

manitoba: classification for growth and sensitivity

by Lee Rolfe

It has been over three years since censorship ceased to exist in Manitoba. What happens when the cutting and rejecting stops? And what is classification anyway? Lee Rolfe talks with a new breed: the film classification agent.

"We don't have the power to censor anybody's genitals out of a movie."

In the summer of 1972, the Manitoba Censor Board ceased to exist. At that time it was replaced by the Film Classification Board under Bill 70. Censorship was abolished in the province; that is, the new board has no powers to cut or reject any film. Its sole purpose is to give each film, submitted by distributors, a classification. The board is responsible to the Hon. Rene E. Toupin, Minister of Tourism, Recreation and Culture.

The legislature debate over Bill 70 was a hot, heavy and lengthy affair. The basic reason for the conversion, which took place under the current NDP government, was that "government control of the mind, implicit in any kind of censorship, is contrary to the very foundation of a free society. Bill 70 is a step toward removing discrimination against films."

The basic opposition to the liberal bill was that the new act placed too much responsibility on theatre owners. Many viewed it as an attempt by government to abort its responsibilities and shift the onus onto the theatre owners.

Ironically, theatre owners wanted the protection of censorship. They wanted the government to decide what was and was not obscene under the law.

However, the bill went through the third and final reading, passing with a vote of 27-26, a victory that could hardly be termed overwhelming. Opponents feared that the flood gates would burst and Manitoba would be inundated with pornogra-

phy, making the province the Denmark of Canada.

But as Father John Pungente, chairman of the board says, "It hasn't turned out that way at all."

John J. Pungente is a Jesuit priest by trade and it was anticipated that with a priest as head of the classification board, it would be more severe than the old censor board. But at the risk of sounding ridiculous, Father Pungente is not your run-of-the-mill stereotypical priest. He is a progressive thinker, and a knowledgeable man on the subject of film.

It is generally accepted among exhibitors, distributors and MPs that Father Pungente is truly the best man for the job. He holds a masters in film from San Francisco State College and teaches courses in film at St. Paul's High School, a private school in Winnipeg.

Although Manitoba has been progressive in the area of film administration reform, Father Pungente sees the board as serving an even larger function. He says: "Film is a very dangerous thing. It's a medium that can and has been used to manipulate people fantastically but it loses all of its danger, all of its power, once you're aware of how it works. And in some way we should inform people of how film works.

"This is what I try to do in my own classes - taking film, breaking it down and showing students what makes it up... what the director's purpose is."

However, what he would like to see accomplished and what can be accomplished are two entirely different things. The Manitoba Department of Education has repeatedly ex-

pressed interest in introducing film courses in schools. But it takes money to train teachers; money that isn't readily available.

"Ideally, it should be done through the schools but since it cannot be at the moment, except in private schools, the board could send its members to different schools and take over an English class for a week or so. Or it could be done through some sort of publication that could be distributed free in theatres. Articles on film, not just reviews, could discuss what films are doing," Father Pungente says.

Father Pungente believes that film must be viewed as a whole and that it is necessary to operate on a set of ground rules, an established rationale. He has laid down such a rationale which the board members use as a guideline in their judgments.

In part, it reads: "Our purpose is to inform and then allow the individual to make his choice on seeing the film. Our direction must be towards growth and not protection; towards artistic standards and not moralism; toward sensitivity and not passive acceptance.

"We must not become tied up in the details of the film rather than seeing how these details fit into the film as a whole. Think for a moment how much nudity appears in films... can we show this part of the body and not that?... how thin can we slice the pie in classifying dangerous situations in film art?"

"We cannot be blind to the larger picture of any film. We must not respond like sensors to a fire detection system, to a specific stimulus, but we must also become increasingly more sensitive to other potentially more destructive stimuli. It is so much safer and more comfortable to say 'all films with any nudity will be classified restricted' than to judge each film on what makes it integral. It is so much easier to list sex, violence, bad language and so forth as disqualifying elements in film than to judge in each instance what is portrayed, the attitudes of the characters toward their feelings, and the attitude of the director toward his characters. We must see the work of art as a whole, independent of morality."

The Manitoba board has four classifications – general, nature, adult parental guidance and restricted. The primary reason for giving a restricted rating to a film is usually the portrayal of anti-social and criminal behaviour in a manner suggesting that such behaviour is quite acceptable. Overly explicit sex and graphic violence are other criteria.

Ratings of current Winnipeg fare are published every Thursday evening in the two city newspapers along with a capsulized synopsis.

The board is composed of 15 people ranging in professions from housewife to university professor, from a sister in the Catholic Church to a retired school inspector.

Board member Barbara Weselake, responsible for the illustrative quotation that began this article, says "The classification board doesn't have three members, we have 15; so we're covering about 12 more bases than most censor boards. We don't have just three people who sit and get satiated, stunted, fed-up with film, we have people who come in fresh every week."

The members of the board sit in groups of threes with the members rotating every week.

"They're out, they're living, they're doing other things. Because film is a powerful medium, doesn't it follow that people who sit on censor boards for 22 years ought to be pretty crazy people. They're just being bombarded; five films a day, five days a week. Most censors are civil servants whose job it is to process film. How do you process film? You watch it... carefully... it's studious, it's a real involvement," says Mrs. Weselake.

Father Pungente feels that the general public is best suited to serve on classification boards. "Since films are to be seen by the general public and since the classification board serves the general public, the best thing to do is to

have a group of peers in there judging for the general public. And that's why it is important to have at least 10 to 15 members on the board."

As a board member, Mrs. Weselake said she has come to see the classification board work and work fairly well. "Over the three years we have grown more confident in our own judgments and I think we've worked ourselves out of the idea that we're there to safeguard the public. We're hired to be ourselves... to come with our own experiences, reflect on what we see and judge it for ourselves. And if you have enough people doing that it seems that it might be the optimum solution to an insolvable problem."

Commenting on the other boards across Canada, Father Pungente said he thought that Ontario's board was "a big mistake".

"Four people watch films year in and year out, becoming atrociously jaded. I don't think they even have to watch a film to classify it," he said.

It was also suggested that many censors were "put-out-to-pasture bureaucrats who really don't like the business of film at all."

In retrospect, Mrs. Weselake views the Manitoba government's change-over as far more radical than was realized at the time. But despite the advances Manitoba has made, the provincial government is still reluctant to make further changes within Bill 70.

"Any little thing you want changed takes three months in order to change four words," according to Father Pungente.

In order to make significant changes the whole thing has to be re-opened in the legislature and although there is little fear of seeing the classification board crushed, Father Pungente says that it would constitute a waste of time.

"They're still hung up on the idea that this board is allowing all sorts of extraordinary sex films into the province but they never stop to realize that when we opened there were five skin flick theatres operating in Winnipeg; now there is only one."

Theoretically, any film can be shown in the province but all films are subject to obscenity charges from the Attorney-General's department. Although the responsibility is placed on theatre owners to police their wares, the members of the board can and do make recommendations to theatre owners on the advisability of bringing a questionable film into the city.

Since 1972 only two films – **The Stewardesses** and **Last Tango In Paris** – were charged with violating the obscenity laws but both charges were dismissed. There were rumblings that charges would be filed against **The Exorcist** but these failed to materialize. With the dismissal of charges against the two films mentioned it is quite possible that any film could be shown in Manitoba, although the distributors of **Deep Throat** have not submitted it for classification.

Because the laws governing obscenity vary so greatly from province to province both Mrs. Weselake and Father Pungente are advocates of a national classification board.

Father Pungente says, "I think it's the only sensible way. Right now it costs the film industry a fortune because the distributor has to pay a different classification fee in each province, so in effect he is paying for the same film 10 times. But one board – a national board – would put a lot of people out of cushy jobs and remove one form of revenue. I don't think the provinces would buy it."

However, the whole question of the constitutionality of censorship could be blown sky-high if Gerard McNeil wins his case in the Supreme Court of Canada against the Nova Scotia censor board which banned **Last Tango In Paris**.

"If he wins his case, censorship is finished in Canada. I don't think there should be any censor boards when you have provisions in the criminal code against obscenity – whatever that is. Anything else, people should be free to see if they want to," Mrs. Weselake asserts. □