
starters and survivors

Many filmmakers get their start in school and survive at the art of filming by working on commercials. Below, Jaan Pill takes a look at the production of the students at York University and reviews some of those commercials which compete in the Canadian Television Commercial Festival and the Retail Television Commercials Competition.

by Jaan Pill

the students start with art

By the end of March, third and fourth year film production students at the York University Film Department are in the final stages of sound mixing and track laying, getting their films ready for the premiere screening in May at the Fine Arts Cinema in Toronto.

As was the case last year, the subject matter of this year's productions frequently revolves around the metaphor of 'being on stage,' – the staging of a performance before an audience.

For example, this year's third year final projects include a documentary on a blues-rock singer, as well as a documentary about a veteran film cameraman. There are also two documentaries on different types of staged performances. One is about putting on a concert and the other is on the production of an opera.

There are two dramas based on adaptations, one from a story by Ray Bradbury, another from a story by John Fowles.

These six films were made by the third year students after they had completed a project which called for the creation of original sound tracks to match footage shot without sound. The earlier project resulted in short films on subjects such as the Toronto harborfront, a school for therapeutic massage, the school-day experiences of a deaf child, a convict's reflection on prison life, a study of noise pollution, a day at a fire station, and a Tai Chi demonstration.

Fourth year projects at York this year include a documentary about the Toronto Islands, two humorous films, one pottery film, one end-of-a-love-affair drama, one passage-of-time drama, as well as a revenge drama, a pocket-sized crime drama, and an allegorical drama about truckers.

A cross-section of these third and fourth year productions will be shown at the premiere screening. I remember last year's screening of the 1976-77 productions, held in June of last year at the Art Gallery of Ontario, as a thoroughly enjoyable experience. It left me pondering the ironies, anom-

alies and fantasies with which film as a medium – and last year's films in particular – are imbued.

The documentaries in last year's program included two studies of social problems, and another two which investigated the metaphor of 'being on stage.' There were also two dramas, one TV-filler type of mood piece, and one piece of satire. The mood piece is **Railyard**, a short (directed by Robert Sax) about a Toronto railyard in winter. A major strength of the film is that it stops when it seems it should, which is at 3½ minutes. (By contrast, some other films were longer than their content warranted, as beginner films sometimes are.)

The satire in last year's series, entitled **Foops**, starts off with an impressively narrated filmography depicting the exploits of Kubla Khan, emperor of China in the Middle Ages, which then cuts to a well-conceived live-action sequence of Khan as a Country and Western performing star in the middle of his act. The rest of the film consists of loosely connected gags which lack the precise sense of

Jaan Pill is a free-lance writer and artist who lives in Toronto.

unfolding from one intriguing context to the next one which was present in the opening. Nonetheless, director Doug Ellis shows a facility with the essential elements of satire and humor.

The first of the two films on social problems is Nancy Tong's **We're Just Children**, which features interviews at a shopping mall in which white subjects express racist feelings about ethnic and racial minorities in Canada. These interviews are intercut with sequences of school children from these minorities expressing their own hopes and interests. The film conveys its message clearly and succinctly.

Fair Game, directed by Mairin Wilkinson, features sequences in which women speak of beatings inflicted on them by their husbands. The women's recollections are intercut with comments by women academics about the socialization process, widespread in our society, which treats women as a form of private property instead of as human beings in their own right.

The sequences in which women describe personal encounters with domestic violence evoke mental images which are powerful enough to get the viewer past the 'talking head' problem which is endemic in documentaries. The same cannot be said, however, for all but the earliest of the academic sequences.

The two documentaries which deal with the concept of 'being on stage' include **Gimme a Break**, a study of Howard Robb, a young Toronto singer who is a would-be David Cassidy. The film, by Bill Kucheran and others, investigates the metaphor with subtlety.

The second documentary in this category is James Orr's **George Oliver: Superbad**, in which 'talking head' interviews (you remember the face but forget what was said) of a Toronto soul band singer are intercut with rather static sequences of his agitated performances.

Among the dramas in the series, the first is Halya Kuchmij's **Streetcar**, which begins on a Toronto streetcar and ends in a cafe on Queen Street. Despite difficulties in maintaining a coherent story-line, the film is serenely evocative in capturing a mood and a way of seeing. It contains some magic moments, tangential to the story-line, which are rich in personal associations about the passage of time.

The second drama, **Just Before the War With the Eskimos**, is directed by James Orr who, along with a competent production team and effective editing by James Lahti, has created a captivating film exercise based on a J.D. Salinger short story set in



Martha Hendriks and Peter Supino in production still from *Just Before the War with the Eskimos*.

New York in the 1940s. The direction is crisp and confident and the acting is of a level — especially in the role played by Martha Hendriks as the female lead — which totally engages the viewer's attention.

Making films in an academic setting may be thought to be a waste of valuable human energy: intellectualizing about an activity which is not primarily intellectual. According to the glos-

sy brochure of its Fine Arts Department, however, the accent at York is frequently on "doing and experiencing rather than merely reading and studying." In the case of the students who made last year's productions, it's a valid claim.

Viewers who are interested in this year's productions can see a selection of them at the Fine Arts Cinema on May 12.

commercials provide the bread

By midwinter, producers are already getting ready for the annual Canadian Television Commercials Festival, which will be held on Thursday, April 13, at the Sheraton Centre Hotel in Toronto.

The festival, which is jointly sponsored by the Television Bureau of Canada and the Broadcast Executives Society, is adjudicated by a panel of judges from within the advertising and production industries.

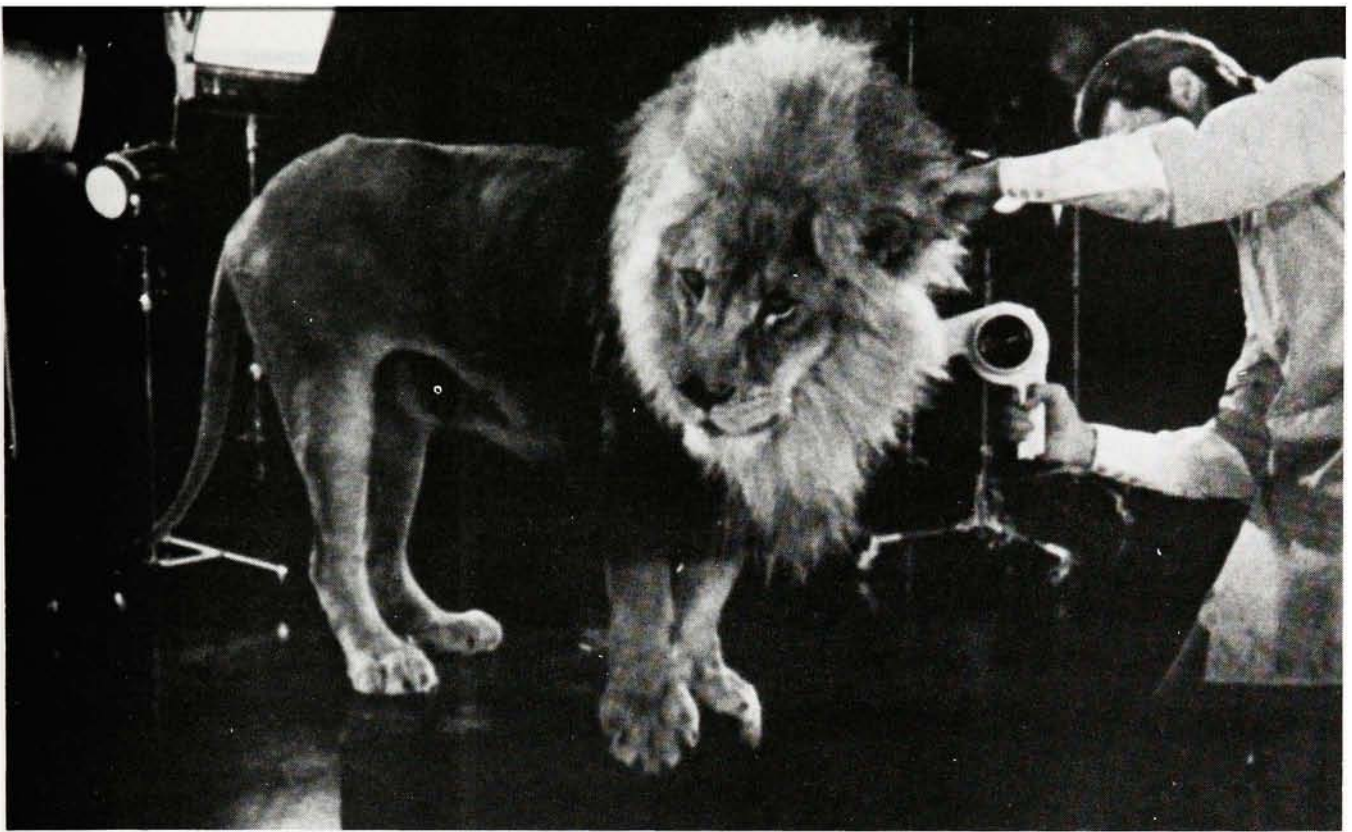
The judges' favorite last year was **You're Looking Good**, a suitably awe-inspiring lifestyles commercial for General Motors of Canada (by Trio Films Ltd. and Foster Advertising Ltd.) which won the Gold Bessy along with assorted craft and category awards.

You're Looking Good, a varied, quick-paced but thematically unified gallery of shots of beautiful people

of assorted sizes, ages and shapes who pose grinning with estimable chutzpah alongside a glittering Buick, is a classic in its genre: "You're looking good, Buick," intones the voice-over: "It's you I love, you know."

Last year, the Silver Bessy went to **Near You**, made for the Trans-Canada Telephone System by Rabko Television Productions Co. Ltd. and McKim Advertising Ltd; the Bronze went to the Chinese cooking performance created for the Ontario Pork Producers Marketing Board by Paul Herriott Productions Ltd. and McCann-Erickson Advertising of Canada Ltd.

Among other commercials of note was Peter Ustinov's lively dialogue with himself for Unicef (Paul Herriott Productions and McCann-Erickson Advertising), which placed first in the Public Service category. Ustinov plays two characters (at least) in a dialogue



Lion, a commercial for a Philips hair dryer, won first place in Appliances and Home Entertainment. We presume the dryer has other uses as well.

on the subject of charity. In the process he conveys a phenomenal range of viewpoints on this subject, all within the standard limited time frame.

Another commercial which lingers in mind is **Lion**, for Philips Electronics (Paul Herriott and McCann-Erickson), which came first in the Appliances and Home Entertainment category. The lion in the ad, which is having its hair dried with a Philips hair dryer, certainly does engage one's attention.

Some of the commercials were especially intriguing because of qualities which actually obscured their intended commercial message. For example, I'm still pondering about the Philips Electronics lion. Why, I ask myself, did it seem so benumbed and subdued? Was it from all those years living in a zoo? Or did the calmness come, in fact, by prescription?

Another film which intrigued me because of the ambiguity which crept into the production was **39 Steps**, made for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce by T.D.F. Productions Ltd. and McKim Advertising Ltd.

The film, which placed first in the Financial category, shows a man, obviously preoccupied and in a hurry, who climbs the stairs to his apartment and is confronted with a note on the door instead of the supper he's been expecting. Next, there's a voice-over pitch about getting a loan. I really don't know what the intended

message was but I much enjoyed the ad; watching it was similar to having a vivid and interesting dream whose hold on one's attention is enhanced by the fact that its meaning and significance remain a mystery.

While I was at the Television Bureau to look at these and other winners in the 1977 Canadian Television Commercials Festival, I was interested to learn about an altogether different kind of festival of commercials which the Bureau also sponsors. The festival in question, which is called the Retail Television Commercials Competition, features retail ads which are shown regionally in Canada, but not nationally.

A unique feature of the retail festival is that the judging is done by consumer panels instead of by judges within the industry. The differing ways of looking at commercials are, as I learned, a constant subject of debate at the Bureau.

Paul Ryan, the Bureau's manager of media and research, remarked to me that, as groups, consumer-judges and industry-judges each have their own characteristic ways of responding to commercials. For example, consumers are less likely to be impressed by production values than are the professionals who judge the national festival. "What the consumer thing has said to us," says Ryan, "is that you

don't need a million dollar budget to produce a commercial and have it accepted."

Ryan invited me to sit in on a retail judging session, held in a church basement in Scarborough, Ontario. At the session, conducted by Les Jones of Research Spectrum, a Toronto market research firm, the top 50 of 450 commercials (judged by previous panels across Canada) were shown to 45 consumers, each of whom later picked up \$5 and a chance at several door prizes for their efforts. (Subsequently, the top 30 and top ten were selected on the basis of the panel's responses.)

I much enjoyed the session, with its ads for real estate, department stores, community colleges and the like in localized markets from Victoria, British Columbia to Sydney, Nova Scotia. Certainly, I enjoyed these as much as I did the national commercials.

I also found it remarkable how the regional commercials, aimed at smaller, local audiences, evoked in their overall effect a sense of a consciously shared human community — and in fact a sense of what Canada is as a country — which was at times altogether lacking in the glossy national commercials, which, ironically enough, are predominantly produced in Toronto for broadcast from coast to coast. □