

**michael spencer**

# **a vote of thanks**

The scenario has run itself out and Michael Spencer will step down on May 31 as the executive director of the Canadian Film Development Corporation. If one sometimes felt ambivalent about the way he did his job, there was always respect for the person, Michael Spencer. Peter Pearson captures these feelings in his tribute.

by Peter Pearson



The Winnipeg days: Kirwan Cox, Tom Shandel, Michael Spencer, Linda Beath, André Lamy, Sandra Gathercole, Len Klady.

Michael Spencer is going to have to cough up his own story, before any accurate appraisal of him and his contribution to Canadian film history can be made.

So much of what he is, and has done, remains cloaked behind that affable, gracious exterior. He has always been the very model of a modern major general. Too discreet.

Once, in Winnipeg, during those mid-winter, mid-Seventies gatherings, he lamely offered that he was fully behind proposals for a quota and levy. Some wag piped up from the audience, "Yes, ten years behind."

Certainly he has been a lightning rod for criticism. Everybody's had a go at Spencer and the Film Development Corporation: Budge Crawley's fulminations, Sandra Gathercole's End-of-the-World invocations, that tag-team of Canadian good taste, Knelman-Fulford's lamentations.

For ten years, he's drawn much of the fire, like a good-natured school teacher, sitting above a dunking stool at the neighborhood fair. From Vancouver to the Gaspé, he's sat in on hand-wringing sessions about the future of the Canadian film industry, bearing the brunt of many an attack. And offering in return a polished say-nothing in his bureaucratized that even a Delphic oracle would have a hard time deciphering.

And yet, it's probably worth flashing back ten years, to the days when CBC-NFB had all the bats and balls, and would not let anybody else play. To say that Canada had a moribund film industry was probably overstating the case. There were four possibilities: the Board, television, Hollywood or London.

Somebody must be given some credit for the distance we have travelled these past ten years. Certainly, no agency — other than the CFDC — has moved us forward. The National Film Board, that beached whale of an institution, still seems marooned somewhere in 1946. The CBC, despite announced intentions with each licence renewal, has offered primarily lip-service to its obligations.

And yet, there are now major tax advantages, co-production agreements, definitions of 'Canadian film', immigration restrictions, and on and on. It is now possible for some to exist as independent filmmakers.

Michael Spencer has been at the centre of each of those initiatives. They would not have gone forward without his support and backing. We now have a feature industry that spends over \$20 million, a commercial and industrial film section that is viable on its own terms, and an emerging television capacity, in both the private and public sectors.

Meanwhile, it's been a ten-year industry-wide objective to sort out Spencer's head for him. We all know, for example, that he had been chugging up to Ottawa through five Secretaries of State — Lamontagne, Lamarsh, Pelletier, Faulkner and now Roberts — whispering his 'on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hands' into their ears. The exercise has been for everyone to put his or her words into Spencer's whispers.

To this day, no one is really sure that Spencer has heard, or passed on any of the messages. And yet... there's Millard Roth at the Festival of Festivals, muttering quietly away with Spencer: here's Perlmutter at Banff in private confab... Everyone graciously received.

Sifting through the entrails — the CFDC's Annual Report — one can scarcely discern any digestion of these thought-manipulations. If the annual report is meant to influence government, it's certainly the bland leading the bland.

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With inflation, the CFDC budget is now about one-half of what it was in 1968. Consider, for example, that the National Film Board's budget for *this year* is greater than the total budget of the CFDC's ten year history.

But then consider what the CFDC, eroded budget and all, has achieved. My own ten favorite films the CFDC has participated in are: (in no particular order) *Kamouraska*, *Lies My Father Told Me*, *Les Ordres*, *Goin' Down the Road*, *Married Couple*, *Deux Femmes en Or*, *Rowdyman*, *Réjeanne Pado-vanni*, *Duddy Kravitz*..... and maybe even, *Paperback Hero*.

Now try and name ten Film Board titles — any ten. That little exercise illustrates as clearly as any the degree of evolution we have experienced. We now have a history, several notable achievements behind us, and even the frail hope for a future.

For better or for worse, we have also bust that confining mould of Canadian 'good taste'. Over the ten years, we've had our crop of skin flicks, horror films, and, on occasions, tough political dramas — films that scarcely existed before the CFDC. It's given impetus to such diverse careers as Claude Fournier, David Cronenberg and Denys Arcand. None of these filmmakers would have evolved without the CFDC's presence.

One of the remarkable documents of Canadian film history is the Hansard of the Standing Committee on Broadcasting, Film, and Assistance to the Arts, the day Michael Spencer doubletalks benumbed MPs about why the government is investing in pornography, to their considerable displeasure.

But then, displeasure with the CFDC and Spencer has been an endemic condition of the past ten years. In part, it reflects the Canadian Wrangle: East vs. West, French vs. English, nationalist vs. continentalist — this contumacious bicker that's miring us all in the debate over the future of the country. Our degree of frustration with Spencer probably is an accurate litmus test of our dissatisfaction with the country.

Like our political leaders, he has often been accused of being completely devoid of vision. He once said, "I like the job. If only I didn't have to look at the films." Certainly he has contributed to some of the most unwatchable films ever made in this country.

But beyond that, he has also contributed to our forced evolution. He husbanded limited resources, and, on the whole, spent them wisely. He participated in the debate, and encouraged it forward. He was accessible to all and beholden to none.

As an industry we now have confidence in our ability to produce, direct, distribute and exhibit films that will attract a public, make a buck, reflect a nation, and stimulate an audience. All without those dreaded stepmothers, the CBC and the NFB. It wasn't like that ten years ago.

To Michael Spencer, we all owe a significant vote of thanks. He stood and weathered the storms, kept the doors open and the dialogues possible, allowed the difficult films to be made and pushed that they be seen.

Now, it's his turn to fess up. Ninety percent of his life has been behind closed doors. He should let us in on his life as a magazine loader for Budge Crawley, as head of security at the Film Board, as ongoing dauphin to Secretaries of State. He's probably too discreet to tell what happened when John Roberts went into cabinet with a lion of a film policy, and emerged with kitty litter. But he has a yarn to tell. And we're all interested.

A gracious man, he has served us all honorably. □