

yorkton shorts

Every two years, in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, there is an international festival of short films. John Hofsess was a jury member this year and gives us his impressions.

by John Hofsess



Two jury members: Jean Oser and Micheline Lanctôt



Two resource people: Ken Black and Allan King (l. to r.)

Alwin Law is what many people – equating armlessness with hopelessness – would call a thalidomide “victim.” He was born in 1960 in Yorkton, Saskatchewan (current population: 15,000) which like most small communities, with a fear of perishing, has a Biblical abhorrence of any abnormalities. In places like Yorkton, anyone who doesn’t marry and produce “healthy stock” to keep the place growing is regarded as worse than eccentric. More like a saboteur of the life-force itself.

The fact that young Law is a straight – A student is not, perhaps, surprising. But that he also plays trombone in the high school brass band (he plays music the way he plays catcher on the local baseball team – with his foot!) is an act of more than physical dexterity. The band played, well, *brassily*, on opening night of Yorkton’s International Film Festival (October 23-27) and Hall gave an extraordinary performance that was as plucky and unlikely as the Festival itself.

Yorkton is 129 miles northeast of Regina. There’s no air or passenger-rail service, only a bus twice-a-day in good weather. There are no bookstores. You can buy *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, *Time* or *Newsweek*, but not *The Globe and Mail* (which comes only to the public library through Canada’s intermittent mail service). *The Canadian* magazine distributed weekly through the *Winnipeg Tribune*, has at least five times the circulation here of any other Cana-

dian periodical. But it’s no cultural loss to Yorkton residents if most eastern magazines and newspapers don’t reach them; for when they aren’t neglected in such publications, they usually only get some smartass putdown. They’re tired of having their grass roots ploughed under by the blades of eastern wit. Yet every two years the city spends about \$15,000 to stage a week-long international film festival – the only competitive one in Canada, and this year with over 200 entries (165 finalists) from countries as far afield as The Netherlands to New Zealand – and fills the town’s hotels with “sophisticated” guests – directors, producers, journalists, and the like – who help Yorkton’s unwashed have a film bath. This year’s adjudicators – Grant McLean, recently retired after 26 lively years at the National Film Board, Jean Oser, film historian and windbag, actress Micheline Lanctôt, and John Hofsess, critic without portfolio – were greeted warmly but warily by the festival organizers who kept looking for the raised eyebrow or barely-suppressed smirk that these metropolitan aesthetes might conspiratorially share with one another over some yokel gaucherie. The fact is the Festival’s chairman, Elwyn Vermette, his assistant, Louise Moore, and past chairman Laurence Pearson, among others, had much more to be proud of than defensively embarrassed about.

The Yorkton Festival was fun, informative and friendly, and well worth the long voyage to get there. Unlike the

Stratford Film Festival, which tends to be pretentious, high-toned and dull, or the Canadian Film Awards (at Niagara-on-the-Lake), which was cold, bitchy and unpleasant. The Yorkton Festival is run by people with a genuine sense of human interest and hospitality.

In a year when practically all the Canadian film festivals – with the exception of certain programmes at Ottawa's Filmexpo in the National Arts Centre – have been poorly attended, it was heartening to see crowds of over 400 people for the evening screenings (all short subjects under 60 minutes) covering the fields of animation, experimental, documentary, television public affairs and drama, sports and children's films. The Yorkton Festival does not take place because of some pervasive passion throughout the town for movies. (There is one theatre which changes programmes three or four times weekly doing the usual **Jaws-Shampoo-Earthquake** business.) For some, the gains of having a film festival have more to do with politics than culture. Allan Bailey, Yorkton's mayor and leading mortician (he obviously made the old adage about "death and taxes" his financial cornerstone) and his wife, Colleen Bailey (whom a local wag of jaundiced views about the festival called "the driving force behind all this inertia,") are happiest when meeting various ambassadors (representatives from the British and South African embassies showed up this year), and dignitaries such as André Lamy, commissioner of the National Film Board, film director Allan King (if only he hadn't made that blue-movie for television, **Baptizing**) and Larry Hertzog from CTV, among others. Yorkton's minkset didn't exactly clasp Micheline Lanctôt to its bosom. She kept talking in French for one thing, and always seemed dressed-down for every occasion, wearing blue jeans and casual T-shirts. "These film people!" one could almost hear the disapproving whispers of Yorkton's bigger burghers as the week wore on, and McLean and Hofsess kept showing up with progressively rumpled clothes and cheerfully dishevelled mentalities (there was a provincial liquor strike at the time but the adjudicators had discovered that it was only *cheap* booze that was in short supply).

Finally, after a week of splendid eating (any town that is as farm-and-family oriented as Yorkton produces an exceptionally high percentage of good cooks) and steady tipping, the judges made their choices.

As a bow to participatory democracy, the Festival created a new category this year, in which the public voted for "Most popular film by audience selection". The audience chose a National Film Board animated short ignored by the jury, **Who are We?** directed by Zlatko Grgic; Allan King's **Baptizing** was runner-up, with **The Man Who Chose The Bush** coming third.

For the next Festival, in 1977, the organizers intend to advertise in as many film publications as possible. This was the 13th Biennial Festival in Yorkton, and in many ways it was the most exciting and *useful* film festival to be held in Canada in 1975. Obviously one has to have an interest in short films to find this particular Festival valuable, but to my eye the most creative, adventuresome and imaginative work done in films is done in the short-subject field, whether by beginners just starting out or by professionals who have honed their skills to a sharp perfection over many years. Canada's feature film industry, by contrast, suffers from excessive pressures, cynicism, and government interference. Nobody here is trying to make the Great Canadian movie, or a million bucks, or both. Yorkton's Festival shows what talent looks like before it gets jaded, stepped-on, or put through bureaucratic rigmaroles. By 1977, Yorkton promises to have air service, a bookstore, and other cultural amenities, in time for its next Festival. Despite its population size, Yorkton thinks bigger about films than most cities in Canada. □

THE WINNERS

Golden Sheaf:

Man Who Chooses the Bush, produced by Tom Radford, NFB.

Best Documentary:

Man Who Chooses the Bush, produced by Tom Radford, NFB.

Best Cinematography:

Man Who Chooses the Bush, produced by Tom Radford, NFB.

Best Direction:

Man Who Chooses the Bush, produced by Tom Radford, NFB.

Best Amateur:

Metamorphosis, produced by Barry Greenwald, Ontario.

Best Informational:

Who Stole the Quiet Day, produced by Alfred Higgins Productions, California.

Best Television-Public Affairs:

Heritage: Ireland, produced by CTV.

Best Sound:

Heritage: Ireland, produced by CTV.

Best Television Drama:

Baptizing, produced by CBC.

Best Arts:

Life Force, produced by Mellenco Films, Quebec.

Best Experimental:

Dull Day Demolition, produced by Insight Productions, Ontario.

Best Animation:

La Faim: Hunger, produced by NFB.

Best Children's:

Life Times Nine, produced by Insight Productions, Ontario.

Best Nature and Wildlife:

New Channels for Sockeye, produced by NFB.

Best Picture Editing:

With Flying Colors, produced by Insight Productions, Ontario.

Best Promotional:

Hors-Série, produced by Société Radio-Canada, Montreal.

Special Certificates - Honourable Mention

Amateur:

Terror in the Wilderness, produced by Joe Borelli, Florida.

Informational:

A Fight for Breath, produced by NFB.

Experimental:

Haps Hash and the Coloured Coat, produced by Hans Veen, The Netherlands.

Animation:

Exhibition Reel of Student films from Sheridan College, Ontario. Animated films, 1975, recognition for **Titles for the Tenth International Tournée of Animation, Beckoning and Da Da Da.**