

6th Annual Atlantic Film and Video Producers Conference

BY MIKE DINN

To a sleepy, little vacation resort on the north shore of Prince Edward Island they came, not in droves like lemmings, but in respectable numbers (about 100), for the Sixth Annual Atlantic Film and Video Producers conference held in Stanhope-by-the-Sea, June 22-25.

Conference organizer Peter Richards, a member of the host group, Island Media Arts Co-op (IMAC), was happy with the event, the biggest to date. He was particularly pleased with the types of sessions and seminars and with the calibre of resource people. "I think the delegates really enjoyed the cross-section from the very influential down to the fledgling co-op member," says Richards.

Conference delegates included filmmakers from New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. As well, there was healthy representation from the government agencies - Telefilm, the CBC and the NFB.

Apart from the Atlantic Festival Atlantique, held each year in Halifax, the conference provides the only forum where Eastern film folk can gather, renew acquaintances, and exchange ideas and ideals. "There's a lot of optimism in the region, and one can learn an enormous amount from each conference," says Richards.

Some of the delegates were "conferenced out," but they were pleasantly surprised when they reached the shores of P. E. I. This was partly due to the isolation of the site (a change from previous conferences held in the more urban surroundings of UPEI, at Charlottetown). Delegates literally ate, drank, and slept film as, for one early summer weekend, Stanhope became a commune for filmmakers.

The marketing seminar, which featured the increasingly popular market simulation experience, was aptly entitled "Taking Your Film to Market." The session provided filmmakers with an enlightening and, in some cases, intimidating view of the marketing process. No punches were pulled as finished scripts (by Bill Skerrett, Luciano Lisi, Neal Livingston, and Shandi Mitchell) were presented to the panel for evaluation and feasibility of budget. The panel, which included Telefilm's Ted East, Hugh Gauntlett of CBC-Halifax, New Line Cinema's Janet Grillo from NYC, First Choice's Jamie Wynn, Phyllis Yaffe of FUND, Jan Rofekamp from Films Transit, and Derek MacGillivray of Ironstar Communications in Toronto, told it like it is.

It was left to the scriptwriting seminar (moderated by Ken Pittman) to give heart to those shaken by the cold, cruel world of marketing. Resource people were Peg Campbell of Vancouver, CBC-TV's Jim Burt, Bill MacGillivray, newly elected IFVA prez Ed Riche, and Rick Schmidt.

Schmidt, in particular, went further than most in expounding the virtues of the small independent film. An independent filmmaker from California, and the author of the book *Feature Filmmaking at Used Car Prices*, Rick Schmidt enthralled and encouraged delegates with the idea that the low-budget (or no-budget, as he put it) feature was still a possibility. Schmidt is also the writer/director of *Morgan's Cake*, a feature which he made for \$15,000. He busied himself telling (and selling) his formula for writing, directing, producing, editing, and promoting a feature film for less than \$10,000. By the end of the conference, some delegates were even sporting copies of the fabled book tucked under their arms. And Newfoundland filmmaker Mike Jones at one point passionately declared, "Thank God for Rick Schmidt... He provides an anchor."

Providing an anchor for filmmaking activities in the Atlantic region is what an event like this is all about. "We're not trying to be the best or the biggest," says Peter Richards. "We're just trying to be useful." He adds, "It's nice to know you're not alone in the Atlantic region."

A look at INPUT '89

BY BILL ROBERTS

INPUT, more formally known as the annual International Public Television Screening Conference, is the world's most important venue for the informal exchange of ideas among producers, programmers, and executives dedicated to public television. INPUT is the only international screening conference, including the Banff Television Festival, organized by programmers, not by paid staff. There are no entry fees and no prizes or awards. Only intense debate and feuding esthetics complement the screenings.

This year's event took place in Stockholm, at the Berns café-style congress centre famous for a) its China Theatre (which was staging *West Side Story*, possibly with Swedish Puerto Ricans?), and b) as a haven for August Strindberg's marital escapes, after which *The Red Room* was written.

The Nordic setting was more than appropriate. Its mediascape has changed drastically



during the last few years because of commercial competition, and it reflects the challenges broadcasters encounter worldwide. In particular, the Swedish-owned commercial channel ScanSat/TV3 now reaches across Scandinavia. Broadcasters talk about extensive advertising; accelerating VCR penetration; increased U.S./U.K. access through CNN, MTV, Sky Channel, Super Channel, etc; more domestic private broadcasters; and pressures for pay-per-view.

Yet, the Scandinavians insist on a rather eclectic approach to these concerns. Iceland abandons all rules on maximum advertising time; the Faroe Islands bans TV two days a week (Monday and Wednesday); and Greenland finances TV with bingo! In Sweden, the effect has been the launch of a full investigation into the structure and financing of the Swedish

Broadcasting Corporation. A complete revamping of the broadcaster is expected in 1992.

SPARKS FLEW

INPUT '89 had the largest attendance in the conference's 12-year history, with more than 700 delegates from some 40 countries. Co-production and acquisition chatter abounded, as is usual for most markets and TV events, but from the common perspective of public broadcasting needs. The largest Canadian contingent was from the CBC, which sent 28 delegates, followed by Radio Quebec with six. Access Alberta/Input '90 and the NFB had four each, while CTV and TVOntario were represented by a lone delegate. Whereas two years ago in Grenada, Spain, the conference facilities actually caught fire, this year the sparks flew during some great

programming and discussion panels.

INPUT is a professional development goldmine for producers and public broadcasters. From dawn to dusk, participants debate ethics, mandates and missions, fuelled not only by the scheduled fare, but by 10 on-demand viewing rooms screening an international collection of often controversial product which approached 200 titles. For one nutty week, INPUT seemed to be the turbulent yet "bonne amie" backstage of public TV.

Much has been said about the need for public broadcasters to work together in some international context as private interests proliferate and globalize around them. For this crew, the place to begin, rightly or wrongly, is with the pictures. Multiple screening sessions were arranged along 24 distinct thematic lines, such as "The Sound of Reality," which focused on music and sound as enriching elements; "Contemporary Arts on TV" to review the special problems posed by this genre - especially with live performance; "Defending the Truth," to deal with current affairs and the range of pressures from technical to political; "Youth," to explore young peoples' impatience and radicalism from Leningrad to Montevideo; and "Keeping Dignity," which pursued the use of both fiction and documentary forms to portray the struggles of the homeless and other disadvantaged groups.

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

A workshop on "Is There a Difference?" between male and female television productions looked at themes, point of view, and resolution of narrative conflicts. Many Scandinavian broadcasters offer internal awards for programs that succeed in promoting equality between the sexes, but while this gathering was similarly innovative, it didn't lead to hopeful conclusions. It determined, in the face of daily screenings which said otherwise, that women side with victims and are more concerned with health and social issues, while men prefer Robin Hood heroes, sports, and science. While it may be that a feminist approach to issues involves a different agenda, this workshop, contributed to its own stereotyping and simplistic generalities.

A great debate ensued as to whether there exists a female esthetic, a debate that retreated to a consensus that at least a feminine tendency can be identified. The workshop ignored a minority case, made by American women present, that TV production is increasingly a personal agenda, not a gender-based one. Any equality/equity discussion of a multicultural, or even gay nature, was quickly passed over.

A great workshop session on "Television in the Baltic Republics" pointed out that television has been a major force in the dramatic political and social changes in these states, especially in Estonia. Producers and executives from Estonia reviewed the role of television in the struggle for national identity, professional standards, and

the nature of debate on Perestroika. Participants also discussed programming dealing with environmental pollution coverups by the state, and Russian migration to secure jobs that has reduced Estonians to a bare majority (60 per cent) in their own land.

A TV producer and elected non-Communist delegate to the new People's Congress in Moscow, Juhana Aare, was present as was Gyorgy Baló, President of the Hungarian Journalists' Association. Apparently, live and uncensored programming is now allowed to coexist with relative openness to complement the emergence of some 15 political "movements" in Estonia alone. Moreover, the excerpts of broadcast material were intriguing - including one lively farmyard chat concerning two pigs named Leonid and Nikita who were about to be eaten or sold! Because of programming like this, Estonian viewing of Finnish transborder fare has plummeted during the last two years. When Jacques Godbout (NFB) wondered aloud if "Perhaps Estonian TV will be a threat to U.S. TV soon?" the crowd cheered.

Despite its successes, INPUT was not flawless. The Europeans remain wedded to an "auteur" approach to TV discussion, and are surprisingly relaxed about the realities of feeding and financing public networks in the face of growing commercial competition. INPUT needs a radical shift toward the broadcaster's perspective, at least in part. There were no panels on alternatives to the U.S. commercial product model, although entities like *The Learning Channel* made no bones about their European-style aspirations. Better use could have been made of the "Get Together" sessions sponsored by the various programming departments of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation.

INPUT also lacked an overriding theme, and ignored the practical consideration of a tempo-setting keynote speaker. In addition, one must wonder about the selection process for programs shown, since some appear to be there not on merit, but as political sops to sponsoring broadcasters.

Hopefully, INPUT '90, to be held next year in Edmonton, will address some of these shortcomings. The Alberta INPUT Alliance organizing the event for May 20-26, has already fixed on a theme, "Ten to the 21st," as a catalyst to ponder the role of public broadcasters in the next century. And none too soon one might add. Already, in the U.S., *The Learning Channel* has issued program announcements that could be confused with PBS, while Channel One, A & E, Discovery, Nickelodeon and C-Span continue to increase audience numbers. All this with a Ted Turnerish eye to the world! Public broadcasters are pondering the old adage "The best defence is a good offence." We'll see.

Bill Roberts is Senior Managing Director, External Relations for TVOntario.

... and INPUT '90

Next year's INPUT will take place in Edmonton from May 20th to May 26th.

Ruth Bertelson-Fraser, on the board of directors of the Alberta INPUT Alliance, says: "It's the beginning of the last decade of this century, and we're looking at INPUT '90 to examine the parameters of television as a public service medium." Pointing out that public service broadcasting is no longer "done only by public broadcasters" and "produced by in-house staff," Bertelson-Fraser adds, "The distinction between public and private is becoming fuzziest and fuzzier. For example, the CBC turns more and more to independent contract producers to do their work, rather than staff producers."

There has also been a "real switch" from "strictly informational programming to the realization that culture comes from the community itself, and broadcasters must mix educational with entertainment programs." Bertelson-Fraser further suggests that the very

role of TV will change in a rapidly mutating mediascape. "We must view TV the way we used to look at newspapers. The medium should now augment the information generated by computers and FAX machines to give more detail, or another slant."

INPUT '90 marks the first time that the conference will be held in western North America, and Bertelson-Fraser is delighted about "the opportunity for western Canadian, young and emergent filmmakers, meet with producers and television programmers from all around the world to discuss program needs" as we approach the 21st century.

Bertelson-Fraser is sure that INPUT '90 will be as enjoyable as it will be informative. The 600 delegates will stay at a "top quality" hotel, where they will also screen films and attend the various seminars. The convenience of a single venue is a first for INPUT.

According to Joan Jarvis of the National Screen Institute - Canada, INPUT 90 will be preceded by PREPUT, a three-day workshop for "trainers," or people who provide professional development within corporations like the CBC.

Maurie Alioff

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