

Tierney On Television

Summer TV is usually the season for re-runs and fillers, a time when we all get to see what we missed intentionally or otherwise, or just plain get stuck with. This summer, however, has been slightly different – one might even think of it as political – and not without its own share of re-runs, as low a political pun as that might be.

The season was kicked off in June with the Liberal Party's leadership convention, a spectacle indeed, if not quite spectacular. When it comes time to write the book, *A Thousand And One Nights of Great Television*, who among us will not want to include the Liberal Party's farewell tribute to Pierre Trudeau? The show featured every trick in the book, from songs and dances to speeches to film clips to interviews to handkerchiefs wiping the corners of puffy eyes. Live TV at its absolutely kitschy best, and all done to the tune of *I'll Be Watching You*, one of the all-time great paranoia tunes.

Nathalie and René Simard tapdancing their way through a thank you to Pierre for doing such a great job; Norman Jewison, Rich Little, and Paul Anka who proved to everyone that even an Ottawa arena could take on the hyped ambience of a Vegas floorshow given the right combination of lights and a tan that just won't quit. But a revised version of *My Way* read off the back of an envelope?

In a way it seemed only fitting that the Prime Minister who had made the most use of television during his years in office be sent off in television style, and Trudeau rose to the occasion. His speech was, of course, the climax of the evening and for a man who will not be remembered for his oratorical powers, it wasn't half bad. He obviously gave this one knowing history was out there watching and, like a trooper, he went out with a flourish.

For the confessed convention addict there was as much pleasure to be had from watching the reaction shots of the leadership candidates: John Turner eyeing the monitor in his box and fixing his tie as though in response to 'Am I on?'; John Roberts trying valiantly to squelch the odd yawn; Jean Chrétien wishing Pierre would tip his hand at the last minute and come out for him; and the comic relief candidate, Eugene Whelan, with tears in his eyes but without his hat – one can only hope the heat permeating the Ottawa Civic Centre isn't as strong as the African sun.

There is something wonderfully attractive and repulsive about TV coverage of things like political conventions. It begins with the fact that the outcome is rarely 100% certain and unlike actual elections, the TV networks' computers don't start accurately predicting the final outcome before the last ballots are cast let alone counted. At a convention the media, while in evidence everywhere (at times looking vaguely like *My Favorite Martian* with little things coming out of their heads) appear to lie in wait for a mistake to be made, for someone to trip. More often than not it doesn't matter how meaningless the much-awaited slip might be, it's just the act of having appeared to make one, magnified by the number of people supposed to be watching on their sets. The candidates know this better than most, and like good scouts they must always be prepared for the onslaught of questions that are sure to follow. The

candidates sit with their stonewall faces, little enigmas wrapped in their own little mysteries, and we watch them watch it.

But the Liberal convention was just a preliminary even in a summer filled with political heats of one sort or another. The U.S. Democrats then had their turn, soon the Republicans will have theirs. As things have evolved in both countries, and particularly as a result of television interests, conventions lead inevitably to debates, and here, too, Canada outdid itself. Well used to having two of everything, this year we'll have three.

Round one was called *Face à Face* and was another television first: the first time Canadian politicians have debated entirely in French on national television. Yes, even Ed Broadbent. The next night they went at it in English. While neither could be called a re-run given that two of the three players are new to their jobs, the national press' morning – after autopsy sounded remarkably similar to the one following the last election debate in 1979. Five years ago almost everyone, including Joe Clark's parents, declared Ed Broadbent the best man for the job. The problem was his party. The 1984 reaction was similar, most ironic in light of how the New Democratic Party and its leader are supposed to be fighting for their political futures.

As a television experience both debates were in a word, boring. The respective party leaders looked suitably blanched, though if Richard Nixon gave the political world anything, he gave it the sense of importance of make-up. Nobody seemed too concerned, on the other hand, that the same Ed Broadbent glowed a little, thanks to a suntan one doesn't usually associate with backyard bar b-q's in Oshawa.

John Turner continues to look like a silent screen star anxiously awaiting his debut in the talkies, sounding almost as if he were being dubbed by a distant relative.

Brian Mulroney appears to have lost some of the glib smile he held on to when he won the Conservative Party nomination, you know the one that seemed to say: You think I'm hot now, wait till you see me after I move into Sussex Drive.

Last summer on TV it was Mulroney versus Clark or all-chin versus no-chin. You had to feel better about Turner's odds when the camera angle changed to split screen profiles.

During the English-language debate the three party leaders were questioned by journalists from the three networks, including Global. No adversary these, they refused to bite the hands that feed their typewriters. In fact, the most telling moment was not even vocalized: CTV's Bruce Phillips' bemused smile, perhaps indicative of his own sense of fun being involved in what might well be thought of as a national hoax perpetrated by federal politicians who know only too well that Canadian networks are most anxious to fill their waves with this kind of certifiable Canadian content.

In this case the medium was definitely the message: the marriage of television and politics most often results in boredom when the predictable and safe are the only matters of concern.

It was once believed by some that television would be good for democracy, but sometimes it seems as though democracy has become good for television. Will that be any less true after more than 200 hours of CBC coverage of another major summertime political event, the XXIII Olympiad?

Kevin Tierney ●

Functioning in a normal manner, Jonathan attends kindergarten and is vastly interested in the space program. He plays for hours in his room and, at one point, announces he is "making some music for my movie!"

An intriguing look into modern medical technology, focussing successfully on the human aspect of an engaging, understandably precocious child who appears to handle his condition with aplomb.

Making A Difference has been purchased by CBC/Toronto for showing in its summer weekday afternoon program "Canadian Reflections" It will be screened at the Montreal World Film Festival this month.

p./d. Louise Quirion Shekter, with assistance from NFB Ontario Regional Production Office. 1984. 30 mins. (approx), colour. Availability: (416) 469-3104.

GOLD LUST

Serra Pelada was once a small mountain in the Amazon jungle of Brazil. Today it is a vast open-pit where amazingly rich gold finds ranging from nuggets to dust frequently occur.

This incredible pit is divided into over 1,000 claims of 2 x 3 meters each, and some 60,000 people are now engaged in this bizarre mining operation. The pay dirt is laboriously shovelled into sacks, picked up and carried by the *garimpeiros* (labourers) who make 40 trips a day under the meticulous eye of a checker recording each load. This mucky muck is carefully sifted for gold and, as narrator Orson Welles trumpets, "Stealing pay dirt is an act of war!"

As the Serra Pelada gold slaves feverishly work their tiny claims, tiered one above the other from the bottom of the pit, the fabulous cinematography conjures up Dante's Inferno as well as the Klondike gold rush of 1898.

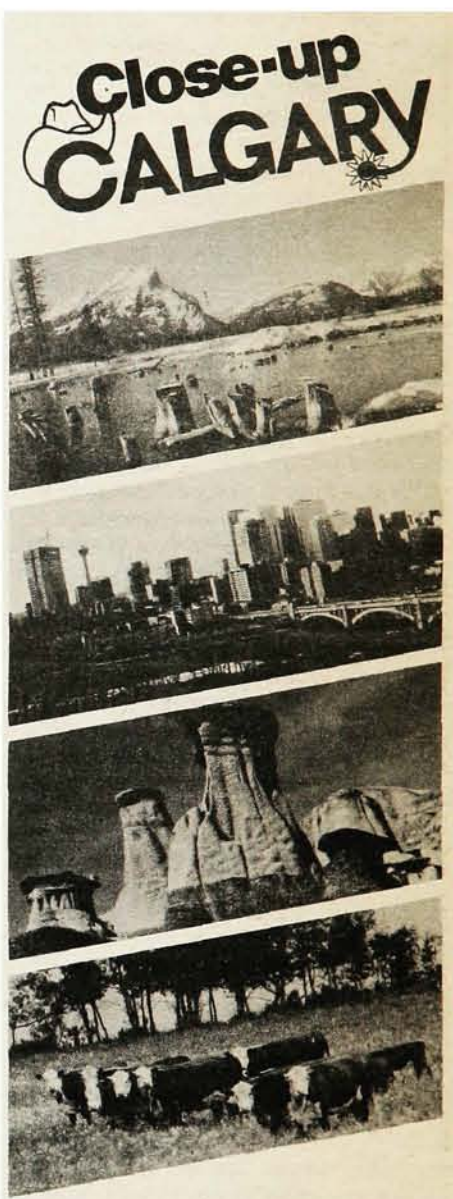
The film gives sketchy background information via brief interviews with prospectors voicing their dreams of wealth (which often come true), and some narrated details of the workers' shelters/hovels, feeding, and the ban on liquor and women.

However, *Gold Lust* dissipates its energy by side-trips into other areas – the suction mining of the Amazon River bed, building the railway through the jungle and discovering iron ore, tin and bauxite in the process. The film takes on a meandering, repetitious air, and sorely needs further editing.

There's no denying the fabulous visuals of the toiling human ants in the Serra Pelada open-pit mine, but the film should have been shorter and stuck to this one subject.

p./d. Robert K. Maclean, sc. Robert K. Maclean/Neil Hollander, mus. Drew King, narr. Orson Welles. Availability: Northwood Communications Inc., 180 Bloor St. W., Ste. 601, Toronto M5S 2V6, Ont. (416) 926-1575.

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