

ready to go professional

It is at the student festivals that we see the filmmakers of tomorrow. Thus we have given considerable space to this year's Tenth Annual Canadian Student Film Festival; the competence of its contenders and the professional quality of competing films shed bright promise on the Canadian film scene.

by Paul Vitols



Dory Dainton, the leading actress in Scott Barrie's sensitive portrait *Gracie* that won both the Best Director Award and the Norman McLaren Award for Best Film

This year's Canadian Student Film Festival, was held at the Banff School of Fine Arts. Its director, Serge Losique, was busy at the World Festival in Montreal and unable to attend. Festival coordinator Lyse Beaulieu organized and operated the student event in his stead, and, despite a number of misfortunes precipitated mainly by the Air Canada strike, produced a high-quality festival that was enjoyed by all those who attended.

Eighty-six films were submitted to Montreal's Conservatory of Cinematographic Art from across Canada this year, of which 40 were selected for competition in Banff, compared to 76 submitted and 24 selected last year. This year's films, besides being greater in number, were of a generally higher quality than last year's, both technically and creatively. The three nights of festival screenings, averaging three to three and a half hours each, were consistently provocative and entertaining. It is ironic that in this year of substantial improvement and advancement of student effort the festival itself was smaller, in turnout and in prizes; for of the 36 students competing only six arrived, and those who won prizes received smaller cash awards than those who won last year.

The general excellence of the films no doubt posed problems for the jury, this year comprising Fil Fraser, film producer at Alberta's Motion Picture Corporation; Louis Hobson, freelance film critic for the *Albertan*; Peter Jones, filmmaker at the NFB, Vancouver; and Don Campbell, film instructor at the South Alberta Institute of Technology. Jury president James Card, and jurors Jean-Claude Lord and Marcel Martin were absent due to the air strike. The jurors attended the festival screenings, made the presentations on awards night, and were available for comment at the party held after the award presentations. In this way the filmmakers were able to obtain criticism and advice from its members, which has not happened in the past.

Part of the reason for the jury's greater accessibility was the fact that there were so few filmmakers present. The air strike evidently made transportation to the festival too difficult for the majority of competitors. The resulting group was therefore small (small enough to fit into Ms. Beaulieu's room for intimate parties on three of the festival's four nights), and very friendly.

The awards were presented in the usual manner: a category would be announced, the winning film would be projected, and the winner would go to the stage to accept his prize. However, since many of the winning filmmakers were absent, representative students from the winners' schools had to accept the prizes in their place. Charles Zamaria of York University went to the stage four times, all for films other than his own.

Prize night started with seven craft awards of \$100. Four were originally intended, but the films were of sufficient caliber to warrant more. Best Sound no doubt would have been awarded, but the jury felt that the quality of projected sound was not good enough to make a judgement. All films suffered some high-frequency distortion, and, some films, from occasional out-of-focus projection.

Best Editing was given to Forrest Taylor of the University of B.C. for his 2-minute fiction film **The Return**. This, I feel, was a mistake on the jury's part. They were somehow

infatuated with the film's adequate, but simple and un spectacular, cross-cutting of two lines of action, and an only slightly convincing car crash sequence. Many other films were more deserving of this award, particularly the films **Le Percepteur**, a 14-minute drama by Jean Fontaine which featured a thoughtfully cross-cut story intertwining three separate narrative lines, **Entymology**, a 5-minute experimental story by Roger LeMoynes, in which cutting was used for particularly eerie and startling effects, and Zamaria's 17-minute film **Islanders**, a highly polished documentary in which sometimes-synchronous, sometimes-divergent picture and sound tracks were effectively juxtaposed.

Islanders is worthy of further mention because it was in strong contention for Best Documentary. It dealt with a small island community in Toronto and its struggle against the city to prevent its eradication and replacement by parkland. Often beautifully shot and cut, the film's theme transcended its subject and made a strong point about personal and communal rights, and integrity in the face of bureaucratic indifference. The film deserved more attention than it received from the jury.

Best Score was awarded to Jean Fontaine for Nicole Fortin's flute and piano music in **Le Percepteur**. The award was deserved; the film's sparing use of music was accurate and evocative.

Best Screenplay went to Maxwell Berdowski of Concordia for his 5-minute light comedy **Conversation**. Again I was disappointed in the jury's choice, for a screenplay is certainly a film's fundamental creative step, defining its scope and all-important thematic content. Indeed, the jury's primary admonition to the filmmakers after the festival was that much more labor ought to be devoted to scripts. No doubt their choice reflected their emphasis on concise, streamlined scripting, but theme, originality, and naturalness are surely important, and **Conversation** was clever rather than profound. The meeting of an English businessman and a French ballerina in a disco was handled mechanically and their conversation, and the film, progressed at rapid-transit pace to a forgettable conclusion. The actors spouted lines which were terse and occasionally funny; the film was a piece of clockwork. Two other films with superior screenplays were **Gracie**, written by Scott Barrie and David Rain, which was similarly tightly scripted but packed a much more substantial payload of meaning, and **Not Another Love Story**, written by John Bradshaw, which combined compelling conflicts with humorous and sensitive characterization.

Best Cinematography went to Louis Arthur of Algonquin College for Denis Vachon's 23-minute fiction **Préméditation**. **Préméditation** was the only film at the festival which could truly be called overtly intellectual. If anyone has the right to experiment with film and analyze unusual or intellectual topics, students do, and I was surprised that there weren't more films directed specifically at the audience's higher faculties. In **Préméditation** the protagonist received instructions to assassinate a man, whom the protagonist then followed and, at the end, killed. There was little synchronous sound in the film, except the shooting, which was rendered in sync. The soundtrack was occupied with two separate levels of narration: the protagonist's narration of his actions, and an unknown narrator's questions posed to the audience regarding what it saw on the screen. When Vachon was asked later who had ordered the killing and why, he replied that he

Paul Vitols had a film entered in last year's Student Festival, and was able to attend this year's fest as the first stop on a trip around the world.

didn't know and didn't care; he was concerned with the audience's attitude toward the events in the film. And, in accordance with the film's abstract nature, Arthur's black-and-white cinematography was objective and austere. The film, although it had technical faults (some scenes lacked contrast and the print was unclear), it was competently shot, and quite striking in parts. The killing was particularly memorable; the assassin shot his victim in an empty warehouse-like building, which was rendered as two plain, contrasting rectangles — the interior, and its large, bright doorway — a bleak, angular, climactic location for this noetic film. Honorable mention for cinematography went to Roman Podzyhun for Anthony D'Andrea's drama **Nomads**. Podzyhun was in demand as a cinematographer at York, and worked on a number of films. His black-and-white work in **Nomads** demonstrated expertise in difficult situations, such as night shooting, and lighting deep, complicated sets with numerous sources.

Once again, I feel **Not Another Love Story** was overlooked. Michael Kennedy's cinematography of this black-and-white film was virtually flawless, all the more impressive a feat considering its 56-minute length — the longest in the festival. The shots were always sharp, steady, well-lit, well-composed, and appropriately contrasty. As for color cinematography, nothing was shot better than **Islanders**, with its many technically clean and evocative images, which are especially difficult to achieve in a documentary.

Patricia Nember of York won Best Actress for her performance in Oscar Zambrano's 30-minute drama **Back From Paradise**. She had the most dynamic female role of the festival, and played it well, weathering the cliché and banal portions of the script with skill. For although the dialogue was occasionally witty and the characters had charm, Zambrano could not over come the intrinsic triteness of his boy-meets-girl, boy-lives-with-girl, boy-loses-girl story. Still, Nember's

prize was earned, and was particularly remarkable because she had had no previous acting experience in either theater or film.

Paul Fitzgerald took Best Actor for his fine portrayal of a slightly confused young TV-news interviewer in **Not Another Love Story**. Fitzgerald was funny, sensitive, and irresistibly human in his performance. His nuances of voice, gesture, and expression were subtle, and revealed great talent. He was a pleasure to watch; the jury and audience were unanimous in their approval.

Four prizes of \$250 were allotted to the best films of the four competing categories: animation, experimental, documentary, and fiction.

Best Animation was awarded to **Madhouse Rag**, a 3-minute rendition of the **Sorcerer's Apprentice** idea by Dev Ramsaran of Sheridan College. The film featured celluloid animation of great technical and artistic sophistication: an entire living-room sprang to life after its occupants left. Characters and backgrounds were well-drawn; action was depicted in several planes simultaneously; character distortion in movement was of professional quality. Ramsaran is obviously a highly competent animator. However, Horace Lapp's piano score seemed weak at points, and the idea is an old one. Honorable mention was given to Carole Trépanier's 1-1/2-minute film **Child's Play**, a brief piece of what appeared to be rotoscoping composed of pastel colors and nursery music.

Ignored (or possibly disqualified) by the jury was **Heads & Tails**, a fully professional-looking 3-minute animation by Ida Eva Zielinska of Concordia. Some of the film's polish was due to the fact it was shot professionally with 35mm equipment. The writing was crisp: a facetious analysis of society's "heads" (thinkers) and "tails" (doers), and the narration was clean and perfectly timed. The film was marred only by its credits, which were rather pretentiously super-



John Hillcoat's **The Finger**, the story of a free-living, disembodied finger

posed on an image of Zielinska's face.

Also worthy of mention is John Hillcoat's **The Finger**. It was the only entry from a secondary school (and about the best entry from the west coast), and, although it exhibited elements of high-school humor and borrowings from Monty Python, it achieved a comparatively high degree of success. The story of a free-living, disembodied finger became a rough account of a creation myth and theogony, with crazy, nutshell encapsulation of many world problems thrown in. The film appeared to have originated from a comic strip, and in its coarse way was funnier than many of the other comedies at the festival.

There were several good experimental films at this year's festival, which is a substantial improvement over last year's. The category winner was **L'Instant**, a 5-minute black-and-white film by Andjela Milosavljevic of Concordia. The film was beautiful in intent and execution — filmed poetry. Milosavljevic depicted a girl in the time it took for a struck match to burn down. The girl forlornly watched the delicate flame in front of her mirror, her emotion revealed by a series of silent, musically-accompanied scenes of her experiencing solitary anguish. In the intercut scenes she paced, wept, stared out through her curtain at the moving street. The indefinable wave of feeling that moved the girl was communicated; the flame died; the instant passed. Film is a difficult medium in which to represent emotion, as opposed to plot, and Milosavljevic's unusual film succeeded.

An honorable mention was given to Suzanne Naughton's 6-minute montage **Mondo Punk**. Punk costume and behavior were cut to music by the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, and the film did not flinch from showing self-mutilation. The film was generally well-cut but suffered from weak transitions between songs.

Entymology was a strong contender. LeMoyne told a brief, bizarre tale of an insignificant man who wrote an autobiographical tome, mailed it to a publisher, and shot himself. The manuscript was lost and the lady upstairs accidentally cut herself when she heard the gunshot. The story was narrated with disquieting casualness, and the film was faintly sinister. The man was played well by Michael Riggio, who had two very experimental films of his own in the festival.

Best Documentary was shared by Michael Kennedy of Ryerson for **Jim & Muggins Tour Toronto** and Robert Boyd of Simon Fraser University for **Labyrinth**. **Jim & Muggins** was something of a novelty; in a typically relaxed, informal style, Kennedy showed a series of scenes of his ex-roommate Jim, with his bull terrier Muggins, describing various Toronto landmarks. Jim discussed the sites and his personal history with unassuming, ad-libbed humor, adding irrelevant and funny facts about his dog. Shot by John Bradshaw, the film demonstrated the technical facility of this Ryerson team. Whether the film ought to have been awarded Best Documentary is another matter.

Labyrinth was entered as a fiction film. The jury changed its category and awarded it. The film was actually a 23-minute promotional film for Alpha Cine lab of Vancouver. Stephen Miller effectively played a brash, know-nothing young film director who insisted on escorting his film through all its laboratory work. I learned a considerable amount about the machinations of a film lab, but it wasn't worth the crass suggestions about Alpha's courteous, responsible service.

A superior alternative would have been **Islanders**, or Cathy Barbalinardo's 13-minute documentary **The Mud Dabbler**. Some people at the festival criticized the film for being too cute, too commercial, but it was effective in that the winsomeness of its sculptress subject and her creations showed through strongly, and the film was technically clean and very well organized. I became absorbed in the formation of clay figures before my eyes, and could not help liking the film.

A worthy, if flawed, effort was made by Christopher Why-not of Queens College with **Sheila**, a 15-minute film about a mentally retarded woman. It was a touching film; Sheila's personality was developed well, and one could not help feeling admiration for the woman with whom Sheila was staying at the time of shooting. Unfortunately, technical problems got in the way: focus and color balance, and a shooting ratio of 2.5 to 1. Why-not did a good job with the material.

Best Fiction was won by Anthony D'Andrea for **Nomads**. The story of a young trucker haunted by the image of a girl, whom he later meets at a truck stop and pursues, ran into

The Winners

BEST EDITING

The Return, Forrest Taylor (director), University of B.C.

BEST SCORE

Le percepteur, Jean Fontaine (director), Cégep de Matane

BEST ACTOR

Not Another Love Story, Paul Fitzgerald (actor),
Ryerson Polyt. Institute

BEST ACTRESS

Back from Paradise, Patricia Nember (actress),
York University

BEST SCREENPLAY

Conversation, Maxwell Berdowski (director),
Concordia University

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY

Premeditation, Louis Arthur (cameraman),
Algonquin College

honorary mention

Nomads, York University

BEST DIRECTOR

Gracie Scott Barrie, Conestoga College

BEST EXPERIMENTAL

L'Instant, Andjela Milosavljevic, Concordia University
honorary mention — not unanimous

Mondo Punk, Suzanne Naughton, Ryerson Polyt. Institute

BEST ANIMATION

Madhouse Rag, Dev Ramsaran, Sheridan College
honorary mention

Child's Play, Carole Trepanier, University of B.C.

BEST DOCUMENTARY

Jim & Muggins Tour Toronto, Michael Kennedy,
Ryerson Polyt. Institute

BEST DOCUMENTARY

Labyrinth, Bob Boyd, Simon Fraser University

BEST FICTION

Nomads, Anthony D'Andrea, York University

NORMAN McLAREN AWARD

FICTION Gracie, Scott Barrie, Conestoga College



Fred Frame's *It Beats Selling Pencils*, a contestant at Banff

some terribly corny moments, but also showed a certain sensitivity of theme and some genuinely good drama. D'Andrea went the way of most student filmmakers and bit off more than he could convincingly chew, but William Finley made an admirable hero, and the subtle equation of the trans-Canada highway with the road of life was well-presented. However, several other films were at least as eligible.

A film which was generally either disliked or ignored was G. Scott LaBarge's *The Hungry and the Hunted*, a 40-minute journey into squalor and utter moral corruption. Its protagonist, played believably by Tom Joekin, was a gun-runner and small-time hitman who was duped into doing an important execution for a pittance. In the interim there were long scenes of his seamy apartment life, and preparations for the big job, strongly reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. There was also an excellent scene with a girl addict whom the protagonist fumblingly, hopelessly, reached out for, but who was in too much of a stupor to pay attention. In bitter, futile anger the protagonist raped the girl, who retaliated by spitting into his sleeping face and vandalizing his bathroom. The film exuded hopelessness, its protagonist a lonely coward destined for oblivion. With slightly more originality and considerable tightening, the film could have been excellent.

Other films worth consideration were Milosavljevic's *Avoir chaud aux pieds....*, a 10-minute encounter between a girl and her ex-boyfriend's friend, who tries to cheer her up and goes so far as to do a strip-tease, and *La vie heureuse des poissons rouges* by Nikola Curcin, a colorful 7-minute story of a writer who submits to sexual blackmail, waiting for his woman to give him some "inspiration."

Best Director and the \$1000 Norman McLaren Award for best film were given to Scott Barrie for his sensitive 14-minute drama *Gracie*. An elderly woman, played skilfully by Dory Dainton, watched fearfully from her window each time the local grocer delivered food and knocked persistently (hopefully?) at her door. He would set the groceries down and

slowly walk away. Diligently, Gracie made herself a dress, in preparation for the occasion when she would finally open her door to the grocer. One night the man knocked, and we saw Gracie standing, ready, in her dress. She opened the door and allowed the man in; their conversation was warm and relaxed; her fears were unfounded. The man stayed to tea, and even listened to some music and suggested they dance. However, with a well-timed, painful cut, Barrie brings us back to reality: Gracie sits alone, frightened and ashamed in her new dress, and the knocking goes on. Slowly, the man once again sets down his groceries and walks into the night. Barrie, in association with his cinematographer Raymond Lam, showed a clean style with excellent attention to detail. Gracie's caged bird was used tastefully, as were the various artifacts in her house which were occasionally cut to. The film was succinct and poignant. Barrie, a third year student at Conestoga College, obviously has a good command of the medium.

Best Director could also have gone to Graeme Campbell of Concordia for his 16-minute film *Bye Now*. The film was unique; an incredibly brash Montrealer bulled and cheated his way through a chaotic night, disrupting every other character's life in passing. Campbell stated that he wanted to create a character who was even more unlikeable at the end than he was at the beginning, and he succeeded. Campbell's style is faintly Altmanesque: he excels at scenes of confusion — everyone talking at once, several actions occurring simultaneously — which is difficult to do well, and rare in a student festival, where depicted events tend to be single and linear. Hence, although aspects of the film itself could be questioned, its directorial style is worthy.

My greatest disappointment at the festival was the comparative failure of *Not Another Love Story*. This excellent film was absorbing and amusing to watch. Some people complained that the film used too many long shots, but both the content and the structure of the film warranted them. The hero's life evolved from entrapment with a nagging girlfriend at the outset, to his freedom and good fortune with a far more interesting companion at the end, and the visual style of the film exemplified this process: long, static shots at the beginning, changing to more free, dynamic camerawork by the end. Also, Paul Fitzgerald allowed Bradshaw to do whatever he thought necessary, because his actor was competent. Indeed, Bradshaw himself was deficient in no aspect of his work. The script was witty, yet plausible, and the directing was outstanding. It is difficult to say how much of the actors' business originated in improvisation, but Fitzgerald in particular was very realistic in his stuttering pursuit of numerous conversational cul-de-sacs, and in his other flawed, true-to-life business. This was a bold step when compared to the cut-and-dried, straight-line dialogue of most films. Bradshaw made a fine film, and it is unfortunate that the festival jury did not acknowledge someone who is so close to mastery of his craft.

I have devoted considerable space to this year's student film festival because the films were of a high quality — at least as high as many professional films being made in Canada — and because this decade's students will be next decade's professionals: the potential objects of Canadian public apathy or adulation. Most of this year's contenders are ready for the market; it is too bad that, by and large, the market is not ready for them.