

The Festival Game

In the following brief introduction to the articles on the Toronto and Montreal international festivals, a model is proposed against which to measure the two events.

Seldom have cinematographic tempers run quite as high as during the great Montreal-Toronto festivals debate. People from the two cities were just hankering to get into a fight about which was best.

It was as if our persistent national confusion could be resolved if only we could get a fix on the festival scene. As if, once Montreal – or Toronto, as the case may be – predominated, all the other problems would fall into place and oblivion.

All the talk (one is tempted to say chatter) about the World Film Festival of Canada and the Festival of Festivals has presumed that the organizers had in mind the same goals: that they were trying to beat each other out, using the same standard. In fact, the festivals were dissimilar in many ways. The common goal, if there was one, was probably for each festival to get its fair share of the grant money available from the Bureau of Festivals in Ottawa.

Qualitatively, festivals can be measured. A festival of international standing must meet certain criteria. (When the flyer for the Festival International de Rouyn-Noranda came across the **Cinema Canada** desk, one knew that the word "festival" had ceased to mean much in Canada.)

There are many events, world-wide, which call themselves "festivals". They show a lot of films and attract a lot of publicity. Most of them also stir up the local public and excite it about films. They are good for the tourist trade and, if they include competitions, can be good for the films in terms of international publicity. But just because a film wins a prize at Teheran or the Virgin Islands, it doesn't mean these festivals take on real international stature.

Major festivals meet several criteria which include the following:

A substantial number of recent films are selected to be shown to film professionals for the first time. Professionals, and here one means film distributors and sales agents for the most part, are busy people. They won't go out of their way unless there is some guarantee that they will be able to see new films, and that these films will be available to them to bid on. They come to do business, not to go to the movies.

The larger the selection of films, and the greater the diversity in terms of country of origin, the greater the potential for bringing in buyers. And, like reverse dominos, the more sales agents and distributors who gather in one place, the more agents and producers and stars tend to follow, all gathering in an effort to sell their product. Other business, like concluding co-production deals and the like, are a happy by-product of a successful festival.

A structured market-place functions, setting up screening facilities for films which are not official participants

in the festival. Basic means of communication are provided by the organization – a meeting place, a directory, an exhibition hall – but individuals are given leeway to promote their films as best they can.

What differentiates a major international festival from, say an international market place like MIFED (the international film and documentary market in Milan), is the presence of the press and that tribal activity, the press conference.

The press is there to go to the movies, which is in itself work; Cannes can easily mean 6 films a day for 2 weeks. Directors are invited by the festival and given a platform, the press conference, to meet with the press. Actors, scriptwriters, producers etc. oftentimes come too, in an effort to impress and get important press coverage. If a festival is to get the kind of echos it needs to stay in business, the press is provided for, wooed with cocktail party here, a supper there, all under the guise of introducing it to the makers of films.

For those few festivals which can claim real international importance, the combinations of these elements is primordial. The festival itself takes on a life of its own as its organizers fade into the background.

In Canada this fall, there was a lot of talk, both in the press and among festival-goers, advocating the maintenance of both festivals. The principal was the-more-the-merrier; several noted that nothing was more typically Canadian than to have two versions, one French and one English, of a major festival. In view of the country's search for harmony, it is easy to understand the emotions of those who prone two festivals.

The problem is that, by their very nature, the great international festivals are highly competitive. Even now, Berlin is trying to ease Cannes out of the number one spot by changing its dates. If a Canadian festival is to take on international significance, then it will have to attract the best films, the most prestigious guests and the greatest numbers of press people. Two festivals can only water each other down.

Canada's two "festivals" may well continue, each keeping the other from attaining real stature. Each will go on pleasing the local audience, and livening up the local scene. But neither will become important in the big sense of the world, and neither will put Canada on the cinematographic map as a focal place for doing film business. This last goal should be weighed heavily when the final evaluations are made.

Connie Tadros