Finding a focus
Atlantic Festival Atlantique '88

BY CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

The shutter opens and closes on another year of the Atlantic Festival Atlantique, and like a flower filmed with time lapse photography the image shows a path and pattern of growth not always visible from day to day. From year to year the profile changes and the festival edges toward a certain understanding of what its task is and who its audience is.

This year the festival seemed smoothly organized. By and large events took place where and when they were scheduled and the overall flow and tenor seemed free of glitches. The challenge thrown down by Brian Harnigton as he left the directorship of the Festival, for filmmakers to become engaged and make the festival their own, has been taken up. It is a thriving vehicle, showing the country what this region is capable of.

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Information, good material and good intentions is by far and away the better film. Also impressive is the way in which Ms. Poulin has integrated the black and white photos of photographer Pierre Kuperenal (Matthias Habich) as chronicle of the spiritual transformation which the character is undergoing. They are beautiful and evocative and speak more forcefully than any scripted dialogue could.

Les Kriszan’s Les Partes Tournantes is a straightforward NFB documentary about one of Nova Scotia’s pioneers of film. There are some very interesting extracts from the film which she made over a 40-year period beginning in 1939. Hubert Schuurman’s The Church and the Ha Ha, also done for the NFB, has good information, good material and good intentions and is dull, dull, dull. For my money his Ballad of South Mountain, dealing with almost identical material, is by far and away the better film. Also from the NFB is Lyra, directed by Shelagh Mackenzie and Sharon Van Rhaete. It concerns an Inuit hunter and artist who has decided to return to the land to live. The subject is fascinating man and we glimpse some of this through the film although I felt that the filmmaker’s aesthetic mediates too much between him and his story. There is some lovely optical printing of his art superimposed on live action to give a genuine sense of the supernatural.

Francis Mankiewicz’s Les Potes Tournants is visually stunning but drifts a little, particularly in the scenes with Blaudelle (Gabriel Arcand), the stereotypically tortured artist drifting into isolation, wrestling with the ghosts of conscience and memories and distancing all those around him. Good performances by Monique Spaziani as Celeste, the country girl who finds earthly glamour in turn-of-the-century Campbellton as the piano player, Miou-Miou as the estranged spouse of Blaudelle also plays her role with considerable charm.

Madame Latour, Herméneugilde Chiasson’s drama about the 17th century wife of the governor of Acadia, Charles Latour, features a powerful performance by Marcia Babineau. Due to casting difficulties, the role of her husband fell somewhat onto the cutting room floor and consequently one misses the powerful foil to her personality. There are some good moments however, and the film is visually lush, with fine sets, costumes and a style of cinematography which is at times straight out of Georges de la Tour.

Tom Berry’s Something About Love, featuring ex-Cape Bretoner Stefan Wodoslawsky is about an errant son come home. When Dad (played with sensitivity and power by Jan Rubes) starts to show signs of Alzheimer’s disease, his son Wally (played by Wodoslawsky) comes back from a film career in Los Angeles. In its concern with returning to roots, wrestling with demons from the past, re-connecting with family and friends, and trying to sort out responsibilities, the film strikes many of the same chords that Bill MacGillivray’s Stations did, only more successfully. At times a little self-consciously commercial, the film is nevertheless an honest and searching exploration of the issues it addresses and does justice to both characters and community.

Paul Donovan’s A Switch in Time (refertilmed from Normand) — although repudiated by its director since he lost control of the final cut in a battle with producers Simcom/Norstar. — is nevertheless a pleasant surprise. Geared to the teenage audience it is still clever, inventive and humorous and exhibits none of the un-directed, gratuitous violence that has marred many of Donovan’s previous forays. At times the humour is a trifle adolescent but the interesting premise of the film (a wrinkle on the time travel notion) is well developed. Filmed in southern Argentina, the film has a very solid look — Roger Corman would be proud of this one! Janis Cole and Holly Dale’s Calling the Shots is superb. So is Allan Goldstein’s The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick, So’s Ron Mann’s Comic Book Confidential. All do justice to their subject matter. All are thought-provoking and entertaining. Nuff said.

Final perspective: Five days of films; all Canadian; many Atlantic; many worthwhile. I would go out and see these films if they were playing in a cinema again. I enjoyed many of them — without reservations. Congratulations Canada! Well done Atlantic Festival Atlantique! Give me more!