



The Canadian International Animation Fest

A damp squib

by Patricia Thompson
with sketches
by Grant Munro

For any film festival, there are good years and bad years. Like wine, a good festival is the product of proper nurturing, careful handling, and appropriate presentation. In Canada, all our festivals depend on government backing—usually upon the benediction of the Festivals Bureau (now part of Telefilm Canada), coupled with provincial, and sometimes municipal, support. The fees the public pays and the monies from corporate sponsors round out the financial aid from the government to provide the budget of each festival.

When all goes well, few questions are asked. A well-organized festival that presents the kind of program the public is prepared for simply hums along to the satisfaction of all. But when things start to go wrong—when the screening get fouled up, workshops and conferences run late or when the selection of films and videos is off-base—then people begin to wonder who's in charge, who's paying for this anyway, and is it worth the public expenditure?

Perhaps the dicey question is "Whose festival is this anyway?" The legal answer is that festivals are run by the people who incorporate them. They, in fact, "belong" to those people who, in turn, answer to the board of directors named in the letters patent. But, as everybody knows, the festivals are handsomely backed by government monies, there is a feeling that they rightly belong to the people, or to the specific people targeted. (In Halifax, one feels the Atlantic fest should be the business of Atlantic filmmakers; in Montreal, the World Film Festival belongs to the public; the recent animation festival in Toronto belongs

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to the animators.) So a festival which is poorly organized and shoddily run invariably comes in for wholesale criticism from the people who care about it, and there is usually talk of a person or a group in the wings ready to do the job better. This has happened recently both locally, in Montreal, in Halifax, and internationally, in Venice.

The sheer weight of the job which needs doing is not always understood by those who criticize, but there are so many festivals now, both in Canada and elsewhere, that there must be standards. Ultimately, the administrative success of a festival—the ability of a festival to present its screening smoothly, and organize its other programs efficiently—is a product of the ability of its organizers to handle the budget well. Good festivals are available at all prices. If the difference between Yorkton and Cannes is enormous, the satisfaction of the participants can—and does—run on a par when each festival delivers what it promises.

This was a crucial year for the animation festival which took place in Toronto in August. Seldom had a Canadian festival been preceded by such legal and administrative upheavals.

For four years, that festival had taken place in Ottawa, sanctioned by the Canadian Film Institute and run by its staff. When the former head of the CFI, Frederik Manter, stepped aside, leaving the CFI with a deficit of \$180,000 (see *Cinema Canada* No. 87), festival director Kelly O'Brien also left the Institute. Together in Toronto, they incorporated the Canadian International Animation Festival Inc., and announced that they were ready to run the animation festival on their own. Meanwhile, the CFI, battle-weary from the task of trying to liquidate the deficit, and still reeling under the pressures created by the wholesale lay-offs/resignations which marked the Institute in 1982, in-

corporated the Ottawa International Animation Festival Inc. to run the animation festival as usual.

When both bodies, competing with each other for the public purse, approached the Festivals Bureau for backing, they were told to work something out together and make one presentation or there would be no festival. Furthermore, the group which received funding in 1984 for the festival would have to absorb the deficit from the last animation festival.

The result was a most surprising shotgun marriage, an animation festival, on whose board sit three members of the CFI, run by two former CFI staff people (Manter and O'Brien), to be administered by Manter.

For her part, Kelly O'Brien has always received top marks from animators and critics alike for her devotion to the animation festival. The ability of the Toronto group to pull off the "coup"—to move the festival to Toronto and take virtual control of it—was, in large measure, due to the excellent relations between O'Brien and the world-wide Association internationale du film d'animation (ASIFA) which sponsors all recognized animation festivals. With ASIFA's blessing, O'Brien set out to program while Manter set out to administer the animation festival in Toronto with only partial accountability to the CFI. Obviously, the festival was going to be monitored closely by many interested people.

Pat Thompson has followed both the fortunes of the CFI and the animation festival closely from the beginning. A fan of the festival while it was in Ottawa, she had already been critical of the way it was run in 1982. As her previous articles in *Cinema Canada* evidence, she is a firm believer in the public responsibility of those who handle public funds. Below, she gives first an overview of this year's administration of the festival, her impressions of the programming and prizes, and some suggestions for the future.

The Canadian International Animation Festival has been a showcase for the best from world animators since 1976. Held every two years in Canada, this specialized festival, until this year, was always in Ottawa under the wing of the Canadian Film Institute (CFI), and sanctioned by the Association internationale du film d'animation (ASIFA).

The context

Internationally, the festival takes place in the larger context of two renowned European animation festivals which alternate every two years. This year it's the Zagreb festival in Yugoslavia, and the Annecy festival in France will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 1985. As well, the Cambridge Animation Festival in Britain, which boasts support from the prestigious cultural Channel 4, is in its fifth year, and the First International Animation Festival in Hiroshima, Japan, has been announced for 1985, sponsored by ASIFA and boasting cash prizes for "the best animation pursuing for peace" (sic). There's no denying that animators should assemble to exchange ideas, assimilate new technology and view the work of their peers from around the world, but it is surely pertinent to wonder just how many global gatherings animators can supply and support?

In the face of stiff international competition, how does the Canadian International Animation Festival define itself? As at present constituted, it hovers uneasily between a film festival and a seminar, with workshops, demos, retrospectives, computer animation, rock videos and so on, jostling with evening screenings of films in competition which hope to attract what is loosely called "the general public." A jury is brought in to screen all the entries and to select those for competition.

Reflecting this mix, participants this year came from around the world totalled just under 400 filmmakers, guests, press and passholders and some 40 people from the Toronto area. Only a fraction of these attended the special programs during the day and, while ticket buyers augmented this number at the evening screenings, no box office figures were available. But the 900 seats on the main

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floor of the Ryerson Theatre were rarely filled for the six festival nights.

Another opening...

Opening night was a good squeeze. Festival director Kelly O'Brien was all togged up in red tie and tails, and animator Frederick Back, the 1984 Honorary President, was his usual courtly and charming self. The opening remarks started late, were mostly bilingual, and mercifully short. The screening began with a tribute to Back, not announced in the schedule or from the stage, which made for a lot of whispering and rustling. Then came the first film in competition, opening on a sprightly note with *Black And White* from Czechoslovakia (an eventual prize-winner). But the program soon went out of balance and a polite but restive audience suffered through some impenetrable films - *Sreoni Vashtar* and *Leo Janacek - Intimate Excursions*, both from England, plus *Chips* (Poland), which was a controversial Grand Prix winner. However, the sound levels were too low, and focussing poor, and these problems were never completely rectified during the festival.

On special

The special presentations during the day were unique opportunities to see rare, early animation and special effects, and all the up-to-the-minute stuff too. Highlights this year included Antoinette Moses with two programs on British Pioneers, ranging from Arthur Melbourne-Cooper's *Matches Appeal* made in 1899 at the time of the Boer War and *Dreams Of Toyland* (1908), to two wonderfully fresh films by Anthony Gross and Hector Hopkin. Their *La Joie de vivre* (1934) was a flowing balletic treat, while a marvellous new 35mm print of *Foxhunt* (1936) in glorious colour and fully animated was a first-class eye-opener.

The two-part tribute to the life-work of James Whitney, one of the foremost artists in the field of abstract animation, was prepared by Louise Beudet of the Cinematheque quebecoise. A stunning and extended experience for the mind and eye with *Lapis* (1960-63), that most famous of computer films, still having overwhelming power. From 1939 to his death in 1982, Whitney lavished years of work and experimentation on these exquisitely beautiful coloured films.

Judson Rosebush of Digital Effects, Inc., New York, returned with a program on computer animation of the human form, including latest 3-D effects, and Charles Samu of Home Box Office was also back with a Rock Video Roundtable - which turned out to be the eye of the storm in a crammed Saturday program that just didn't work out right...

The Tribute to UPA, also arranged by Louise Beudet, promised Mr. Magoo, Gerald McBoing Boing, Christopher Crumpet, Madeline, and The Tell-Tale Heart, to mention but a few delights. However, arrivals at 3 p.m. that Saturday were asked to come back later as the Rock Video Roundtable was running beyond its allotted time-slot. So, the UPA films started well behind schedule and were cut off at 6 p.m. to prepare for the Gala Award Presentations at 8 p.m. Rumours were abroad that films had been misplaced but this was apparently not true. Some brand-new prints arrived in the projection booth wound backwards on the reels, and righting this



took up further extra time. An extremely unfortunate mix-up on a tightly-programmed day that depended on meticulous timing and execution.

Cruisin' round the lake

The Festival Picnic is always eagerly anticipated, and the secret of its fresh-

air venue was guarded well until the actual day. For 1984, the restored lal steamer "Trillium" was hired to whisk participants away from the excessive humidity of the city and into the cool breezes of Lake Ontario. While magnificent views of the Toronto skyline, the Harbourfront installation and Ontario Place floated by, everyone talked, sunbathed, and unspooled endless reels of films. Co Hoedeman shot film which I planned to show on the last night of the Festival. Grant Munro sketched like mad, with an occasional break to dance up a storm to the Dixieland band pounding away all the time. Lunch was served on board; a Hungarian TV crew captured everyone for posterity; and Melnie, the Owl girl, dressed up in an unbelievably hot padded costume representing the Festival logo, danced, posed and generally hammed it up.

Awards, audiences and jury

What an awards night: cheers and jeer and boos and hisses and kisses! In Category A (films longer than five minutes), *Spotting a Cow* in first place was not the greatest. But it was slick and fast: "It isn't easy to find a proper design for a new creation," intones The Voice From Above, and away into some crowd-pleasing gags. *Anna & Bella* in second place also won the ASIFA Publicist Award, and was a lovely understanding of old age as two sisters pored over their lives via an old photo album, while knocking back the vino and getting progressively more giggly by the minute. Many expressions of regret were heard that *Augusta Makes Up Her Face* (Csaba Varga, Hungary) did not get an award in this category. The title describes this madly funny plasticine creation, which had the whole audience in whoops. Ference Rofusz won a first in Category B (films shorter than five minutes) with *Gravity*, a tiny, forceful tale of a young apple straining to leave the tree, with a painful *dénouement*. It received another ovation from the audience, repeating Rofusz's success in 1980 with *The Fly*. *Black & White*, a neat little allegory with black and white sheep vividly illustrating the absurdity of uniformity, was second.

The announcement of no awards in Category C (promotion films) elicited groans and gasps from the audience, and murmurs of "cop-out" were heard. A number of commercial spots were bandied about as being worthy winners. Two from Richard Williams Animation in England, *Terry's Harlequin*, charming pastel drawings for Terry's chocolates, and *Super Softies*, in which a pair of delightful cherubs discuss baby skin care; and two from Canada, John Weldon's *Emergency Numbers* (NFB), fast and furious fun with a dog burglar pointing to the wisdom of keeping emergency telephone numbers handy, and *Stop To Think* (Jim Burt, Graham Watt, Michael Mills), another pastel promotion, exceedingly well executed, for the Ontario Milk Marketing Board.

Category D (first films) also provoked displeasure, not because Jon Minnis's *Charade* with its mad and witty game of charades based on film titles didn't deserve its First Prize, but because no Second was given. Many participants felt strongly that this is the category where encouragement should be given. The omission was particularly irritating because one first film, *Second Class Mail* (Alison Snowden, England) received much admiration from animators. A funny quirky little invention about an old lady who purchased an inflatable

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man through the mail, but whose pleasure was short-lived! A definite Jury boo-boo here.

The films for children (Category E) ranged from First for cute – *Doctor De Soto* is a mouse dentist who works on animals (but not dangerous ones) – to *Imbrium Beach*, a surrealist picnic for three friends originally created as a pilot for a children's TV series. Other delightful films for children included Michel Ocelot's *La Princesse insensible* (France), an exquisite confection set in a theatre where nightly entertainments are provided for a tiny, but bored, princess. These episodes, made for TV, suffered from being badly strung together, leaving in the same interminable credits as each fragment began. Ocelot who has such accessible taste and style, is fondly remembered for *The Three Inventors*, concocted primarily from lace doilies, in the 1980 Animation Festival – but he didn't win there either. Also for children was *The Snowman* (Dianne Jackson, England), a 26-minute piece in 35mm, the story of a boy whose snowman comes to life and joins him in the house. In exchange, the snowman takes the boy on a magical trip to the North Pole. A sentimental tale, but no-one could deny its stunningly executed full animation, which must have cost a fortune and taken for ever.

The Special Awards were acceptable, though regrets were expressed that *Anijam* didn't get a Category prize, as Marv Newland's idea was terrific, came off well and was rapturously received. He inveigled 22 animators from around the world to contribute 15-second segments without being told what came before or after their effort. Newland put it all together and the outcome was wild, wacky, and sometimes unnerving, but it wowed the audience who hollered and hooted their appreciation.

The Grand Prix was a whole different kettle of fish. Boos and hisses greeted *Chips* from Poland. A plodding, repetitious study of loneliness, interspersed with flashbacks to the past, hands peeling potatoes (chips??) into a pot of hot water over a gas ring, and so on – at nine minutes it seemed interminable.

After the Gala Awards there was a press conference. Livelier than many of the films, the atmosphere heated up as questions were fired off to a very defensive Jury: for example, why did the Polish film *Chips* merit the Grand Prix when it was old-fashioned in style and content, loaded with clichés, and not even animation? Giannalberto Bendazzi undertook to answer, saying they all thought the film had great poetry and a dream-like style, and was very graphic. The Jury was then asked why no Second Prize was given in Category D (first films). They replied that the others were good but did not warrant the singling out of one more and, when queried about *Second Class Mail*, the answer came back that it was not considered special. The biggest uproar was reserved for Category C (promotion films) in which no prizes were given. Several fine examples were shouted out, the Jury was uptight but stubborn, and sparks flew. Nice to witness lusty reactions instead of polite acceptance.

A damp squib

And yet the switch to Toronto in 1984 did not give the Animation Festival a much-needed boost. In fact, it was something of a damp squib. Advance publicity was almost non-existent, and schedules were hard to find prior to opening night. While there was a fair bit of press



coverage, the publicity needed to stimulate a potential audience to come out for specialized films failed badly. There was no blanketing of libraries or public

places with flyers, and no help requested from interested groups. For example, the AV departments of both the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library and

the University of Toronto had to pick up bulk supplies of schedules, and neither the Toronto Film Society nor the Ontario Film Institute were approached to spread the word. That's a lot of potential ticket-buyers ignored.

Given such a seeming lack of concern about attracting the general public, one might have thought that the Festival was, instead, a haven for Canadian animators. But a public tiff in *The Globe & Mail* between Manter and Michael Hirsh, president of the Canadian Animation Producers Association, indicated that trouble was also brewing on that front. While Manter insisted that the festival is not "a commercial marketplace, but a cultural event celebrating animation," Hirsh – still smarting from the rejection of his feature *Rock 'n' Rule* – retorted by saying that a recent poll of all members of the Canadian Animated Producers Association "revealed that more than 90% of the producers feel ignored and abused by the Festival organizers..." If so, surely one of the challenges before the organizers of the festival is to create some solid support within the community concerned.

Budgets and bills

The festival was run on a budget this year of approximately \$204,000, according to Festival director Kelly O'Brien. This includes federal, provincial, Metro Toronto and corporate grants, as well as box office receipts. To this figure can be added about \$40,000 representing goods and services supplied. Expenditures included salaries to seven full-time staff and jury expenses. Filmmakers with films in final competition, and the foreign press had hotel bills paid and a Hungarian TV film crew also received a per diem.

A 12-man board of directors of the CIAF, in conjunction with the CFI (still carrying the deficit from past festivals in Ottawa) is responsible for the festival now. And until that old deficit is retired, the CFI will continue to be consulted. It is certain that this year again, the animation festival will rack up a deficit, which, given the current cruel economic climate, should give pause.

Problems, problems

As matters currently stand, ASIFA must evaluate this year's performance, and ask itself whether it is appropriate to accredit a festival, which is not fully sponsored by an established Canadian organization, with full-time staff, office facilities, financial structures, and so on. At the moment, the festival is run by two part-time people, and festival director O'Brien has just taken a full-time job at the CBC, working for the festival "evenings and weekends."

It is also up to the funding agencies to judge whether, given this year's performance, it is fitting to contemplate the further expenditure in 1986 of almost a quarter-of-a-million dollars of predominantly public money on this specialized project. If Canada wants to continue to welcome animators from around the globe, a tighter, better organized format of seminars and workshops with screenings is the way to go. The board of directors that handles this problem in two years' time, in consultation with ASIFA, needs to be informed and principled, and must insist on a complete rethinking of the shape of the event, a strict watch on expenditures and accountability, and an even firmer hand on those who administer the animation event.