

brand names and bland films

by Lois Siegel

It seems that the films selected to be shown at the Canadian Student Film Festival are perhaps more technically competent every year, but they are certainly, for the most part, less imaginative.

One cannot help but wonder what happened to the independent creative filmmakers like Rick Hancox (**Next to Me, House Movie**), who experimented with the study of time and space and human relationships within a space; Eric Huuree (**Under Glass**) – a sophisticated portrayal of a middle-aged woman going crazy in a sterile, modern environment; Veronika Soul (**How the Hell Are You** and **Tales From the Vienna Woods**), films which investigated animation as opposed to most student animation films which merely use the medium; Lorne Marin (**Rhapsody on a Theme from House Movie**), a sensitive study of a street realized through camera dissolves which melt one image into another; Pedro Bonilla (**Vice Versa**), a documentary about a transvestite which was a rough but real exposé or Holly Dale (**Minimum Charge No Cover**).

Since there are more film schools in Canada every year with more emphasis on 'learning' filmmaking, one cannot help but think that perhaps someone must be stressing 'how to operate a camera' rather than 'how to be sensitive about film as a creative art'.

This year, 24 films competed for awards.

A Day Much Like The Others by Sturla Gunnarsson (University of British Columbia) experimented with stop motion. A man was filmed live-action against a black background and then was animated through the use of an optical printer: step-printing and re-printing. The photography was well-composed, the script indicated serious thought, and the film was concise. Although reminiscent of Chris Marker's **La Jetée**, it retained a personality of its own.

Live and Learn by Harriet Pacaud (Algonquin) exuberated life. It may have seemed to make fun of people, and the audience did laugh unrestrainedly at the collage of golden-agers and karate choppers, diet watchers and male gourmand cupcake artists, but the film emphasized active people. Everyone pictured was doing something. Whether the



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viewer finds the activities valid or not is his problem. **Live and Learn** is similar to **Natural Habitat** by American filmmaker Ralph Arlyck. Arlyck assembles the same kind of images and says that his film is not an essay about alienation, but more a kind of ballet about the crazy things we do every day. At the end of Arlyck's film, the viewer sees a group of black children who ask the cameraman what he's doing. Arlyck replies, "I'm a filmmaker." One girl moves toward the camera and questions, "That's your job?"

The filmmaker says, "Yes."

Then, in an unbelieving down tone, the girl reacts with a drawl, "Shit..."

To make a good film about people, a filmmaker has to be perceptive. Harriet Pacaud has made a good film about people and has avoided being self-indulgent, which became the weakness of the film **Under the Lights** by Alan Goluboff (Ryerson). His film included interesting interviews with Toronto area film distributors, filmmakers and film watchers, but then it became less strong as he turned the camera on himself and made rather commonplace comments concerning his feelings about going to movies.

Pizza to Go by George Mihalka and Rodney Gibbons (Concordia) should have received an award for locations and lighting. They used at least 25 original settings, including a real old-time jail, a mexican tavern and one of the best looking men's washrooms seen since Polanski's **When Angels Fall**. And the lighting was superb. Rodney attended Vilmos Zsigmond's workshop in Maine last year and his lighting in the film was immaculate. **Pizza to Go** included commercials that resembled bright-lit television commercials and foggy cloak and dagger scenes which exemplified shady intrigue. Unfortunately, the acting and vocal intonations were far below the achievements of the other technical aspects.

The script for **Bed Movies** by Anthony Southgate (University of British Columbia) was so true that at times it hurt. It could have been entitled **Scenes from a Marriage**. A few new camera angles would have aided the performance.

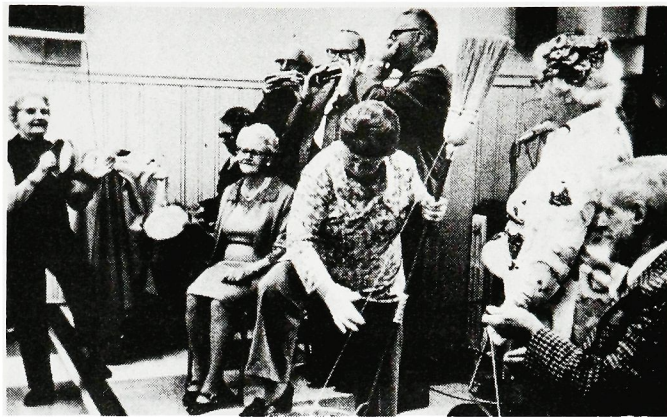
Peter Pan Lunch by David Chud (Sheridan) was a good student movie. The characters were interesting, although the film didn't seem to go anywhere; but perhaps it wasn't intended to go anywhere.

Nine Minutes by Paul Vitols (Carson Graham Secondary School) dealt with nuclear warfare. Paul is a high school student and made a good film for a beginning filmmaker, although his subject matter has already been examined at length. His female actress showed a good deal of potential.

My Pulse Wants to Become Song by Shan Wong (Concordia) was both imaginative and well composed. Dance films are prevalent, but the mixing of the arts (dance and film) is not an easy one. Both Ed Emshwiller (**Chrysalis**) and Maya Deren (**A Study in Choreography for Camera**) are outstanding examples; most others fail. Wong's film holds up. Although a trifle long, his selection of movement and music shows that he has an artistic understanding for filming dance. But why was his film listed under the documentary category?

The festival reeked of television animation: **U.S. Prime**, Allyn Terry (Sheridan) and **Weather Building**, Ross McLaren (Ontario College of Art). One would think that the festival pre-selection jury had never seen this type of experiment. Animation used to be a highlight of the student festival with excellent films from the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. Sheridan College has always produced outstanding work, such as **Da Da Da**, a group effort of two years ago. What happened to animation this year? **A Night in the Movies** by Jim Bescott (Vancouver School of Art) was the only contender this year.

Down Among the Deadmen by Mark Fernley (Concordia) should have won the award for the most unusual film of the



Joy and enthusiasm pervade **Live and Learn**

THE WINNERS

Prix Norman McLaren

A Day Much Like the Others by Sturla Gunnarsson (University of British Columbia)

Best Fiction and Best Directory

Vision House by Rafal Zielinski (Concordia)

Best Documentary

L'âge dort by Denis Boivin (Université Laval)

Best Animation

A Night in the Movies by Jim Bescott (Vancouver School of Art)

Best Experimental

Category dropped in lieu of Entertainment

Best Cinematography

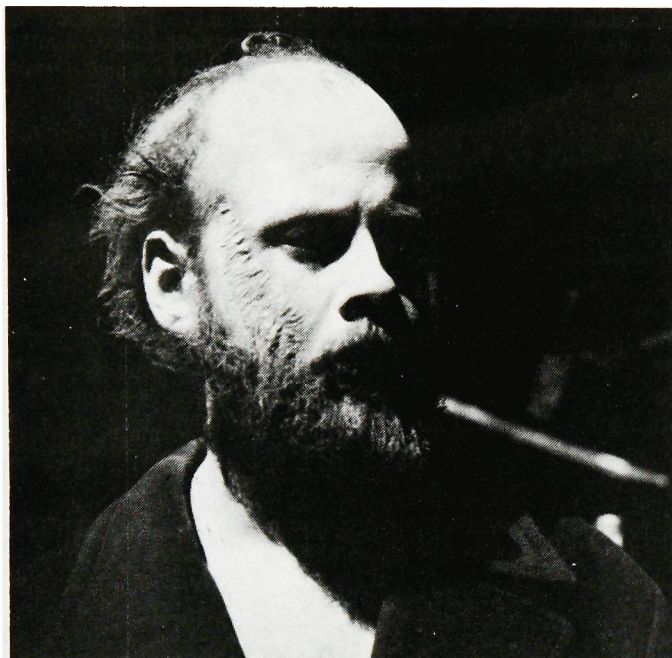
The Prophet Nostradamus by Steve Dowell (York)

Best Entertainment and Best Editing

Live and Learn by Harriet Pacaud (Algonquin)

Best Dialogue

Bed Movies by Anthony Southgate (University of British Columbia)



The make-up fit the mood in **Down Among the Deadmen**

year. Not quite the bar scene from **Star Wars**, it did have it's bizarre personality. The film was commissioned by a rock group to be shown as the band performed their song "Down Among the Deadmen." Although the film is not your usual beginning-middle-end scenario, it did illustrate the song with excellent make-up and effects, and very good camera work.

Vision House by Rafal Zielinski (Concordia) requires special comment. Rafal is a young filmmaker in his early 20's who is constantly directing films with inexhaustible energy. Although he isn't your typical student filmmaker, since **Vision House** was made with a professional cameraman, ACTRA actors and CBC money, Rafal is definitely a feature director contender. Unlike most young filmmakers, Rafal understands both the business and technical aspects of filmmaking. The drama of a would-be-robber who meets a would-be rich lady in an empty real estate house is intended for a television audience. Although not that sophisticated, **Vision House** remains a good television film.

Never Say "Hi" to Strangers by Craig Cottle (Concordia) is a first film by a student filmmaker who had only studied, but not made films before last year. Craig's short film about a frightened little girl was concise and well-presented.

One special presentation during the festival was the 1976 National Student Film Awards (Academy of Motion Picture



Zielinski works with the pros (actress Griffith and cameraman Czernski) to make **Vision House**



Taking a shot in **Pizza to Go**

Arts and Sciences and sponsored by AT & T). These film Awards presented 35 films selected from 300 entries. Top films won \$1000. Curiously enough, four of the five top award winning films were made in California, and curiously enough, at least three of these films included pro-Hollywood photographs or remarks. The films were introduced by a terribly shot film or video of the awards presentation, with Hollywood clips hastily inserted before and between - propaganda plus.

What the Notes Say by Karen Grossman and Richard O'Neill (Adelphi) was a competent documentary about the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. The film was lovely because one watched serious young people adeptly creating music. The film was humorous because one watched a young boy just slightly bigger than the violin he was holding, accomplish quite a difficult line with the exact changes his instructor had just indicated.

Fame by Richard Jeffries and Mark Kirkland (California Institute of the Arts) had no redeeming value. The animation began well and then disintegrated into a mass of un-sensuous, unartistic, cold graphics of famous people and famous words. The film exploited familiar entertainment names and failed to stimulate the imagination.

The Preparatory by Terence Cahalan (University of Southern California) dealt with a rather well-worn subject - a boy in a Catholic boarding school, but the film was probably the best shot, best acted, and best directed film shown during the festival.

We've been through Lindsay Anderson's **If** and Marco Bellocchio's **In the Name of the Father**, but **The Preparatory** doesn't pretend to tell a complete story in 24 minutes. Instead, it tightly sketches a few dramatic scenes of institutional life.

One last remark. It seems that once again, this is the year for the anti-experimental film category. Only two experimental films were pre-selected for the Canadian Student Film Festival. Then the jury dropped the 'Best Experimental Award' in lieu of 'Best Entertainment', of all things. No one seems to know what kind of film should be labeled experimental, and if one doesn't understand, one drops. The Canadian Film Awards completely ignored the Experimental Category this year. What is happening to the creative 'risk' in filmmaking? Ironically enough, the film that won 'Best Entertainment' could be called an experimental documentary. But this is the 20th century, the land of brand names and pre-identified moving algae; even babies in wombs are now given identity numbers. □

Note: One perhaps failed to comment about two of the award winners **L'âge dort** and **The Prophet Nostradamus** because one, perhaps unfortunately, fell asleep during both of these movies.