

by Geoffrey Shea

I had three immediate observations at the *Festival international du nouveau cinéma et de la vidéo de Montréal*: 1) I was being asked by *Cinema Canada* to cover only the Canadian videotapes at this lively international event; 2) video generally seemed to be the poor cousin at the picnic, compared to film; and 3) the programmers' claims notwithstanding, the Canadian work was treated differently, and I might add, worse than the rest of the video program.

As for the first point: I know that our tax dollars are largely responsible for the livelihood of this event, and that programmers all over the world have a responsibility to their own national cultures. However, this festival of the 'best' independent film and video in the world has defined its mandate and its strategies in a particular way and cannot really be made to answer to another's idea of what should be done (i.e. what *they* would do if it were their festival). After all, the organizers of this event are 'Canadian cultural workers' too. Both video programmers, Thrassyvoulos Giatsios and Festival Director Claude Chamberlan, were proud of the Canadian tapes and pleased that they represented a full 25 per cent of the video selection.

Alas, if it were so simple! Their pride, you see, did not extend all the way to the catalogue covers and posters where the word *Video* was unceremoniously dropped from the working title: *16ième festival international du nouveau cinéma Montréal 1987*. Mind you, the video venue was comfortable; the large screen made the good tapes look very good (and the so-so tapes look very so-so); and the press office was helpful. However, no formal video preview screenings were arranged until the final week, lest these interfere with the film previews. (I can't imagine which would have detracted from which.) And although the film/video split was a healthy 60 per cent film titles to 40 per cent video titles, tapes actually made up only 15 per cent of the total program minutes.

There was ample rhetoric about the Canadian tapes being chosen solely for their excellence, so it was especially disappointing to find out that there was an essential difference in the way these tapes and the non-Canadian tapes were selected. This was immediately noticeable in the programming: most of the evening screenings included tapes from

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... et de la Video at the New Film Fest

Europe and the States, grouped according to thematic or stylistic similarities. Except on Canada nights. Then all the tapes were programmed together just because they were Canadian.

Thrassyvoulos Giatsios, it seems, had chosen the international tapes from work he had found at festivals and during his extended travels over the past year. He is aware of the central dilemmas of video, such as its position between Fine Art and Mass Media, and he provided a good representation of various Western artists' approaches to television.

On the other hand, Claude Chamberlan, a man noted in many circles for his vision and dedication to independent film, chose the Canadian selection from tapes which were submitted to him. The resulting smattering represented only a fraction of the diverse video activity going on in this country. Of the 67 tapes in the 'International Video' section, 18 were Canadian. Half of these were less than 10 minutes long. Seven were from Toronto. Eleven were from Montreal. One wonders what happened to vander Zaag, Wong, Werden, Hume, Sujir, Peacock, Askevold, Abrams, Len, Yael and Nicol, to name just some of our most active video artists.

In all, it was hard not to feel disap-

pointed, perhaps because the selected tapes had to carry the extra burden of representing 'Canadian Video Art' in an international context. However, a handful of the year's best were present.

Frankly, Shirley, a fun, lesbian-sex-fantasy-romp by Margaret Moores, was one of the highlights. It was too well-crafted to be pornography, too funny to be erotica and certainly too good to be true. Two women rekindle a relationship based entirely on clandestine sex. When the passion dies and talk fails to fill the gap, they part amicably – again. Witticisms and 'video cool' combine to make this a likable tape, even if it is too tongue-in-cheek to encourage deep reading. Whether it is an advertisement for 'Girl Sex', the unburdened entanglement of the 'zipless fuck', or simply a more pleasurable world, this tape was made with good will and good taste.

Montréal Danse is an impressive document of three contemporary dance works by choreographers Daniel Léveillé, Jean-Pierre Perreault, and Paul-André Fortier. Produced by François Girard and Bruno Jobin (and Velvet Camera, their latest, well-named company), this tape displays the level of video mastery these two have achieved. The camerawork, lighting and editing fit the

dancers like a glove; only the most refined video effects are used, never competing with, always complementing the stark choreographic arrangements. The slow, intentional introduction of colour during the 24 minutes creates enough narrative glue to bind the three works into one riveting program.

Summer 86: A Neighbourhood Notebook was another highlight – an unassuming collection of fragments, images and issues around a block of boul. St-Laurent. Edward Hillel wanders and wonders through the histories of his neighbours, the unstoppable process of gentrification, and the fate of his neighbourhood. He is refreshingly non-reductive, giving a condo developer a fair chance to speak, and portraying the stoicism of the old-timers who have seen waves of development over the decades. His own life seems disturbed by the changes however, and he has created this document as a keepsake of a place and a time which meant something to him.

The Baby Drop, by John Cooke and Mark Owens, is a visually and aurally complex and cogent production. Subtle video processing and a highly appropriate, dominant music score (ranging from hymns to rock 'n' roll) compensate for the sadly predictable plot: a 'drug addict' and a 'suburbanite' both desire each other's lifestyles – and the same man. But even as this premise flounders, the sentiments of despair, the struggle between Free Will and Destiny, and whatever else motivated Cooke and Owens to produce this tape, are strikingly conveyed on a sensual, intuitive level.

Hands Up by Jean-Marc Roy is a fairly funny, vaguely satirical short tape that seems characteristic of many of this year's entries. In this slapstick skit, a young man dreams of robbing a bank and goes through the actions without waking up. A good performance, imaginative sound effects and stylized camera work make the tape entertaining and eminently watchable. But when it ends after five minutes, one is left with an impression of 'filler', and is anxious to get on with the rest of the screenings.

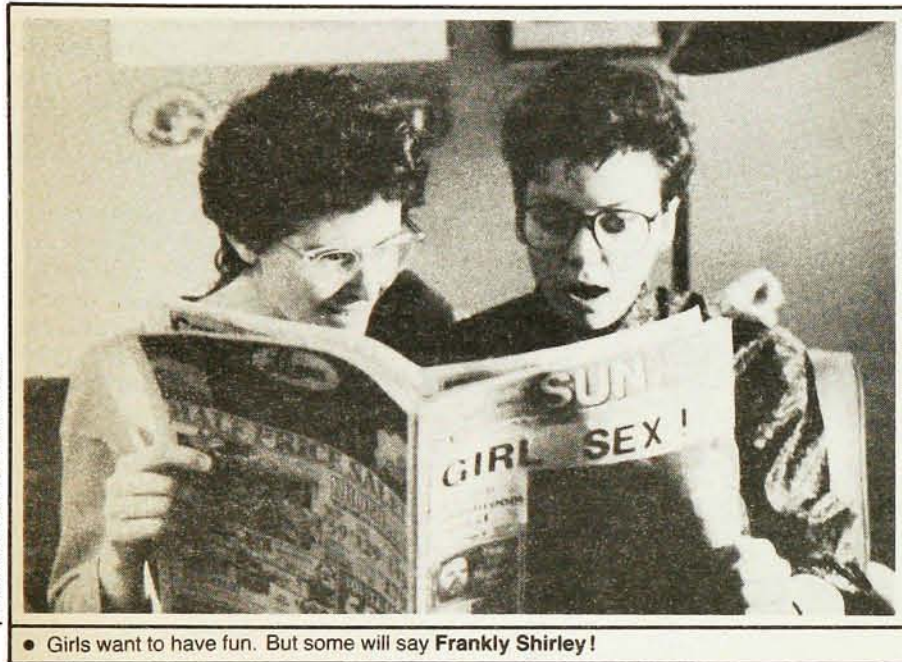
Ne retenez pas votre souffle was an obvious choice in this year's lineup. It is a collection of interviews with participants in last year's *Festival*: Eddie Constantine, David Rimmer, Sara Driver, Maxi Cohen, Stefaan Decostere, *et al.* These 15 or so subjects discussed their involvement with film and the state of the art generally. As a document of a certain place at a certain time it is interesting, and producers Luc Bourdon and Louis Bronsard have managed to keep these talking heads engaging for 45 minutes. (Visual conception was handled by François Girard.) But these speakers and their in-

sights are not earth-shattering and so *Ne retenez pas votre souffle* is likely to have limited usefulness outside of the context of this event.

Première Édition is another one of the visually complicated, short tapes parked down at the 'form' end of the form/content paradigm. A version of *The Pied Piper* is jumbled up with some

ery of the twins, and less in her assumed responsibility as a social critic.

Trudel's *La Théorie mordue*, also has two revolving young women – except here they speak. Their basic dilemma stems from their paralysing self-consciousness – a dilemma which all theory-conscious artists need to resolve. Its conclusions seem optimistic – conveyed by



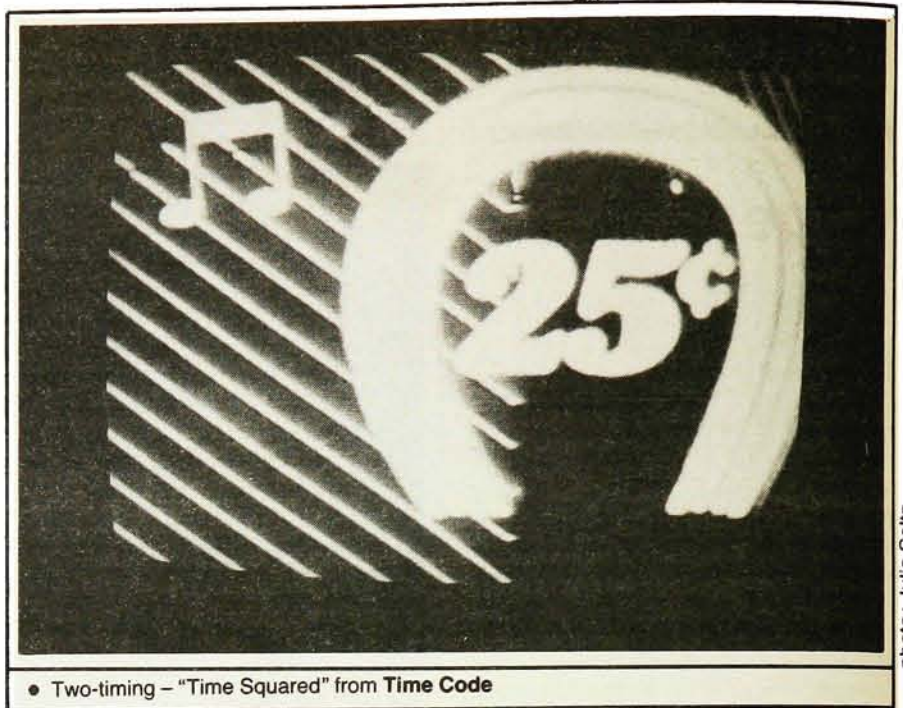
• Girls want to have fun. But some will say *Frankly Shirley!*

interesting model-sets made of vegetables and a chequer-board, as well as some not-so-interesting random video effects and close-up shots of hair or amoeba or something. Martin L'Abbé produced this tape during a 'creative workshop'; opening the possibility that he originally conceived the piece as an exercise and only released it as a finished tape as an afterthought.

Christine Martin and Gisèle Trudel each produced a 'female-doppelgänger-with-theory-and-text tape.' In Martin's *Twins*, two identical young women slowly turn while engaged in a sisterly embrace. The text sets up a parallel between their differences and the differences between men and women. She assumes that there is a degree of cynicism or perversion in the audience and she concludes by addressing that. The strength of this tasteful tape lies mainly in Martin's strong attachment to the imag-

the text sequence: Dance, Laugh, Reach, Rise, presumably, above the need for over-verbalizing.

Time Code was not one tape but seven – an international television project involving the collaboration of independent producers and broadcasters from seven countries. Artists from England, Spain, Holland, France, United States, Germany and Canada worked with their national television networks to create short pieces of 'television art' without dialogue. These were combined into a single, hour-long program which was available to each broadcaster. Video art which is designed for television works differently than that which is intended for other contexts – and all of this program works exceedingly well – as television and as art. Bernard Hébert and Michel Ouellette were the Canadian representatives, and their work continues to fascinate. Hopefully, other projects like this



• Two-timing – "Time Squared" from *Time Code*



• Eddie Constantine through the looking lens in *Retenez pas votre souffle*

one are brewing, and these two imaginative producers will be involved.

In retrospect, perhaps dropping *Video* from the name of the Festival was a good idea this year. The tapes, as good as some of them were, could not generate the enthusiasm they deserved, precisely because they were appended to a film festival. If next year's project is going to con-

tinue as a film *and* video festival, hopefully the video part can be greatly expanded. Giatsios's European and American connections should be supplemented by Asian and Latin American selections. And the Canadian tapes, if handled separately, should be chosen to represent the full depth and breadth of our current national video activity. •

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