

The Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival

Strong content, weak form

by Frank McGinn

The flesh was willing, but the spirit of the 3rd Atlantic Film & Video Festival was a little weak. As an event it lacked the intimacy and excitement which gave last year's festival the air of an extended family reunion. This year seemed somehow perfunctory, as if the clan had gathered more from a sense of duty, and less from a sense of occasion. You could see it in the poor attendance at key, critical seminars; in the fact that proper directions were lacking when festival locations were changed; and in the dearly-missed absence of free-flowing libations. (Cash bars are a sordid intrusion at family reunions and film festivals alike.) Festival director Mike Riggio likely expressed it best when he said that last year the Atlantic Film and Video Festival had peaked, and this year it was leveling out.

The 2nd Atlantic Film & Video Festival represented the big break-out. The scene was shifted from relative obscurity in St. John's, Nfld., to centre stage in Halifax. Suddenly there was a huge gasp of mutual recognition. Atlantic filmgoers, who hadn't known there was such a thing as an Atlantic film industry, discovered Atlantic film makers who hadn't know there was such a thing as an Atlantic audience. And vice-versa. Greetings were cordially exchanged, and for the rest of the week the two groups were rarely seen apart. Everyone said it couldn't last, and this year it looked like they were right. The bloom had faded, and the relationship had reached the familiarity that breeds complacency. It had to happen, one supposes, but it still registered as an anti-climax.

Not that anyone was taking the actual films and videos for granted. There was widespread rejoicing, for instance, at the selection of the festival's opening film. Last year's kick-off picture, *Threshold*, had only been Atlantic by virtue of the fact that Donald Sutherland went to highschool in Bridgewater, N.S. *Stations*, a Picture Plant production by Bill MacGillivray, was a genuine achievement of the Atlantic Canadian feature film industry. The star was from Newfoundland, the faces and locations throughout were familiar, and you didn't have to be an industry insider to recognize names all through the credits. Halifax just isn't that big a place. A fair piece of the population was there at opening night in the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium, and all were duly impressed.

Stations, while not the world's most accessible film, certainly provides food for thought. It was an auspicious debut for the festival, which wound up six days later with Jacques Savoie's *Massabielle* copping five awards, including best overall entry. In between, audiences were saturated with all manner of film experience, from animated features to documentaries and video dramas. The new *Wormwood Dog* and *Monkey Cine-*

ma, two doors down from the NFB Theatre, provided a second screening location, and the NFB video theatre a third. Viewer discretion was necessarily random, as Atlantic films in general are not widely known. I lucked into Ian Easterbrook's *The Hooded Seal*, winner of best film and best documentary, but unknowingly missed *Ronnie (2) - Crap Out 8000*, a commercial produced by Lawrence Carotta Studios which earned a special merit award for humour. After a crowded week of screenings, there is a much greater general awareness of our film industry, and in that sense the Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival was a big success.

Mixed reviews were given that other requirement of the complete film festival: the dialogue or exchange of ideas. Where were the lively forums of stimulating discussion, and the rapier-like parries and thrusts of spirited, public debate? Nowhere, that's there. And not, entirely, for want of organized encouragement. Festival planners could have promoted the seminars more thoroughly, but there's no denying they were there. It's just that the Atlantic film makers by and large abstained. I went to one with the provocative title "Pay TV - Rise and Fall", and there were about as many people in the audience as on the panel. You'd think that such an occasion would prove educational for the budding filmmaker, which is generally how Atlantic filmmakers describe themselves; and sure enough, very quickly the motion was carried that "when push

comes to shove, we're all in television." This referred to the importance of television presales in getting a project off the ground, and is probably a ground rule for plying a lucrative market. But it fell on largely barren ground, as did First Choice vice-president Joan Schafer's advice to be more crass and Torontonians. Schafer expressed surprise and dismay that no enterprising filmmaker had taken advantage of her presence in the city to badger her with ideas. She said she'd come here to listen and no one had spoken. Those who *did* show up heard Schafer and her co-panelists, including Duncan MacEwan of Star Channel and Edgar Cowan, formerly of C Channel, agree that Atlantic filmmakers had to be aggressive and make themselves heard. Pay-TV is still an experimental field, we were reminded; the pay channels themselves are still trying to find what their audience wants and, who knows, you may have exactly what it takes. It was an inspirational little pep talk, sorely needed.

The second important seminar, "Marketing - Script to Screen", was better attended and represented the zenith of dialogue for this festival. The panelists were Roman Melnyk, who buys independent films for the CBC; Robert Verrall, the NFB executive producer for *The Tin Flute* and *The Wars*; Michael MacMillan, president of Atlantis Films, and the CFDC's Robert Linnell. They were all excited about the federal government's Broadcast Fund, for which the CFDC is currently accepting applica-

tions. This manna from Ottawa can make or guarantee loans for up to one-third of a film's expense, and is dedicated to making the airwaves more Canadian. It represents a golden opportunity for the independent filmmaker, one which the panel was gleefully expounding until MacMillan reminded us not to concentrate on it exclusively "or you'll go blind." It's not the only path to glory, he pointed out, and listed other steps a beginner could take, including starting small and building up clout. Everyone agreed that you had to pay your dues and the discussion swung back to what, exactly, was meant by "Canadianization." Did that just mean producing Canadian copies of American trash, the audience wanted to know. The CBC's *Empire, Inc.* was cited by some as a case in point, being nothing more, it was claimed, than a Dallas North. Maybe so, replied Melnyk, but a lot of people liked it. This opened up the floor to what people really want, and whether the filmmaker should give it to them or just do what he likes. An interesting debate but unresolved throughout the ages, and it wasn't settled on this particular occasion either, although not for want of trying.

When I asked festival director Mike Riggio whether the festival was now an established event, he said it takes about five years for a festival to become an institution. The Third Atlantic Film & Video Festival was strong on content, if a little short on excitement. Here's hoping that it lives to peak again.

Festival highlights

The Jury:

Dr. Jackie Oland, president, Neptune Theatre Foundation, Halifax
Charlotte O'Dea, CBC, St. John's, Newfoundland
Ned Norwood, supervisor, Film Production, Province of Nova Scotia
Dr. Josette Deleas-Matthews, Mount St. Vincent University, Halifax
Patricia Thompson, editor, Canadian Film Digest Yearbook, Toronto

A brisk walk in the sunshine of a Halifax fall morning (bright enough to bring a twinkle to a filmmaker's eye) brought me from hotel to the NFB office. Once there, it was to plunge into darkness and begin jury duty for this sprightly three-year old festival.

Judging was divided into *Video*, managed by Chipman Hall, an enthusiastic sailing and film buff, with *Film*, managed by Chris Majka. On Saturday at 1:20 p.m. Chris announced he was dancing in a show for children at 2 p.m. but, as his part was at the beginning, he would return at 2:45 p.m.... and did so, in make-up and Cossack costume, to continue projecting until 7 pm.!

An affable, opined jury managed to see all the video and film, discuss every award extensively and finish off in two-and-a-half days and remain friendly.

The Awards are given elsewhere in this issue, Herewith mini-reviews of the highlights.

MASSABIELLE

A half-hour Acadian drama of warmth and eccentric charm. Written and acted with style and verve, and beautifully photographed. The wittiest end-credits in many an age are guaranteed to rivet viewers to their chairs. Should be sub-titled in English immediately and circulated throughout the country.

THE HOODED SEAL (Film)

Rare first-time footage of the hooded seal - the birth of a pup on the ice and the curious mating display by the male. He inflates the hood over his head, and then his red nasal septum to the proportions of a large balloon. A sensible informative commentary coupled with good underwater photography add to the general appeal.

TIGHTEN THE TRACES, HAUL IN THE REINS (Video)

Robbie O'Neill assembled his one-man show from stories told to him by Leo Kennedy of Canso, N.S., a cerebral palsy/polio victim since childhood. O'Neil recreates his stage role - a tribute to a determined survivor who walked around his locality for over

25 years and made a living as a pedlar.

LES GAGES DE LA SURVIE - ANTONINE MAILLET (Video)

Winner of the Prix Goncourt 1979, creator of *La Sagouine*, authority on Rabelais - Antonine Maillet's expressive presence pervades this glimpse of her early life and progression to fame. An artful blend of photographs, archive material, art work and interviews, ill minate this leading exponent of Acadian culture.

THE APARTMENT CONFLICT (Video)

A series of images of a girl in an apartment with a male/statue/lover - she discourses in an incomprehensible language. The man departs. The girl leaves through a window which gives a glimpse of a certain reality outside. Washed with chromokeyed colour, this experiment elicits an eerie sense of foreboding.

The commercials yielded some fun - the delightfully animated *Moose Campfire* gently but firmly conveyed its "put out that campfire" message, while a merit award for humour went to *Crap Out 8000*. Yes, there really is a game of this name and a courageous film company took on that advertising challenge!

Pat Thompson ●