

filmexpo

Filmexpo, the Canadian Film Institute's annual festival of cinematic delights, was down to eighteen feature films this year — less than half of last year's total. Lack of finances was as usual, the problem. A drastically reduced grant by the Secretary of State's department from over \$40,000 last year to this year's \$20,000 necessitated a move from the Scotch and water National Arts Centre to the popcorn and potato chips Towne Cinema. I always was partial to popcorn anyway. The length of the festival was reduced also from thirteen days to seven. So things were a little less festive this year. The buoyant optimism of last year was absent, but in its place a more realistic and probably sounder attitude.

Wayne Clarkson, the co-ordinator of this year's Filmexpo, feels that the festival was a success in spite of its more modest proportions. Apart from the opening night, when Bunuel's *The Spectre of Liberty* attracted an overflow crowd, coming by tickets was no problem. Even though the crowds are small, he hopes that over a period of years Filmexpo will build up a substantial following. They're already thinking about next year's festival, which will be a major retrospective festival — if they get the money.

Canadian films were one of the casualties of this year's reduced format. Last year's Filmexpo presented ten — five each from English and French Canada. This year there were only three, all from English Canada. Mr. Clarkson made it clear that the absence this year of French-Canadian films was not due to any lack of effort on their part. The films they wanted were simply not available, most being tied up in the prestigious American film festivals with which Filmexpo has to compete.

The three Canadian films this year were Jack Darcus' *The Wolf-Pen Principle*, Morley Markson's *Monkeys in the Attic* and Patrick Loubert's *125 Rooms of Comfort*. For the latter two films it was their first public showing in Canada, the first anywhere for *125 Rooms of Comfort*.

Vladimir Valenta, a former Czech actor who appeared recently in the well-known Czech film *Closely Watched Trains*, is the star and main attraction of *The Wolf-Pen Principle*. This is not to downgrade the other participants in the film, but Valenta is just so good, capable of communicating so much with so little apparent effort, that he overshadows everyone else.

The film explores a different type of character than has usually been the case in recent Canadian films, which are mainly youth-oriented. Valenta plays the part of a middle-aged, middle-class, paunchy husband and bread-winner who is trapped in his job, spied on by his elderly in-laws, and at a loss as to what he should do. He is drawn to the wolf cages at the local zoo, identifying with their plight. There he meets a young Indian boy, played by Laurence Brown, who is also attracted to the wolves, but for different reasons. Eventually they decide to free the wolves, but they will not leave their cages. But the attempted freeing of the wolves sets off a chain of events which ironically destroys the bars of Valenta's own cage one by one. He is arrested, and then released as a harmless nut, he loses his job, his wife is killed, and her parents die. At the end of the film Valenta is free, but alone.

The plan of the film is good, and up to a point it works, largely due to the tremendous sympathy Valenta can arouse through his acting. But there is a lack of imagination or perhaps a lack of sophistication in the handling of the film.

The basic idea of entrapment is worked over and over again without sufficient variation to prevent it from becoming trite. Perhaps it's possible for an actor to be too good — the film lacks any counterbalance to Valenta's expert acting. Canadian acting tends to be more natural and less polished than European acting, so that Valenta sometimes seems out of place with other elements of the film. But it's still an interesting film, and well worth seeing.

It might console our nationalistic feelings to know that not all good film actors come from somewhere else. Appearing in both *Monkeys in the Attic* and *125 Rooms of Comfort* is Jackie Burroughs, who could overwhelm anyone with her incredible vitality. But she has talent too.

Unfortunately not many of the other creators of *125 Rooms of Comfort* share Jackie Burroughs' level of talent. A washed-up night club comic (Les Barker) ends up at a hotel whose new co-owner has just left a mental institute. The comic wanders around displaying his numerous hang-ups, while the new co-owner eventually ends up in drag and gets beaten up by the local greasers. This and a couple of other things are apparently supposed to say something about our screwed-up, brutal society. But not, I'm afraid, very much. We simply are not made to care about the characters, so that what happens to them is never a matter of great concern to the viewer. The two separate stories of the comic and the co-owner never do come together satisfactorily. It seems that the makers of this film attempted too much. Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.

And now for Morley Markson's latest mind-game, *Monkeys in the Attic*, a film about five people who spend the night together in a mansion. I did not enjoy the film, but I'm quite willing to concede that this is more likely my deficiency than the film's. It's the old bourgeois desire to know what's going on, a deficiency which many other viewers will likely share. I suppose one test of a good film or a good anything is that it is disturbing. There aren't the usual things to hang on to — just when you think that something is starting to make sense, it ceases to. We are never allowed to forget that this is a performance, not reality. And that's disturbing. Or as Robert Fothergill puts it in his article on the film in *Cinema Canada* no. 16, it's an attempt to render hysteria.

But do you have to be hysterical to render hysteria? Communication still has to take place somehow, if audiences are going to continue, as I think everyone hopes they do. It's a problem — how to portray meaningless behaviour in a meaningful way, but one which I do not think this film solves sufficiently. Still, it's an extremely intriguing film. Henri Fiks' cinematography is superb, and the actors are very good. Ultimately perhaps appreciation of this film should be like that of a painting or music, simply taking it as it is, without trying to hang some meaning on it.

Ottawa's Towne theatre, which housed Filmexpo, has been doing a lot of good things lately, and making money at it too, which is a pleasant if rare coincidence. Currently they are following the lead of some theatres in Montreal and Toronto in showing a different film each night. Most of these are recent classics which attract both the film buff and the guy (or girl) who just wants to see a good film. It's a good sign for future film festivals and Canadian films that they are doing so well, as this appeals in large part to a similar audience. It shows that the people are out there. Slowly they're finding their way inside. □

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