

Best of the fests



• Awards night in Yorkton: TV star Bruno Gerussi; director Barbara Sweete (*The Magnificat*, best fine arts production); and best d.o.p. John Walker (*On To The Polar Sea*)

In September, I got a call to go to Yorkton, Sask., as a member of the pre-selection jury of five at the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival. I'm very glad that I accepted. It was a wonderful experience at a Festival which, I would like to suggest, deserves more attention than it gets. Here are a few words on the award-winners.

Making Overtures

d. Larry Weinstein, p.c. Rhombus Media Inc. 28:00 mins.

Rhombus is a company that specializes in films about music, and which prides itself on the teamwork that goes into its productions. Making Overtures is a great example of what this kind of devotion can pull off. It's about the community-based Northumberland Symphony Orchestra, with lots of emphasis on the "community." The film is packed with good humor, affection, and commitment both for the people who make up the orchestra, and for the effort they put into their community with their talent. The film gives you a good feeling as a sampler of what it is celebrating. (*Best production of the Festival, Best documentary production under 30 minutes.*)

The Study of an Apartment

p/d. Martin Rose, 3:30 mins.

This film provides a simple record of everyday events in a woman's apart-

ment, using cut-out animation on multiple levels of glass. It was made at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Rose has a fine sense of visual rhythm, and an good eye for line, color, and design. (*Best Animation Production*)

Sunspirit Saskatchewan

d. Jack Tunnicliffe, p. Neil Sawatzky, 24:11 mins.

Here's one of those eternally cheerful tourist films where everything is always sunny and smiling. Saskatchewan comes out looking like the greatest tourist attraction imaginable. The whole thing is so good-natured that you can't take exception to the obvious hyperbole that is the film's mainstay. It's bright, it's funny, and it's quite enjoyable too. (*Best Commercial/Promotional Production*).

Le Film d'Ariane

d. Josée Beaudet, p.c. Parlimage, 55:00 mins.

This documentary is made of images from the lifetime picture collection of the film's central subject, Ariane. There are sections of home movies dating back further than you would think there were any home movies. There are stills from private collections and from magazines catalogues, and who knows where else. The story which is exceptionally well unfolded through the editing of these pictures is not only that of Ariane, but also that of the role of

women in Quebec over the last 60 years. It's a sort of *Rosie The Riveter* with esthetic taste and an individual human focus. For English-speaking audiences there is some difficulty, naturally, with the French voice-over, but I was able to follow it quite well with my rusty classroom French. (*Best Documentary Production Over 30 Minutes, Best Picture Editing*).

La Fuite

p/d. Robert Cornellier, 49:00 mins.

The story of this film forces us to consider the inhumanities that all countries perpetrate on the nationals of others in the name of patriotism. Two Germans, caught in Canada by the outbreak of World War One, are arrested as prisoners of war and held in a prison camp without trial. The authenticity of the film is one of its chief assets. Costumes, settings, and characterizations are first-rate. The mixture of dialogue in French and German (with French subtitles) causes some problems for English-speaking audiences, of course. (*Best Drama Production Over 30 Minutes*).

The Painted Door

d. Bruce Pittman, p.c. Atlantis Films Ltd., 24:00 mins.

Pittman's atmospheric adaptation of this Sinclair Ross story of isolation, infidelity, and death is one that is already well-known and much acknowledged. It tells

its story with remarkably little dependence on words, calling on acting, cinematography, editing, and design to carry much of the narrative. They all succeed very well indeed. (*Best Drama Production Under 30 Minutes, Best Performance [Linda Goranson], Best Script [Joe Wiesefeld], Superchannel Best Script Cash Award Of \$1000*).

The Magnificat

d. Barbara Willis-Sweete, p.c. Rhombus Media Inc., 50:00 mins.

Another fine production from the company which won the Best Production of the Festival award, *The Magnificat* documents the rehearsal time and performance of two very different musical approaches to J.S. Bach's Magnificat in D. One group, featuring Tafelmusik and the Tudor Singers, prepares a traditional rendering of the piece, while the other, consisting of the Swingle Singers, a jazz combo featuring the likes of Moe Koffman, and vocalists Ann Mortifee and Bobby McFerrin, rehearses a jazz-improvisational approach to the same music. The footage of the rehearsals is full of tension, anticipation and glee. The footage of the performance at the end of the film pays off magnificently. The two performance groups alternate before the same audience and prove that when good music and good musicians get together, musical preferences take a back seat to raw virtuosity. (*Best Fine Arts Production*).

Making a Difference

d. Louise Shekter, p. Reuben Nissbaum, 29:00 mins.

This is a great documentary on cardiology and the role of the pace-maker. What makes it so good is its focus on the central character, the filmmaker's son, Jonathan, who was born with a heart defect. Jonathan himself explains how his pace-maker works, takes us on a tour of the manufacturing plant, and describes what's happening as he has a cardiology check-up. Scientific subject made human by a nice kid. Can't lose. (*Best Health/Medicine Production*).

Dads And Kids

p./d. Christian Bruyere, 28:00 mins.

Here's a film that tells the story of the single-parent family from the point of view of the sole-support father. In fact there are five case studies in the film. (Top-prize in my book goes to Dennis whose youngster hits a couple of off-camera home-runs with his plastic baseball bat during one of his father's interview's.) Without any anti-feminism, the film succeeds in quietly insisting on masculine rights in family situations which are complicated by the sexist assumptions of the law. (*Best Instructional/Educational Production*).

Turn It Off

d. Allan Stein, p.c. Stein/McLean Productions Ltd., 4:00 mins.

Can't remember a thing about this film. (*Best Music Video Production*)

Elk Island

d. James Jeffrey, p.c. NFB, 24:00 mins.

Nothing fancy about the filmmaking here. Good documentary coverage of a good subject is still enough to win the prize, I'm glad to say. Elk Island is a wild-life sanctuary just a few minutes' travel from Edmonton. In it is preserved one of the few remaining Canadian herds of elk. The film shows the careful behind-the-scenes work that goes into the maintaining of such a sanctuary by its Parks Canada managers.

I don't grumble with acknowledging the excellence of this film. If I could have had a vote on the final jury, though, mine would have gone for the John Stoneman film, *The Last Frontier*. But I'll plead guilty to being partial to

Stoneman's underwater documentaries, and keep my vote for another time. (*Best Nature/Environment Production*).

Rediscovery - The Eagle's Gift

d. Peeter Prince, p.c. Vision Quest Films, 28:55 mins.

The awards jury brought this film back into the running after the preselection jury had eliminated it as a finalist. It's a decision that puzzles me still. The film itself is a fine enough production, covering the operations of a wilderness youth camp in the Queen Charlotte Islands. At the camp young people, both native and non-native, learn about themselves as they discover some of the cultural history of the Haida. My puzzlement stems from the problem I have in seeing the film as one that will appeal to children, rather than to adults. My personal choice in this category would have been one of the excellent dramas such as *Griff Makes A Date*, or *Rabbit Goes Fishing*. (*Best Production For Children, Queen City Junior Film Society Cash Award of \$500*).

Poison of Bhopal

d. David Kirk, p.c. CBC, 15:53 mins.

Ann Medina gives one of the CBC *Journal's* extended documentary reports on the direct aftermath of the Bhopal toxic gas leak. Her on-the-scene interviews with the wretched and suffering natives of the area, who literally cough away their lives as they are interviewed, offer the viewer a wrenching and unforgettable experience. It's an award-winner all the way. (*Best Public Affairs Production*).

On To The Polar Sea: A Yukon

Adventure

d. Peter Raymond, p.c. Investigative Productions Inc., 52:00 mins.

A group of American professionals spend their vacation canoeing the white waters of the Yukon rivers. It's a rugged excursion. Not my idea of a vacation at all. John Walker has described the conditions to me, and given me by his first-hand account an even greater admiration for the cinematographic achievement of this film considering the impossible shooting conditions. Bad enough trying to look after a canoe in those

waters, let alone a camera too. It's all here, from lyrical visual poetry to sheer visceral excitement. (*Best Sport/Recreational Production, Best Cinematography/Videography* - [John Walker])

Harvest of Despair

d. Zlavko Nowytski, p. Ms Z. Hrycenko, UFRC, 55:00 mins

There isn't a film in the Festival that has stayed with me more vividly than this one. The subject of the film is the "forgotten holocaust" in the Ukraine, created by the decree of Joseph Stalin as a way of bringing the Ukraine under the Soviet heel. Estimates of the deaths created in this manufactured famine range from seven to ten million. There are still survivors alive today to tell what they remember to the documentary camera. Much of the film is made up of documentary and newsreel footage of the actual events. Zawnyshyn's mournful and melancholy choral music is a perfect complement to this overwhelming film. (*Best Original Music Score [Zenoby Zawnyshyn], Special Jury Award, Antoinette [Nettie] Kryski Canadian Heritage Award of \$500*).

Red Rocket

p./d. Colin Strayer, 10:00 mins.

This is another of my very favorites. A film without words is such a rarity these days that an outstanding one like this one deserves to be celebrated. It's hardly important that the film is about the old PCC streetcars which Toronto is busily taking out of service. The film is excellent because of what every frame tells us about the sensitivity of the cinematographer; what every cut tells us about the skill of the editor; and what every juxtaposition tells us about the artistic vision of the filmmaker. All of these are the same person, and I wish his film many appreciative viewers, as it well deserves. (*Best Sound Editing*).

Pluie d'été

d. François D'Auteuil, p.c. SDA Productions Ltée., 27:50 mins.

This is one of the French-language titles which largely escaped me because the dialogue was beyond the grasp of my feeble French. It was, though, a film that brought me several moments of pleasure with its wit of situation, character-

ization and execution. I remember a middle-aged man puttering in his rural garden wearing an incongruous walkman. I remember the performance of this actor as being a delight of humor and character. I remember the scene in the row boat - who wouldn't - when a young couple fling themselves into uninhibited love-making in front of him. (*Best Direction*).

fifth estate:

A Journey Back

d. Brian McKenna, p.c. CBC, 51:56 mins.

Broadway producer Jack Garfien together with his *fifth estate* host retraces the journey he and his family took from their home in Slovakia to the death camp of Auschwitz. In Canada he confronts the official from his home town who was responsible for the transportation of the Jews. The final image of the film is an indelible moment: Garfien rubs his shoe in the thin snow on the ground at Auschwitz, then stoops to pick up something. He then recognizes that he is holding a fragment of human bone. All the patience and restraint that he has shown throughout the documentary are lost in this moment as he gives way to a scream of sheer rage. Freeze frame. End of film. (*Special Jury Award*).

Street Kids

d. Peg Campbell, p.c. NFB, 28:00 mins.

I remember a spirited discussion about this film in the preadjudication screening room. It's about street kids, male and female - prostitutes. Some of the scenes are taken in a hostel where a few of the street kids try to get straight, not always succeeding. The film is tough and gritty in its subject-matter, and in its presentation. It's filmed in black and white, and the processing is then pushed to give a grainy effect. Some of the sequences are optically modified too to make the movement jerky and dream-like. It was these visual effects which led to the discussion in the screening room. Some felt that their use in such a long film was overdone. (*Special Jury Award*).

Chris Worsnop •

The Grierson Seminar

Video productions at the Grierson Seminar were a mixed lot, most working on very low budgets, all staying within Canada for their subjects. A kind of grass-roots aesthetic dominates. Almost all the videomakers establish an intimacy and warm regard for the people they are filming, a feeling more suited to closer identification between artist and subject (unlike the Central American films which often took a North American into a foreign land). The trade-off, however, is a softening of critical attitudes; though some, like *Orientations* and *Show Business*, retain a more open perspec-

tive, all are celebrations of their subject. Since most are minority groups who suffer from negative or non-existent visual representation, the videos fill an important gap in our cultural network. And though the relative lack of critical analysis by the videomakers threatens sometimes to dissolve into simplistic imaging (a strategy which helps neither the artist nor the subject), the work does fill a crucial gap in the cultural network of the minority groups themselves. For this reason alone, all the videos shown were valuable.

Orientations:

Gay and Lesbian Asians

d. Richard Fung, 56 min., 3/4" video, dist.: DEC Films, 1985.

Fung made *Orientations* as a pioneer project to counter the complete absence of video or film documentary on gay and lesbian Asians. As such, he describes it as an "educational tool," and its straightforward style foregrounds the sensitive, articulate people whose interviews make up the bulk of the video. Fung admirably avoids whitewashing his subjects and presents them with contradictions intact to avoid stereotyping the minority he wishes to liberate. *Orientations* fits into the now

conventional "minority positive image" structure. Individual interviews which move chronologically from childhood recollections to a moment of crisis (here, coming out) are intercut and culminate in a sequence of collective action. Often, this is a celebratory demonstration; in this case, Gay and Lesbian Pride Day in Toronto. Working within this structure, Fung's care and thoughtful handling make his video a sound forerunner project for its subjects.

Our Two Cents Worth

d. Sarah Newman, 30 min., 3/4" video, dist. WAVES, 1985.

Our Two Cents Worth, a rough-cut from Halifax-based collective WAVES (Women in Video Explorations) uses the same structure as *Orientalisms* to discuss minority women's economic oppression. The collective's work is as rough around the edges as Fung's is smooth, but trades clarity for the freedom to experiment. Working on many feminist film/video collective principles (valorizing "unprofessionalism", highlighting process over product), the video is uneven but full of wonderful moments which make it a fascinating and promising work.

The Struggle For Choice

d. Nancy Nicol, 90 min., 3/4" video, dist. Horizontal Forest Productions. Work-in-progress.

The Struggle For Choice raised some hackles at the Seminar for being a "boring" work-in-progress. While the video is visually unexciting and, in its rough form, unstructured and un-paced, it was an important video for the Seminar as an example of video-as-historical-document. The depth of research, national scope (important figures from almost every province in the abortion debate in Canada are represented) and the obvious commitment of the videomakers makes the video an important historical text for the pro-choice movement.

Un Génocide culturel - L'Adoption d'enfants Amérindiens

(18 min.)

La Famine chez les Inuits

(17 min.)

d. Magnus Isaacson, 3/4" video, dist. Radio-Canada, 1985.

Isaacson's two "pocket documentaries" were most interesting for the tensions they exposed between the demands of a subject for responsible, complex, broad analysis and the demands of the form of distribution (Radio-Canada says, "do it in 17 minutes"). Isaacson quit the "pocket" format because the ethical compromise was too strong. The meticulous care he devoted to his craft and subject matter, and the obvious intelligence of his work are, ironically, the qualities which led to his frustration with the restrictions of TV news.

On fait toutes du showbusiness (We're All In Showbusiness)

d. Nicole Giguère, 60 min., 3/4" video, dist. Video Femmes, 1984.

Giguère's production works much more subversively. Video Femmes actively seeks exposure on television (*Show Business* is their first sale to Radio-Québec). A flashy, fast-moving collage of interviews and performances of more than 12 women in the Quebec rock music industry, the film celebrates their toughness and energy. At the same time it honestly shows the tremendous level of sexism the performers suffer from and sometimes "profit" from. Nanette Workman's ambiguous place in pop's curious form of porno-rock is an example of how sexism sells in popular culture. Some problems, like performance sound and Sylvie Tremblay's

"poetic narration", but the technical strength and free-spirited energy of the production make it work. A hilarious interview with Diane Dufresne doesn't hurt either.

To Pick Is Not To Choose

d. John Greyson, 45 min., 3/4" video, dist. Tolpuddle Farm Labour Information Committee.

This documentary on the hardships of farmworkers in southern Ontario is another good example of the tension between a director's aesthetic ambitions and the demands of the sponsor, here, the TELIC. Their wish for a conventional Grierson-style social action resource (a demand competently met by Greyson) clashes with the director's more radical aesthetic concerns, creating some interesting disjunctions. Though the video moves informatively along, Greyson's moments – some symbolic and technical innovations, and use of irony (the best use of a John Denver song ever) – are the video's high points.

One of the most concentrated areas of political film today is Central America. And interesting work is being done by North Americans in solidarity with the revolutionary groups and people of the strife-torn region. Five films, all directed by women, were featured at November's Grierson Documentary Seminar and raised some complex questions concerning feminist and political approaches to film and revolution. How important is the filmmaker's consciousness of perspective, be it native or North American, liberal or radical? How much responsibility goes to the subject, to the issue or the people being filmed? Can one of these outweigh the other? Finally, how appropriate are a film's theoretical, formal strategies to its audience? The films discussed below explored these questions; the successful ones respected the complexity of the issue and kept some balance between self-criticism and assertive solidarity.

When the Mountains Tremble

d. Pamela Yates, 83 min., 16mm, dist. DEC Films, 1983.

The American trio of Pamela Yates, Peter Kinoy, and Tom Siegal have made a sprawling, hard-hitting, but inconsistent *agit-prop* look at American involvement in Guatemala. Mixing dramatic scenes with a variety of documentary styles – from *vérité* to talking heads to archival footage – the film is sophisticated and effectively makes its point on the military, economic, and cultural encroachment by the U.S. (United Fruit is the main trans-national culprit here). The film's fervent sincerity, however, overwhelms any sensitivity to complex tone or irony. *Mountains* dissolves into the outraged but presumptuous cry of the foreign correspondent. Our distrust of the filmmakers undercuts their laudable motives.

As Women See It: Bread and Dignity

d. Maria Josez Alvarez, 16mm., dist. DEC Films, 1983.

Alvarez, the only native Central American filmmaker of the group, concentrates on the role of women in the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua. A fairly conventional political documentary on women in education and in the military (where half the battle is combating *machismo*), the film gains its emotional power from its narrative framework. *Bread and Dignity* is a supposed film-letter, a continuation of the open letter sent 50 years earlier by Sandino, the father of the revolution, to the U.S. demanding political and cultural sovereignty. Unfortunately, producer Pierre Hoffmann, who engineered post-production in Germany, uses a BBC-accent voice-over which, according to Alvarez, changes the original tone of her more understated reading. Hoffmann, apparently coordinating a series of international features on women, kept the final print from Alvarez, who first saw her 1983 film three days before the Seminar.

Las Aradas

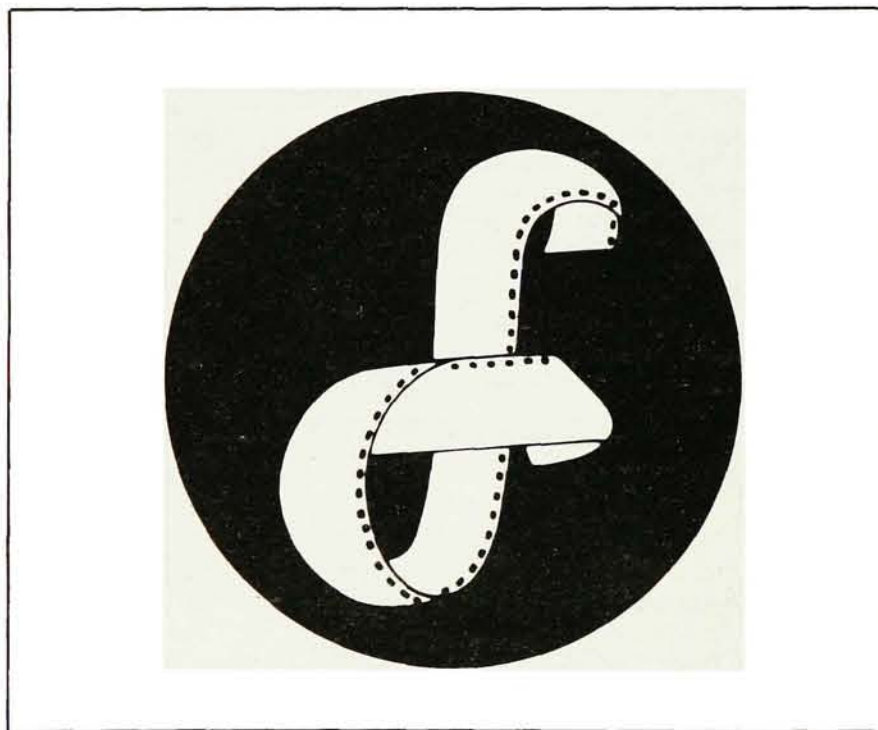
d. Janis Lundman, 8 min., 16mm., dist. Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 1984.

Las Aradas contrasts one eight-minute tracking shot of a tranquil Canadian valley with a horrifying voice-over account of the massacre May 14, 1980, on the Honduras-El Salvador border. The short works because Lundman respects the distance between herself and her subject. In not trying to represent the event dramatically, she gives a dignified voice to the victims.

For Women of El Salvador, Speaking

d. Sara Halprin, 16mm.

Halprin's film, while more ambitious in terms of form, comes across as an undergraduate semiotics assignment, combining a number of language systems – mime, dance, film, painting, English and Spanish voice-over – to tell the story of a woman whose tongue was cut out for asking after the whereabouts of her daughter in El Salvador. The idea is fascinating but its execution is simplistic; when Holly Near, in all her political correctness, blares over the final credits, the edge of unintentional parody does a disservice to the subject.



Still Sane

d. Brenda Ingratta and Lidia Patriasz, 60 min., 3/4" video, dist. Women In Focus, 1985.

Still Sane was the most moving and demanding of the videos presented at the Seminar. Much of the power came from the subject, a sculpture by Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly based on Gilhooly's three years spent in psychiatric institutions for being a lesbian – an experience which saw her submitted to drugs, sexual abuse, and shock treatment. Ingratta and Patriasz carefully structure the video, sensitively shooting a series of sculptures as Gilhooly reads a searing accompanying text; in the second part, Gilhooly and Blackbridge are interviewed and show the humour and commitment that makes them, not victims, but survivors. Made for a mere \$250, *Still Sane* is very sophisticated in its mix of text, sound, voice-over, fiction (the sculpture), actuality (Gilhooly's experience), and image – this video effectively uses the medium's capacity for texture. The formal complexity does not, however, overwhelm the subject but rather supports it with a subtlety that demonstrates great ethical and aesthetic balance.

Eye of the Mask: Theatre Nicaragua

d. Judith Doyle, 57 min., 16mm., dist. S.L. Simpson Gallery and DEC, 1985.

Eye of the Mask, one of the most ambitious and successful films of the Seminar, best balances a respectful and critical attitude to its subject. A Canadian filming for a North American audience, Doyle examines the cultural side of Nicaragua's rebuilding, focussing on the aims of Alan Bolt's theatre: reclaim history, "kill off bad inheritances," create a new society. As it follows the theatre group Nixtayolero (Dawn Star), the film depicts Bolt's attempt to appropriate traditional forms into popular culture: though tentative, the film suggests the idea is fascinating and courageous in theory but problematic in practice. Doyle's formal play of fiction and documentary, ranging from an eight-minute long-take theatre scene to a 30-second rapid montage history of the revolution, reveals an engaged and intelligent approach to ethics in film.