



ACTRA's Nellie: A farewell

by Linda Kupecek

Nellie bowed out with grace April 2, after 15 years of celebrating excellence in Canadian broadcasting. The appealingly plump statuette which has symbolized the ACTRA awards will reappear in the future, but never in the same way, nor as the star of her own show.

The Alliance of Canadian Cinema Television and Radio Artists began the ACTRA Awards "to publicize the contributions being made to Canadian culture by Canadian writers and entertainers, and to publicize the name of the Association under whose umbrella we all operate," recalls Pierre Berton in the final program notes. Lorraine Thomson, in the same sentimental brochure, remembers a committee of herself, Berton, and ACTRA staffers Margaret Collier and Elizabeth Malone working to organize those first awards. "The moment we saw Bill McElcheran's statue," writes Thomson, "we knew that she represented the freedom of choice, pride of achievement, and the sense of abandon that all of those who work in

Canadian television and radio must have." Malone, who in recent years has worked unflinchingly as the awards administrator, was in fact responsible for naming the statuette Nellie. ("You never know what you start," mutters modest Malone today).

Since then, the ACTRA Awards grew from a small party for 200 to a nationally telecast event for 1,000, with glitter, glitz and glamour galore. Now, with the growth of the industry and the emergence of the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, ACTRA is "stepping aside", as president Gino Marrocco said, to allow the Academy to develop their awards show, which will encompass more crafts and areas. Thus, the April 2 celebration echoed with the reverberations of memories and many unspoken farewells to the lady with, as Gordon Pinsent put it, the "beamish, saucy smile" and high standards.

As a member of the national executive of ACTRA, I was one of the 1,000 celebrants, and although not one of those who were with Nellie from the beginning, I still felt the faint sweet sadness of bidding adieu to a dear and respected friend.

So many of our country's finest performers and writers worked to support Nellie and what she symbolizes: that which is excellent, individual and truly Canadian in our broadcasting. As awards chairperson Alex Barris said, "Her very plumpness emphasizes an absence of pretension to glamour, and whether by accident or design, her upturned glance reflects ACTRA's own undaunted spirit as we look to the future of the arts in Canada."

But more than a sentimental party for a special friend, the 1986 ACTRA Awards also signal the end of an era. The ACTRA Awards have always been dubbed "a celebration of Canadian talent," and in that sense, have also had a regional commitment. ACTRA branches from west to east nominated the best of their members' work, and from these, final nominees were selected by individual judges. These avenues to the national awards allowed participation, regardless of geography. In 1982, a little-known drama from Newfoundland, **The Undaunted: Sir Humphrey Gilbert** won Best Television Program; in 1985, Don Truckey, a writer from Calgary, won for Best Script — Television Drama; in 1978, actress Joan Gregson from the Maritimes won the Andrew Allan Award. In this sense, the ACTRA Awards were a true forum for the best of the country, because of ACTRA's distinct position of being a large body joined by connecting regional branches, with pipelines from talent to Toronto.

From my crowded table at the Sheraton Centre, my sense of pride in being Canadian was renewed and rekindled. The inevitable comparisons with the glossy U.S. Emmy and Oscar shows highlight much of what is admirable and distinctive in our northern spirit. The spontaneous emotion, devoid of ambitious artifice; the dry self-effacing humour (award-winner Eric Till saying, "Like true Canadian optimists, we came only with a speech for losing") the literate wit (how many American stars speak multi-syllabically? How many U.S. humorists could match the lightning mind of Roger Abbott?) the innate dignity of Pierre Berton, the substance of Donald Brittain, the bravery of Lenore

Zann (who spent \$2,000 to buy out the theatre where she was performing in Stockholm for one night so she could attend, receiving Nellie before her peers) the infectious fun of Vicki Gabereau reciting the alphabet backwards in one of the many fast-paced, often zany clips introducing the nominees; the hilarity of Maury Chaykin intoning (in a parody of Sally Field) "You like me. You really like me."

How can others label Canadians as humourless or over-serious? We have a wonderful talent, demonstrated by Dave Broadfoot, Gabereau and the Royal Canadian Air Farce, in the ability to laugh at ourselves intelligently. The ACTRA Awards had an IQ in the three-digit category — and that's more than can be said of its North American counterparts.

ACTRA enhanced this occasion with the presentation of a special Nellie to Paul Siren, ACTRA's General Secretary Emeritus, spokesman, lobbyist and crusader who is credited with the development of ACTRA as a major advocate and protector of the professional artist.

And the future? Nellie will make regular appearances at the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television Awards; and ACTRA (with the continuing support and sponsorship of Texaco) will maintain separate radio awards. In the meantime, those who cherish the notion of a Canadian culture can only hope the tradition of recognizing the talent of Canadians from coast to coast, and from regions other than Toronto, will not be lost. Meanwhile, we move forward. Yet many will, for a while, feel a pang of nostalgia for the days, recalled by Pierre Berton, when "just a few talented people giving a few talented awards to a few other talented people, did it with grace and wit and not taking any of it terribly seriously."

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