

Film Reviews

André Melançon's **Fierro** (The Summer of the Colt)

Number eight out of the starting gate in the *Tales for All* series, *Fierro* looks to have legs equal to its forerunners, and demonstrates the same warmth and sophistication that have made winners of previous entries from the (producer Rock) Demers stable.

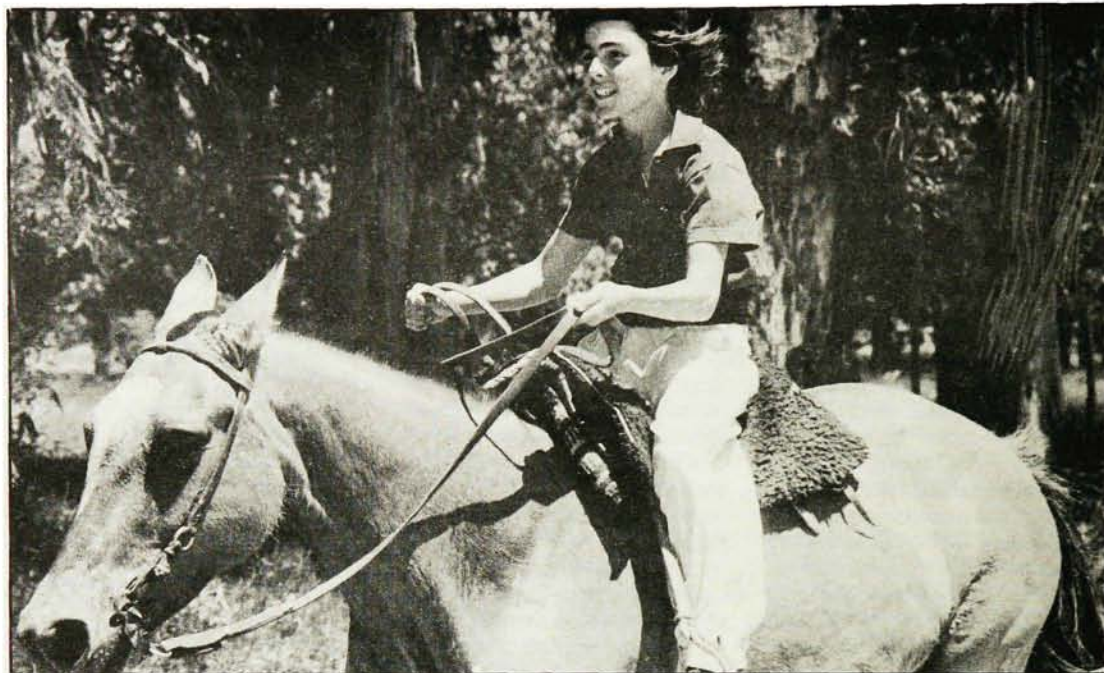
Director André Melançon (*The Dog Who Stopped The War, Bach and Bottine*) is back in the saddle and, along with co-scripters Geneviève Lefebvre and Rodolfo Otero, has fashioned a satisfying film; one that occasionally meanders down the backstretch, but eventually rounds the clubhouse turn and crosses the finish line in good form.

Fierro's pairing of kids and horses is a can't-miss formula, especially if the kids and horses in question *can* act, which, fortunately, is the case here. (They all, horse included, flash winning smiles). Daniel, Felipe and Laura (Juan de Benedictis, Mariano Bertolini, and Alexandra London-Thompson) are three city kids who spend their summer holidays riding horses around the ranch owned by their grandfather, Federico, played by Hector Alterio (*La Historia Oficial*). This Canada-Argentina co-production was the impetus for the treaty signed between the two countries last year.

The story is essentially an amalgam of classic coming-of-age themes – the intrusion of both sexuality and of political awakening into the reverie of childhood. As the film opens, the three youngsters arrive in the foreman's truck for their happy, annual reunion with Grandfather Federico, Great-Aunt Ana (China Zorrilla), and – for 13-year-old Daniel especially – with Martin (Santiago Gonzalez), the foreman's son and his friend. This, however, is to be the last idyllic summer before the stormy onset of adolescence. Of course, the bad weather shows up a little sooner than expected (or there wouldn't be much of a film).

Fourteen-year-old Laura has attained physical maturity in the past year, and her growing resemblance to her grandmother – who deserted grandfather Federico many years back – shakes the old man and causes him to reject his formerly beloved granddaughter. Unable to understand this rejection, Laura resorts to a variety of attention-getting tactics while searching within herself for some fault. In the process of trying to regain Federico's acceptance she runs head-on into her grandfather's sexist double standards and the other major plot line.

Sensing that her problems with Grandpa stem



Santiago Gonzalez as Martin, in (but not on) *Fierro*.

from the fact that she's female, Laura cuts her hair and joins the boys in their competitive riding games. Unfortunately, her actions provoke greater disapproval from Federico. Meanwhile, Daniel and Martin are having their friendship tested by their love for a horse. When Federico offers Daniel his choice of the wild horses on the ranch to break and train, he chooses *Fierro*, a lovely golden stallion. But *Fierro* is already the secret favourite of Martin, who for some time before Daniel's arrival has been working with the animal himself.

What ensues is reminiscent of South African writer André Brink's *A Chain of Voices*, a classic anti-apartheid work in which the friendship between two boys, a white farmer's son and the black son of slaves, is torn apart as they take up their adult destinies (all but irrelevant in childhood). Here, the friendship between the two boys crumbles as Martin, the foreman's son, silently accepts Daniel's right to arrogantly assert his ownership of *Fierro*. In one particularly effective scene, the point is driven home by a simple gesture; Daniel silences his friend by handing him the reins of a horse in a way that strongly implies the master/servant relationship.

This is where you realize – in spite of the standard kids and horses formula – that you're not in Disneyland anymore. In addition to the class-conscious element of Martin and Daniel's rivalry, the conflict between Laura and Federico comes very close to suggesting incestuous feelings on the grandfather's part. Perhaps director Melançon's experience working on a film about incest (*Le Lyse Casse*, 1987) served as inspiration. As well, Laura's announcement to

her aunt that she now has her period, and the straightforward treatment of other "delicate" subjects – Daniel comes upon Martin's mother breastfeeding her newborn – shows a refreshing intent to sever the artificial distinctions between children's and adult cinema (which is, of course, one of the laudable hallmarks of the *Tales for All* series.)

Just when all this adult, psycho-drama stuff threatens to overwhelm (one wonders what kids under 10 are going to make of this?), Melançon picks up the pace with wonderful, winning scenes of graceful horses and riders on the Argentine *pampas*. Daniel and Martin compete over an ingenious obstacle course on horseback, as well as in a fast, colourful, rugby-like game, also played on horseback. This is another important element in Melançon's films: the portrayal of kids as having specific and realistic (not magical), talents and responsibilities, like caring for animals and watching over smaller children.

Relief from the heaviness also comes from the younger brother, Felipe. Just nine years old – but carrying on a regular correspondence throughout the summer with his girlfriend in Buenos Aires – Felipe is the embodiment of the adage "from the mouths of babes..." His humour and common sense eventually cause the others to see the foolishness of their ways, as he becomes the catalyst for their eventual reconciliation. His is also an important character in the sense that, though he may not have the physical skills of his older siblings, his personality and affability mark him as an important member of the family – a reassuring notion for younger siblings of any age.

Important too is the film's ending. The characters may reconcile their immediate conflicts, but there is never any suggestion that the future will be entirely bright, or that they will all live happily ever after. One senses that there are many more life lessons ahead for all involved.

Frank Rackow ●

FIERRO (THE SUMMER OF THE COLT) p. Rock Demers, Lita Stantic d. André Melançon sc. Geneviève Lefebvre, André Melançon sc. collorig. idea Rodolfo Otero d.o.p. Thomas Vamos art d. Esmeralda Almonacid line p. Daniel Louis, Jose Strier mus. Osvaldo Montes ed. André Corriveau p. mgr. Dolly Pussi 1st. n.d. Carl Delaroche-Vernet. Victor Dinenzon a.d. Ana Maria Bas cont. France Lachapelle loc. sd. Yvon Benoit sd. des. Claude Langlois post. p. sup. Lorraine du Hamel 2nd n.d. Cristina Civalo cost. des. Lucrecia Matilde de Ricart asst. cost. des. Maria Molina cast. (Can.) Danyele Patenaude (Argentina) Ana Maria Bas asst. to p. Louise Belanger p. admin. Bernard Lamy, Stella Fontan cam. op. Daniel Vincelette 1st. asst. cam. Michel Girard cam. assts. Jose Manuel Cajaraville, Luis Casteleti 2nd. asst. cam. Guillermo Alvarez Mesas app. cam. Grigori Craer boom Perfecto de San Jose props Oreste Sacchi, Jorge Oscar de la Renta stills photo Jean Demers props assts. Sophie Ethier, Irene Banchik makeup Ines Morrone hair Rodolfo Spinetta asst. hair Nelida Aued gaffer Carlos Enrique Centeno elec. Juan Carlos Centeno, Javier Sergio Centeno, Ruben E. Menendez, Gustavo Hungaro, Nicolas Adalberto Gatto key grip Philippe Palu grips Miguel Juan Zarkovich, Edesio Rogelio, Imbert sp. fr. Tom Cundon/Los Centuriones S. A. asst. ed. Teresa de Luca, Anne Jose Boudreau mix. Michel Descombes asst. mix. Luc Boudrias mus. dir. Jimmy Tanaka orch. Gilles Ouellet guitar solo Roque Carbajo song "Siempre en Ti" sung by Mercedes Sosa, sd. fx. Viateur Paiement, Jerome Decarie, Monique Vezina horse trainers Felipe Gallegos, Lucio Gallegos, Hugo Lemus, Carlos Mena, Mario Perez *Fierro's* trainer Pedro Vargas p. sec. Ines Vera p. coord. Geneviève Lefebvre p. assts. Miriam Bendjua, Silvia Polecollo, Aldo Guillermo Arregui app. p. Nancy Defilipi d. promotion Kevin Tierney. An official Canada-Argentina Coproduction. Les Productions la Fête.

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Larry Weinstein's Ravel

More than a decade after Bo Derek's passion for "The Bolero" hit the big screen, and at a time when Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra have made numerous award-winning recordings of Ravel's *oeuvre*, it's difficult to imagine that his music was ever considered controversial. But the French were unprepared for his use of the jazz idiom in serious music and when he first staged *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, which included a fox-trot between a teapot and a teacup, Parisian audiences booed.

A portrait of any man through his music is a tall order, especially when the man is as enigmatic as Ravel appears to have been. The film is a collage of interviews with friends, excerpts from letters, and performances by some of the most brilliant musicians in the world, including Alicia de Larrocha, Collard Dumay, the Odeon Trio, and Victoria de Los Angeles, not to mention the Orford Quartet and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

Any documentary that revolves around music poses a problem for its makers simply because music is the most abstract art form and, without accompanying images, not filmic. Larry Weinstein avoids the most obvious pitfalls by frequently training the camera on the musicians at work. It is interesting to watch their concentration and sense of humour, their involvement with the music, but there are times

when the director's attempt to catch everyone in the orchestra, for instance, seems clumsy and distracting. An example of this is de Larrocha's performance of the *Presto*, from *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. Charles Dutoit's torso floats somewhere over her left shoulder, and Weinstein tries too hard to match the staccato of the piece with choppy editing from one section of the orchestra to another.

The film's most exciting moments are those which include dance or opera: the softly-lit, athletic couple dancing to *Daphnis and Chloe*, and *La Valse*, superbly choreographed by and featuring nine pairs of elegantly-clad dancers. But my favorite scenes were those from the opera, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, where a grandfather clock, a teacup, and a teapot come to life to the exquisite horror of a little boy who's been rude to his mother. Staged specifically for the film, these visual passages provided a well-needed break from the purely "musical" focus of much of *Ravel*.

For the film cannot, and does not, pretend to be so much a film about Ravel as a film about his music. As one friend gives the interviewer a tour of the composer's house, she says that he was not one to show his feelings. And another friend muses that "It's quite possible that artists or musicians have the ability to express themselves in art because they can't express themselves in life."

What we do discover about Ravel is this: he never married, and friends claim that he was not known to have had any romantic attachments to women or men. He loved children and liked to go out with friends to watch them dance. He

liked to take long night-walks, and to please his mother by buying her clothes and trinkets when he could afford them. During WWI, he was rejected by the army and made his contribution by driving cars and trucks.

Ravel's work only began to earn him international acclaim in 1927, when he took a whirlwind tour of North America. The United States, the land where jazz was born, welcomed him with open arms. This is particularly poignant given that only five years later, after a car accident, Ravel was to lose his ability to compose and spent the next five years waiting for "music or death," as one friend puts it. Weinstein chooses to end the film with the haunting *Adagio Assai*, again from *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, as if in respect for those sad, useless years before his death.

Larry Weinstein won a well-deserved Alberta-Quebec Prize for Television for this documentary. As enigmatic as Ravel's private self was, Weinstein has paid a great tribute to this innovative, provocative composer with an elegant, beautiful film.

Naomi Guttman •

RAVEL p. Niv Fichman, Larry Weinstein, Julia Sereny d. Larry Weinstein et. Ewa Jaworska, Bruce Lange, Anthony Sloan d.o.p. Leonard Gilday, c.s.c. sl. John Martin int. Charles Dutoit, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Alicia de Larrocha, Victoria de los Angeles, Jean-Philippe Collard, Augustin Dumay, Toronto Dance Theatre, Odette Beaupre. A Rhombus Media production in association with the CBC, the SRC, Bravo Cable Network, Danmarks Radio, Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, Norsk Rikskringkasting, Oy Yleisradio, Sveriges Television, Television Espanola and TVOntario with the participation of Telefilm Canada and the OFCD. 105 minutes, col. 16mm.

Alain Chartrand's Des Amis Pour La Vie

Des Amis *Pour La Vie's* thought-provoking script, was directed, acted and photographed by a group of skilled and artful individuals, but the film is heavily clothed in the lead trousers of commercial television.

Written by Diane Cailhier and directed by Alain Chartrand, *Des Amis*... is a story of six elderly friends who decide to live in a communal fashion so as to ward off the loneliness, bitterness, and indignity that old-age threatens. They quickly become imbued in loving nostalgia for their friendships, and just as quickly, they become the target of an anonymous letter writer who aims to break their pleasant arrangement apart.

After they receive a few letters, unrest sets in as the six friends search in their minds for identity of the person who is sending these enigmatic messages. As the story unfolds, we learn that Françoise, the widow who owns the house where they all live, is, in fact, not a widow. Her husband, Charles, suffered a stroke and being partially paralyzed and unable to talk, he has been living for the past several years in a hospital, wanting his friends to believe he was dead for fear of their pity. Charles is now confronted with the fear of losing his wife to the new living arrangement with those whom he feared, and thus the letters.

All this intrigue remains a secret that Françoise tries to keep, but Alex, one of the six, reveals the secret by following her to the hospital one day. Alex confronts Françoise, and, through their discussion, that which was the impetus for the communal arrangement shines through as the solution to this painful situation. Support and love, which Charles needs and yet has rejected, are the answers. The end of the film has Alex bringing Charles home to live amidst communal affection.

Des Amis... is an admirable film because, in a dramatic context, it discusses very real problems that are faced by our elderly. This subject, in the television and film world of smooth, unblemished, and uneducated heroes and heroines, is refreshing. What the film proposes in terms of lifestyle - communal old-age rather than institutional old-age - is interesting, though it is a product of the author's imagination. Cailhier introduced the film at the *Rendez-vous du Cinéma Québécois* by admitting that she knew of no such living arrangement amongst the aged, but believed it to be a plausible lifestyle, especially for those communally oriented former long-hairs from the '60s. By offering this suggestion, the filmmakers

The Toronto Dance Theatre in *Ravel*.





PHOTO: BERTRAND CARRIÈRE

Des Amis' four friends for life.

bring us a forum for the viewers to discuss lifestyles of the elderly.

The actors bring a very charming and real aspect to the drama, and Michel Brault's photography enhances the changes in mood throughout the film. These elements, combined with the music of Django Reinhardt and Felix Leclerc, sweep us into a rich autumnal story. Yet, while the film maintains this sensuality and has intelligent intentions, it is plagued by a struggle that weighs its artistic merits down.

Lead trousers. The commercial television framework makes structural demands on drama that can kill intelligent and challenging works. Typically, writer guidelines for television stipulate stock plot-structures, often applying similar rules to tragedy, comedy, action/suspense, or documentary. *Des Amis*... smacks of these limitations. The plot is introduced rapidly in the first couple of minutes and character development is sacrificed completely. What passes as character development is stagey, and is especially obvious in the character of René, with whom we feel uncomfortable throughout.

We are further insulted by "what's-going-to-happen-next" shots which lead us into a commercial break. (For example, the camera follows René and Alex through a door and then tilts down to the mailbox. Is someone going to receive a letter?) This kind of format is acceptable for Bugs Bunny, but not for human interest drama. The story continues, we want more depth, and while the filmmakers are striving to give it to us through their craft, we are struck in the head with another lead-into-a-commercial shot. The film starts to wear the burden of the medium. One gets the feeling that the filmmakers have tried very hard to deal with these limitations, but that little box is not malleable. The lasting impression of *Des Amis pour la Vie* is that it is a good film for television, but that television is not good for it.

Kirk Finken •

DES AMIS POUR LA VIE p. Claude Bonin, (NFB) Monique Létourneau d. Alain Chartrand sc. Diane Cailhier d.o.p. Michel Brault art d. Louise Jobin ed. Yves Chaput orig. mus. Jean Corrivéau p. mgr. Muriel Lizé p. coord. Suzanne Comtois loc. sd. Dominique Chartrand 1st. a.d.

GINETTE GUILLARD cont. MARIE BEAULIEU cam. asst. René Daigle unit. mgr. Bernard Vincent gaffer Yves Charbonneau key grip Michel Périard 2nd. a.d. Nicole Bernier add. cam. Sylvain Brault, René Daigle set dec. Pierre Perreault props Charles Bernier art dept. d. Blanche-Danielle Boileau boom Claude Lahaye cost. Luc Bédard dresser Luc Le Flaguais elec. Marcel Breton grips Jean-Maurice De Ermed, Guy Ferland carp. François Gascon makeup Kathryn Casault hair André Morneau asst. ed. Aube Foglia admin. Ian Boyd p. acct. Hélène Aubin p. a. Catherine Faucher, Sylvain Arseneault, Anne-Marie Gill sec. Nicole Fauteux loc. scouts Guy Bouchard, Mona Medawar cast. Danyèle Patenaude stills Bertrand Carrière. pub. Christianne Ducasse l.p. Françoise Faucher, Paul Hebert, Roger Joubert, Jean Mathieu, Anais Goulet Robitaille, Gisele Schmidt, Olivette Thibault, Jean-Louis Roux, Johanne Fontaine, Carmen Ferland, Véronique Lemay, Kiki Nesbit. A coproduction of Films Vision 4, Producteurs TV-Films Associés, and the NFB. With financial participation from Telefilm, SOGIC and Radio Québec.

Anne-Claire Poirier's **Salut Victor**

One of a series of 10 television films produced for Radio-Québec, *Salut Victor* is an impressive work. Based on Montreal writer Edward O. Phillip's *Mathew and Chauncy*, the film is an effective document attesting to the collective fears and individual concerns of many of our aged. But more than that, it is a surprisingly moving account of the friendship that two male residents form in a private retirement home. That both of these men are gay underlines the absence of screen representations of the aged, both gay and straight.

The film chronicles the friendship that evolves between two men living in a home for the aged, presumably in Montreal. Philip, recently arrived, and demonstrating in no uncertain terms that his nature is an inherently reserved one, is introduced to the irreverent Victor, the residence's self-confessed *tapette* and title character of the film. Victor, played by popular Québécois actor Jacques Godin, embodies all of those qualities which the repressed Philip (Jean-Louis Roux) outwardly appears to be

opposed to - he's brash, candid about his sexuality, and more than just a little revealing in his discussions of other residents. In short, the men are classic examples of the personality contrast necessary to the unfolding of a narrative cinema which is concerned with the progressive moral enlightenment of its central character. Predictably, it is Victor who convinces Philip that life is too short to allow oneself to be dictated to by confining, oppressive notions of pride and, following their initial, strained introduction, the two men soon become dependent on each other's company.

Filmmaker Anne-Claire Poirier, the "conscience" of Québécois cinema, has solidified her position as one of the Quebec industry's chief talents in this film, her first, since the disappointing *La Quarantaine* six years ago.

With a mature, sensitive hand not afforded many directors, Poirier has created a significant work of popular Canadian cinema. Responsible for selecting the short story from which the film has been adapted, Poirier has been keenly involved with the production since its inception. This is clearly evident in her polished use of form. Several of the many outstanding formal elements to be found in this film include a stylized editing which serves the film's scenes well by allowing each to fade and "wash" into one another, and the consistently ochre-bronze toned tints that dominate the film's images further complementing its temporal "meshing." But it is perhaps Poirier's direction of the actors, and the accommodating manner in which they are photographed, that remains the film's essential strength.

Realizing the importance of performance to a project such as *Salut Victor*, Poirier has encouraged nothing less than noble performances from Godin and Roux, as well as supporting actors Murielle Dutil and Julie Vincent. She is acutely aware, no doubt, that the degree of success or failure of fiction film that examines previously unexplored terrain is determined by the actors' performances. The formidable talents of Godin and Roux, especially in their scenes of interaction, and Poirier's

insistence that each be photographed from the other's perspective throughout the film are *Salut Victor's* primary means of discourse and the most progressive of all of the production's ways of voicing its concerns for social reform. When Victor is reprimanded for touching one of the male employees of the residence, Godin's delivery as Victor is coolly restrained. But it is also highly communicative, suggesting that his touching of the worker was instinctual and that he could not ever be made to feel ashamed for something that gave him "le sens de la réalité."

While it is true that the film does not question issues of race, class, etc., issues that are pertinent to any discussion of the gay aged, it is difficult to be critical of the film. Poirier and the excellent cast she has assembled have confronted without apology what it means to be gay and aged in a society that does not especially value either group. This counts for a great deal. Unlike many films of the "social realist" tradition that tend to be overly sentimental at moments when *points* are being made, *Salut Victor* transcends this tendency simply by playing by the rules that govern this genre. That is, it remains faithful to its subject, and does not at any point trivialize or demean the lives of its characters.

Jonathan St. George •

SALUT VICTOR p. Monique Létourneau d. /sc. coll. Anne-Claire Poirier sc. Marthe Blackburn adapted from Matthew and Chauncy by Edward O. Phillips d.o.p. Michel Brault art d. Denis Boucher ed. Suzanne Allard mus. Joel Vincent Bienvenue p. mgr. Michelle Marcl tech. coord. Edouard Davidovici loc. sd. Richard Besse 1st. a.d. Mireille Goulet cont. Monique Champagne cost. Huguette Gagné makeup Brigitte McCaughy gaffer Pierre Provost key grip Jean-Louis Daoust cam. asst. Nathalie Moliavko-Visotzky unit mgr. André Dupuis set dec. André Chamberland props ext. Mario Hervieux boom Philippe Scully elec. Marc Charlebois grip Robert Auclair sd. ed. (diag.) Diane Boucher sd. ed. (fx) Marie-Claude Gagné sd. fx. Jérôme Décarie fx. rec. Christian Fortin mus. Hans Peter Stobl, Adrian Croll admin. Monique Lavoie p. scv. Johanne Messier p. a. Johanne Boudreau, Guy Ferland stills Bertrand Carrière pub. Christianne Ducasse/Novak and Associates l.p. Jean-Louis Roux, Jacques Godin, Julie Vincent, Murielle Dutil, Jean Besré, Huguette Oligny, Juliette Huot, Terrence La Brosse, Marthe Nadeau, Cédric Noël, Manon Vallee, J.A. Robert Paquette, Robert Favreau. A co-production of the NFB, les Producteurs TV-Films Associés., with financial participation from Telefilm, SOGIC and Radio Québec.

Jean-Louis Roux (Philippe) and Jacques Godin (Victor) toast their friendship.



Gerald Saul's and Brian Stockton's Wheat Soup

It always seemed to me that a province like Saskatchewan would never be a place where unique cinema could be made. Not that the prairies are visually (or thematically) uninteresting: the arid and barren geography with its golden fields of wheat, and grain pools by the railway, would leave even Terrence Malick drooling. But somehow, abysmal cinematic efforts, produced mainly by easterners – films like the NFB's outdated *The Drylanders*, or Allan King's saccharine *Who Has Seen The Wind?* – popularized the stereotype that Saskatchewan was forever existing in a '30s-style depression, populated by Kurelek figures straight from a W. O. Mitchell novel.

A change was long overdue, and it came in the form of *Wheat Soup*, a little-known film by Gerald Saul and Brian Stockton, and the first feature-length effort out of Regina's Saskatchewan Film Pool. *Wheat Soup* is a pseudo-experimental drama, laced with existential philosophy, post-apocalyptic science fiction, and a dry, minimalist sense of humour: a sort of cross between *The Seventh Seal* and *Waiting for Godot*, as directed by Jim Jarmusch or Luis Buñuel. While in turns entertaining and perplexing, *Wheat Soup* offers a new and strikingly original vision of the vast prairie flatlands.

Described as a "Freeform Depressionist Drama in Six Parts," *Wheat Soup* begins with an opening sequence entitled "The Agoraphobic." An isolated, bored artist (played by Gerald Saul) tries to live his life by switching TV channels and churning out expressionist paintings in a self-contained basement environment. Whenever he tries to leave the front door of his rural household, he is gripped by a strange paranoid sensation of standing all alone in an Arctic wasteland. After finally managing to break out of his basement shelter, conquering his phobia, he is whonked from above by a plummeting anvil (perhaps an escapee from a *Roadrunner* rerun?). The next segment ("The Great Flattening Begins") consists of a long camera pan down a metropolitan street to the tune of a hammer banging an anvil, foreshadowing the approaching apocalypse.

We then jump to 100 years after the "great flattening" (either a nuclear war or numerous freefalling anvils) to be introduced to "The Last Wheat Farmer," a young, tanned Kamikaze named Sam (played by Shaf Hussain), bored with defending the precious grain from nerdy wheat poachers and harvesting a crop for outsiders he never meets. Sam decides to throw in his hoe and leave the farm to see what the world outside is really like. In the course of his journey, he discovers lots of dirt roads, cockroaches, and a



Shaf Hussain and Brian Stockton in *Wheat Soup*.

bizarre assortment of dregs and wanderers, who add to the confusion of his quest. Only his offscreen chats with a seated female goddess occasionally shed any light on some of the more difficult issues. Sam eventually teams up with a nebulous wheat poacher named Ralph and later sojourns with a colony of low I. Q. farmers (who harvest a substance called gristle).

Later, after temporarily returning to the farm to bury his ex-farming assistant, Har, (killed by wheat poachers), Sam makes a vow to continue the tradition of cultivating the precious grain beyond the wasteland. The film ends on perhaps the longest sunset shot ever filmed, as Ralph and Sam look over the edge of the Earth, contemplating various thematically related, but rather incongruous subjects (eg., What happens when your feet get all tingly, and won't hurt even if you hit them with a big rock?).

As wafer-thin as the plot is, the film somehow manages to successfully relate its own particular, regional philosophy that flat is, in fact, quite beautiful. In the course of his journey, Sam crosses paths with Delaney, a zealot, who along with his topless assistant, drags an anvil, believing it was once used to compress the planet. ("The glory, the glory! The flatness forever! Two dimensions is all you need! All you got out here!") Other scenes show Sam having chaotic, terrifying visions of himself in a modern, three-dimensional city, overwhelmed by massive skyscrapers and urban architecture.

Technology of the past generation has little use in this brave new world. In one scene, Sam asks the goddess what the farmers used to do

with their appliances, and she replies "Well, they made a lot of toast." As she later points out, things are much better now, since the world is flatter, less complex, and a little more banal.

Wheat Soup projects its prairie, post-modernist view partly through the film's provincially localized text. No English-Canadian feature since *Faustus Bidgood* has provided more regional in-jokes. In *Wheat Soup*, religion has become mainly pantheistic, centering completely around wheat (The Wheat Farmers Almanac has replaced the Bible). In fact, wheat is considered the only thing worth living for. This grain fixation, in its own self-mocking way, suggests that in the aftermath of an apocalypse, the drylands will be the best place in the world to live. Propaganda, Saskatchewan-style!

The sparseness and banality of the theme reflects itself not only in the script, but also in the movie's nonexistent production values, occasionally overlong scenes, and shoestring budget (around \$14,000). Inevitably, some viewers will view *Wheat Soup* as too peculiar, aimless, or confusing. Despite the film's unity of theme, it seems debatable whether the filmmakers really knew what they were doing in the first place. This is a rarity, a film that makes its point, without really going anywhere. On the plus side, there is a wonderful sense of deadpan, hilarious humour; some clever references to old films and cartoons (Ralph and Sam are the names of the wolf and sheepdog in Chuck Jones' cartoons); and occasional sparks from a largely amateur cast. The one standout is Brian Stockton as the dry, deadpan Ralph. Also

especially memorable as the shy disc jockey in Will Dixon's *Heartline*, Stockton strikes me as sort of a low-key Dustin Hoffman.

But the film's major triumph, for which it cannot be ignored, is its visual imagery. In stark black and white, Stockton and Saul, along with cinematographer Spyros Egarhos, have concocted a view of the prairies which is both dream-like and hallucinatory. The vast horizons of cloud and sky, the long stretches of wheat fields, and even the final sunshot sequence have none of the picture-postcard qualities found in archetypal CBC or NFB products. These prairies are a strange, sublime, alien world – dry, sterile, mysterious and, in their own way, appealing. When T. E. Lawrence is asked in *Lawrence of Arabia* why he likes the desert, he merely replies "It's so clean." Such a description seems proper for so desolate, yet so serene a world as that created in *Wheat Soup*.

Patrick Lowe ●

WHEAT SOUP p. Saskatchewan Film Pool d. /sc. / Gerald Saul, Brian Stockton d. o. p. Spyros Egarhos mus. Rod Croften title song: mus. Scott Hudey, lyrics Mike Benny add. mus. Scott Simmie, Spyro Egarhos sd. rec. Angelos Hatzitolios, Marc Lafoy crew Don Cornelius, Chuck Gilhooly, June Madeley, Steve Meikle, Paul Stockton firearms cons. Grant Campbell 2nd. unit d. Szymon Choynowski graphic des. Cec Semchuk add. ed. Chuck Gilhooly special thanks to: Eldon Zimmer, Neal Berken, Grant Zalinko, Joe Siller, Raymond Sebastian, Bill Mills, Larry Bauman, Chuck Jones, Marie Stockton, Wayne Stockton, Dave Sim, Michelle Dempster, Veronica Macdonald l. p. Shaf Hussain, Sandi Happy, Gord Wilson, Leonard Cyrman, Mike Benny, Bob Campbell, Scott Teece, Brian Stockton, Gerald Saul, Martin Kondziewski. assistance Saskatchewan Film Pool, National Film Board, Saskatchewan Arts Board.



A tribute to corporate raiders? Only the braintrust behind this knows for sure

Edward Hunt's
The Brain

The *Brain* reunites the team of Edward Hunt, director, and Barry Pearson, writer. In 1977 the two produced a virtually unknown tax-shelter film, *Plague*, starring Daniel Pilon, Kate Reid and Céline Lomez, that was eventually released on the Texas drive-in circuit in 1979.

Hunt had previously written, produced and directed *Starship Invasion* with Robert Vaughn in 1976, and Pearson had written the screenplay for Peter Pearson's *Paperback Hero* in 1972. You would have thought that these two gentlemen of modest but promising talent would have learnt a thing or two about filmmaking over the years and perhaps gone on to do better things. However, time seems to be working in reverse with the theatrical release of *The Brain*. A more inept, amateurish piece of celluloid excrement cannot not be imagined even in the darkest days of tax-shelter filmmaking.

The film was produced by Tony Kramreither, the man responsible for such Canadian cinematic gems as *Mondo Nude* (1978), *Humungous* (1981) and *Thrillkill* (1983). However, recently Kramreither has been moving away from his more lurid films and getting behind quality projects like Leon Marr's *Dancing In The Dark* and the underrated *Concrete Angels*. *The Brain* represents a major step backwards to the bad old days. In fact, all involved in this laughable piece of junk, including special effects co-ordinator Mark Williams (*The Fly*, *Aliens*), should be thoroughly embarrassed that this film has actually seen the

light of day on the theatrical circuit. *The Brain* is headed directly for the bottom of the bin in the sleaziest section of your local video-cassette outlet reserved especially for this sort of pre-pubescent schlock/horror flick.

The Brain, which borrows liberally from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, without a whit of justice done to either of these far superior films, concerns the doings of an evil, alien psychiatrist (David Gale) who controls the minds of those who watch his TV show by means of a living brain. The brain, which at first looks like an oversized piece of turd with a tail, is hooked-up to all sorts of electrodes and TV monitors from which it relays commands to its master.

Not content with merely controlling human minds with hallucinations, the brain unexplainedly develops a carnivorous appetite for the mad doctor's female assistant. "That's food for thought!", exclaims the wide-eyed psychiatrist as the unfortunate assistant disappears inside the squirming lump of turd. After a satisfying burp the creature develops the funniest set of fangs and bulging eyes imaginable.

Into this ludicrous state of affairs comes our all-American hero (the suburbs of Toronto and Mississauga are thinly disguised to be somewhere in New York, although the art director forgot or couldn't afford to lose the Toronto transit stops and other assorted bits of Canadiana), played by Tom Breznahan with a perpetual smirk. Of course he is cute and contemptuous of authority. He resists the psychiatrist's attempts at brainwashing and subsequently he is chased all over the lab and town by the mad doctor's remaining assistant, a certain overweight, lunatic-looking Nurse Varna, played unintentionally for laughs by George Buza. Every once-in-a-while the rapidly growing brain will appear out of nowhere to menace our hero and wreak havoc on the good folks of Meadowvale.

Our macho high school hero is helped by his virginal girlfriend, the pretty but incompetent Cyndy Preston, until she too comes under the brain's power. Once again he is chased all over the place by Nurse Varna. Again he escapes and sneaks back into the TV studio, intent on destroying the brain. By now the organ has become the size of a Mack truck, eating everybody in its path, including, thank goodness, Nurse Varna. However, our hero, with his ex-virginal girlfriend at his side, comes face-to-face with the worst case of bad breath this side of King Kong. With an unbelievable sleight-of-hand, he blows up the saliva-drooling monster and happily all the good people of Meadowvale are released from its spell. Canada, oops, I mean America, is once again saved from alien domination.

In the middle of one of the endless boring chases, our hero's best friend and girlfriend, who are looking for him in the TV studio, stop,

and she wails "We have to find him!" "What do you mean we have to?", asks the best friend. "I don't know", is her idiotic response. It seems sad that the makers of *The Brain* also apparently don't know what they are doing. I can only hope they got paid well for their efforts and that the talent wasted here will get on with the better films they all are capable of making.

Paul Townend •

THE BRAIN exec. p. Don Haig p. Tony Kramreither d. Edward Hunt sc. Barry Pearson ed. David Nicholson d.o.p. Gilles Corbeil creature and makeup fx. Mark Williams mus. Paul Zaza co. p. ip. mgr. Ken Gord assoc. p. Phillip M. Good p. exec. (IVE) Victor "Jake" Davich p. exec. (SGE) Gary Drucker asst. to p. Teresa A. Wain art d. Byron Patchett stunts coord. Gary Brown sp. fx. Danny White, Craig Williams cast. Lucinda Sill, CDC 1st a.d. Robert Petovic 2nd a.d. Randi Richmond 1st. asst. ed. Robin Russell 2nd asst. ed. Rae Crombie, Cyndy Fret sd. ed. Karl Konny loc. mgr. Jeremy Gauthier, Tony Morrone, Mark Mowad gaffer J.P. Locherer best boy Alan Pill electricians Yuri Yakubiw, Dean Emerick key grip Bill Heintz 2nd grip John Boan-Mitchell best boy grip Richard Emerson grips Bruce Chadwick, Mark Mavrinac sd. rec. Jin Hong, Rae Crombie boom Doug Dixon cast. des. Eva Gord ward. Jocelyn Senior ward. asst. Sara Schult set dresser Nick White 1st. asst. cam. John Joffin 2nd asst. cam. Jane Davis cam. assts. Dvgr Plank, Josh Melamed, Ben Sharp, Gisele Turpin, Mark Willis key props Danny White props asst. Craig Williams Dial. ed. David Nicholson sp. fx. assts. Ray Greer, Cathy Mullanphy, Gabe Fallus, Rae Crombie, Kevin Danzey, Thomas M. Bellisario brain op. Chris Thiesenhausen, Phillip M. Good video cons. Bruce Parlette p. coord. Sandi Henri, Sandra Deziel 3rd. a.d. Carlos Caneca a.d. trainee Christine Doré office p.a. Tom Willey cont. Karen Paterson set des. Roderick Mayne asst. art d. Michael Borthwick 2nd. a.d. Andrea Stokes art dept. trainee Tamara Boan-Mitchell const. foreman Andrew Colpitts hd. carpenter Jim Parry carp. Chris Radley Walters, David Hoekstra painter Harry Patchett p.a. Thomas M. Bellisario craft Anne Fotheringham hair/makeup Odelya hair/makeup asst. Donna Keravica driver capt. Noella Nesdoly drivers Mark Currie, Andrew Sparkes, Andrew Ward, Andrew Vincent comp. animation Larry Chase stills photo Sophie Hogan extras cast. JW Casting Foley artist Reid J. Atherton Foley asst. Maureen Wetteland neg cutter Catherine Rankin video transfers Alndon Grp. Prods. re-rec. mix Mike Hoogenboom asst. mix Peter Kelly adr sd. rec. Rae Crombie Inserts crew: p. mgr. Rae Crombie gaffer Phillip M. Good key grip Mike Brown grip Harold Delisle p. asst. Mike Toke stunts Gary Brown, Ed Hellier, Steve Pernie, Cindy Goldhawk equipment Cdn

Motion Pic. Equipment Rentals l.p. Tom Breznahan, Cyndy Preston, David Gale, George Buza, Christine Kossack, Bret Pearson, Bernice Quiggan, Susannah Hoffman, Justine Campbell. Presented by Brightstar Films.

George Erschbamer's
Snake Eater

O.K. It plays like this. Vietnam vet "Soldier" is back home after serving in the crack search-and-destroy squad the "Snake Eaters." Back in civvies there's not much call on the streets of "big city U.S.A." for eating snakes or searching & destroying, so our boy lines up undercover work as a narc stinging dope dealer. Benefits include a sexy black pusher with a scar from neck to navel who likes to play strip poker without the poker. Anyway the boy plays by his own rules and when the junkies come by he nails their feet to the floor to make sure they don't split. His superiors at the P.D. don't like his approach and turf him from the force.

Meanwhile, down some desolate backwoods bayou, Soldier's family are vacationing on their houseboat when set upon by a group of snarling, sadistic hillbillies who've been festering in the Ozarks since *Deliverance*. Mom & Dad sink into the black cesspool in a burning blaze of glory while lithe, nubile Sis goes off to be a sex slave, locked up in a fetid shack. Soldier finds out that his folks are dead from a sheriff after he's laid out a couple of particularly nasty bikers at a roadside pit stop called "The Cage" where he landed after his chopper went out of control after he veered to avoid hitting a child chasing a ball. The man has a heart of gold.



Josie Bell and Lorenzo Lamas in *Snakeeater*

Anyway he smells something fishy (not surprising considering all the depraved things the locals do with fish) and with an AK-47 assault rifle and his bike retrofitted to cruise the waves, he heads off to seek vengeance...

Snake Eater – a new action/adventure shot in New Brunswick and co-produced by Cinepix and Carota Films. Allow me to ask a rhetorical question? Why does anyone bother to write or produce such nonsense? Why does anyone (does anyone) go to see such schlock? I know, I know – it's escapist entertainment written to appeal directly to the adolescent midbrain. The infantile jokes, references to masturbation, beer bottles in the groin, gimmicks with condoms, etc. appeal to the adolescent sense of humour. All the knives, guns, blood, gore, fights, shootouts, imaginative ways of killing people, etc. appeal to the sense of action and adventure. Gets the adrenalin flowing. And the barely clad, semi-clad, and un-clad female bodies, wet T-shirts, and bestial sexual attitudes of the uncouth hillbillies – well I don't know what lurid fantasies they're supposed to appeal to.

And they make them in the U.S. and if we want to show we're every bit as good (or bad) as the Americans then... And they have them on the back racks of the video section of the convenience store where they rent for a couple of bucks and make money for someone but, but, but... seriously, why bother? Is it too idealistic to believe that one can make other hip stuff which will appeal to teenagers without the veneer of violence? That turning this material out into the community just reinforces sexist stereotypes and exploits the female body? That all the money and time and effort and talent that go into making *any* feature film could be employed in better ways?

The only thing, in fact, that can be said for *Snake Eater* is that it avoids the very worst excesses of the genre. There is some humour, the plot, while not actually credible, at least hangs together. The climactic shootout is sparse on anything other than rounds of ammo and the film dribbles to a conclusion with an after-the-fact filmic aside in a warehouse involving an arsonist-cum-bug exterminator and a condom full of lighter fluid. Try and figure that one out. The cinematography is passable and the art direction creates a certain appropriate ambience. Lead Lorenzo Lamas of *Falcon Crest* fame manages to cultivate some character and Ronnie Hawkins and Josie Bell have a moment or two. *Snake Eater* is only slightly less appetizing cuisine than its name might suggest. Avoid it like a pit full of vipers.

Christopher Majka •

SHAKE EATER ex.p. Andre Link p. John Dunning d. George Erschbamer ior. Michael Paseornik & John Dunning d.o.p. Glen MacPherson music John Massar l.p. Lorenzo Lamas, Josie Bell, Robert Scott, Ronnie Hawkins, Cheryl Jeans, Larry Csonka, Ben DiGregorio, Mowava Pryor. A Cinepix/Carota Films co-production.

A few short films and videos in two of the programs, Childhood's End: Working on the Family and Family Secrets, in the overflowing cornucopia at the Images '89 Festival of Independent Film & Video in Toronto, May 3-7/89.

QAGGIQ

This impressive work is the one against which all others viewed at the Festival were judged! Zacharias Kunuk wrote a script, and then members of the Igloodik community improvised the docudrama under his direction. This story of home life in the Arctic in the 1930s centres on a young man who wants to marry a local girl. Her father won't give his consent, his wife favours the match, but to no avail.

The community prepares for the annual Qaggiq games, and builds a large igloo to house the gathering. People come by dog team for the singing, the telling of stories, and the games. The young man hopes to win over the girl's father by displaying his courage and strength.

Right from the large-screen video opening shots, one's interest is caught and then held throughout the unfolding of the story. The sheer "foreignness" of it all is overwhelming – the unending open spaces of ice and snow; the unfamiliar language (accompanied by adequate English sub-titles); the Inuit seen not as we know them today, but as they were in the '30s with authentic clothing and large and beautiful dog teams. The slight storyline is fleshed out by the daily round of living in a male-oriented, harsh environment.

A visitor brings a new pipe for his friend – the father of the girl who's desired by the young man – and there's much talk about its merits as it is passed around. When the sun shines, the children play outside and good humour abounds with everyone saying that it's a fine day – when the temperature must be way below zero.

The staging of the games event starts with the building of the large igloo, and here the camera is right inside the edifice with flakes of ice raining down on the lens as the work progresses. When the igloo is filled with people, the storytelling and singing and drumming starts, and is soon followed by the young bucks displaying their skills and staying power. Wriggling out of their large jackets, stripped to the waist, the youths indulge in good-natured

From *Quaggiq*, by Zacharias Kunuk: in a direct line from Flaherty's *Nanook*.



competition in such exotic sports as mouthpuling (complicated to describe precisely...).

Qaggiq is in a direct line from Flaherty and, assuming its authenticity, is a rivetting glance over the shoulder into the past. Director Zacharias Kunuk was unable to attend the screening, but sparse information gleaned indicated that he has made about eight films, and *Qaggiq* will be shown on the Inuit Broadcasting Channel this year. Would that a wider audience could see more of his work.

A video by Zacharias Kunuk. (1989) N.W.T. 58 mins.

FARM FANTASY

Elizabeth shows us her family at work on their potato farm in southern Ontario – but with a twist. This short video charmingly portrays family members animated and larger than life, working steadily, and looming over the horizons of their acreage as the seasons follow each other. A pleasant little piece with a specially composed and agreeable C&W soundtrack.

A video by Elizabeth Van der Zaag. (1989) B.C. 4 mins. Distributor: Video Out

MATEUS – FIFTY YEARS A COALMINER

The filmmaker's grandfather, Mateus Pieszchala, came to Canada in the 1920s from Poland looking for a better life. Through his children's memories and his painfully sparse disclosures, Mateus's hard life and battle against poverty, hardship, and discrimination emerges.

An interesting record of an immigrant family's struggle during the Depression years, contrasting vividly with today. The children are outgoing, comfortably settled and fluent in English, while Mateus appears lost and uncertain and, at times, unintelligible in his adopted tongue. One is acutely aware of the large gulf between children and father in this family.

A 16mm film by Rock Whitney. (1987) B.C. 25 mins. Distributor: Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution West (604) 684-3014

ZOE'S CAR

The avalanche of advertising gets a drubbing in this somewhat entertaining send-up. Zoe's parents enjoy looking at ads and dreaming about a life far from their own humdrum existence.

Giving into her pleas, they order a farm set for Zoe, which turns out to be a teeny-tiny tackey

version of the one depicted in the come-on catalogue. But, in this electronic age, it results in the family name and address being added to endless mailing lists, and so the glossy, seductive material rolls in to tempt and to upset the family balance.

Though lighthearted in style, with cut-out ads worked into a number of collages, the underlying message is a dark condemnation of the divisive nature of advertising.

A video by Ardele Lister. (1986) B.C. 8 mins. Distributor: Video Out (604) 688-4336

BORN TO BE SOLD: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby SM

The video artist relates the details of the famous surrogate mother case in the U.S. and, in the process, manages to analyse, dissect, and have a certain amount of highly entertaining fun with a serious issue that turned into somewhat of a circus.

With the aid of written material and TV clips, plus added pseudo-dramatizations, Rosler zeroes in on family rights and class attitudes and cleverly turns them on their collective ears. A mite too long, but gruesomely amusing nevertheless.

A video by Martha Rosler. (1988) U.S.A. 28 mins. Distributor: V/Tape (416) 863-9897

PRETENDING WE WERE INDIANS

A small video speculation by a walking woman as to a perceived, but not confirmed, family secret. A whiff of native ancestors, hushed up long ago; pieces of a puzzle worked upon during the walk; scraps of information sifted through her mind – what really happened?

A 16mm film by Katherine Assals. (1988) Québec. 3 mins.

MOLD GROWS ON BABY

The viewer is in the driver's seat looking through the windshield as the car moves along in a frosty suburban winter landscape. The car radio spews out the story of a widow, and her daughter who, as a teenager 20 years earlier, gave birth to an illegitimate child. The baby died – perhaps murdered? The unresolved family mystery is rehashed, with recrimination and speculation tossed between the mother and daughter. The landscape slips and slides past the window, but all the unhappy talk fails to provide an answer to the unsolved secret: who killed the unwanted child?

A "radio" video! The viewer is trapped inside a moving automobile and, with no visually dramatic highpoints, is forced to concentrate on the dialogue. After a while, the movement of the car and the blandness of the passing scenery combine to induce a hypnotic effect, to the detriment of the subject matter. But this is an intense, uneasy video which does not reach a safe, orderly conclusion.

A video by Shalhevet Goldhar. (1988) Ontario. 50 mins. Distributor: V/Tape (416) 863-9897