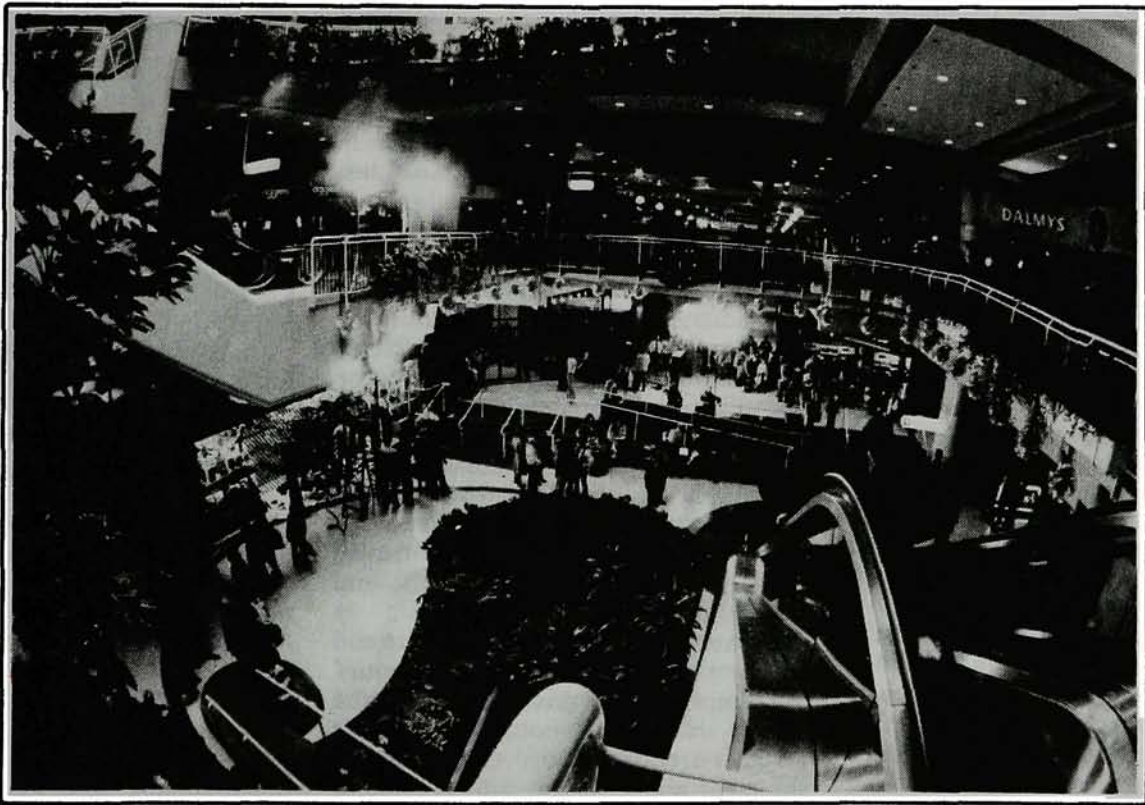


# short and sweet

by pat thompson

**The increased screening of short films is long overdue. But finally, short filmmakers are getting a break. Pat Thompson describes what she looks for when selecting shorts for the new Cineplex 16mm theatres.**



The trouble is choosing... Cineplex, at Toronto's Eaton Centre, boasts eighteen 16mm theatres.

I've long been fascinated by the short film and always approach it with a considerable amount of zest and excitement. To me, it represents a breeding ground for the embryonic feature filmmaker, a testing ground for wild and whacky ideas, a visual canvas on which to express beauty and poetry in many shapes and forms, and an arena for opinionated opinions and deeply-felt wrongs that should be righted.

After years of film viewing, I can still conjure up vivid images from James Broughton's **The Pleasure Garden** screened at an Edinburgh Film Festival over 25 years ago; a first taste of 3-D from Norman MacLaren at the Festival of Britain in the fifties; and Minnie and Mickey Mouse magic at a Saturday morning film club in Britain.

### The Start

When the *Cineplex* concept of 16mm multi-theatres was first considered by N.A. (Nat) Taylor and Garth Drabinsky, along with the diversified types of films to be shown, it was exciting to learn that short subjects were also envisaged to round out the programming. With the advent of *Cineplex/Eaton Centre* in Toronto, the first complex of 18 cinemas, I was offered the far from arduous task of selecting the short films to be screened — and jumped in with both feet.

Rules and guidelines for locating and using 16mm short films in a theatrical situation are, as far as I know, non-existent. And so — with a fair amount of glee — I've started from scratch. A background in film society and film theatre is my most valuable asset. In two decades, I've seen a wide variety of short films from all over the world — animation, experimental, funny, serious, weird, wonderful, and generally exciting outbursts of celluloid creativity. Unfortunately, they never reached the screens of the regular cinemas I patronized which were, of course, 35mm. The experiments made and the chances taken were in the less expensive 16mm format, and these were the ones I was after.

### The Selection

There is an abundant supply of 16 mm prints to choose from for use in the *Cineplex* system, and the selection process continues from week to week. (I'm generally reluctant to look at a film with its maker present, as this often creates a somewhat nerve-racking atmosphere — the filmmaker tries to peer at me in the semi-darkness to gauge my reaction, and I try to imagine myself

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From the short film **The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa** (NFB)

alone!) I usually gather up two or three films to see at one time, or to set up screening sessions, of about two hours, with various companies and organizations.

In screening each film — I *never* program a short film that I've not seen — I look for a professional quality and sheen in the photography, editing, and other technical aspects, plus a good pace in relation to the subject matter. A new idea, a turn or twist of an old idea, a little charm and style, suitable music, a sense of humour and fun... Any or all of these ingredients, that can capture and intrigue an audience, are eminently desirable. Sometimes a witty notion, engagingly rendered by a filmmaker can overcome one or two shortcomings in the technical area.

I must, however, confess to having some really strong dislikes when viewing — voices that *tell* me what I can see perfectly well in the visuals; intrusive music whether it be loud or soft; and sloppy technique.

Because the *Cineplex* policy is to run separate shows of roughly two hours' duration, *length* often narrows the choice. Have you noticed how *long* features are these days? Consequently, shorts of about five to fifteen minutes stand the best chance of being used. Also, colour prints have it all over black-and-white offerings, since features are inevitably in Tech. Black-and-white tends to lose impact when programmed with colour features — after all, a **Manhattan**



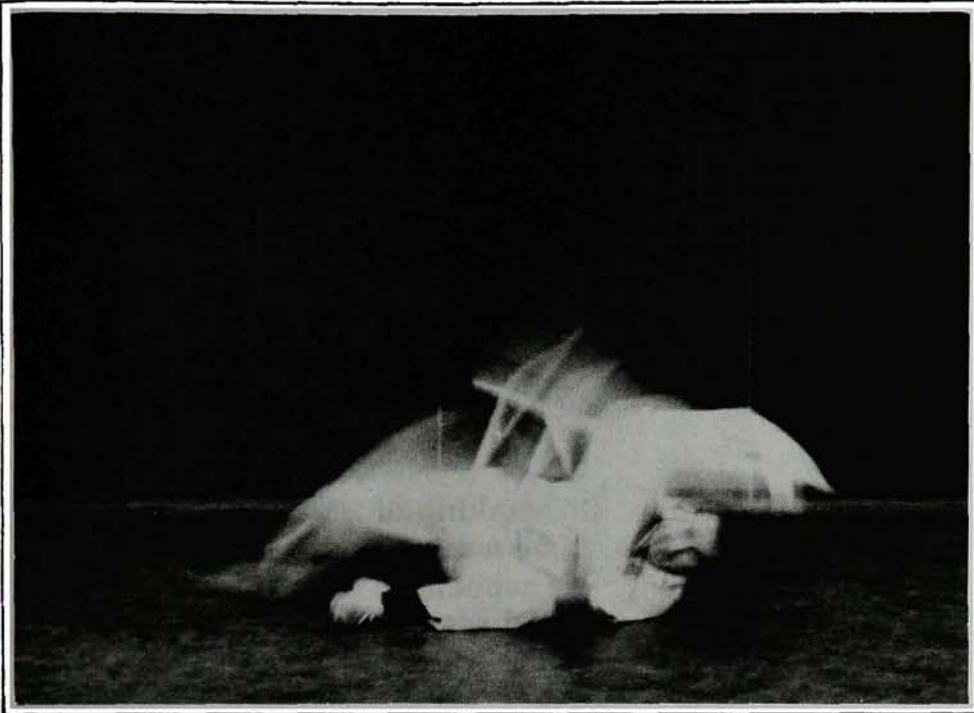
**Bubble** — David Troster's film tribute to his Jew

doesn't come along every day!

The really hard part is rejecting a film — and I turn down many. I may like a part of it, hate the whole, or recognize the effort, but for whatever reason, I always try to say "No thanks" in a constructive and kindly way.

### The Sources

The premier source of Canadian short films is, of course, the National Film Board. (I've always been convinced that NFB films are not selected and programmed with enough care, and that's why people groan in a 35mm house, and generally head out for popcorn,



Claude Jutra outwitted by a chair in the NFB's *A Chairy Tale*



andmother.

when the green logo goes up on the screen.)

Because the *Cineplex* head office operation is located in Toronto, that area is mined for independent companies and groups. However, now that the filmmakers themselves are becoming conscious of this small, but growing market, they telephone and call upon me offering prints for viewing. Word of mouth has resulted in some nice little finds, and I think the individual filmmakers like dealing directly with the person who actually selects and programs, and who is in a position to say "Yes" or "No" without hesitation.

### The Programming

It's of paramount importance to bear in mind, when programming for a theatrical situation, that the general public has paid for an afternoon or evening of entertainment. Nat Taylor is absolutely right when he says, "People don't pay money at the box office to see a short subject." However, many have remarked at *Cineplex* that it's refreshing to see more than the feature.

Features fall into a few broad categories — general entertainment such as dramas, comedies, actioners; foreign films in the original language with English sub-titles; and the specialized films dealing with an intellectual or difficult subject matter. The accompanying short film can be on the same theme — comic with comedy, serious with drama — or can offer a contrast, such as a light cheerful short preceding a weighty, intense feature. Some are simply visually pleasant, i.e. country or town life, nature... and can complement a number of features. Then there are those which are "just for fun" or "just for the hell of it" — certain experimental films, for example. The age group to which a feature appeals must also be considered. A short with a rock score appreciated by teens and twenties will not necessarily bowl over the forties!

These programming choices illustrate what I mean: Caroline Leaf's *The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa* (NFB) ran 17 weeks with *Midnight Express*; *Hardware Wars*, a U.S. space-spoof with

electric irons and toasters flying around, played 10 weeks with *The Rubber Gun*; Barry Stone's *Dog* — dogs doing doggy things and making comments in variously accented human voices — ran 8 weeks in all with *Your Turn, My Turn*, *Escape From Alcatraz*, and *The Last Married Couple*. *Hokusai*, from the Arts Council of Great Britain — about an ancient Japanese artist — was 12 weeks with *The Seduction of Joe Tynan*, while David Troster's *Bubbie*, a lovingly created tribute to his Jewish grandmother, played 8 weeks with *Yiddle With His Fiddle*. An NFB oldie, *A Chairy Tale*, by Norman MacLaren — Claude Jutra trying to sit on a recalcitrant chair — played 12 weeks with *The Silent Partner*.

I try to use as many Canadian short films as possible, with a balanced sprinkling from other countries. In the first 52 weeks of operation at *Cineplex/Eaton* Centre in Toronto, 68 short films were programmed. Of these, 38 were Canadian (20 independent and 18 NFB) and 30 were from other countries.

### The Rewards

The financial reward for the filmmaker is, let's face it, not great — and never has been where theatrical exhibition of short subjects is concerned. But to my mind, it's a fine opportunity and testing ground for a filmmaker to get a reaction to his creation. I've had a movie maker ring up on a terrific high because an audience had laughed loud and long with genuine amusement at his film; and another, who reported in hushed tones that people actually applauded at the end of his film. It may be corny, but that's something money cannot buy. And if a short film is good enough, there are other markets where it could be profitable — T.V. and educational print sales, to name a couple.

### The Future

Within the next year the *Cineplex* concept will spread across Canada. It has already begun its expansion in Ontario: in July *Cineplex/6* opened in Kitchener, with Burlington and Ottawa following in August. There will be others in and around Toronto, and eventually, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, for starters.

It's easy to see that the need for Canadian short films will grow, and that prints can be used in, say, Toronto, and then circulated across the country to the various *Cineplex* operations. Ultimately, this will mean more exposure for films from Canadian filmmakers, with more playing time leading to more revenue.

It looks like the renaissance of the 16mm short film, doesn't it?