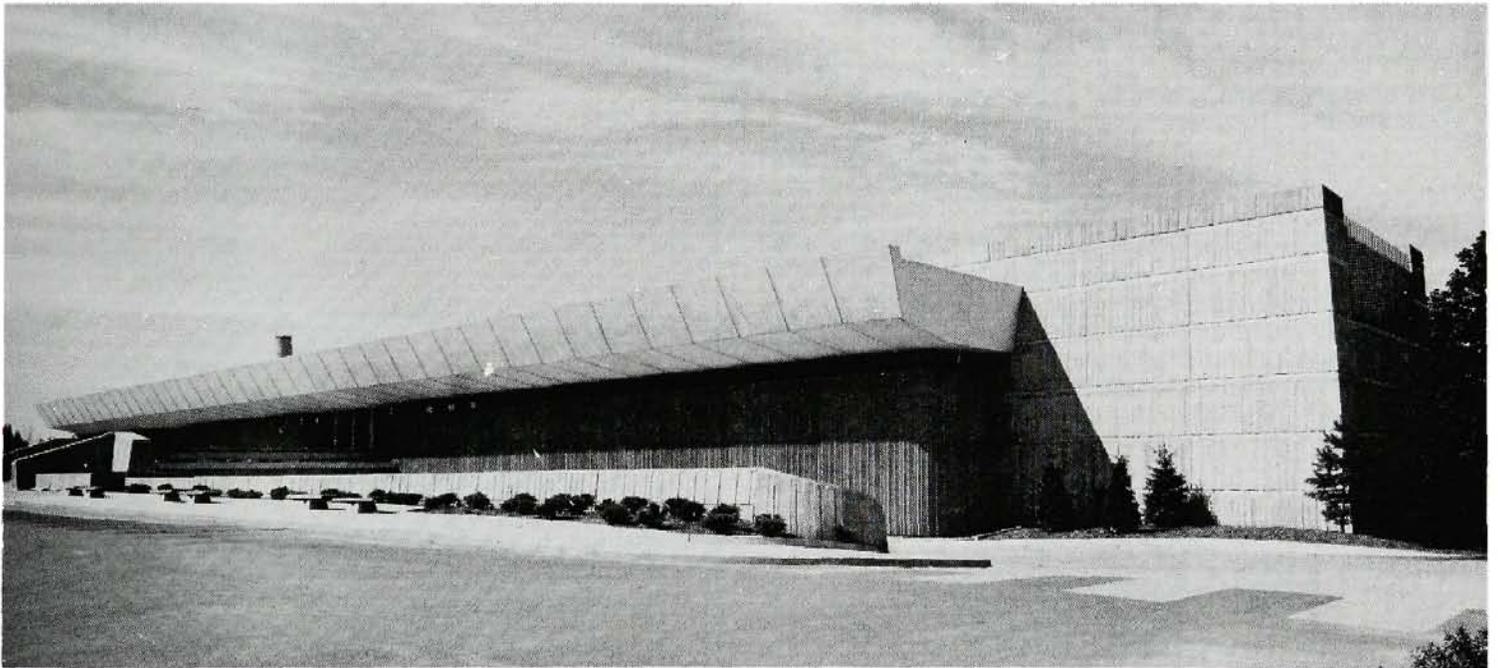

Film institutes and cinémathèques are important for the distribution of quality films and the gathering of cinematographic information in Canada. *Cinema Canada* will profile the most important of these institutions, starting now with the Ontario Film Institute. Both the structure of the Institute and the past programming of the Ontario Film Theatre are examined below.

focus on the o.f.i.-o.f.t.



The Ontario Film Institute at the Ontario Science Centre

ontario film theatre

by Clive Denton

The Ontario Film Theatre opened its doors at the Science Centre on the evening of October 9, 1969. Before an almost capacity audience, D.W. Griffith's **Broken Blossoms** came on the screen (backwards, for the first few seconds) to herald the start of a repertory of classic and modern cinema which has continued and expanded without a break to the present.

The idea of a film centre in Toronto had been a gleam in Gerald Pratley's eye for several years before the

happy opening night. He had, with a quite stoic perseverance, found some support from the government and, in 1967 I believe, asked Patricia Thompson and me to join him in his plans. We all began working for nothing even after the opening but then salaries came through. In 1970 office space was found to house the collection of books, records, stills and cuttings (the basis being Gerald's own acquisitions of several years). This has now grown into a treasure trove for the reference of film students and enthusiasts. But — with limited space — I am writing here only about the film showings, now in their seventh year.

After the opening, projection standards improved rapidly and it was a delight to have available, like bricks in a gigantic playbox, brand new machines capable of showing all gauges from the invaluable 16mm to the prestigious 70mm. On one of the early evenings, the red curtains swung back

to reveal Chris Chapman's **A Place to Stand**, looking every bit as wide and colourful as the Ontario it celebrates. Other memories remain vivid from the first few months. **Claudius, The Epic That Never Was** proved an ideal blend of scholarship and filmic richness; we were all looking for instruction *and* enjoyment, preferably together. The Marx Brothers' **Animal Crackers** – almost unknown at that time because of a complex rights situation – brought down the house. By contrast, Bresson's **Diary of a Country Priest** received not the usual generous applause but a greater accolade of silence at its spiritual conclusion. Martin Knelman wrote of the Film Theatre's "short, happy life". The one night a week showings were about to explode into two or more. This development was no doubt as desirable as it seemed inevitable. Personally, though, I would have liked to have maintained the "special occasion" feeling of those early Thursdays for awhile. If you were there, you may agree they were very special.

As time went by, more new films were shown at OFT including many from Canada. Some were brought out (if only temporarily) from under wraps, like Eric Till's **A Great Big Thing** and Rene Bonnière's **Amanita Pestilens**, with a young lady named Genevieve Bujold in the cast. Others went on to acclaim, **Mon Oncle Antoine** and **The Rowdyman** among them. Some visiting directors, while generally impressed with the theatre and technical standards, disliked the "pulse light" projection which made colour very sharp but rather cold. Eventually, this system was modified and the present picture is more faithful if not quite so dazzling. The first visiting director, William Friedkin, was especially fond of OFT and told an unsuspecting full house that he was hoping to make something called **The Exorcist**. It was only a difficulty of timing that eventually prevented this horror being first perpetrated on patrons in Don Mills.

OFT was never political in approach but we did mount national seasons from many different countries, in all three worlds and on both sides of the curtain. Some fine and little-known films came to light in this way, such as the poetically haunting **Rendezvous at Bray** from Belgium, the charming and humane **Stepmother** from Russia and several early works of the industrious Rainer Werner Fassbinder in West Germany. These seasons were usually arranged through embassies and sometimes resulted in less than stirring films, Brazil being an especially cautious sponsor. One could not always endorse all the evidence, either socially or artistically, but at least it was evidence – a cross-section of a country's recent output and hence valuable at a period when less and less new subtitled films from anywhere were being otherwise shown in Toronto. The regular film-buffs who came to be familiar at OFT would be ethnically augmented on these "national" evenings and I often cursed my lack of languages when the audience roared at quite impenetrable jokes! An absence of any kind of response was noticeable at a showing of the Chinese ballet film, **Red Detachment of Women**, (about ten spectators) indicating either that the world is safe for democracy or that we were missing a potential audience.

I usually enjoyed the special evenings of short films, from abroad or especially from Canada. Many young and independent filmmakers, some still at the student level, have had a chance to test the effectiveness or otherwise of their work on a big screen and with a disinterested group of viewers. (Not uninterested, non-partisan). My own favour-

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ontario film institute

by Alan Parker

The creation of the Ontario Film Institute in 1969 filled a vacuum in Toronto – a vacuum many people didn't even realize existed.

"There were so many films that weren't being seen, that people weren't even aware of, because the films couldn't pay their way in a commercial theatre," said Gerald Pratley, director of the Institute since its inception.

The CBC's chief film critic from 1948 to 1974, Pratley lobbied for two decades for the creation of a film forum with cinematic rather than commercial values.

"Almost every other country in the world had a film institute or cinemathèque to foster the study and appreciation of film. In English Canada, we had virtually nothing," he said.

When the Ontario Science Centre was begun in 1967 as the province's Centennial project, provincial authorities acted on Pratley's advice and included facilities for the Ontario Film Institute.

Opened two years later, the Institute (incorporating the Ontario Film Theatre and the Ontario Film Archive) now provides an ambitious weekly program of screenings in the Science Centre as well as informational and resource services for the entire country.

"The centre's auditorium was the major consideration. Without a good theatre as our home, we couldn't do much," Pratley said.

Between three and five films are presented each week in the 482-seat theatre, one of the best in Canada. Equipped for 16, 35 and 70 mm, the theatre can – and does – show everything from **2001: A Space Odyssey** to Stan Brakhage's experimental work.

Programs range from the Canadian premières of big-budget Hollywood productions with the director or star in attendance to screenings of obscure film classics.

However, the theatre's primary mandate is to provide interested filmgoers with the opportunity to see the work of Canadian and international filmmakers who are relatively unknown on the commercial circuit.

The theatre's most recent coup was a package of 26 Japanese films shown weekly from January to March. Pratley obtained the package only after two years of exhaustive negotiation with Japanese filmmakers and government agencies.





The Ontario Film Theatre

ite discovery in this field was a short from Connestoga College, **Book of Ambivalence**, an anguished but assured essay in distress. I would like to know what its director, Larry Nelson, is up to now. Are you out there, Larry?

Of the many guest directors, perhaps most charming and valuable have been the veterans; King Vidor, Rouben Mamoulian, Frank Capra and John Cromwell brought their vivid recollections and their lifetime instinct for cinema to share with the full audience and then, later in the evening, with smaller circles of buffs diminishing in size but increasing in avidity. That irreplaceable super-buff, George Patterson, was in his element on such occasions, whether complimenting Colleen Moore on her unfading beauty or politely correcting Jessie Matthews on a minor detail from the '30s. More modern directors have included the awesome Otto Preminger, the greatly likeable Arthur Hiller and a self-styled "ex-taxi-driver from Toronto", Norman Jewison. More modern stars – Jack Lemmon, Michael Caine – have caused the biggest traffic jams. Who says stars don't matter any more? Some administrative confusion on the night of **Sleuth**, when a horde of humanity descended on the box office, resulted in angry phone calls, letters to the editor and hurt feelings not fully assuaged to this day.

I have just compiled a list of all the features shown at OFT so far and it makes reading both stimulating and frustrating. So many films have not yet been shown which should take priority over some that have. Blame that on high costs of transportation, difficulties of obtaining good prints or sometimes any prints at all, the heartbreak of almost getting a certain film or guest. Or blame it if you want on me, for in six years I had remarkable freedom from my director, Gerald Pratley, to program as I pleased. We had twenty-seven John Ford films (I like Ford), a bunch of Bunuels, some by Renoir and Clair, Olivier's Shakespeare, W.C. Fields and Busby Berkeley and a lot of Buster Keaton. Among favourites I waited too long to salute Susan Hayward but that is my fault. I would raise Gerald's eyebrows only at the suggestion of Douglas Sirk or Samuel Fuller. These gentlemen have not yet been represented at OFT. I never quite understood why in their cases but other relative neglect is simply a reflection of the city's situation. Bergman, Fellini and Truffaut are staples of other cinemas' programs and the OFT with somewhat wider resources (although financially not nearly so wide as some seem to think) is dedicated to showing mainly what is good but unavailable elsewhere.

Programming a film theatre is great fun, at least part of the time. It's a pity more people don't get the opportunity to try their hand at it. □

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"That's one of the advantages of working under government auspices. Without some sort of official status, it would have been impossible to get the necessary co-operation," Pratley said.

The theatre is only one element of the Ontario Film Institute's work. Working on an annual budget of about \$60,000, Pratley and his staff of two are a major resource centre for the Canadian film community. They co-ordinate the activities of OFI regional theatres in several Ontario towns and cities and organize the Stratford International Film Festival each September. They collect, catalogue and cross-index almost every film journal and book published in the English language, and generally keep tabs on everything that happens in cinema.

The Ontario Film Archive in the Science Centre is one of the most complete libraries of film information in North America.

Starting from the nucleus of Pratley's own library, the archive has collected more than 5,000 film books – original screenplays, biographies and technical guide-books.

There are also about 3,000 files dealing with individual films; 1,500 biographical files on actors, directors and producers; subject files covering areas like film festivals, studios, countries; posters and photographs; and the original scores of more than 3,000 films.

"The amount of information coming out about film today is unbelievable. It's a tidal wave," Pratley said, looking at the overflowing rows of books and publications in the archive.

The Institute doesn't store any actual films, partly because of space and primarily because the Institute doesn't have the finances to acquire many films.

"Our budget is modest but that's appropriate since we do appeal, in a way, to a minority audience," Pratley said. "We rent the films we show from their distributors or from other archives."

The Ontario Film Institute works closely with the Cinémathèque Québécois in Montréal, the Pacific Cinémathèque in Vancouver, and the National Film Theatre and National Film Archive in Ottawa.

Films do occasionally come into Pratley's possession at the Institute – sometimes in strange ways.

When the manager of a Toronto theatre recently discovered a reel of 40-year-old film in the theatre's basement, he made two phone calls.

The first was to the police bomb squad, because the nitrate-based film was potentially explosive after so many years of deterioration.

The second was to Pratley, because the film appeared to be a rare documentary of the 1932 Canadian National Exhibition.

Pratley quickly rescued the film from the clutches of the bomb squad and sent it by the Institute's regular courier service to the National Film Archive, where it is now stored in a fireproof vault awaiting transfer to film with a safe acetate base. □

Alan Parker is a Toronto journalist currently working for The Mirror. He was formerly Associate Editor of Entertainment Magazine.