

Which way to the future?

BY BOB VERRALL

In December, Cinema Canada asked Bob Verrall to report on the NFB as it began the post-Macerola era (Film Commissioner François Macerola left the board on Dec. 1) and entered its 50th year.

Originally hired by Norman McLaren, Mr. Verrall was an employee of the board for 40 years during which time his positions included Head of the Animation Department, Director of English Production and Head of Studio B. He also served for a time as president of the S. G. C. T.-NFB, (Union of Filmmakers and Technicians).

At the time I left the NFB, in the winter of '86, I was hopeful about the future: the Board's recent performance had given the lie to the Applebaum-Hébert Report, which had deemed the NFB "irrelevant", by producing some of its best and most innovative films, - *Final Offer*; *Canada's Sweetheart*; *90 Days*; *The Big Snit*; *Feeling Yes*, *Feeling No*; *Incident at Restigouche*; *Democracy On Trial*; *The Morgentaler Affair*; *If You Love This Planet*; the *War* series; to name a few. The Board was being acclaimed in the press and celebrated at festivals in Montreal, Toronto, Cannes and Hollywood as the place where some of the most gifted Canadian filmmakers were working.

There was also, at that time, a dark side: The Film & Video Policy introduced by Francis Fox in the spring of '84, while apparently refuting the recommendations of Applebaum-Hébert by reaffirming the Board's role as public producer and distributor of film and video, nevertheless called for a diminution of this role and a radical overhaul of its operation.

The Board was instructed to prepare a Five Year Operational Plan which would, among other things, transfer control, production and revenue of government-sponsored films to the private sector; increase the use of freelancers through a major reduction of staff; streamline the distribution network by closing a number of film libraries; favour electronic packaging over 16mm distribution; contract out technical services and sell technical facilities not needed for training and research; and channel more resources into R & D for the benefit of the industry.



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The rhetoric of reaffirmation in the Policy was not able to disguise an inherent contradiction: if the objective of the Policy and the Five Year Plan was to ensure that the Board would continue as a "world centre of excellence", how would this be possible if the policy proposals were carried out in full?

"In the interests of channelling more public resources into private production, the Policy proposed to dismantle the infrastructure - physical and intellectual - which has permitted the NFB its stature. Both the collaborative creative production teams, and the fully integrated facility within which they have worked, would disappear as the volume of in-house production shrunk forcing yet more reductions in the NFB's creative personnel, technicians and services." (*Setting the Record Straight* August, 1985).

By the winter of '86 the Five Year Operational Plan was into its second year with its defenders insisting that the Policy would have been worse but for the Commissioner's vigorous interventions at D. O. C. There were elements of the plan which made sense, for example, recognition of the growing importance of video delivery systems. And, of course, no one argued against reasonable reduction in the cost of administration: the NFB would be leaner and healthier, with more money freed up for production.

Briefly stated that, as I recall, was the situation back then.

What about now?

Clearly the NFB has tried to make the best of things and keep its end of the bargain: staff has been reduced from 1,000 to 700, or approximately 30%. Roughly 70% of the program is

now contracted out to freelancers. Six of 29 distribution offices have been closed to date and, although 16mm libraries have been maintained, the videocassette is on its way to being the principal component of the library system.

In return for this reduction in infrastructure the D. O. C. had promised that the money freed up, estimated at \$10 million per year, would be kept by the NFB and reallocated to new programmes. And, although the Board would receive no increases, the budget would be protected from cuts at constant '84 dollars.

This promise has not been kept. Not only have there been cuts to the annual appropriation but supplementary funding expected to cover expensive initiatives of the Commissioner's office - eg. the cost for an application to licence a specialty youth channel - TV Canada; Drama Lab; Saskatchewan Film Development; - has not been forthcoming. And inflation has been allowed to reduce what was left of any savings to zero.

The Board now finds itself much smaller and poorer in the bargain: programmes are on hold if not cancelled in every production centre across the country and freelancers, who had expected contracts, are cooling their heels or giving up on the Board. The Lab, still the best in the country, soldiers on trying to cope with the demands of the PAFPS programme (professional assistance to filmmakers in the private sector - see "Getting aired: the 'right' spin" *Cinema Canada*, Dec. '88), the heavy demands of feature co-productions, and what remains of the Board's own programme, with virtually a skeleton staff. Next year more of the same is expected if not worse with rumours of further budget cuts.

In the midst of this turmoil the Film Commissioner has said goodbye, leaving last December to work for Prodevio Lavalin Inc. as Executive Director of operations of a film and television production centre in downtown Montreal.

In a final statement made at the time of his leaving, François Macerola said concerning his legacy, "I don't want to do a postmortem, I would rather imagine something new than remember my time at the NFB."

People at the Board are not surprised that he would choose to forget what they see as a time of further disintegration of an organization that was supposed to be renewed.

It is believed that his regime encouraged a larger involvement in co-production with the private sector of expensive feature films than is healthy, given that the Board's role in this is mainly that of dispenser of funds and purveyor of goods and services, with the little or no creative input or control.

There are few or no complaints about support for films like *Unfinished Business*; *Anne Trister*, *Le Déclin de l'Empire Américain*; *Un Zoola Nuit*. And it has been gratifying to see the Board thanked for helping such films as *My American Cousin*; *I Hear The Mermaids Singing*; *Life Classes*; and *Faustus Bidgood*; help that ranged from the modest – an office, phone and photocopier – to some post-production.

But the extent of the present and projected claim of the co-production of features on the diminished resources of the place, at a time when Telefilm's budget has increased and the Board's has been cut, makes no sense.

In other words, the NFB has lost a large measure of the independence it once enjoyed. Based on an integrated system, publicly financed, it was accountable only to Parliament and the people of Canada for its performance. Increasingly, it is influenced by initiatives

governed by imperatives of the marketplace – pressures which will distort, if not corrupt, its central purpose of public service.

What, then, is at stake? Consider some of what the Board has produced these past few years: Beverly Shaffer's *To A Safer Place*; the Oscar-nominated *George and Rosemary*; Gil Cardinal's *Foster Child*; Alanis Obomsawin's *Poundmaker's Lodge, A Healing Place*, and *No Address*; Jacques Godbout's *Will James*; Michel Régnier's *Sucre Noir*; Patricia Watson's *The Legacy Of Mary McKeown*; Bonnie Klein's *Mile Zero*; Dorothy Hénauld's *Firewords*; Les Drew's *Every Dog's Guide To Home Safety*. And some major series: Norma Bailey's four-part *Daughters Of The Country*; *Defence Of Canada*, sequel to the acclaimed *War* series featuring Gwyn Dyer; *At The Wheel*, judged the best yet on driver safety; Don Brittain's *King Chronicles*; Don Winkler's and Alan Handel's additions to the *Canadian Authors Series* (Irving Layton, Mordecai Richler, Brian Moore); *Reckoning – The Political Economy Of Canada* featuring James Laxer. And some features – John Smith's *Sitting In Limbo* and the superb *Train Of Dreams*, both made with low budgets the NFB could afford. And there is Wolf Koenig's programme of shorts – 15 minute-

dramas. Begun as training for producers, directors, writers and crew, working with actors, two series have been completed so far, the first dealing with *Bio Ethics* (in demand worldwide by medical schools) and *Wednesday's Children* – causes of teenage crime. In the Multi-Media studio, Julie Stanfel has launched *Perspectives In Science*, a pilot series of "interactive" videos which tackle moral issues in science, technology and the environment.

Judging from the above, the idealism which infected the NFB during the days of Grierson remains intact. Consider the subject matter of this partial list: incest, aging, Metis women; foster care; alcohol & drug abuse; the homeless; disarmament; North-South dialogue; poets and authors; road safety; safety in the home; social history; political history; economics; racism; medical ethics; teenage crime; the environment.

The Board's bashers, mainly people obsessed with expanding Hollywood North, and claiming every available tax dollar to do it, habitually complain that no one sees NFB films. The truth is otherwise.

Although NFB films are not as regular a part of the CBC schedule as they deserve to be, many of the series mentioned have had national

telecasts. The provincial educational channels and new independent stations, which together comprise an ad hoc network, have become an important window for NFB films. The *Reckoning* series, refused by the CBC because it did not conform to the corporation's notion of balance and fairness – read blandness – was shown across Canada via this network and carried as well on P. B. S. border stations. So the TV audience is numbered in the millions and growing.

Numerous polls, including a most recent survey commissioned by the NFB, confirm that audiences want more thoughtful and provocative documentaries on their TV screens in addition to *News* and *The Journal*. The Task Force on Broadcasting Policy, 1986, stated: "We are persuaded that the Board has a significant contribution to make to Canadian television... in its proven fields of excellent social issue documentaries and educational films."

"We would be disappointed if its participation in the broadcasting system proved to be at the price of watering down its advocacy role."

But the largest and most valued audience for Board films is to be found in the schools of the nation – all levels – and with those groups

NFB celebrates golden 50th in style

MONTREAL – An honorary Oscar for the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada at the 61st annual Academy Awards is just a single voice in an international chorus of praise for the NFB on its 50th anniversary in 1989.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will present an Oscar to the NFB in recognition of artistic, creative and technological excellence over the past 50 years.

Five major NFB retrospectives have already been planned outside of Canada. Le Centre culturel canadien de Paris will present a two-week retrospective beginning April 1 at Cinéma l'Entrepôt.

In Los Angeles, the American Film Institute will pay homage with six two-hour lectures, April 14 to 27, presented by filmmakers on various topics related to the NFB.

The Museum of Modern Art will present five 21-hour programs, May 4 to 8, highlighting a different decade of filmmaking.

The Swedish Film Institute and the British Film Institute are planning events.

International film festivals that have already organized a tribute include Berlin, Melbourne, Chicago and Nyon.

Launching

At the recent launching of anniversary celebrations Acting Government Film Commissioner Jan Pennefather announced that Her Excellency the Right Honourable Jeanne

Sauvé will be the honorary chairperson of the celebrations.

She also announced that the Canadian Post Office will issue a commemorative stamp in September. It was also learned that the operation headquarters of the NFB in Montreal will be named after the late Norman McLaren.

In a vote of confidence for the NFB and its future, Pennefather said the anniversary will allow Canadians to become more familiar with the NFB. She said it is gratifying that the NFB is so widely recognized abroad.

"It is an honor that in this country we have an institution called a public producer to create a dialogue between Canadians and, at the same time, expand the frontiers of the art of film... "we are open to change and to new ideas, coproductions and partnerships all in keeping with our public mandate," she said.

Television programming

The golden anniversary of the NFB will be celebrated by various means throughout the year in Canada. But most Canadians will participate in the celebration via television where the NFB will have a high profile.

The CBC has pledged substantial air time which began Jan. 26 with the first film in the series called *NFB Thursday Night Movie*.

Vision TV began a weekly series of NFB films in January. First Choice has reserved a slot each month throughout the year and the CTV has

acquired for the coming season *The New North with Farley Mowat*, an NFB co-production with Noralpha Productions. TVOntario has already devoted its entire Jan. 14 four-hour program *Saturday Night at the Movies*.

The NFB presence on French-language television will include programming on Radio-Québec, Radio-Canada, TVOntario, Radio-Canada Atlantique.

New films

The NFB has also announced a number of 50th special anniversary films. These include *L'anniversaire*, a French computer animation short for Imax; *Cherchez la femme*, a one-hour film by Anne-Claire Poirier focussing on NFB films reflecting the image of women; *The Creative Process*, a film on the works of Norman McLaren.

A major highlight of the year will be the premiere (June 28) of *Qin Shihuang, The First Emperor*, a \$7 million Canada/China Imax production at the opening of the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

Open house

During April and May, the NFB headquarters in Montreal and its regional offices across Canada will open their doors to the general public. Studio D, the women's filmmaking studio, will also be honored on its 15th anniversary. An introduction of a new program created by the NFB to promote the study of science will feature

an environmental symposium in Ottawa comprised of several dozen high school students.

Documentary salute

Salute to the Documentary, a celebration of the documentary film by the NFB in cooperation with other partners in the film industry, will have a three part format: the international Symposium in Montreal (June 18 to 23), the International Documentary Film Week in Montreal (starting June 16) and the National Dimension – a Canadian tour (summer/fall 1989 and winter 1990).



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UNIATEC

For the first time since its inception in 1957, UNIATEC's (International Union of Technical Cinematograph Associations) international congress will be held on the North American continent and hosted by the National Film Board of Canada in Montreal from Oct 14 to 18.

concerned about the urgent issues of the day. This has been the important and undercelebrated constituency served by the Board since the days of the itinerant projectionist and the church basement - union hall circuit established during the war.

Although the 16mm library system has been reduced, it has not been shut down. There are still people ready to come to a church or school auditorium to see a film. (The house was packed at Concordia University last month to see Bonnie Klein's *Mile Zero*.)

But the videocassette is becoming the preferred instrument for classroom use: it is cheap and easy to use. The NFB is establishing collections of videocassettes in public libraries in every province, creating a phenomenal increase in access for teachers, group teachers and individuals alike. School boards, with tight budgets, are more able to extend their own libraries. The home VCR market is growing as people discover that for the price of a VHS or Beta cassette they can own the work of Norman McLaren, Don Brittain, Claude Jutra, Beverly Shaffer or whomever, from a growing catalogue.

So all of this - good product and growing audiences - is now at risk for lack of money: the place is being starved. As money runs out, programmes are delayed or cancelled. The freelance component which was supposed to be part and parcel of a revigorated NFB can't be recruited in force. Competition for a piece of a smaller and smaller pie between regional centres and headquarters calls into question the Board's ability to sustain the existing structure and is forcing a narrower focus on an organization which has thrived on pluralism.

Initiatives which should be taken to launch new films or follow up on the progress of older ones can't happen because there is simply not the money to hire the hands to cover the phones, conduct the workshops, put out the publicity or carry out the myriad tasks necessary to exploit in an orderly way the potential of the distribution system.

But most disturbing is the lack of new blood: The creative core is not being renewed. The youngest members of staff, hired in the '70s, are past 40!

The debate over permanent staff versus freelance is as old as the institution. The original team hired by Grierson didn't know whether it would be for a month or a lifetime and weren't encouraged to even think about it. They were expected to get on with the job at hand. For some, it would become a lifetime task; for others it would be an interval - preparation for somewhere else.

Grierson was enamoured of the idea of the artist as civil servant, with a commitment to all the duties to the public implied by the term. He also understood the need for the restless talents who would come and go. It would be a balancing act, then, between the "lifers" and the transients. For the most part the balance has

worked. It was the lifetime commitment of the likes of Tom Daly, Norman McLaren and Jacques Bobet which provided the stability, continuity and magnetism that would attract over the years brilliant teams of both staff and freelancer, and put Canadian documentary and animation on the map.

But Tom Daly, Norman McLaren and Jacques Bobet are no longer there: and many of those they recruited, and trained, have left or are about to.

Those who would save the Board know it is urgent that the best talents in the country be recruited and given the time to prove their worth and commitment for the long haul into the next decade.

"In 1939, the NFB was set up as a public information producer. During the 1940s, it became a producer of propaganda films as part of the Allied war effort. During the 1950s, the NFB focussed on documenting the physical and social reality of the country. By the 1960s, the Board expanded into French production and developed Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle as the Bi and Bi Commission and the Just Society dominated the political agenda. During the 1970s, Regional Production Centres and the women's Studio D were established as feminism and regionalization were in ascendancy. In the next decade Canada's psychic sovereignty will take on increased significance as the possibility of economic sovereignty declines." (*Setting The Record Straight*)

The Board during its 50th year deserves something better than an occasion to celebrate an illustrious past. This unique organization, headquartered in Montreal, with six regional centres of production across the country, producing in two official languages, maintaining a distribution network linked to every neighbourhood in the land, reaching audiences around the world through offices, embassies and consulates abroad - all this for \$3 a year or thereabouts from each of us - is a resource that surely the government will agree deserves to be renewed and strengthened.

The Prime Minister will be making, in the next months, many appointments to high office. Two of those appointments will be persons who will take charge of programmes essential to the "psychic sovereignty" of the country - a President for the CBC and a Government Film Commissioner.

The Film Board deserves someone who will love the place, who will understand its strengths and see its great potential, who will believe in the continuing importance of its original mission to "interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations," to 'imagine' the country (create it in the imagination of its people) and bring it alive to itself as a distinct entity within North America."

And the government must provide this new Commissioner with the financial means to do it. ●



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Elizabeth Vander Zaag
Still from video,
Hot Chicks on TV, 1986



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