

# more important than cannes ?

For filmmakers who don't aspire to see their films playing to packed commercial houses – for the makers of documentaries, educational films, experimental ones, etc. – the American Film Festival is of great importance. Ben Achtenberg, a juror at the A.F.F. last year, gives us his account of this year's festival.

by Ben Achtenberg



Ten the Magic Number by Barrie Nelson

It gets less public attention than almost any other major festival on the continent, but for Canadian and American filmmakers trying to sell to the US nontheatrical market, the American Film Festival in New York can be more important than Cannes. Sponsored by the Educational Film Library Association (EFLA), the Festival was organized to bring filmmakers and distributors together with the organization's members, most of whom are film librarians, school and museum media personnel, and other film programmers.

Jerry Bruck, who made *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, says flatly that this is the *most* important festival in the United States for independents. "A lot of filmmakers look at the entry form and see that there's a fee and they feel, 'What the hell, they want me to *pay* to enter my film?' and there are no big cash prizes, so they don't enter. It's a big mistake. This festival gives you a chance to meet the people who can really support independent filmmakers, the librarians and media people who actually buy and rent film prints." *I.F. Stone's Weekly* swept the Festival's major prizes two years ago, and Bruck feels that has had a good deal to do with the film's success in nontheatrical release.

Bruck is one of an increasing number of filmmakers who have given up on the traditional route of working with commercial distributors and are trying to handle their own films. He is working on a book about independent distribution, based on his experience with *I.F. Stone*. One of his earlier films, *The Old Corner Store Will Be Knocked Down by the Wreckers*, was a finalist this year. It deals with the unsuccessful fight of people in the Montreal neighborhood where he used to live to save their seventy-year-old corner store and their community from demolition.

This year more than 750 films – television documentaries, industrials, scientific, fiction, children's and curriculum films and many others that might be hard to define – were submitted. Pre-screening juries around the country narrowed these down to 377 films in 39 categories.

At the Festival, a second jury screens the films in each category and awards a blue ribbon to the top-rated film and a red ribbon to the runner-up. The single highest-rated film among all the blue ribbon winners is awarded the Festival's "Emily", and its only cash prize, the \$500 John Grierson Award, is given to "an outstanding new filmmaker in the social documentary field." Two years ago *I.F. Stone's Weekly* won the Emily and shared the Grierson with Lucinda Firestone's *Attica*. Last year's Emily winner was Jill Godmilow and Judy Collins' *Antonia: a Portrait of the Woman*, and the Grierson Award was won by the Pacific Street Film Collective's *Frame-Up! The Imprisonment of Martin Sostre*.

Evaluations of the films entered, as well as special writeups of the winners, are widely distributed to EFLA member organizations and have a good deal to do with buying decisions. One southern librarian at the Festival admitted that the large regional library he represents buys as many as 50 percent of its new films on the basis of EFLA recommendations, often sight unseen. Blue and red ribbon winners get additional exposure to purchasers from a year-long circuit of screenings at libraries around the US.

A good deal of informal persuading also goes on during the Festival. Distributors rent table space to display their catalogs and new releases, and the larger ones try to wine and dine the librarians from the larger institutions

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*Mr. Frog Went a-Courting* by Evelyn Lambart

and lure them up to private suites to screen additional films. One hustling young independent producer claimed to have made 10 print sales on the first day of the Festival.

## The Winners

This year's Emily winner was Richard Patterson's biography and tribute to Charlie Chaplin, *The Gentleman Tramp*, produced by Bert Schneider. The film includes stills, newsreel footage, home movies and recently shot material from Switzerland as well as clips from Chaplin's greatest films.

The special jury for the John Grierson Award (Perry Miller Adato, Madeline Anderson, Arnold Eagle, William Sloan, Willard Van Dyke, Amos Vogel, and Edith Zornow) split the prize between Richard Brick's *Last Stand Farmer*, a documentary on the struggle of a 67-year-old Vermont hill farmer to keep his farm going, and western Massachusetts filmmaker Dan Keller's *Lovejoy's Nuclear War*.

The film deals with the case of Sam Lovejoy, organic farmer, who decided he had to do something about the threat of nuclear power plants. One night in February, 1974, he went out and loosened the guy wires supporting a 500-foot weather tower which had been erected in preparation for an



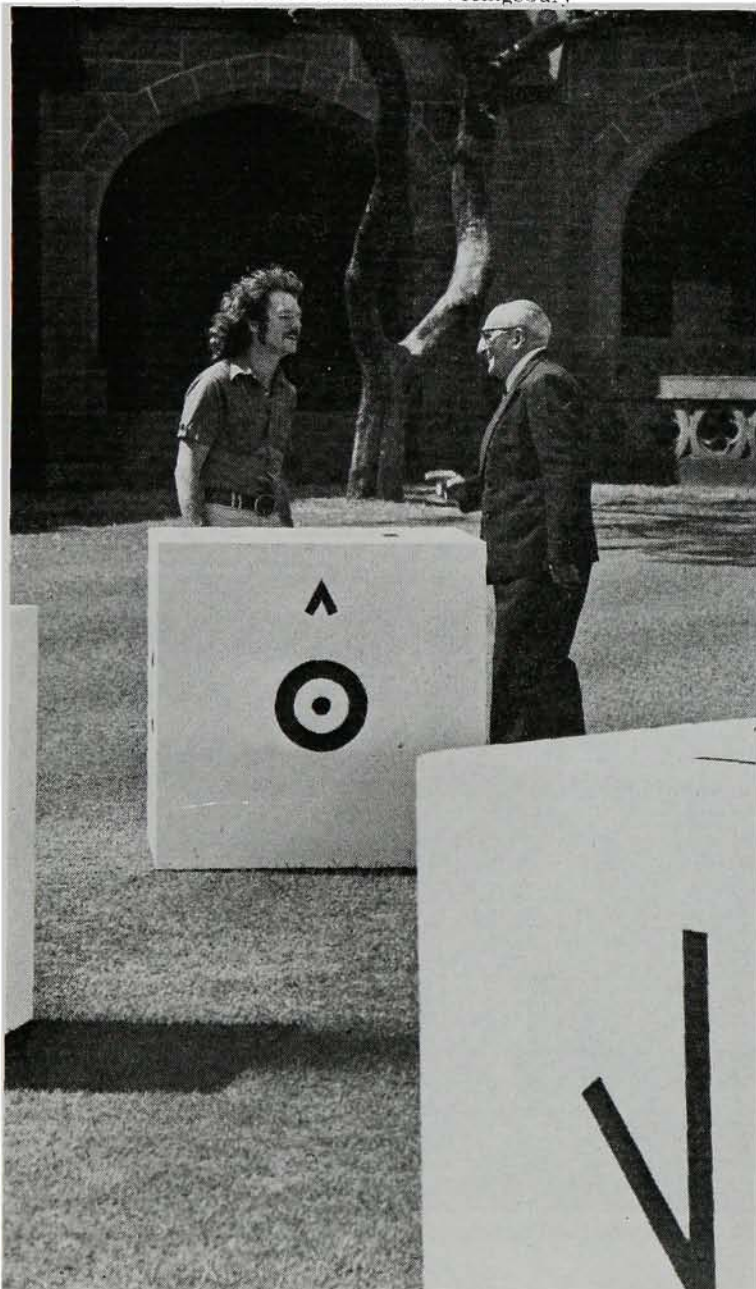
*The Bakery* by Paul Saltzman

atom plant project in nearby Montague, Mass. The tower collapsed and Lovejoy turned himself in to police after issuing a statement explaining his action. His trial, for "willful and malicious destruction of personal property," mobilized community opinion around the power plant issue and provided the film's focus.

The film has already been honored as the best political film in the 1975 San Francisco International Film Festival and is one of three films representing the US at the Berlin Film Festival. Another kind of testimonial to its effectiveness came when the Atomic Industrial Forum, lobbying front for a consortium of nuclear utility companies, singled it out for attack. Earlier this year the AIF circulated a memo to its members and supporters calling for "a nuclear acceptance campaign which will be geared to motivate and persuade the public to observe the positive values of nuclear energy and its safe use."

The anti-nuclear movement, complains the memo, "warns of invisible killers and pending catastrophe. It also advocates property destruction and sabotage as in **Lovejoy's Nuclear War**, a film which has been shown to thousands of environmental and other activist organizations across the country." According to Keller the AIF has also circulated material attacking the film to schools and other potential users of the film; nonetheless, he estimates the film has already been seen by at least half a million people.

**Mr. Symbol Man** by Bruce Moir and Bob Kingsbury



## Canadian Entries

As usual, many of the Canadian entries in the Festival were National Film Board productions, and the NFB's animators fared the best in the prize competitions. Evelyn Lambart's animated version of **The Story of Christmas**, which is complemented by a music track performed on Renaissance instruments, was the blue ribbon winner in the Religion and Society category. The Film Board's other blue ribbon entry, **The Light Fantastic**, is a retrospective look at the development of animation at the NFB which focuses on Lambart as well as Norman McLaren, Lotte Reiniger and Ryan Larkin. Another Evelyn Lambart film, **Mr. Frog Went a-Courting**, was also a Festival finalist.

Michael Rubbo's **Waiting for Fidel** – about his visit to Cuba with millionaire businessman Geoff Stirling and former Newfoundland Premier Joey Smallwood – won the red ribbon for films on "World Concerns." His **I Am an Old Tree**, also about Cuba and the changes its people have undergone since the revolution, was a finalist in the same category. **Waiting for Fidel** has already received fairly wide distribution and a good reception in the US. **Bate's Car**, a film by Rubbo about a guy who has solved his personal fuel shortage by converting barnyard manure into methane gas, was another Festival finalist.



**Waiting for Fidel**, starring Joey Smallwood

Red ribbon winner for environmental films was Dorothy Todd Hénaut's Challenge for Change film **The New Alchemists**, which documents the efforts of a group of Canadians and Americans living on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to establish an environmentally sound ecosystem for producing vegetables, fish and meat using only organic fertilizers and only solar and wind power as energy sources.

Red ribbon winner **Whistling Smith** was also nominated for an Academy Award in 1975. Directed by Michael Scott and Marrin Cannel for the NFB, it's about a tough cop who claims to have cut crime in half on his Vancouver beat – though perhaps only by terrorizing the prostitutes, junkies and other street people into moving to the next block. A finalist in the same category was Paul Saltzman's independently produced **The Bakery**, on the Perlmutter family's bakery in Toronto's Kensington Market. Saltzman's film, **Indira Gandhi: a Heritage of Power**, which includes interviews with the Indian leader filmed in the summer of 1975, was the red ribbon-winning International Affairs film.

The red ribbon film in the "Human Sexuality" category was **Making It**, directed by Pat Corbett and produced and written by John Churchill. **And They Lived Happily Ever After**, made by Kathleen Shannon for the NFB, was a finalist in the same category.

Other Film Board productions among the Festival finalists included **Ten the Magic Number**, an animated introduction to the metric system by Barrie Nelson; **Walk Awhile... in My Shoes**, by Nimbus Films Ltd. for the NFB, on the

problems of the handicapped in public buildings and on public transportation; **The Child, Part I: Jamie, Ethan, Marlon – the First Two Months**, by Robert Humble; **Mr. Symbol Man**, by Bruce Moir and Bob Kingsbury; and **Smoking/Emphysema: A Fight for Breath**.

Additional Canadian finalists included Pen Densham and John Watson's **Reflections on Violence in the Media**; Douglas Sinclair's **Cross-Country Ski Techniques**; Peter Rowe's **Horse Latitudes**; and CBC Toronto's **Young and Just Beginning**, by Mark Irwin and Ruth Hope, on Olympic gymnast Elfi Schlegel.

In addition to the films in competition, Ishu Patel's **Perspectrum** was chosen for inclusion in the special, out-of-competition "Film as Art" screening.

## "Foreign Propaganda"

One of the topics of corridor conversation at the Festival was the recent attack by the US Justice Department against Tricontinental Film Center, a major distributor of films from Third World countries. Tricontinental has been ordered to register as a "foreign agent," and label its films and publicity as "foreign political propaganda." The group would also have to report all film sales and rentals to the Justice Department within 48 hours and turn in the names and addresses of its customers to the government.

As a statement issued by the EFLA Board noted, "The effect would be to discourage the viewing of their films because many individuals and groups would be reluctant to rent a film if they knew that their names would be supplied to a government agency as a result. The loss of customers and the cost of complying with regulations would soon force Tricontinental out of business and the education community would lose a valuable resource."

"We are also concerned," it went on, "that this tactic may be applied to other distributors of foreign films with the ultimate result being the suppression of points of view with which the Justice Department disagrees."

While the Justice Department has declined to specify exactly what foreign government Tricontinental is supposed to register as an agent of, most observers feel sure the move is aimed at Cuban films and is part of the Ford/Kissinger administration's efforts to put pressure on Cuba. Among the Cuban films the company handles are **Lucia** and **Memories of Underdevelopment**, which *The New York Times* called one of the 10 best films of 1973. Tricontinental also distributes films from other Latin American countries, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, as well as from the United States.

## Some Suggestions for Festival entrants

Several years' experience with EFLA pre-screening and Festival juries suggest a few points that may be useful for filmmakers planning to enter the American Film Festival.

It's worth mentioning first that a large proportion of the films are submitted by distributors rather than directly by the filmmaker. If the film has already been placed with a US distributor, the filmmaker may need to do no more than make sure the distributor plans to submit it.

Filmmakers entering their own works should fill out the entry forms with some care. For example, entrants are asked to specify the audience for which the film is intended and its purpose. Jurors are asked, among other things, to evaluate how well the film *accomplishes* the stated purpose. Some jurors take this very seriously, and it can cost points if an entrant has proclaimed excessively grandiose goals and fails to deliver. A film about a group of old people might be more accurately, and more safely, described as intended "to increase awareness of the problems of the elderly," than "to clarify and illuminate the human predicament." (An actual example, slightly changed to protect the embar-

assed.) No matter how insulting it may seem to be asked to put into a couple of lines what may have taken a year or more to achieve, this question should be taken seriously.

A film can also be hurt by being judged in an inappropriate category. Unfortunately for the filmmaker, the increase in entries has resulted in a proliferation of vague and similar-sounding categories, which makes it hard to figure out what is the best category to enter in, especially for the type of films broadly describable as social documentary.

The only real solution is to read the guidelines carefully and look over past Festival catalogs and winner lists to see what films have done well where. Looking at past Festival reports will also reveal the fact that some juries have shown consistent tendencies toward particular types of films or even political slants. While there is no guarantee that such tendencies will continue, they are worth taking into consideration. Catalogs and information on past and future Festivals should be available through any local EFLA member library or from Educational Film Library Association, 17 West 60th Street, New York, New York 10023. □

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