

## 'Toon town

## Ottawa '88 – International Animation Festival

BY PATRICIA THOMPSON

On the road again to Ottawa for the "return home" of the animation festival in October. My little corpuscles throb with anticipation! A new team is in place, and Ottawa '88 is (as proclaimed in the program book) presented by the Canadian Film Institute, a division of Cinémathèque Canada, in collaboration with the National Arts Centre, the Ottawa-Hull Film and Television Association and ASIFA-Canada. Sweep aside unhappy memories of past horrors in Toronto and Hamilton, and think positively – as it turned out, that had already been done by the organizers. In eight months they managed to pull together a pleasant, affable event at the National Arts Centre which, while lacking outstanding films, did provide many absorbing and interesting hours of animation.

## Day One

It rained all day! But registration at the National Arts Centre was a breeze, the staff helpful, and the media handled smoothly by Alain Garceau and his team. T-shirts for sale; a lot of informational material; flower arrangements incorporating film; and a corporate sponsor, The Upper Canada Brewing Company, displaying tasteful sweatshirts and beer mugs. Serge Losique, president of Cinémathèque Canada,

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prowling around and smiling a lot...

The Festival kicked off in the afternoon with International Panorama I (films not in competition) – a mixed bag from a number of countries. A Czechoslovak puppet film, *Lakoma Barka*, about a mean little village, its rotten inhabitants and Barka in particular, the cranky housekeeper of the village priest, raised one's hopes. But they were dashed by *Pleasure Domes*, an incredibly pretentious set of drawings about the "nature of perception" from Maggie Fooke of Australia, and by *Binky and Boo* (U.K.), which had some first-rate cut-outs but proceeded to fail badly with a muddy storyline and gruesome attempts at humour.

The official competition got underway in the evening. Introductions, speeches, thanks to everyone (including an impressive number of sponsors), and then the Festival was officially declared open by the Hon. Flora MacDonald, (now former) Minister of Communications. The Ottawa '88 Signal Film started to run. Produced by the NFB English Animation Studio, and animated and directed by Ishu Patel and Les Drew, it featured Patel's hands parting for bursts of his familiar "Bird of Paradise" showers of colour and shapes, and on to a weird running person on a praxinoscope, who finally reaches a small rocket, lights it and, whoosh, it's up and away in another great shower of colour and stars. (As the official competition evenings went on, the main body of the Signal Film remained the same, but the rocket expanded and the little figure endured a number of problems!)

Sixteen entries were then unreeled, running

from one to 14 minutes. *Dobro Pozhalovni/Welcome* (U.S.S.R.) was a wonderfully wry and funny adaptation of a Dr. Seuss story about an elk ambling through the forest who's persuaded to give rides in his wide branching antlers to various small animals encountered *en route*. They take over – serve afternoon tea, engage in games of dominoes, swing in little hammocks, feed young families – until nature asserts itself and the elk loses his antlers! Yugoslavia scored twice with the audience – in *Lalilonska Kula/The Tower of Babel* a man falls from the Tower and his life flashes before him, a good idea that ultimately became repetitive – and *Tutankhamon* gave a new twist to the great Pharaoh tale, as the baby ruler teased his guards unmercifully and was soundly thwarted. *Picnic* (U.K.) presented a chilling, heartless vision where, against a montage of still photographs, menacing black shapes and slashes of colour painted a stark picture of chaos in today's world. In contrast, jolly *Jake the Snake* (U.S.A.) tried to explain "body parts" while hampered by the wrong physique – forced to omit legs, and having a bit of trouble with elbows! In another downer, the interesting cut-outs in *Smatchkan Sviyat/A Crushed World* (Bulgaria) just about made bearable the story of a poor, put-upon man who learns the true nature of optimism. Canada was represented by *Coeur étourdi/Dizzy Heart* in which a lonely old bachelor participated in Love-A-Thon, a matchmaking game show, but it went on and on for 14 minutes (and the audience fidgeted); and by *The Cat Came Back*, an audience-pleaser but, after several viewings, its

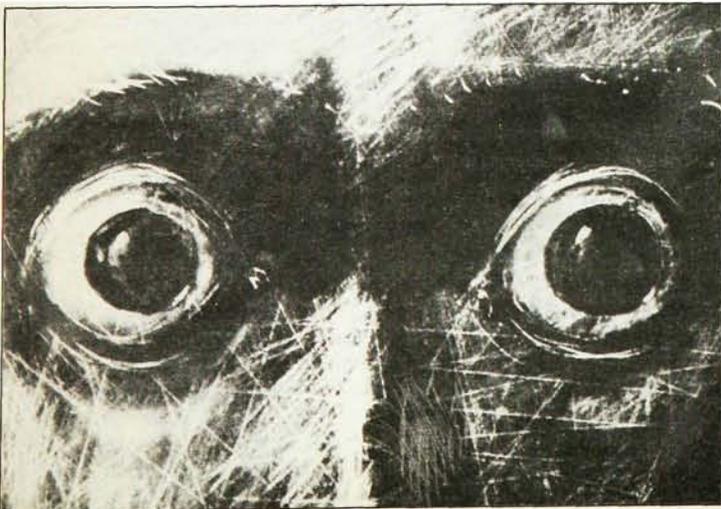
ugly, loud, hit-over-the-head style doesn't fizzle on me at all. And that goes for *How To Kiss* (U.S.A.) too – which could have been witty, but was definitely not.

The evening was rounded out by a reception where opinions on the first competition films varied from "pretentious, self-indulgent and boring" (so there!) to "not bad, but nothing stood out". There was lots more to come – 77 films and videos in competition.

## Day Two

The pace heated up. "Storytelling in Animation", the first of four workshops during the Festival, opened with a morning panel discussion. A Tribute to Evelyn Lambart, the Festival's honorary president and longtime Norman McLaren collaborator, followed. She was interviewed in the auditorium by Grant Munro, an animation colleague at the NFB for many years, (he also wrote a graceful, personal tribute in the Festival's official program).

One of Lambart's earliest films, *The Impossible Map* (1947), showed the difficulties of depicting the world flat when it is round. She painted it on a grapefruit, and sliced the peel in various ways to demonstrate the problem. Lambart's cut-outs are unique, in both wonderful shapes and colours – the bright pastels (not really a contradiction!) and the images of fruit, flowers and all nature are marvellous to behold in *The Lion and the Mouse* and *Mr. Frog Went A-Courting*. It was also revealing to find out how much she contributed to McLaren's work, *A Chairy Tale*, *Lines – Vertical/Lines – Horizontal*, *Begone Dull*



Sciany/Walls: (Poland) Man and his imagination enclosed



L'Homme qui plantait des arbres reaped the grand prize

Care. Someone in the audience asked her what she had done on *A Chairy Tale* – “I moved the chair.”

Then came International Panorama II and some goodies including the first-class *George and Rosemary* (Canada), which was nominated for an Oscar in 1987 but couldn't get past the selection committee here and into competition... very strange. *Pas à deux* (The Netherlands), featured continually shifting pairs of celebrities dancing together including Miss Piggy, Astaire, Bardot, van Gogh, and was a good idea that worked. And two from the U. S. A., *Come Back Little Shiksa*, a live-action/clay-mation segment for the TV series *Moonlighting*, with Bruce Willis coming off hilariously as a pliable horny toad; and *A Warm Reception in L. A.* (from the team that brought us *Jake the Snake* in competition) featuring some brightly-coloured drawings accompanying a witty, upbeat song about rejection in LaLaland showbiz. Two Canadian commercials were also in the program, *Obélix III* and *Fantasy Friends*.

The evening competition started with Wendy Tilby's charming *Tables of Content* (Canada), which has been nicely reviewed just about everywhere. Canada was well represented this night: *If Only*, two beery bums drinking and dreaming of a paradise which is just outside their door, was a not very new statement from the NFB – greatly admired by some, but not by me; *That's Not Cricket*, featured a befuddled Englishman trying to visualize a baseball game heard over a taxi radio, may have been funny but the sound was extremely fuzzy; and *Corporate Blues* presented an executive interview that was sharp, loud and nasty – perhaps true to life? The rest of the program contained some rich moments. *Transatlantique* (France), is a beautifully drawn story of an agitated young woman who jumps from a liner and finds the underwater dead; but, ultimately, at 17 minutes it is far too long. Also from France, *Un point c'est tout/Full Stop* cleverly explores perspective aided by a droll French commentary. The audience really warmed to *Veseliakati/Lucky Man* (Bulgaria), as a man carrying a banner surges forward and struggles against a vicious horde that will eventually overwhelm him. Superb b&w drawing reminiscent of Topolski, with the banner in colour but again, a familiar message that takes too long to deliver. *Technological Threat* (U. S. A.) was a smart computer-assisted idea involving a corporate wolf who fights back when his colleagues are replaced by robots. Another audience-pleaser, *My Baby Just Cares for Me* (U. K.), with the Nina Simone vocal – featuring a sultry clay-figure singer driving a besotted cat mad with passion – left me cold, but the feline was cute and cuddly! The “event” of the evening (and, indeed, the Festival) was *Yvonne* (Switzerland), described in the program as an absurdist film with “some wretched humming”, but when the yellow rectangle was projected on a white background, filmmaker Kilian Dellers



The elk overcome with it all in *Dobro Pozhalovat/Welcome* (U. S. S. R.)

stepped in front of the egg-colour and played his euphonium atrociously for a minute. Great fun!

The competition films were followed by a program devoted to Daffy Duck, introduced by Mark Langer, associate professor of Film Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, who read a telegram from DeeDee... After the beginning with *Porky's Duck Hunt* (1937), through such remembered titles as *Wise Quackers* (1949), *Duck Amuck* (1953) and *Robin Hood Daffy* (1958), and up to the recent revival with *The Duxorcist* (1987) and *The Night of the Living Duck* (1988), I decided that my funnybone had re-formed and that DeeDee wasn't as hilarious as I remembered, and Porky Pig was der-der-der-der-downright irritating...

### Day Three

The second storytelling workshop in the morning was followed by the NFB 50th Anniversary Animation Program I, featuring the early favourites – *V for Victory*, *Hen Hop*, *Cadet Rousselle*, *Romance of Transportation*, and others. Since I had seen all of them many times, I rested my eyes and *derrière*.

At noon came THE PICNIC – the sun was co-operating, the buses filled up with animators for the tiny trip from the NAC along Wellington and over the bridge to Victoria Island with its great view of downtown Ottawa. Upper Canada beer flowed, six neat step-dancers tapped away

like mad (they *must* retire at 12!), and the folkies twanged and sang. After a nourishing lunch, served in a huge marquee, came the great Pumpkin Carving Contest. Some worked with a helper, or in a team, or hunched alone over an emerging masterpiece, and when the judging was done the winners were – Most Beautiful: the Canadian team of Jacques Drouin, Sylvie Pagé and Malcolm Cecil (who had *Coeur étourdi/Dizzy Heart* in competition) and Weirdest: a two-tier edifice from the team of Bulgarian animators, who utilized paint (always in their pockets), a handy rake, and some of the yellow and black balloons used to decorate the site. (All the pumpkins later took up residence in *Chez Ani*, the Festival meeting place and, at night, with candles lit inside them, the faces flickered in the dimness...)

The official competition films at night started off well with *Dog Brain* (Canada), featuring a dreaming dog with a wonderful snore, which had the merit of being funny and short. Canada was also represented by *The Man Who Stole Dreams*, a dreadful, plodding embarrassment from the NFB, and the comically absurd (and independent) *Nice Day in the Country*. Other remembrances include *Snoppen/Mr. Dick* (Sweden), a snappy ad for condoms; *Eyes on the Prize* (U. S. A.), an effectively drawn squib depicting civil rights marchers who gradually shift and form into the American flag; *Skate*

*Butcher* (France), a slightly hysterical piece of dimensional paper sculpture with punk rock track (mercifully only about two minutes...); and a curious one from Denmark, *Flasken/The Bottle*, concerning an alcoholic enamoured of a woman shaped like a bottle who regularly removes the cork from the top of her head and leans over to pour him a pacifying drink! This evening produced my personal “Favourite in Competition”, *Sciomy/Walls* (Poland). Drawn in stark b&w, a man is confined within cell-like four walls and imagination plays strange tricks. In his isolation he dreams and fantasizes and listens to noises from outside. Though the theme is familiar, this little gem succeeds superbly because it builds up a truly ferocious tension during its seven minutes.

The second program of the evening was a look at Bulgarian Animation, with a selection of 13 films from 1963 to 1988. I recalled some of the earlier ones – *Umno Selo/The Intelligent Village* (1972), a witty folk piece by Donyo Donev telling of a village plagued by snakes, and how the subsequent ‘remedies’ weren't much good; and *Tupanati/Drum* (1973) with the animator's hands drawing various drums while their rhythms reverberate on the soundtrack. The program felt over-long and the films have a heaviness and oppression about them, even the supposedly lighthearted ones – it must be tough to live in Bulgaria.

**Day Four**

All geared-up to slog through a Saturday jam-packed with "something for everyone". The storytelling workshop at 9 a.m. was followed by competition films for children, and the times were out in force, wriggling in anticipation. Canada opened the program with *Peep and The Big Wide World No. 3*, a charming episode in the NFB series featuring Peep the chicken, Chirp the robin and Quack the duck (chronicled in an Animation On Location piece, *Cinema Canada* January 1988), all voiced by Peter Ustinov. And there were also two tiny jolly segments for *Sesame Street* from CBC Graphics/Toronto: 'J'ai Faim! I'm Hungry, with an obnoxious little bird screeching incessantly from the nest, "J'ai faim, Papa!", as his parent brings him all the wrong, non-edible things; and *The City* which follows a cow visiting a metropolis and explaining the French for "city" and "country". Other kidstuff featured a stunningly coloured fantasy world in *Csiribiril/Abracadabra* from Hungary; an elephant story from the U.S.A., *Morsalazunt II*; a young girl transformed into a butterfly, *Peperuda/Butterfly* (Bulgaria); and a beautiful, but overlong, tale from Iran of a raven's scheme to come in from the cold and live in a nice warm cage, *Bazghast/Return*. The two bores were one of an old-fashioned puppet series from Hungary, *Cupboard Tales - The Old Pop*, with an awfully arch English voice-over, and a goody-goody piece made for French television, *Flosco - Histoire d'une enfance/Flosco - A Story of Childhood*, about a sappy lad surrounded by invisible elves and spirits...

Later, an "Animation in the Marketplace" panel exploring current buying and selling, overlapped with "Cinémathèque québécoise: 25 Years!" (and with lunch too), so I opted for the latter. The opening film, *Slippery Jim* (1909 France), had some wonderful "tricks" and special effects and just zipped along, and there was a vintage Betty Boop, *Betty in Blunderland* (1935 U.S.A.). The rest of the program was a bit unbalanced with some pretty heavy stuff from Japan, Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Ottawa - animation capital of Canada - an absolute truth that was celebrated with "Ottawa Showcase" in the afternoon, and featured Norman McLaren's first films made during the 15 years the NFB operated out of Ottawa, early and late Crawley, and up to the present-day *Raccoons*.

Before the final program of competition films came the premiere of *Tin Toy* (U.S.A.) from Pixar, which blends a number of new techniques in computer animation. The story of a wind-up drummer-boy toy and his first encounter with a lively and destructive baby is quite delightful, incredibly polished and in glorious colour. However, this "first work to feature the animation of a human character" delivers a really weird baby, a smooth and creepy Pillsbury Dough Boy-type clad in a hilariously rigid diaper - but the film was received with rapture. Then

on to the highs and lows of competition, with Canada represented by *Disconnected*, (I can't remember it at all!), three very short commercials, *Takes The Heat*, *A Matter of Opinion* and *Top of the Hour*, which were OK but not soul-shattering; a dreadful yawn-inducing piece, *Dreams of a Land*, from the NFB. All of these were overshadowed by the much-admired *L'homme qui plantait des arbres/The Man Who Planted Trees* with French voice-over by Philippe Noiret. Two other films linger in the memory, *Pencil Dance* (U.S.A.) an engaging b&w abstract with free-form and angular shapes dancing around to a modern arrangement of a Prokofiev suite, and *The Quitter* (U.S.A.) spells out the advantages of not smoking in a witty and laid-back manner helped by some wonderful voices on the track.

*Outrageous Animation* came on at 10 p.m., and I passed out - of the theatre...

**Day Five**

It's Awards Day! But not until we've had the final "Storytelling in Animation" workshop, and "German Animation Pioneers", and a repeat of the *Daffy Duck* program at a downtown cinema, and the NFB 50th Anniversary II program of "Recent Humorous Shorts" including such favourites as *Getting Started*, *The Sweater*, *The Big Snit*, and so on. I'd seen most of the German animation (a lot of praise was heaped on the pianist, Gabriel Thibaudeau of Montreal), and all the NFB program - which was a blessing since I dashed off to an On Location assignment (coming soon to these pages).

The Awards were presented in the well-filled Opera of the NAC. As often happens with these "hand-out" ceremonies, it was too long and started 20 minutes late after the audience began a slow, insistent hand-clap. The International Jury filed out and sat on-stage - Howard Beckerman (U.S.A.), Clare Kitson (U.K.), Caroline Leaf (Canada), Nicolai Todorov (Bulgaria) and Juan Padron (Cuba). Beckman was the M.C., and thought he was a standup comic. Dispensing a phoney folksy air, mispronouncing names, and losing his place in the script, he was overshadowed by Kitson who delivered the announcements in impeccable French with overwhelming aplomb. She should have done the whole thing.

The awards were largely deserved and mostly predictable. But the presentation of the Norman McLaren Heritage Award to Pierre Hébert, a prolific experimental filmmaker and producer, was inexplicable to many. His latest work, *La Lettre d'amour*, was shown - an indulgent piece that unforgivably forgot McLaren's dictum that the eyes should be allowed to rest at intervals...

There were some puzzlements. Category E had a First only and Category H spawned a Special Jury Prize for *Transatlantique* but no category awards were handed out. The ways of juries are mysterious as are those of the Selection Committee... This band of toilers - Gerry

## Ottawa '88 International Animation Festival Award Winners

**Category A - Debut works**  
First: *Tables of Content* (Canada) Wendy Tilby  
Second: *Pencil Dance* (U.S.A.) Chris Casady

**Category B - Educational productions**  
First: *The Quitter* (U.S.A.) Paul Fierlinger  
Second: *Snoppen (Mr. Dick)* (Sweden) Stig Bergqvist

**Category C - Children's animated productions not being part of a series**  
First: *Drobno Pozhalovat (Welcome)* (U.S.S.R.) Alexei Karayev  
Second: *Peep and the Big Wide World No. 3* (Canada) Kaj Pindal

**Category D - Promotional works under five minutes**  
First: *My Baby Just Cares for Me* (U.K.) Peter Lord  
Second: *Eyes on the Prize* (U.S.A.) John Hays

**Category E - Animated productions especially produced for television**  
First: *Szekentmesek - Az Apoka (Cupboard Tales - The Old Pop)* (Hungary) Csaba Varga  
Second: No award given

**Category F - Productions five minutes or less**  
First: *Picnic* (U.K.) Paul Vester  
Second: *Technological Threat* (U.S.A.) Bill Kroyer

**Category G - Productions more than five minutes and up to and including 15 minutes**  
First: *Veseliakat (Lucky Man)* (Bulgaria) Anri Koulev  
Second: *Sciany (Walls)* (Poland) Piotr Dumala

**Category H - Productions more than 15 minutes and up to and including 30 minutes**  
No awards given - not enough films in this category

**Special Jury Awards**  
*Nice Day in the Country* (Canada) Christopher Hinton - for humour  
*Smatchkan Sviyat (A Crushed World)* (Bulgaria) Boyko Kanev - for unusual technique  
*Lailonska Kula (The Tower of Babel)* (Yugoslavia) Rastko Ciric  
*Transatlantique (Transatlantic Liner)* (France) Bruce Krebs

**The Norman McLaren Heritage Award** (established by ASIFA Canada and Guy Glover for the estate of Norman McLaren) To Pierre Hébert - for a body of work

**Grand Prix of the Festival and the Public Prize**  
*L'homme qui plantait des arbres (The Man who Planted Trees)* (Canada) Frédéric Back

Capelle (Canada), Zdenko Gasparovic (Yugoslavia), Yvon Mallette (NFB), Thelma Schenkel (U.S.A.) and Véronique Steeno (ASIFA-Belgium) - had a lot to answer for in the opinion of many at the Festival. They screened 551 films and videos in 10 days and, while one's eyes and rear-end quiver in sympathy, a lot of dreadful clinkers shouldn't have got into competition. On the other side, the two varied International Panorama programs covered lots of ground and a good deal of excitement was generated by the aggressively futuristic

Japanese animation and by a wealth of good ideas well executed.

Frank Taylor and his Canadian Film Institute crew deserve plaudits for getting Ottawa '88 together in a hurry. The organization was good, and staff helpful and friendly. But I really missed morning press conferences - they do start the day right and put things into focus and get you moving and out and about! So here's to Ottawa '90 which, with the same teamwork and longer think-and-organization time, should be an absolute blockbuster. ●