

the best of the nfb?

by Gene Waltz

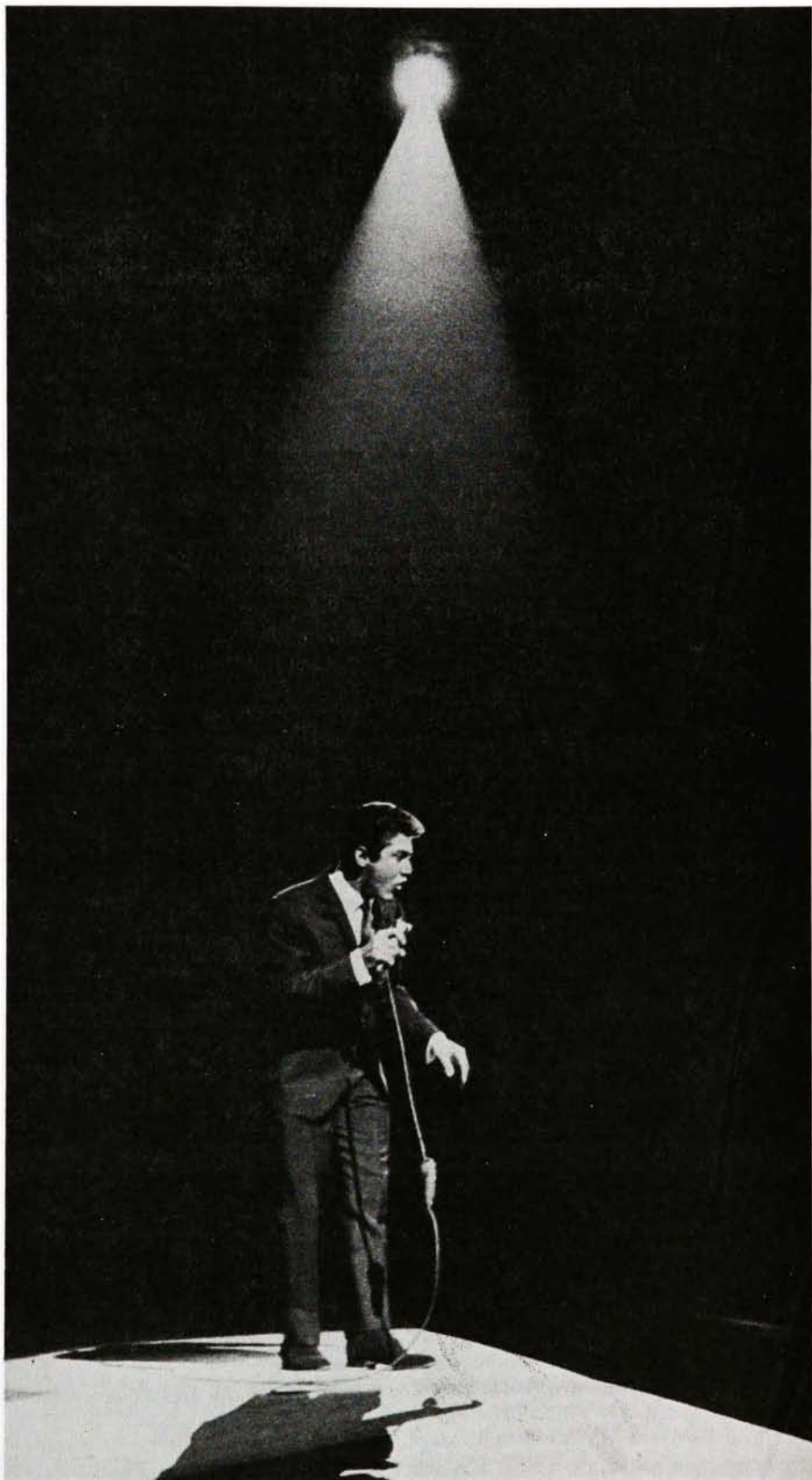
The National Film Board of Canada will be forty years old in 1979. The letters NFB are as recognizable in Canada as almost any other three letter groupings. Abroad the NFB has enjoyed a growing reputation, highlighted by last year's representation at the Academy Awards broadcast in Hollywood. And courses in NFB films taught at one of the foremost film schools in the U.S. were highly publicized during the past year.

Recently the Film Studies Association of Canada, an organization of people interested in film as an aesthetic and academic pursuit, conducted an informal survey of its membership to determine whether there was a recognizable body of films by the NFB that clearly established themselves as superior to the others. The results are rather surprising and enlightening — if not about the relative quality of NFB films, then perhaps about their distribution to and/or reputation among many of the people who teach film in this country.

The F.S.A.C. membership was asked (rather clumsily) to list the "ten best, most useful, or your favorite NFB films." One third of the respondents chose not to list any films at all, several stating that they did not have enough information on or familiarity with NFB films. Many people could not list ten films, some choosing to mention only two or three. A couple of people took short cuts and simply stated "all of

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How would you do if asked to list the ten best, most useful or favorite National Film Board films? The Film Studies Association put this question to its members and here are the results.



Paul Anka croons in Kroitor's *Lonely Boy*



A twirling majorette during a winter celebration Brault and Groulx's *Les Raquetteurs*"

McLaren's films" and "all of Pierre Perrault's films."

Over one hundred films were mentioned at least once on one list or another. This in itself is quite a testimony to the general quality of NFB productions and also, I would think, to its range. Of these one hundred films, the one mentioned more often than any other was *Lonely Boy*, the twenty-six and one-half minute ironic documentary of pop singer Paul Anka made in 1961 by Roman Kroitor for the famed "B unit."

Second on the survey was *Mon Oncle Antoine*, the 1971 feature film directed by Claude Jutra.

Third was *Les Raquetteurs*, the amusing twenty-eight minute documentary on winter festivities in Quebec filmed by Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx in 1958.

In fourth position, rather surprisingly, was *Back-Breaking Leaf*, a half-hour documentary about the southern Ontario tobacco industry made in 1959 by Terence Macartney-Filgate.

After this came *Grierson*, the 57 minute documentary tribute to the first head of the NFB, produced and directed by Roger Blais; *Paul Tomkowicz: Street Railway Switchman*, a nine minute homage to a hardy old Polish emigré made by Roman Kroitor in 1954; *Pas de Deux*, the stunning Norman McLaren

ballet and special effects piece; *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, Don Owen's 1964 documentary-turned-fiction-feature; *Wake Up, mes bons amis* or *Un pays sans bon sens*, Pierre Perrault's investigation of nationalism; *City of Gold*, Pierre Berton's nostalgic recollection of Dawson City made by Wolf Koenig and Colin Low; *Waiting for Fidel*, Michael Rubbo's film about trying to film Fidel Castro in 1974; and *The Merry World of Leopold Z*, an entertaining film about a snowplow operator on Christmas eve made in 1965 by Gilles Carle.

Other films singled out were: *Le chat dans le sac* (1964, Gilles Groulx), *Cor-*

ral (1954, Colin Low), *Hunger* (1973, Peter Foldes), *J.A. Martin, Photographe* (1977, Jean Beaudin), *Memorandum* (1965, John Spotton and Donald Brittain), *On est au coton* (1970, Denys Arcand), *The Railrodder* (1965, Gerald Potterton), *Rouli-roulant*, or *The Devil's Toy* (1966, Claude Jutra), *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970, Michael Rubbo), *Street Musique* (1972, Ryan Larkin) and *Alexis Tremblay, Habitant*.

The survey was interesting for those films mentioned and for those films noticeable by their absence (for whatever reasons). Award-winning films which failed to garner any votes at all were: *Evolution*, *High Steel*, *Paddle to the Sea*, *Tchou-tchou*, *Whistling Smith*, and *Wrestling*. Only one vote was cast for *Neighbors*, *Universe*, *Volcano: an Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry*, and *Walking*. Are these films victims of that perennial Canadian malady of works of art being recognized elsewhere but not by their countrymen?

The survey was not a large one and perhaps not a representative sampling. But it was not insignificant in that those surveyed are responsible for much of the post-secondary training film studies in Canada. More importantly it was meant not as a definitive list but as a beginning. The NFB's international reputation deserves more systematic investigation here in Canada. More surveys should be made — broader ones, even narrower ones. Booking patterns of NFB films in schools, community groups, and on TV should be fully computed. Perhaps then the impact and the importance of the NFB can be registered.

'mon oncle' revisited

by Paul G. Socken

A viewer of Claude Jutra's "Mon Oncle Antoine" comes away from the film reflecting on two difficult questions: if the film is about the youth and maturing of young Benoît, why is it titled "Mon Oncle Antoine"? And what, then, is the importance of Benoît's presence?

Attempting to answer those central questions whose concerns lie at the very heart of the film, one grapples with a host of others: What is the reason for the setting — a small mining

town encircled by mountains of asbestos? What is the significance of the constant preoccupation with death and why does the action take place at Christmas time? How is the social reality portrayed? And what is the townspeople's attitude toward religious institutions and rites of the church?

Let us first examine the personage of Antoine. He is a man who, as undertaker for the village, lives with death and yet is repulsed by it; he has no children of his own but is the guardian of two; he dreams of owning a hotel



Smothered in furs and cut-off from the world by mountains of asbestos in Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine*

in the United States but does not act on that dream, and, finally, he is a man cuckolded. To put the preceding in symbolic terms, Antoine must confront the past and yet he is terrified by it; he is a man without a future for himself and yet responsible for that of others, a man desperate to escape his plight but who does not do so, and in the final analysis he is deceived by the one nearest and dearest to him.

Antoine is Quebec. Quebec's future is uncertain and its past places demands on the present. Quebec is the victim of escapism as so many have forsaken her if not by physically leaving, then by abandoning their cultural heritage. And Quebec too has been deceived by what it thought to be its closest allies — the Church and the politicians.

Benoît's presence is crucial to this drama as he represents the youth that will inherit all that he is witness to. He is very much a spectator of the action that is unfolding, but he undergoes a profound transformation himself. The trip he takes with Antoine to pick up the corpse at the bereaved family's rural house is literally a voyage from innocence to experience. His initial eagerness at the prospect of accompanying Antoine turns to sober second thoughts as he helps him put the body in the coffin, and finally to revulsion and disgust as Antoine sobbingly relates his deepest fears. The whisky,

offered to Benoît so many times on the way there and just as often refused, is consumed by him on the way back. Benoît too, then, must fortify himself against bitter reality just as Antoine did before him. That Benoît's lot will not be any better than Antoine's is suggested at such moments.

An examination of the setting and other contributing effects and techniques will reinforce this interpretation. Jutra sets his film in a mining town whose mountains of asbestos cut it off from the rest of the world and symbolize the limited horizons for the townspeople and thus their entrapment. Even though they may leave temporarily, as does M. Poulin for the woods, their departure is not permanent because their minimal education and skills prevent them from succeeding in the world beyond the company-town.

The portrait of the town as a social reality is revealing and poignant. The company that owns the mine is English and so are the lower echelons of management. A representative of the company throws favours to the children from his horse-drawn carriage — the ultimate gesture of condescension. There will be no raise for the workers of the mine this year just as there was none last year.

The class distinctions are not limited, though, merely to the division between the English and the French. The distance between the wealthy lawyer's wife and the other French-speaking citizens exemplifies the stratification within the French community.

But for all the tears in the social fabric, there are moments when it seems remarkably resilient. After Benoît throws the snowball that frightens the company representative's horse, Carmen shows her approval and we know the others are delighted. And when Carmen's father comes to pick up her wages without a single caring glance toward her, the people in the store are galvanized in their antipathy for him. In addition, the announcement of the marriage of a young girl gives rise to a spontaneous outburst of joy by all. These moments portray a sense of community and solidarity among the poorer French-Canadians that is as much a part of the film as is their desperate economic situation, but they do not constitute its major focal point.

The action takes place at Christmas time — the celebration of a birth — and yet death is omnipresent. It is as if the characters' lives were defined by the constant presence of death since life can be emphasized in this way to be fragile and man as vulnerable. The scene in which Benoît chases Carmen, who is wearing a wedding veil, around the coffins is an eloquent dramatization of this idea. Life and death are boldly juxtaposed to portray the characters' helplessness not only in a social but in a metaphysical sense as well.

The attitude toward religion shows these Quebeckers as casting aside their historically close ties with the Church. Although the church building is geographically at the centre of the town, the rites of the church are treated flippantly and often with disdain. Benoît and the priest snack on the host and sacramental wine, and the Virgin Mary and the Holy Ghost are the objects of ridicule.

Adrift from the social and economic mainstream and no longer reassured by their traditional closeness with the Church, the characters are groping for substance and stability. There is not a great deal of dialogue and there are very few if any sustained conversations. The lives of the men and women seem therefore to be contained within themselves, and the sense of community mentioned earlier is more potential than real. In addition, shadows are everywhere present and often there is a lack of sharp definition. This effect contributes to the feeling that the characters are not complete and are searching for an identity and for a place for themselves.

For anyone sensitive to Quebec's social and cultural dilemma, "*Mon Oncle Antoine*" is an important work of art that merits the closest scrutiny.

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