

# a view from nowhere

Production is one half of the cultural equation; exhibition is the other. And for a film to work in a theater, the public has to want it. Whether Canadians are given the chance to become familiar with Canadian films is the question raised by Douglas Bowie. One can not want what one does not know.

by Douglas Bowie

When he was Secretary of State, Hugh Faulkner complained that, in spite of all the Canadian feature films apparently being made, he could never see any of them in Peterborough. Has this situation improved? The answer, it seems, is yes

*Douglas Bowie is a screenwriter (U-Turn) who has lately been writing TV drama. His plays The Man Who Wanted To Be Happy and A Gun, A Grand, A Girl were seen on the CBC's Performance series this past season, and Breakdown is currently in production at the National Film Board.*

— and no. You *can* see the films, but you have to move quickly. And it remains highly doubtful whether Canadian films, with a few rare exceptions, are really making any impression on the country's consciousness beyond the boundaries of Toronto.

I am currently living in Kingston, on the shores of Lake Ontario halfway between Toronto and Montreal, and there has been an interesting phenomenon in the cinemas here recently which casts some rather bleak light on the question of the public's response to Canadian films. In the past three weeks alone no fewer than six new (or relatively new) Cana-



Some of the Canadian characters who hurried through Kingston: from *Eliza's Horoscope*, *Goldenrod*, *Partners* ...

dian features have played commercially in Kingston. The films: **Eliza's Horoscope**, **A Sweeter Song**, **Rabid**, **Partners**, **East End Hustle**, and **Ragtime Summer**. That's not even counting the semi-Canadian **The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane** which was in town a few weeks earlier. (It's no coincidence, incidentally, that these are all English films. No French-Canadian feature has played here in the past year.)

And how did the filmgoing public respond to this splurge of Canadian culture? Well, I'd bet you could walk up and down Princess Street here all morning offering \$1000 to anybody who had seen even one of these films and your money would scarcely be safer in the bank. The dismal record of their staying power reads as follows: **Eliza** – four days in a tiny theatre **A Sweeter Song** – four days in a tinier one; **Rabid** – one week on a drive in double bill; **Partners** – four days; and **Ragtime Summer** – the hit of the bunch with one full week in Odeon's smallest theatre. Did the Montreal Expos at their most inept ever have a drearier box score? (Precisely how Odeon and Famous Players are fulfilling their voluntary quotas with these negligible runs in their smallest theatres is a whole other question. A question, I suspect, of high mathematics.)

Whatever one may think of some of these films, taken together they represent a substantial chunk of a year's English-Canadian filmmaking, a sizeable expenditure of imagination and effort, not to mention a million or so of the taxpayer's money. And they've slipped stealthily through town in the dark of night and vanished without a trace – unheralded before they arrived, unseen while they were here, unlamented now that they're gone.

It may be argued that Kingston hardly represents a key market, and the failure of these films to make an impact here is not of particular significance. Well, again, yes – and no. English-Canadian films certainly can't make back their costs in Toronto alone, or even in the handful of major cities. Surely the countless smaller and middle-range markets – the Kingstons, the Windsors, the Londons, the Peterboroughs, the Kitcheners – are equally important in making, or almost invariably breaking, Canadian films.

Kingston has an area population of about 100,000 and with seven cinemas (four Famous, three Odeon) and two drive-ins, a relatively high number of theatre screens per capita. There are two universities, one with a thriving film department. There is a dynamic amateur theatrical movement

with several active groups and often three or four well-attended productions running simultaneously. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, The Dutch National Ballet, The Hartford Ballet Company, The Toronto Dance Theatre, The Canadian Opera Company have all played here recently with sellouts for almost every performance in a large theatre.

In short, the culture quotient here is quite high, and if there is such a thing as a prime small city market for Canadian films, Kingston would seem to fit the bill. Yet one after another these films open only to drop over dead along about the second reel without even being pushed. (And it's not just the bunch which has played here in the past few weeks, although they dramatize the situation. **Shoot**, **Goldenrod**, **The Far Shore**, **Second Wind** all had equally short runs.)

So what's the explanation? It can't simply be that the films are no good – although assuredly some of them aren't – because they weren't reviewed and they weren't here long enough for word of mouth to have any effect one way or another. The public hasn't heard these films are lousy. I don't believe it has heard anything about them at all. Although the local paper has a semi-regular film reviewer, not one of these films was reviewed, and only **Eliza's Horoscope** received any unpaid newspaper publicity at all – a telephone interview with Gordon Sheppard the day before it closed.

Nor is it just the ad campaigns which are to blame, although in most cases they betray a sad lack of imagination. **Partners** had a tiny ad and died. **Goldenrod** had a full-page ad and died. For whatever reasons, the arrival of a new Canadian film in town is simply not perceived as a social or cultural occasion of any significance.

It comes as no surprise that people will go to see **Rocky** or **Network** before a Canadian film. The recent experience here suggests, however, that they will go to see almost *anything* – an amateur theatrical production, a Junior A hockey game, a Dutch ballet company, Marty Robbins – before a Canadian film. The only possible conclusion from all of this seems to be that for all the time and money, for all the conferences and debate, for all the position papers and proposals, for all the energy and creativity, for all the dreams and broken dreams, English-Canadian feature films are still not accepted as a significant part of our consciousness – of our lives – either as art or entertainment. And that's the name of that tune. □



**Rabid**, **East-End Hustle**, and **A Sweeter Song**.