

toronto's festival of festivals

all that glitters . . .

by gary lamphier

The Festival of Festivals has hit its stride. Strong local support, a solid organizational base, a balanced budget and a secure identity helped to guarantee the success of this year's extravaganza.



photo: John Williamson

Smiles all around for **Divine Madness** star Bette Midler, her agent (right) and Alan Ladd Jr. at the festival

By almost any standard, the 1980 version of Toronto's Festival of Festivals must be considered a success.

Attendance was up by 25,000 over last year's record 105,000, box office tallies reached a heady \$160,000 (50 percent more than '79), attendance, at least on paper, at the expanded, slickly run Trade Forum was on par with last year's successful inaugural event. The quality of the galas and additional premieres was thoroughly respectable, and the annual parade of famous faces continued unabated. In

all, the festival attracted the kind of media coverage reserved for the Stanley Cup playoffs.

No longer struggling for an identity, nor preoccupied with those tiresome verbal wars with Serge Losique, the festival has become an annual focal point for the Canadian feature film industry and thousands of Toronto movie addicts alike.

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As with any event of like proportions, the festival is many things to many people. To serious students of the cinema, the 1980 model revolved around an exhaustive look at the work of Jean-Luc Godard; to neo-punkers it was Sid Vicious and company in the New Music series; to the stargazing Toronto public, it was the divinely charismatic Bette Midler, with a dash of James Coburn, Ellen Burstyn and Sally Kellerman for added colour; to the Canadian Filmmaking Establishment it was a five-day post-mortem examination of last year's \$170 million house party; to boxing fans, it was Bill Marshall and Mordecai Richler going toe to toe; and to all ye who refuse to lose faith in the Canadian film industry, it was the sublime satisfaction of **Mr. Patman**, **Les bons débarras** and **L'homme à tout faire**.

Essentially, though, the festival has two major components: the unadulterated celebration of cinema that is the public entity; and the political in-fighting, lobbying, handshaking and occasional outpouring of anguish that constitutes the Trade Forum, a five-day, \$275-a-head gathering of industry heavyweights. The two events, of course, serve radically different functions and audiences, and this year achieved rather different levels of success.

The 157-film program compiled for the 1980 festival was quite strong on balance, though it lacked some of the excitement generated by last year's entries. There was no equivalent to the **Best Boy** phenomenon that swept the '79 event, for instance, and the timely appraisals of New German cinema and the horror genre programmed a year ago failed to find equally electric encores.

Nevertheless, 1980 had its gems: the enduring popularity of David Overby's Critic's Choice series (and the fine Dutch films that formed part of it); John Katz's politically timely Less is More series, which brought us two of the best of last year's crop of Canadian productions — Micheline Lanctôt's **L'homme à tout faire** and Francis Mankiewicz's **Les bons débarras**; and a host of well-received galas: Bill Marshall's **Mr. Patman**, Universal's **Resurrection**, Polish director Andrzej Wajda's **The Conductor**, Nicolas Roeg's **Bad Timing** (winner of the Labatt's Most Popular Film Award), and the super-charged energy of Bette Midler in **Divine Madness**, an ideal closing gala if ever there was one.

On the down side, disappointment must be registered for two other Canadian entries, Robin Spry's **Suzanne** and Michael Grant's **Head On** (though both had merits: Jennifer Dale's performance in the former and Grant's promising direction in the latter).

In addition, the eight-film Contemporary French Cinema series so disappointed festival director Wayne Clarkson that he plans to scrap subsequent national cinema programs.

And due to logistical problems, a print of **Jaguar**, the much-praised film by Philippine director Lino Brocka, could not be obtained for a scheduled festival screening.

Aside from the above, the only other major problem, ironically, was due to the festival's embarrassment of riches: there were too many films screening simultaneously at too many theatres to allow passholders — the festival's bread and butter — to see them all. Consequently,

this year's highly-successful program of repeat screenings at the Revue Cinema leads Clarkson to believe that a reduced overall program next year (with increased repeats) is the answer.

While the festival struggled to find an adequate form for its cinematic content, the second annual Trade Forum suffered from the same problem in reverse. The enduring impression one retains from this year's 10-seminar installment is that, contrary to the film program, form far outshone content.

To be sure, the trade sessions were slickly and efficiently staged, and by all accounts well-run. Topics were carefully chosen and panels were reasonably balanced. Official attendance, though reportedly hurt by the U.S. Screen Actors Guild (SAG) strike, was roughly the same as last year. And most of the key players were there.

Despite all of that, very little of real value transpired. The same people repeated the same tired things, assuming the same rigid positions and dredging up issues that are by now clichés of the Canadian experience: nationalism vs. internationalism, culture vs. commerce, art vs. the profit motive, star power vs. home-grown talent; all of it paraded before the audience like so much cattle at an auction, garbed in rhetoric that is by now painfully familiar. We'd heard it all before.

To assess what did — or didn't — happen at the 1980 Trade Forum, it is perhaps necessary to establish a context. As everyone in the industry has by now been told, 1980 is the Year of the Shakedown.

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The stratospheric spiritual heights reached at last year's Forum — a short 12 months ago, though it seems an epoch — have given way to internal bickering, disappointment, loss of investor confidence and a sobering atmosphere of re-evaluation. The industry has witnessed the departure of Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) chief Michael McCabe, rumblings of policy shifts with the crowning of his successor, André Lamy, and promised belt-tightening at both the Secretary of State and the provincial Securities Commissions.

But the epicenter of this prolonged earthquake undoubtedly occurred at the Cannes Film Festival in May, when Canada's critics dumped on many of the films produced during last year's explosion. Put differently, the pie received in last year's sky was unceremoniously shoved in the industry's face.

Perhaps it was, as some say, an overreaction to the excessive expectations nurtured by last year's hype. Perhaps it was unfair generalization based on a few bad films. Or perhaps, as the critics argue, Canada's films at Cannes were just plain stinko.

Regardless of the answer, it was clear at the beginning of Trade Forum '80 that industry spokesmen were still smarting from the scathing attacks in the Canadian press. "Last year we were talking about boom," recalled CFDC chairman Michel Vennat at an opening luncheon. "This year, if one reads the Toronto press at least, we're talking of gloom."


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Since many of the panelists (and audience members, for that matter) played central roles in the production frenzy that overtook the industry in '79, it shouldn't have been too surprising that some panel discussions were simply used as springboards for attack against *The Enemy*. The old *Us vs. Them* shuffle.

The press got theirs, the "fascistic cultural imperialists" at the Council of Canadian Filmmakers (CCFM) got theirs, the monopolistic exhibition chains and their U.S.-based accomplices drew heavy fire, the CFDC board of directors was given a blast, and a few subversives continued to hound the dealmakers — the producers themselves.

That isn't to say that constructive exchanges didn't take place. Indeed, some incisive probing and realistic proposals were aired: witness producer Robert Lantos's push for "equalization measures" to aid Canada's beleaguered independent distributors; casting agent Lynn Kinney and producer Stanley Colbert's call for increased CCA incentives for the low-budget filmmaker; producer Stephen Roth's suggestion to encourage production during the traditionally-slow first quarter by altering the CCA, and financier/sales rep David Roffey's proposal that residency be a factor in determining whether or not a performer qualifies as Canadian under the point system.

But these were exceptions. Too often, key points seemed simply to vaporize and disappear without a trace. (Unless, of course, they materialized on the notebooks of Ian McLaren and company from the Secretary of State's office.)

As Clarkson puts it, the Trade Forum is meant to annually "evaluate, assess and project conditions in the Canadian film industry." And as one Forum organizer adds, "The purpose of the Trade Forum isn't necessarily to find new things all the time, but to discuss what's been going on."

As a reflection of "what's been going on," then, the name-calling, sectoral rivalries and dogmatic bickering that took place at this year's Forum was dead on.

While official figures put attendance at between 375 and 425, seldom more than one-third that number attended the sessions. In fact, a spokesman says only about 100 people purchased Forum passes, with another 30 or so buying daily passes. That means the bulk of the official attendance was comprised of press people and other festival guests.

At a cost of about \$200,000, most of it paid by various government bodies, the Trade Forum seems a rather extravagant way to re-hash old news. Perhaps smaller groups focusing on the pragmatic rather than broadly general issues might serve the interest of the industry more effectively. Witness this year's meeting of provincial and municipal film officers at the Forum.

In the final analysis, though, it's the viability and vitality of the Canadian film industry that will determine the Forum's fate. If Jerry Rappoport, Arnie Huberman, Andy Vajna, Jack Freedman, Bill Marshall, David Perlmutter, Stephen Roth, Jack Gray, and Syd Banks continue to have something in common, presumably they will find the opportunities for exchange afforded them by the Trade Forum useful.