large cuts demonstrated clearly the ignorance and ineptitude of the censors, for in each case they destroyed the significance of a vital scene with blunt insensitivity. In the crucial rape scene, for instance, it is the devil's calculated late appearance *after* Mariken's rape to "save her" that permits us to understand that the essence of his nature is true evil. By cutting the rape, the censors make it appear that the devil comes in time to rescue Mariken. This is nice for the reputation of the devil perhaps, but rather unfortunate for the film and its creators.

That Mr. Pratley and the Stratford Film Festival should have permitted this to happen is a wound, an insult, a scar. The guests, present all week, and this clearly misguided scissoring, could have provided excellent publicity for an essential clarification of the limits of censorship of festival material. The most hurtful censorship was the lack of public outrage, a castration of the Canadian conscience by once again ignoring an issue of importance to film and to art in the interests of *getting along*.

And finally, a large and vocal group of viewers debated hotly and at length on the wisdom, practicality or dignity of crowding all the Canadian films, except some shorts, on Monday, September 15, a bad day in any man's language, and this year incidentally Yom Kippur.

Four Canadian films were shown. As proof that there is a Canadian audience emerging for Canadian films, a surprisingly large and enthusiastic crowd turned up for the 9 a.m. showing of Gilles Carle's ever-popular 1970 **Les mâles** chosen by Rock Demers as one of the Ten Best from Ten Years distributed by his company, Faroun Films, which was honoured by the Festival. Mr. Demers considers Carle's films to be the most popular of all Canadian films in terms of world sales.

Following the picnic lunch by the banks of the drained Avon River, an event that was actually more interesting in the video programme filmed by the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (OECA) Channel 19, than it seemed at the time, John Palmer's film **Me**, a rough, exuberant, lively, bloody adaptation of Martin Kinch's successful stage play, received its public premiere (After only about a year's wait, and still without a distributor). Thoroughly overplayed by the stage actors Stephen Markle, Brenda Donohue and Chappelle Jaffe, uneven and with barbaric makeup, the work nevertheless caused the sort of criticism and rebuttal that bring a festival discussion to life. (See review page 54.)

Claude Jutra's new film **Pour le meilleur et pour le pire** was also premiered, and for those who liked **A tout prendre** a lot, **Mon Oncle Antoine** quite a lot, and **Kamouraska** only middling, it was a revival of all that is best in Jutra: fluctuating, fantastical, sometimes almost surreal, always entertaining and entirely competent and delightful (See review page 54). Jutra himself turned up after a ludicrous accidental sidetrip to Niagara with a strange driver in a strange car, which apparently had been meant for someone else, as if he

were still a character in his own film, suffering the practical jokes of an amused diety.

Finally, Canadian Film Day premiered **Eliza's Horoscope**, a film that has been in the offing so long that it comes to us with something of the virginity of Miss Haversham in **Great Expectations**. After seven years of scriptwriting, casting, finding money, filming, editing, scoring and so forth, it turned out to be yet another Canadian surreal fantasy.

This inspires some conjectures on the prevalence of the surreal in contemporary Canadian art. We know that people of low personal esteem fantasize a lot (particularly women, for reasons that used to be obvious) but can we apply this fantasizing on a national level to a country with low esteem? Or is surreality and fantasy just an imaginative route to escapism from increasingly ugly and unpleasant realities. Or just an awfully good use of film? At any rate, like **125 Rooms of Comfort** and **Monkeys in the Attic** (two recent examples) **Eliza's Horoscope** avoids direct confrontation with the past, present or future by dwelling instead on the importance of personal development. And also like them it has some stunning visuals, absurdist sequences, and an extremely personal imprint, as it develops the tale of Eliza and her theatrical and symbolic adventures as she seeks her love and her identity.



Elizabeth Moorman as Eliza is about to perform for the perverted Doctor played by Marcel Sabourin in Gordon Sheppard's **Eliza's Horoscope**.

The following morning at the coffee seminar session, four Canadian filmmakers with recent completed features, were present. Gordon Sheppard from Montreal and Los Angeles (**Eliza's Horoscope**), Leonard Yakir from Winnipeg (**The Mourning Suit**), Peter Bryant from Vancouver (**The Supreme Kid**) and Brian Damude (**Sudden Fury**).

Their presence led to an interesting development. Lee Rolfe of the *Winnipeg Tribune* asked Mr. Pratley, as head of the Festival, why the three unscreened new features could not have been included in the week-long schedule, explaining that he couldn't write about them and help promote them unless he saw them, and there was no chance of that in Winnipeg. Mr. Pratley's answer was convoluted and ended with the conclusion that unless Mr. Rolfe and other journalists wrote about the new Canadian features, no one would insist on seeing them and thus encourage their distribution.

The subject was changed and a few more questions answered before Laurinda Hartt spoke out, wondering if somehow she had lost her place in her notes, and asking Mr. Pratley if he would just clarify for her his reasons for not showing the three Canadian feature films mentioned by Mr. Rolfe. After a pause Miss Hartt repeated her question, rephrased.

Mr. Pratley did not explain, as he probably should have, with indignation, that this was after all an international film festival of international films, and that including all the recent little offerings made in the homeland would not necessarily embellish the festival's reputation. Mr. Pratley simply looked uncomfortable and remarked after a bit that if one wanted to see these Canadian features one could always go to the Canadian Film Awards in Niagara in October. (This wouldn't have helped Mr. Rolfe much, even if he could have made the return trip, for as it turned out, of the three only **Sudden Fury** and **Eliza's Horoscope** made it past the pre-selection committee).

Pressed by Laurinda Hartt still further, Mr. Pratley finally said, oh well, if people wanted to come at 9 in the morning next year, he would be glad to include more Canadian films.

Response was mixed.

Actually, Mr. Pratley, why not? As the competition for being the big international film festival in Canada intensifies between Filmexpo and Stratford, surely the heaviest government support should go to the festival that does the most for Canadians. Stratford is ahead at the moment, with Canadian Film Day, but Filmexpo is coming along fast, also having shown four Canadian films in their week's schedule.

Visiting journalists like Mr. Rolfe, as well as various interested people who find limited opportunities to see the homeland's products, including reviewers, distributors, exhibitors, students and other filmmakers, would all benefit from an accessible selection of Canadian films. But could we, however, plead for nine-thirty a.m.? The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. □

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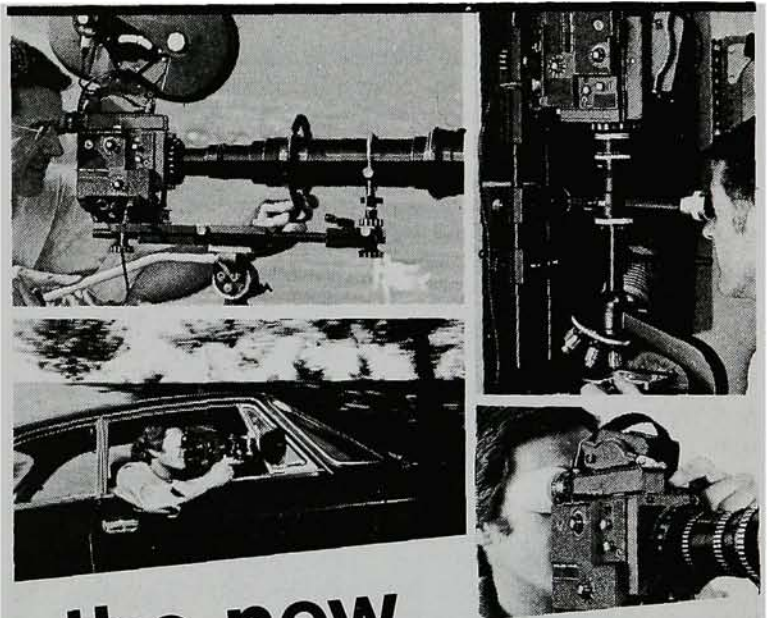
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