

Going Public

Mary Brown and the Ontario Film Review Board

by Tom Perlmutter

The Ontario Film Review Board (formerly the Censor Board) stands at a crucial juncture in its history. In the last two years it has lost two court battles on its constitutionality and faced a technological erosion of its powers with the rapid spread of home videos. In 1982 the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFAVAS) launched a court challenge against the Board for violating the newly enshrined Charter of Rights. In March 1983 the Supreme Court of Ontario ruled that, while the government had a right to limit freedom of expression, it had to clearly define those limits which the Theatres Act did not. The Board appealed but in February 1984, the Court of Appeal upheld the lower court's decision. The Board was allowed to continue its work pending an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. In the meantime, the Ontario government decided to change the rules to conform to the courts' decisions. At the same time it addressed the video challenge. In December 1984, new legislation was passed which brought the Censor Board's guidelines into the law, placed home videos under the Board's jurisdiction and eliminated the controversial word "censor" from the title of the Board. OFAVAS expressed its deep dissatisfaction with the Board and announced plans for a new court challenge.

For Mary Brown, head of the Board since 1980, critics misunderstand the nature of the Board's work. Brown sees the Board as providing a consumer service that is responsive to the community's needs. In her view, the controversy that often surrounds the Board is clearly media hype which ignores the real concerns of ordinary Ontario citizens.

In her mind, censorship is not what the Board does, though she defines censorship in a way that makes film censorship arguments irrelevant.

Personally, Mary Brown is an engaging woman with a sharp sense of humour which belies the public image of a stern upholder of public morality. Since taking the helm she has worked hard to bring the Board out into the open: publishing Board decisions; developing the guidelines which were subsequently incorporated into the Theatres Amendment Act; making sure Board members were fully acquainted with the latest research on film viewing; and establishing strong international links, last year hosting the second international conference of film censors.



photos: Paul Orenstein

Cinema Canada: *The Ontario government has recently made some changes in the law with respect to the Theatres Act. What are those changes?*

Mary Brown: The Theatres Amendment Act and Regulations dealt with housekeeping changes in the form of the Board, firming up the fact that it's a rotating Board with widely representative members; expanding the Board's jurisdiction to include video cassettes that are available on retail shelves for rent or sale; and putting into the regulations the criteria which the Board may use in any act of censorship. But I think it's very important - perhaps the most important thing - that the Board's name has been changed to reflect what it really does. It is now the Ontario Film Review Board because 95% of what we do is review and classify; 95% of what we do does not involve censorship.

Cinema Canada: *When you say 95% you mean in terms of the total amount of titles you're looking at?*

Mary Brown: That's correct. We review about 3,000 films a year. Ninety-five percent are simply classified or approved in the way in which they come to us. They are not censored.

Cinema Canada: *Presumably some of the impetus for the changes come from court actions taken against the Board by the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society under the Charter of Rights. The Board was criticised for*

having an arbitrary censorship mechanism.

Mary Brown: The court action accelerated the changes. But before the new Charter was even proclaimed, we had established and published our guidelines throughout the province. For the past four-and-a-half years we have operated on the basis of printed public guidelines. The only thing that's changed is to formalize them into the Act itself. The court judgement was that the guidelines were not part of the Theatres Act. They acknowledged that there were guidelines that had been widely disseminated throughout the province and had fairly widespread public approval.

Cinema Canada: *How involved was the Board with drafting the new legislation?*

Mary Brown: It wasn't involved really. I was consulted but the drafting is done by Legal Services with the minister and deputy minister in consultation with the attorney-general's office. They were involved in the Charter case so I guess they were definitely trying to meet the court's decision. But basically I believe they worked with our guidelines and listened to women's groups, like the women's Directorate and from delegations from the community who expressed their concern about the kind of material they felt should be prohibited. They listened to a lot of different women's concerns. I think they weighed a lot of things. When

they had weighed all these things, the guidelines that are now proclaimed are very close to the ones that we have been using and that we had determined over a period of five years to be really representative of a cross-section of the public.

Cinema Canada: *Can you say something about how the Board's guidelines have developed?*

Mary Brown: Yes. When I first became chairman in 1980 we went to a rotating Board shortly thereafter, striving for a good cross-section representation of the community. This was also a follow-through from the federal Supreme Court decision in the MacNeil case that said, "The standards by which you review and censor films should be consistent with the community standards." I think this put on us the onus of determining what that community standard or community level of tolerance was. That was when the Board members undertook an on-going, in-depth program of community contact - public meetings with high-school and university students, with professional people, parent-teacher associations, lawyers, blue-collar workers. I personally have been out two or three times a week speaking, explaining the types of films that are coming through, asking for feedback on what was appropriate for the specific age groups so that we could classify. We were trying to identify clearly what most people felt shouldn't be in commercial distribution. What I and the rest of the Board members felt was very interesting was that the things that the community were prioritizing were not covered in the Criminal Code. They had not to do with sex. They had to do with violence and the sexual exploitation of children. So we revamped our guidelines. We prioritized violence and the sexual exploitation of children. That was in late 1980, early 1981. I think we were unique in Canada at that time. We were the first Board to prioritize violence as opposed to sex. But we were really in tune with other jurisdictions around the world: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, France and Germany. All are prioritizing these as the greatest concern in their film censorship.

Cinema Canada: *What are the actual mechanics of the public consultation process? Do you make notes of the reaction? Do you hand out questionnaires? How does it work?*

Mary Brown: If it's a group that is at all manageable in terms of numbers we take our guidelines with us and say, "These are the guidelines that we use, could you please assess them?" We distribute a very simple questionnaire to those in attendance asking for their comments, asking them if we're on track with it. The classification guidelines are the most difficult. People take a look at what we feel people are not prepared to accept, in other words, the censorship guidelines. Classification guidelines are difficult.

Cinema Canada: *Most of the public arguments seem to revolve around the censorship issue rather than classification.*

Mary Brown: Only in the media. Our appeals and our complaints - when we get them - are on classification, not on censorship. Not in the past five years. Can you think of one criticism for censorship of this Board in the past five years that affected many people?

Cinema Canada: *The Tin Drum.*

Mary Brown: *The Tin Drum* was six years ago. Before my time. I'm saying five years since we went to a rotating Board and since we prioritized violence and children. Name one out of 3000. Name one.

Cinema Canada: *Michael Snow's Rameau's Nephew.*

Mary Brown: Never been censored. It has never been refused a permit.

Cinema Canada: *Bruce Elder's The Art of Wordly Wisdom.*

Mary Brown: Never censored.

Cinema Canada: *Weren't there problems with that film?*

Mary Brown: For a 24-hour period we had trouble with a very hard, what we called hard-core footage - vaginal penetration that went on for 46 seconds and nothing but genitalia on the screen. Yes, we had a few problems with that. We got letters from art galleries saying that this was an artistic production and we said all right, fine. That's the way you want to play it, that's where the permits go. Since that time we never ever refused a permit. But they want to press immediately before they even sat down and discussed it, and they've been using that as an example now for five years. It was never censored.

Cinema Canada: *You haven't censored it by demanding any cuts. But aren't there limits as to where it can be shown? Can it be shown only in art galleries?*

Mary Brown: No, that's not true. It's wherever they want to show it. They simply have to get the permit to show it. If they want to take it to the Odeon Theatre, they should probably come and say they want to take it there. I really don't think they want to play it there. It's not a mainstream commercial film.

Cinema Canada: *So what you're saying is that the distributor can show this at any suitable venue and will always get a permit for this particular film whether on campuses, art galleries and so on?*

Mary Brown: Absolutely.

Cinema Canada: *What about Not a Love Story?*

Mary Brown: The same. That was their marketing plan. That's what they gave to us. "This is what we want - public, not commercial screening." We've never, ever refused a permit for *Not a Love Story*. Never.

Cinema Canada: *There was a lot of controversy about it. What was that all about then?*

Mary Brown: It got a lot of publicity. After they went through their public exhibitions they came and said, "We think we want to go commercial now. What cuts would be required?" We said, "Please don't cut it. The whole point of the film is to make this statement." So they decided to go ahead with the public, not commercial screening. I think it's working out well. In Montreal it was a disaster.

Cinema Canada: *Why not give it a commercial release? This film does exactly what behavioural scientists say should be done when viewing pornography to escape its effects. There is a lot of debriefing within the film about the hard-core porn you're seeing.*

Mary Brown: There is also a lot of desensitization. The problem is if you go into a constant run, a six-week run at the theatre. They found in Montreal for example people going back again and again commenting, "That's better than we could see for \$3.50 down the street." The film itself could defeat the very purpose for which it was being made if it was used in a long-run engagement and if it were catering to a crowd who went for that purpose. Now, we're not supposed to make decisions on that basis. What we had to do was make a decision and we spent two weeks on it, reviewing it, thinking about it, talking about it. It wasn't made lightly. But we really thought it was something the public should see. Board members actually went out with the film to encourage discussion and debate. We really supported it. I went to the University of Western Ontario with it. Our Board members went all over the province encouraging the distribution and viewing of the film. On a non-commercial basis.

Cinema Canada: *One area that always seems to create controversy are the films that come in to the Toronto Film Festival.*

Mary Brown: Are you interested in the Board or are you interested in the media-hype? 448 films came through for last year's festival. We ruined it again because we said no to one. It was *Sweet Movie*. Have you seen *Sweet Movie*?

Cinema Canada: *No, I haven't.*

Mary Brown: Well, bless you. *Sweet Movie* starts out for the benefit of the audience with young women graded, undressed and placed in stirrup-style chairs, examined with a magnifying glass to determine their virginity. One is then turned over to a very wealthy man who first beats her and then rapes her and then turns her over to his body-guard. This is all very explicit. In another scene a naked man is held down by about 10 people. His nude body is smeared with excrement. His body is pummelled and manipulated until he vomits and urinates onto the screen while the cameras close in on the genital area. Then some of the guests get up on the stage nude, defecate onto plates and pass the excrement round for eating. There's another scene in which nine-year-old boys are seduced by a woman who undresses in front of him, lifts her leg to expose her genital area, unzips the fly of one of the children and takes him behind a curtain. There's another copulation scene in which the woman is obviously not happy with her lover because she stabs him over and over again in the genital area.

Sweet Movie violated community standards. We have no jurisdiction to treat festivals differently. *Sweet Movie* was beyond the pale. So there are no apologies for *Sweet Movie*. Every year the Festival seems to introduce a film that we have no choice about and it gets them a lot of publicity.

Cinema Canada: *To answer your question, I am interested in the Board. This is your forum for thinking about these things.*

Mary Brown: I guess I get so tired of these interviews. They spend all the time talking about *The Tin Drum*, *Not a Love Story* and the festivals. And that's not what the Board is about. The Board is a consumer service that provides tremendously good information about films to help parents guide their chil-

dren. Ninety-five percent of what we do is very serious research into the suitability of film content for children. We classify... we provide a tremendous public service. This 5% up here is what people keep zeroing in on and it's so boring.

Cinema Canada: *It's possibly boring.*
Mary Brown: I get tired talking about it.

Cinema Canada: *I am interested in that 95% and it's something I would like to pursue...*

Mary Brown: Good.

Cinema Canada: *The reason the 5% is of interest is that, as with anything, it's always at the margin, when you're talking about controversial topics such as censorship...*

Mary Brown: But it affects so few people.

Cinema Canada: *It's not a question so much of how many people it affects but how one organizes society to deal with important topics like censorship. The exploration of such issues is always done at the margin, the decisions are made there where immediately it's not going to affect a wide body of people.*

Mary Brown: And you're not talking about censorship either. You're talking about film regulation. Censorship is political manipulation. It's the manipulation of ideas. This has nothing to do with visual images, really, or very little.

Cinema Canada: *Let's get this one straight. I'm not sure I understand what you mean by censorship.*

Mary Brown: Censorship to me is the suppression of ideas. It's the suppression of books or magazines. It's manipulation for a political purpose. To me that's censorship and that's anathema in the democratic system. What we're talking about here is film regulation, the



regulation of visual images that have nothing to do with or very little to do with ideas because you can communicate ideas without screwdrivers up a vagina, for goodness' sake. And that's what we're talking about and I don't think we should ever mix it up with the suppression of ideas. Not ever.

Cinema Canada: *Art deals with things that are not ideas, with emotional states...*

Mary Brown: I don't think we're talking about art here. We're talking about a very commercial medium that trims itself and gears itself and censors itself for the best commercial market because most of the films before they ever get here have been targeted at a particular audience. They've taken the director's version of that film and they have either added a few garbary works to it to bump it up to PG or they've reduced the themes as in *Scarface* so it can get a restricted and not an X rating. That's 90% of what we're dealing with. A very, very commercial industry. Now, you're talking again about the art community who are using the film medium as an art form. I'm telling you that in the last five years since we went to the documentation process we have not censored anything that is an art film, unless you consider *Sweet Movie* an art film.

Cinema Canada: *I haven't seen it and I can't respond. But are you suggesting that in terms of art films their appropriate display is within galleries?*

Mary Brown: No, I don't determine that. It's whoever wants to exhibit that determines that. The documentation is by whoever is going to exhibit. The curator of a venue or whoever... their biggest concern was when they were dealing with films like Michael Snow's or Bruce Elder's was that this was not one of many copies. This was the artist's copy and obviously they don't want to subject it to the physical strain of bringing it before the Board. So they do it on documentation and tell us where they want to show it.

Cinema Canada: *I would like to stick with this area of censorship and the arguments surrounding the issue. I want to pursue it and get your vision.*

Mary Brown: As long as it's relevant to what we're doing.

Cinema Canada: *I would like to pursue the arguments the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society have brought to bear...*

Mary Brown: You mean the three people... I guess there are more now.

Cinema Canada: *They argue that there should be no prior restraint on films. That pornography can be dealt with by the Criminal Code.*

Mary Brown: You're going to have to deal with the minister on that. I have nothing to do with that.

Cinema Canada: *Do you have a view on that?*

Mary Brown: Not for publication, no. You see, I can't afford to have personal views. I can't afford to have personal views on on-screen copulation. Certainly, I have attitudes to that, but again if you're dealing in my area, it has to be a reflection of what the Act says and what the community says. And whatever the theatres Act says is my responsibility to administer for the next year. After that it will be somebody else's respon-



sibility. It's like... I hate to compare it... it's like the chief of police. He can have all the opinions in the world about whether or not the speed limit on the Spadina Expressway should be 50 or 60 km/h. But whatever the traffic act says, that's what he administers.

Cinema Canada: *Let's get back to the topic of community standards. Are there major differences between urban and rural community standards?*

Mary Brown: Not in terms of prohibiting material. We were insightful enough to change the way people used to ask the questions. In the past they were asked: What do you want to see or not see on the public screen? We can't do that because that becomes almost a moral issue. People are more concerned about public harm. The question now is, "What are you prepared to tolerate being exhibited on the public screen and what are you prepared to tolerate your neighbour seeing?" I think that's when you get more and more people thinking about the harm effect. What kind of material exhibited on the public screen is apt to motivate anti-social behaviour, violence? More and more people are zeroing in on that kind of thing. So if you're sexually exploiting children, you're motivating to act aggressively against children. If you're eroticizing sexual violence such as rape, torture, mutilation, that's a problem. We found that what is now reflected in our guidelines is pretty consistent in major urban areas and in small towns. There's an agreement on the kind of material most people think should really not be on the public screen. But they might differ quite radically on what their personal viewing tastes might be. If, however, they are going to put a prohibition on other people seeing it, they really are standing back and saying, "My moral values cannot be imposed on my neighbour unless it's going to affect my ability to walk my street safely or my children's ability to grow up in a fairly sane environment."

Cinema Canada: *Does the fact that the guidelines are now enshrined in law mean you stop the documentation process? Does that mean you can no longer respond to changes within the community because the process of*

changing the guidelines would be too slow and too cumbersome?

Mary Brown: You were asking before if I had any influence on the legislation. I guess my strongest plea was that they not be enshrined in the Act but they they be put in the regulations where they can go in and out in two weeks. So that's where they are. I saw what happened to the Criminal Code. It hasn't changed in 25 years and it's not even relevant today unless you have an enlightened judge. In my opinion, and I'm very serious about this, it had to be in the regulations, otherwise you were defeating the whole purpose of the community standards.

Cinema Canada: *How do you standardize the different Board members' responses to the guidelines? How do you ensure that they all understand the guidelines in the same way?*

Mary Brown: How do you instruct a jury?

Cinema Canada: *Is there a process you have?*

Mary Brown: The procedure is that a panel of five will screen a film. At the end of the day they take their personal notes and they meet and enter into discussion about their perceptions given various backgrounds. Ninety-five percent of their decisions are classification anyway. The censorship or eliminations are usually fairly clear cut. They don't touch anything that they're not very sure is beyond the pale. It's always a panel of five and it's always a discussion based on guidelines that everyone has agreed to because they've done their research and they figure that's exactly where the community seems to stand.

Cinema Canada: *Would you say there is a fairly consistent application of the guidelines?*

Mary Brown: Some in the industry may not agree, but yes, I would say so. The industry disagreements are in terms of classification. We had one very violent film come through which was restricted but they said, "You let *Indiana Jones* through and it's much more violent than this one. You're being inconsistent." But the *Indiana Jones* kind of violence was perhaps, in the Board's view, much more fantasy. When people parachute out of a plane on a rubber raft and land safely on the water, it's not the same kind of realism as in a crime film. They do tend to compare decisions on films as far as classification is concerned, but not in terms of censorship.

Cinema Canada: *You mentioned earlier other jurisdictions in other parts of the world. You had a meeting last September in which censors from all over the world gathered. Would you say that there was a commonality of view?*

Mary Brown: Yes, very much so in terms of what peoples and governments in other countries are seeing as film content that can impact very negatively on the community. I think we're all identifying the same thing and that's what's so exciting. When you get in and sift out and say, "What content is the community concerned about; what content do governments perceive can impact on anti-social behavior?" and compare it with research that has been done it all seems to come out with the same answers. That's what I found very exciting because I think, in Canada, our Board was very much in the forefront of prioritizing violence with children. It seems to be reinforced by the research

that is now being conducted all over the world.

Cinema Canada: *Isn't there a certain amount of controversy among the researchers?*

Mary Brown: Not among serious scientists, no.

Cinema Canada: *A sociologist at York University, Thelma McCormack...*

Mary Brown: You found one. I don't know anything about Thelma McCormack although I've heard of her. But there have been over 100 field and lab studies done in over 22 countries and the results are unequivocal. They say that there is a direct correlation between exploitative violence and sexual violence and behaviours and attitudes. No serious scientist today challenges that. Having said that, we can't base our decisions solely on that, unless that's the kind of thing to which the community is saying: "Yes, we accept that." Their zeroing-in on the content they feel is a problem is a reflection of what researchers seem to be saying. And it seems to be fairly universal on the international scene. Australia, West Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England - all of them are saying that that is the content we're concerned about. I guess the most ironic thing is their observation that those who had let film boards lapse are now reinstating them to deal not with their own countries' products, but with American products. The only country in the world that has no censorship or regulation of film is the one that is creating problems for the rest of the world.

Cinema Canada: *Richard Heffner, chairman of the American Film Rating Board, presented quite an anomaly at the international meeting. He argued quite forcefully against censorship.*

Mary Brown: But Richard Heffner sees 450 mainstream films a year. He has no idea of the other 1500 that we see. His board reviews 350 films a year. Our board reviews 3,000. I think if I only saw mainstream films I wouldn't see the need for censorship either.

Cinema Canada: *Are you suggesting that he is basically blind to what is happening?*

Mary Brown: I wouldn't want to put it that bluntly. Richard Heffner and his board do not see the films that the other countries see and the kind of films that are generating the concern and the kind of films that we are "censoring." They are titles you have never heard of and Richard Heffner has never heard of and that would be out there without us saying, beyond this line you don't go.

Cinema Canada: *You were saying those films affect so few people. Why bother then?*

Mary Brown: Why don't you ask the minister that? That is not my decision. The Theatres Act says 'thou shalt review every film and thou shalt approve it or not approve it based on the community level of tolerance.' And that's exactly what we are doing.

Cinema Canada: *Let me go on to the video question. You are now going to classify them in the same way that films are classified.*

Mary Brown: Correct. That's what the Act says we must do.

Cinema Canada: *At this point, you have to go through classifying all existing videos and insuring that they are*

the same videos of the films that you've screened?

Mary Brown: I imagine that at least 60% of the product will be that.

Cinema Canada: *How many videos are we talking about?*

Mary Brown: I would guesstimate anywhere from 4 to 6,000 titles. It's very difficult because I don't think anyone in the industry has a handle on it. I think some of the major distributors have about 3,500 titles in their inventory but then you have small independents who have been supplying the retail outlets and that is what we're going to have to get a handle on.

Cinema Canada: *How will the Board handle the increasing number of videos being released?*

Mary Brown: We'll have to screen them and classify them.

Cinema Canada: *Are you going to take on additional people?*

Mary Brown: Oh, yes. The numbers depend on the minister. I've requested between 40 and 50 reviewers. Obviously, we'll work in panels. Depending on the volume, we could be doing four or five parallel screening panels a day.

Cinema Canada: *Is the budget of the Board going to increase?*

Mary Brown: It will, of course. But we're self-supporting. We always have been. There is 97-98% revenue return for expenditure. We're certainly not a drain on the taxpayer. The licensing and screening fees cover our costs.

Cinema Canada: *What is the annual budget at the moment and what will it go up to?*

Mary Brown: It's about \$600,000 now. I'm not sure that I can tell you what it will be. A budget has been presented to the minister with the plan over the three years to show that we are solid and our revenues and expenditures are going to balance. But the figures are always released at the end of the year in the annual report. I don't know that I'm free to talk about them when I have just submitted them to the minister.

Cinema Canada: *Do you hope to be caught up with video classifications by April 1?*

Mary Brown: Oh, no. By April 1 we want everyone licensed. It will take six to eight months to get their on-shelf products identified, classified and labelled.

Cinema Canada: *Is licensing an automatic procedure?*

Mary Brown: They simply apply and we license them. Initially, I wouldn't think there would be grounds for refusing a license unless you have a situation that is blatantly organized crime. Subsequently, if someone were in repeated violation of the Act, renting unclassified product or renting a restricted cassette to a child, that sort of thing, one could refuse to renew a license.

Cinema Canada: *What do you do about pornographic videos that come, say, by courier from another province. Is that out of your jurisdiction?*

Mary Brown: If it is being mailed directly into someone's home, it's a federal matter. What we will be dealing with is distribution within the province, with what is on the store shelves. I don't think anybody is naive enough to think they're going to stop pornography. What

most people are concerned about is what is being publicly stored - the standard accepted as normal within our society. And what is publicly and openly available on our shelves is going to be regulated. It's not going to be the norm to have sexual torture and mutilation as a viable commercial product. I think basically it's a statement about what society finds acceptable and not acceptable. It also deals with a concern about children getting their hands on some of this material. I think that this legislation is going to deal with that. But there will always be pornography.

Cinema Canada: *Don't you feel that technology will overtake the Board? The public may be able to receive uncensored those kinds of material, say, via direct broadcast satellite transmission. Doesn't that make the work of the Board somehow redundant?*

Mary Brown: I think we're talking about regulation of the mainstream. When we were regulating theatrical film you always had the backroom. There were body-rub parlours showing pretty rough material that hadn't been approved. We'll probably always have that sort of thing.

Cinema Canada: *This is quite different. There is a whole new delivery technology at work. We're not talking about backrooms but telecasting.*

Mary Brown: That is obviously going to create problems for the federal government. I think there is a lot of pressure right now for them to do something about that.

Cinema Canada: *Do you view those prospects with concern?*

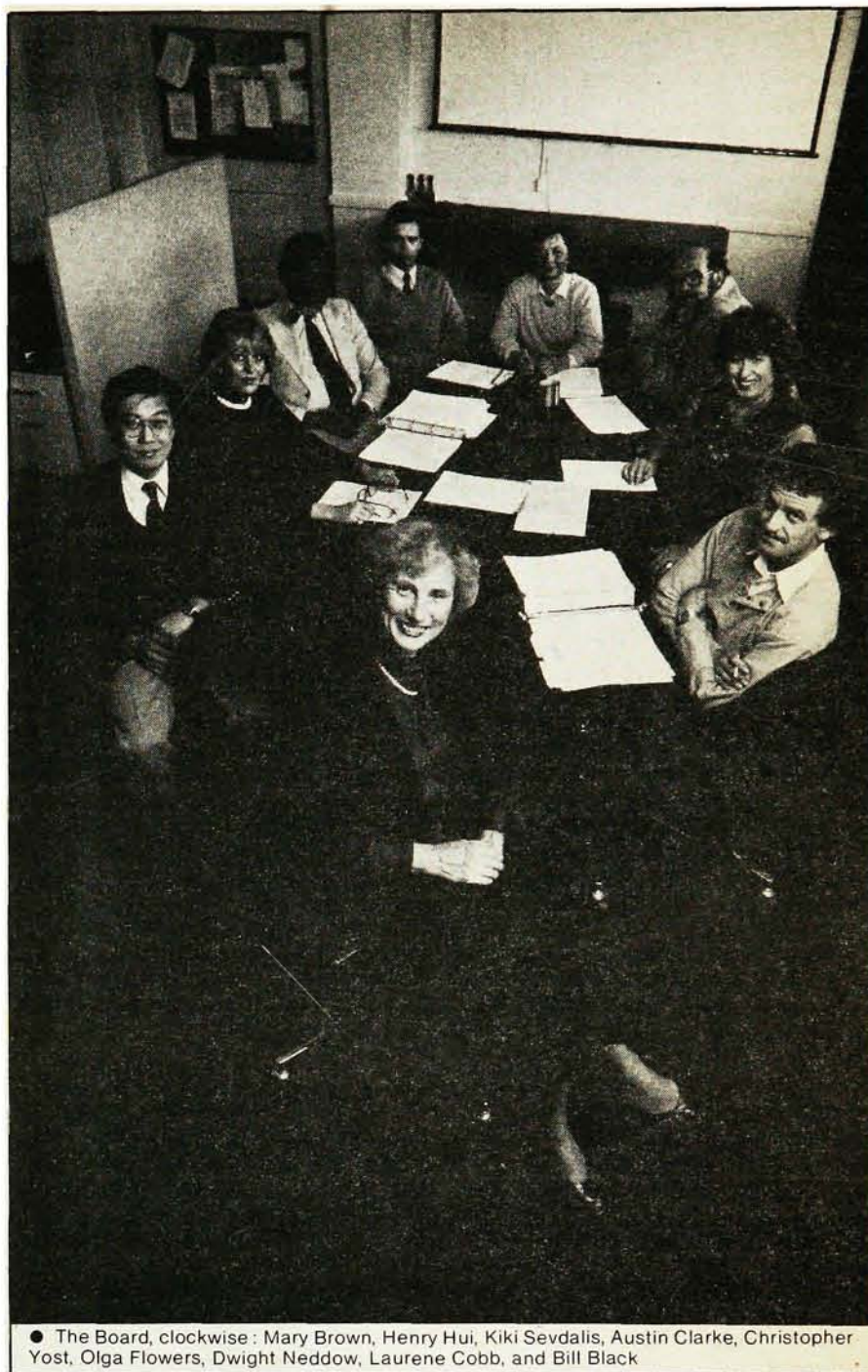
Mary Brown: No, it's not my jurisdiction. I've got enough problems without worrying about that. I found it interesting that at the international meeting in London, England, in 1982, they did mention this because some of the jurisdictions like Australia include television. But in Europe there is a great deal of concern about broadcasting countries sending signals to unwilling receivers and they're trying to work in Europe on some kind of international treaty whereby the originating countries will undertake to prohibit the beaming of pornographic or unacceptable material outside the country. I found it interesting but it's beyond the Theatres Act. I think the public, from what I understand, will react to what is happening if it gets too much heavier.

Cinema Canada: *Are you concerned that there are different guidelines in the other provinces? Do you feel there should be consistency among the provinces?*

Mary Brown: I think the industry would like that. I don't see tremendous inconsistencies, except in Quebec perhaps, and British Columbia. And there the attorneys-general have individual interpretations of the Criminal Code which makes even the obscenity provisions different. Aside from that, I find that the standards across Canada are very similar.

Cinema Canada: *You're in your final year as chairperson of the Board. What would you like to say about your time with the Board? What would you like to say you accomplished?*

Mary Brown: I really believe the Board has become not only consistent with, but essential to, a democratic system. Because we have derived the guidelines



● The Board, clockwise: Mary Brown, Henry Hui, Kiki Sevdalis, Austin Clarke, Christopher Yost, Olga Flowers, Dwight Neddow, Laurene Cobb, and Bill Black

from the community. We are not sitting in isolation. We were five full-time civil servants making decisions without any public input; in secret, really. We brought that out. The guidelines are no longer our own perceptions but honestly reflect community concerns. We've gone from five full-time civil servants to a rotating board of representative members from right across the community. We have an ongoing assessment by the community and continuing response of the community. Perhaps the most important change is public accountability. Every single decision we make, every report is open to public scrutiny. Every elimination we request is public knowledge. I think our Board is unique in the world. We have been working very closely with the industry and the public and I think we have in the past four years increased the public's awareness of the nature of films today so that they can make informed decisions about what they want. I also think we've got the Board into an international perspective. We were very much involved in liaison and attending the two international conferences that involved all the countries in the world that are dealing with censorship. I think we really have an in-depth knowledge about research being done in film.

Cinema Canada: *Were these things*

you felt strongly about when you assumed your present position?

Mary Brown: When I first started screening on the Board, I felt there was a real need to get some public input into our decisions. Because the kind of things that, it seemed, were disturbing me, like the violence, were not being paid any attention. They were dealing with sexual content. I was sure a lot of people out there thought the same as I did. That's when I felt a real need not to sit there and make judgements based on my value system but on some kind of representative basis.

Right after I became chairman, the government announced they were intending to pursue a policy of freedom of information and I guess I jumped the gun on that one. I felt it was terribly important to open our records.

The thing that was most disturbing me was that every time a film jumped in a theatre, people assumed that we had cut it. Well, we weren't touching mainstream films. If a film jumped, it was because someone had done a bad splice or the film had broken. I felt it was so important that the public should know exactly what it was that we were cutting - to take away a lot of that paranoia - to let them know we weren't touching mainstream films, at least not usually. We were dealing mainly with low-budget exploitation films. That took

some meetings with the industry and getting them to acknowledge the fact that we weren't going to keep it secret any longer.

Cinema Canada: *What was the reluctance on the part of the industry?*

Mary Brown: Apparently, the Board previous to my time had entered an agreement that if they made a cut in a film it would not become public. It was a mutual agreement between the industry and the Board. I think the industry was a little bit concerned that, if we were to cut a mainstream film, the public wouldn't want to see it. But when we came to them saying, "Look, do you realize that the public has a perception that much more is being cut than really is and it would be to your advantage for us to publish this?", they agreed.

Cinema Canada: *You mentioned the Board is now keeping abreast of research in this area. Is that something new under your chairmanship?*

Mary Brown: Very much so. It has been extremely helpful in classifying for children because there you can be paternalistic. We can know intellectually what the research is saying for the censorship function, but unless there is a public mandate to censor we can't do anything about it. Unless the public is aware of that research and they say, "Yes, we agree with that," we can't move. But in the area of classification, that is where we can be paternalistic. That is where we can say most of the research says that this type of violence at age seven is very bad news. So we use a lot of research in the classification



process in what could be damaging or harmful to children.

Cinema Canada: *Could you tell us how you ended up at the Board?*

Mary Brown: I was a wife and mother for 25 years. I raised six children. But during that time I was very much engaged in education. I was on the executive of the Metropolitan Toronto High School Commission. I served on the steering committee for Christian-Jewish Dialogue in the city. I served on the Senate of the University of Toronto. And I co-ordinated an international conference for third world development. I was doing a lot of things on a volunteer basis. I also worked for the University of Toronto Alumni Association. I was approached by the university to see if I would join the permanent staff in the department of external affairs as assistant-director of the department of alumni affairs. It was almost an extension of what I had been doing as a volunteer. I wasn't looking for it. But when I

was there I developed branches for the alumni association across North America and I ran international conferences. When I was there I was doing a lot of student-liaison work too. I was approached by a friend in education who said there is an opening on the Censor Board, with your background dealing with young people, teaching and being articulate, you could probably serve a really good role there. I thought about it a lot and I thought yes. It didn't make any sense because I had a really good job at the university. I was assistant-director of a department. I had a big office. All of a sudden I'm saying, "Yes, I'll go and sit in a dark room and screen movies." I thought it was an important thing to do. I did that for two years. And it was very debilitating. It was desensitizing and I really didn't feel I could do it for much longer. That was when the assistant director of the branch retired and his job was open for competition. It was a wide-open competition throughout the ministry. I had been on the Board for two years and I had administrative experience so I got the job. It was when I was there that *The Tin Drum* happened. In the midst of that controversy I was appointed chairman.

Cinema Canada: *You've complained about media-hype. How does that affect you?*

Mary Brown: If I weren't out there all the time listening to the groups I meet with and really explaining where we're coming from and getting the mandate clear in my mind, certainly the media paranoia would disturb me greatly. I know that in this issue they're totally

unrepresentative of where the community stands. I was at Queen's Law School yesterday. There was two-thirds support for what we're doing. Even at the law school! I spoke to Grade 13 students at Seneca College, about 700 of them. When I walked in you could have cut the hostility with a knife. They knew about Mary Brown... reading in the press, right? By the time that I finished explaining exactly what we are doing, there was a standing ovation from 700 Grade 13 students. I know the public support is out there and I've just learned to feel that the media have a real concern about something called censorship and so their perception of the Board is distorted. That's to say the least, and their reporting isn't responsible in many cases. They always come from an editorial position and they are feeding to the public an image of this Board that has no relation to reality at all. And that's too bad, because that's the kind of censorship that scares me to death.

Cinema Canada: *Where do you see yourself going after the Board?*

Mary Brown: I have no idea. It's like working at the University and ending up in the screening room. I tend to go where whatever skills I've developed could be useful. Not for my personal gain. I have no career aspirations at all.

Cinema Canada: *Are you committed to public service?*

Mary Brown: It sounds kind of religiously fanatical and that's not really it. I'm volunteer-oriented perhaps, but not causist. I think I can do an excellent job in an area that I think makes sense and where I've developed skills.

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