

Finding a focus

Atlantic Festival Atlantique '88

BY CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

The shutter opens and closes on another year of the Atlantic Festival Atlantique, and like a flower filmed with time lapse photography the image shows a path and pattern of growth not always visible from day to day. From year to year the profile changes and the festival edges toward a certain understanding of what its task is and who its audience is.

This year the festival seemed smoothly organized. By and large events took place where and when they were scheduled and the overall flow and tenor seemed free of glitches. Although it appears to me that the festival has yet not been able to cut quite the swath it would like, it has at least drawn and satisfied the film and video production community. The programming, by Gordon Parsons and Ron Macdonald, featured a broad and entertaining selection of films and largely avoided the problems of past years.

This is the second year that Elizabeth Clarke has shepherded the Festival along and the programming, organizational, fund-raising, and corporate support elements all seem to be firmly in place. The challenge thrown down by Brian Hannington as he left the directorship of the Festival, for filmmakers to become engaged and make the festival their own, has been taken up. It is a thriving vehicle, showing the country what this region is capable of.

For the first time, films produced outside the region were not only screened within the Festival, but ran head to head with local productions in terms of potential awards – and in a number of cases came out on top. I believe this inclusion has had a positive effect, allowing local productions to line up realistically against some of the better material being produced throughout the country. These coveted "Moonsnail Awards" were presented at a special awards banquet at the conclusion of the festival. The promise of a champagne breakfast brought slightly haggard-looking filmmakers out of their homes and hotel rooms to hear local writer H. T. Hatte expostulate in his own inimitable, laconic style as master of ceremonies. **And the winner is...**

Les Halman, for many years the guru of sound editing at the NFB Atlantic studio before his recent transfer to Montreal, received the much deserved Pioneer Award for his years of contribution to the industry. Having many times myself been the recipient of his unstinting and generous help, advice and guidance on any and every problem, I can only commend the jury



Stefan Wodoslawsky and Diana Reis in *Something About Love*.

for the wisdom of its award. Three cheers for Les!

Moncton filmmaker Marc Paulin received the Best Experimental Film award for his production *Deadline - Date d'échéance*, a humorous, offbeat all-over-everywhere film which features filmmaker Robert Frank and a crew of aspiring experimental filmmakers. The award for Best Makeup went to Guy Maddin's *Tales From the Gimli Hospital*. Guy Maddin himself walked away with the award for Best Direction. High marks for Television Journalism went to Janet Thompson for *Robbie's Story*, a CBC-produced portrait of a 31-year-old schizophrenic. Robbie lives impoverished in a closet-sized room drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, but resists his family's attempts to have him placed under professional care.

Best Narration was awarded to Paul Cowan's *See No Evil*, a docudrama set against the backdrop of an industrial accident and issues of safety and responsibility. In the related category of On-Air Narration, Cedric Smith, the M.C. in Brian Pollard's *A Wake For Milton*, was given the honours. Ernie Tomlinson, art director of Herménégilde Chiasson's *Madame Latour*, must have been pleased when it received the award for Best Costumes. Best Art Direction, however, passed him by and went instead to *Les Portes Tournautes (The Revolving Doors)*, Francis Mankiewicz's bitter/hopeful tale of two

time-periods, set, in part, in Campbellton, New Brunswick.

Editor Angela Baker, too, must have been pleased when Bill MacGillivray's documentary on the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, walked off with the prize for Best Editing. The award for Best Acting went to Robyn Stevan, the actress who played Julie Belmas in Paul Donovan's *The Squamish Five*, a CBC Toronto made-for-television film about the 'Direct Action' group responsible for the fire bombings of Litton Industries and the Red-Hot Video stores in Vancouver. Best Performance (I've not been able to discern how this differs from Best Acting) went to the CODCO company – Mary Walsh, Andy Jones, Kathy Jones, Greg Malone and Tommy Sexton – the stars of John Blanchard's *Codco The Movie*, a compilation of some of the best segments of this year's CBC television series of the same name.

The most Promising Filmmaker Award went to Ken Pittman, whose first feature film, *Finding Mary March*, opened the festival. The Best Short Film went to Alex Busby and David Coole of the Atlantic Filmmakers Coop for their off-beat, cross-Canada film, *Jackass Johnny*. Best Cinematography went to Rebecca Yates and Glen Salzman's film *Milk and Honey*, a look at the problems of immigrants in this country. Josette Simon, a native of the West Indies who now lives

in Great Britain and who is the lead actress of the film, won the ACTRA award for Best Performance.

Finally, the big prizes for Best Documentary went to Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential* and Best Drama went to Léa Pool's *À corps perdu*. The Air Canada People's Choice Award, selected by audience members, came home to Cape Bretoner Stefan Wodoslawsky and Tom Berry for *Something About Love*.

Selected separately, but awarded at this presentation, was the Linda Joy Busby Media Arts Foundation award. This year the \$2,000 award went to St. John's Nfld. filmmaker Debra McGee. The money will go towards post-production costs on her film *Multiple Choice* which concerns a researcher who is coming to grips with control, power and her own high-consumption lifestyle. In addition, there were separate awards for advertisements and some 10 of the 70-plus entries were so honoured. The jury was composed of filmmakers Jon Pedersen, Diane Poitras and writer Tom Perlmutter.

Talking it up

In addition to the 36 films screened as part of the festival, there were five panel discussions held during the festival. *Getting Started* dealt with entry-level opportunities for aspiring filmmakers and included Peter O'Brian, Terry Greenlaw, Ken Pittman and Barry Cowling as panelists. *Increasing Your Edge* was concerned with market issues and featured Jane Newman from New York. *What's Going On* was a panel on current happenings in the film and video industry in Atlantic Canada. On hand were Germaine Wong (NFB), Ralph Holt (Telefilm), Ann Janega (N.S. Dept. of Small Business & Development), Hugh Gauntlett (CBC), and Jamie Wynne to field questions. *Fact and Fiction* looked at the similarities and differences of the fiction and non-fiction genres through exponents Bill MacGillivray, Paul Donovan and Herménégilde Chiasson. Finally, a lively and entertaining session entitled *Everyone's A Critic*, chaired by Carleton University professor Peter Harcourt, dealt with various aspects of criticism and the role of the media in film. Critics included the *Globe & Mail's* own Jay Scott, the Festival of Festivals' Geoff Pevere, and local writer/broadcasters Dave Swick and Lindsay Brown.

Notes and observations: a much anticipated *Finding Mary March*, which was the gala opening film of the festival, did not live up to its potential. Despite an excellent concept, the obvious passion and integrity of director Ken

Pittman and some fine cinematography (particularly in the stunning historical sequences of the Beothuk Indians) and music, the film becomes too bogged down in the moral imperatives of its concerns and is too removed from the cinematic reality of the medium. The script does not create convincing characters in whom we can believe and whose concerns we can share. They are two-dimensional cutouts from the fabric of socio-moral cloth from which they are cut. As a result, the performances of Andrée Pelletier, Rick Boland and Tara Manuel simply never get off the ground.

A superb script, razor-sharp direction and stunning performances by Josette Simon and Lyman Ward (originally from Saint John N. B.) make *Milk and Honey* the fine film that it is. A flawless fusion of conception and execution with real drama, humour, sympathy and passion, it tackles its issues head-on without ever making its analysis simplistic or two-dimensional. Top marks to Rebecca Yates and Glen Salzman.

Angela Baker's *The Boland Twirlers* is a nice, off-beat, short documentary on a group of majorettes who may not have great skills... but they try anyway. Kimberlee McTaggart's *The Unbelievable Story*... also has a fine humorous edge, even if it occasionally tumbles off it. Both of these productions augur well for future ventures from these filmmakers.

Léa Pool's *A corps perdu* is a very artful meditation on conscience and purpose in which form and content form a seamless fusion. Particularly lovely is the way in which Ms. Pool has integrated the black and white photos of photographer Pierre Kurwenal (Matthias Habich) as chronicle of the spiritual transformation which the character is undergoing. They are beautiful and evocative and speak more forcefully than any scripted dialogue could.

Les Krizan's *Margaret Perry: Filmmaker* is a straight-ahead NFB documentary about one of Nova Scotia's pioneers of film. There are some very interesting extracts from the 50 films which she made over a 40-year period beginning in 1939. Hubert Schuurman's *The Church and the Hearth*, also done for the NFB, has good information, good material and good intentions and is dull, dull, dull. For my money his *Ballad of South Mountain*, dealing with almost identical material, is by far and away the better film. Also from the NFB is *Lypa*, directed by Shelagh Mackenzie and Sharon Van Raalte. It concerns an Inuit hunter and artist who has decided to return to the land to live. The subject is a fascinating man and we glimpse some of this through the film although I felt that the filmmaker's aesthetic mediates too much between him and his story. There is some lovely optical printing of his art superimposed on live action to give a genuine sense of the supernatural.

Francis Mankiewicz's *Les Portes Tournantes* is visually stunning but drifts a little, particularly in the scenes with Blaudelle (Gabriel Arcand),



A Roman and a Norman square off in Paul Donovan's *A Switch in Time*



Madame Latour (Marcia Babineau) under arrest in H erm en gilde Chaiisson's film of the same name



Lypa Pitseolak and his wife in the NFB documentary *Lypa*

the stereotypically tortured artist drifting into isolation, wrestling with the ghosts of conscience and memories and distancing all those around him. Good performances by Monique Spaziani as Celeste, the country girl who finds earthly glamour in turn-of-the-century Campbellton as the cinema piano player. Miou-Miou as the estranged spouse of Blaudelle also plays her role with considerable charm.

Madame Latour, H erm en gilde Chaiisson's drama about the 17th century wife of the governor of Acadia, Charles Latour, features a powerful performance by Marcia Babineau. Due to casting difficulties, the role of her husband fell somewhat onto the cutting room floor and consequently one misses the powerful foil to her personality. There are some good moments however, and the film is visually lush, with fine sets, costumes and a style of cinematography which is at times straight out of Georges de la Tour.

Tom Berry's *Something About Love*, featuring ex-Cape Bretoner Stefan Wodolawsky is about an errant son come home. When Dad (played with sensitivity and power by Jan Rubes) starts to show signs of Alzheimer's disease, his son Wally (played by Wodolawsky) comes back from a media career in Los Angeles. In its concern with returning to roots, wrestling with demons from the past, re-connecting with family and friends, and trying to sort out responsibilities, the film strikes many of the same chords that Bill MacGillivray's *Stations* did, only more successfully. At times a little self-consciously commercial, the film is nevertheless an honest and searching exploration of the issues it addresses and does justice to both characters and community.

Paul Donovan's *A Switch in Time* (retitled from *Normanicus*) - although repudiated by its director since he lost control of the final cut in a battle with producers Simcom/Norstar, - is nevertheless a pleasant surprise. Geared to the teenage audience it is still clever, inventive and humorous and exhibits none of the undirected, gratuitous violence that has marred many of Donovan's previous forays. At times the humour is a trifle adolescent but the interesting premise of the film (a wrinkle on the time travel notion) is well developed. Filmed in southern Argentina, the film has a very solid look - Roger Corman would be proud of this one! Janis Cole and Holly Dale's *Calling the Shots* is super. So is Allan Goldstein's *The Outside Chance of Maximilian Glick*. So is Ron Mann's *Comic Book Confidential*. All do justice to their subject matter. All are thought-provoking and entertaining. 'Nuff said.

Final perspective: Five days of films; all Canadian; many Atlantic; many worthwhile. I would go out and see these films if they were playing in a cinema again. I enjoyed many of them - without reservations. Congratulations Canada! Well done Atlantic Festival Atlantique! Give me more! ●