

# Canada's many festivals search for a clear policy from Telefilm

MONTREAL - With 16 film festivals each year, Canada now claims the curious distinction of holding on its territory roughly one-tenth of all the film festivals in the world, according to Jean Lefebvre of Telefilm Canada's Festival Bureau. For four recent Canadian film festivals, however, this year's cinematic festivities have been more like wakes, each one facing serious problems for the future.

For a variety of often very different reasons - ranging from the personalities of the festival directors, to acts of God like the weather, to acts of men like transit strikes, to chronic organizational, financial, conceptual problems - the 5th Canadian International Animation Festival, held in Toronto for the first time this year (Aug. 13-18, see Patricia Thompson's report in this issue on p. 17), the 13th Montreal International Festival of New Cinema and Video (Oct. 18-28), the Fourth Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax (Oct. 25 - Nov. 1) and the 20th Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival in Yorkton, Sask. (Oct. 31 - Nov. 4), all occasioned profound difficulties.

Conversely, and within approximately the same time-frame, four other film festivals - including Canada's two largest, the World Film Festival in Montreal and the Festival of Festivals in Toronto, the ever more popular Third Abitibi-Temiscamingue Festival of International Cinema (Nov. 1-7), and the most recent newcomer to the crowded fest circuit, the First International Guelph Film

Festival - had problem-free, if not highly successful, runs. (The sparsely attended and thinly covered festival of Forbidden Films in Toronto Oct. 18-28 must be considered a different kind of cinematic event, and outside present parameters.)

The 13th International Festival of New Cinema and Video, spatially over-extended and conceptually over-ambitious, was, before it even got underway, hit by so many problems that it almost didn't happen. Only the last-minute decision by the festival's 20-person staff to see the event through, working for no pay, allowed it to take place. Caught by the change of government in Ottawa, as well as by the change of film-funding regimes in Quebec from the Institut quebecois du cinema to the Societe generale du cinema, which delayed the granting of funds, and hampered by a \$60,000 deficit from 1983, which meant that suppliers, printers and services this year all required up-front payment, fest co-directors Claude Chamberlan and Dimitri Eipides found themselves heading a festival without cashflow.

Initially budgetted at \$420,000 this year - Chamberlan and Eipides point comparatively to the Rotterdam or Berlin fests with budgets in the \$900,000-range - the 1984 budget was revised downwards five times to 1983 levels of \$240,000 which, Chamberlan notes, "left us with absolutely no breathing space." With a total of \$150,000

coming from provincial and federal agencies and ministries, Telefilm's Festivals Bureau, and the Canada Council, plus an as-yet undetermined amount from corporate sponsors, the event was clearly headed for trouble. Add additional overhead, like a \$20,000 phone bill, 16mm equipment and projectionist for one of the festival's six locations, unexpected out-of-pocket shipping costs, and the result, for the second year in a row, was another \$60,000 short-fall.

Even then, say Chamberlan and Eipides, the gate might have made a dent here, projecting an increase over last year's 30,000-plus entries. Then, on the day of the festival's opening, Montreal bus-drivers went on a month-long strike. While final attendance figures had not yet been compiled, Eipides estimates the strike could have affected the festival with a 20% drop in attendance.

The problems would just go on and on: 13 films never turned up; the festival had no money to fly in guests, though some, like Wim Wenders, came on their own and others, like Chantal Ackerman, said they would come to show support then didn't; films were stuck at the brokers, and others shipped to the wrong address. The sudden deaths in Paris of Francois Truffaut and 24-year-old actress Pascale Ogier within the first three days of the festival only added to the spirit of gloom. And then, within two days of the festival's ending, Serge Losique, director of the Montreal World Film Festival, would, in the letters column of the newspaper *La Presse*, launch a blistering public attack.

In spite of it all, the quality of the 75 features screened this year was incomparable with films like Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise*, Alexander Rockwell's *Hero*, or Ulrike Ottinger's *Image of Dorian Grey in the Yellow Press*. And surely the absolutely outstanding film of this problem-plagued 13th festival had to have been German director Edgar Reitz's 16-hour epic *Heimat* which one aficionado described as "Without a doubt the greatest film ever made, anywhere, anytime." Yet even such extraordinary works could not compensate for the organizational, conceptual and other difficulties that prevail and are compounded in a climate of cultural cutbacks and restrained state-spending.

Scattered this year in six different venues, the festival, which included a video section of some 170 tapes, was almost impossible to cover for the working press, let alone the public.

"Ideally," says journalist

Martin Delisle who covered the fest for Radio-Canada, "there should be only one great big festival annually in Montreal, encompassing the World Film Festival and the International Festival of New Cinema, the same way that Cannes or Berlin have an official and a parallel selection. Unfortunately, this will remain utopian until Losique and Chamberlan stop trying to outdo each to prove that their festival is the best.

"Having said this, one must stress the importance of the New Cinema festival. It allows us to discover new films, new currents, and often innovative ways to look at film. Such a festival must continue to exist, and should never be allowed to disappear: it is like a whiff of fresh air for the adventurous filmgoer."

"Is there room in town for two film festivals?" asks journalist David Winch who covered the event for the *Toronto Globe & Mail*. "I don't think so if they're competing. Maybe they should all calm down, stop trying to outdo each other, sort out their problems, and maybe they would then find that there is, indeed, room here for the range of alternative cinema.

"The inner-city yuppie crowd has the size and the strength to support an alternative festival. They have the identification with the films, and the late fall season is a good time for a festival like this.

"As a filmgoer, the great attraction of this festival is that it shows films you just couldn't see anywhere else. So I hope they can pull it together and get stable. This could become what Rotterdam is to Europe."

"This is a festival that announces a lot more than it can actually deliver," comments *La Presse* film critic Luc Perrault. "There's a difference between what they say they're going to do and what they do, and that's the source of a certain deception.

"If this festival wanted to come back to its original terms of reference, it will have to realize that it will always be the number-two festival in this city. They should change their approach, get rid of the video festival and stop being a ramshackle grab-bag. It's high time this festival took its context into account and held all its screenings in one place. Otherwise it's ridiculous.

"One possible approach would be to move this festival squarely into the summer and have it parallel the World Film Festival. Since the WFF has reached a ceiling in terms of public capacity in its present location, there must be room for an alternative festival.

"But this would take someone with guts and daring to

bring it off - and really offer a festival of new cinema. Perhaps, in the end, this could only be done with backing at the political level."

If Chamberlan and Eipides are vocal in their denunciation of the inequities of federal film festival funding policy, which Eipides terms "a scandal," they have a sympathetic ear from Festivals Bureau head Lefebvre.

"We're acutely conscious of the problems festivals have," he told *Cinema Canada*, "and we do whatever we can, but we have no money. We understand that festivals have financial problems, though we're not responsible either for their deficits or their profits. Festivals do not exist because we ask them to. In fact, in the beginning, the intention - to the extent that there was one - was to have at most one or two international festivals in the entire country, and look where we are today."

Lefebvre, an 18-year-veteran of the Festivals Bureau, is sadly conscious of the lack of a festivals policy - "We simply administer a program that grants subsidies to festivals" - the inequities of the program whose granting structure, he says, was developed on "a first-come, first-served" or precedential basis - the fact that "the program hasn't evolved in the last 10 years," without the funding to keep up with the level of inflation - and that the situation is going to get worse.

"Perhaps the moment has time to signify clearly that, in a time of economic crisis, there is no money for festivals. The only thing that's quite clear is that we don't have the money to develop anything."

The Festivals Bureau now has an annual budget of \$950,000 - an original \$350,000 plus \$600,000 allocated as a result of the National Film and Video Policy which will, as of January 1985, fund one federal grant per festival. After that date, if a festival receives funding from another federal source, for example, External Affairs, the Festivals Bureau grant will be cut by the equivalent amount.

As a result, the Festivals Bureau is virtually helpless in the event of a festival's appeal for emergency funds.

Which was the situation faced by the Atlantic Film Festival when it tottered following the 11th-hour resignation of festival director for the last four years, Michael Riggio. Plagued by severe funding and organizational problems, rent by dissonance within the Atlantic film community, the festival was cancelled for two days before actually lurching ahead. Despite the Festival Bureau's turning down an emergency request

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## Festivals

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for \$10,000, replacement director Ramona McDonald, with the help of volunteer labor and funds from the National Film Board's Atlantic Region studio, carried on with an unofficial budget of \$30,000.

The week-long disorganized event - no figures were available on the numbers of films and videos screened - drew an estimated 500 people, though some observers put the figure as low as 100, while one member of the fest organization claimed "thousands" attended.

Twenty international films from small, lesser-known countries were screened, including an East German western *The Scout*, Israeli thriller *The Arrest*, the Danish feature *Ladies On the Rock*, *The Silent Pacific* from Holland, and *Kamilla* from Norway. Taking the Air Canada \$1500 award for best feature, best director and best performance was Swiss director Kurt Gloor for *Man Without Memory* and lead, Michael König.

Toronto filmmaker Philip Jackson's low-budget, meta-physical sci-fi film *Music of the Spheres*, starring Anne Danereau, received a jury award for most promising first feature. Among regional films screened were the NFB documentary *Herbicide Trials* by Neal Livingstone; Dan Hutchison's documentary *Alex Colville: The Splendour of Order*, which won the \$1000 Atlantic Television Network award for best overall Atlantic entry, while Chris Majka was awarded best performance in an Atlantic film for his role in the local video *The Indifferent City* by Doug Fairfield.

Despite this year's festival fiasco, however, local filmmakers feel optimistic that there is a future for an Atlantic film fest.

"There are enough talented people here to pull off something like a festival, and there's a real warmth and desire within the film community for that," says Halifax independent cinema owner Gordon Parsons.

"As a result of this year's fiasco, the festival will change," says Atlantic Filmmakers' Coop chairperson Lulu Keating. In the interim, the Atlantic Film Festival Association, the corporate entity behind the four Atlantic Film fests, has been disbanded.

According to Keating, independent filmmakers "will meet sometime after we've all calmed down; we'll get a new board, a new director and then we'll get on with business. Probably next year there'll be two events - a film festival in the fall and a seminar in the spring."

Though none of the four Atlantic provincial governments were involved in funding this year's festival, the Nova Scotia department of Culture,

Fitness and Recreation did contribute funds in past years. Nor is the future bleak for funding support for a reorganized festival.

"We have a strong commitment to funding festivals," says the department's cultural director Allison Bishop, "but any organization needs a sound business plan and an indication that the community is being serviced and supporting it. It's public money and has to have accountability."

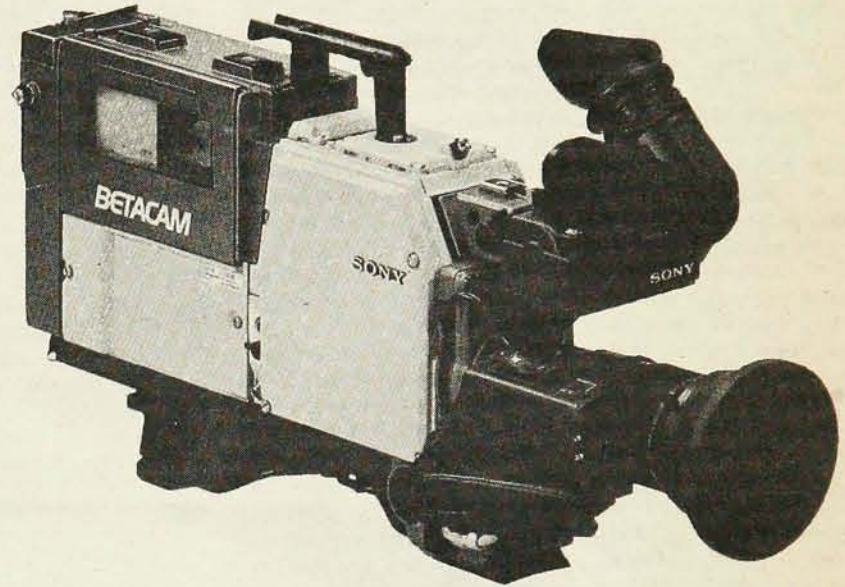
Hampered by snowstorms since September in the worst weather in 77 years, the 20th anniversary of the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival was a chilly one. With high winds and nighttime temperatures hitting 40 below, the annual showcase of Canadian short film production, and the longest-running film festival in North America, was a far cry from the mellow, end-of-harvest-time, Indian summer event of less extraordinary years.

With scattered local turnout, a half-dozen filmmakers, two Regina film producers, one television buyer from Toronto, feuding pre-selection and awarding juries, and to judge from a selection of the 162 submitted shorts (out of Canada's annual production of 2000) a thoroughly uninspiring year for filmmaking, the kindly Yorkton fest organizers, headed by the unflappably energetic Sheila Harris, put the bravest face on probably the worst of circumstances.

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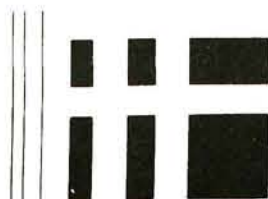
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