

THE MOONSNAILS INVADE!

by Chris Majka

Last year the Atlantic Festival Atlantique '86 took a big step forward. Moving beyond its predecessor, the Atlantic Film Festival, it presented a significant body of work of Atlantic area producers to local audiences. Still, despite efficient organization and no lack of fine productions, the festival was only a qualified success. It failed to draw the kind of public, corporate and industry support which are essential to make a festival truly work. Mirroring the Atlantic film and video industry, it showed a media sector which was young, enthusiastic and talented but also undisciplined and undisciplined. Festival director Brian Hannington threw down the gauntlet when he said, "Do filmmakers in this region really *want* this festival? I'm convinced that they *need* it. But do they want it?"

This year the Atlantic Festival Atlantique '87 moved a step forward and showed that the industry is even more dynamic and talented than the previous year had hinted, and also more professional and responsible. For the first time the festival really felt like a *festive-al* (*Modern World Dictionary* - festival: a time of feasting or rejoicing; a festive celebration, civil or religious.).

That festive excitement was there from the very beginning; the gala screening of *Life Classes*, Bill MacGillivray's feature drama which was being given its first Atlantic screening. In a cleverly cut sequence which fuses, (and con-fuses) cinema and reality, MacGillivray anticipates precisely this gala in the opening of *Life Classes* - on-screen, through-the-television-screen interview with lead actress Jacinta Cormier at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium at the premiere of *Life Classes*. *Life Classes* is in fact being premiered in the Rebecca Cohn Au-

ditorium with Jacinta Cormier in the audience and the reflections of reality, social and political, are tangled beyond easy resolution. It is a homage to the 'even' which MacGillivray treats with a respect equal to his esteem of the 'film'. Everybody there felt a part of the film which at that very instant was flickering in front of their eyes. The film had come home to the community from which it had grown and was tipping its hat in acknowledgement. The event was a microcosm of the film, in fact, of all of MacGillivray's films, which at base deeply and sincerely want 'to come home'. It was a carefully calculated one-time, one-shot salute but it struck home. Having been thus launched, the festival never looked back.

This year's festival was a film programmer's delight. In the very recent past, a single or perhaps two feature films a year from the region were the most which the festival could hope to show. This year *five* features (all available in 35mm) shot and/or produced in the region, were in competition for the coveted Moonshell Awards.

Jon Pedersen's feature drama, *Tuesday Wednesday*, well regarded in Montreal in August, also received an enthusiastic reception here at its Atlantic premiere. Intelligently and spellbindingly written by New Brunswick author David Adams Richards, the film follows Phillip Delaney (played with clenched-jaw determination by John Alexander) as he returns from prison to the town where some time ago he had killed a little boy in a drunk-driving accident. Rebuffed at every turn, rejected by all his former friends and his ex-wife, he tries to strike a kind of separate peace with Evelyn (Liz Dufresne), the mother of the dead child. Ms. Dufresne is completely convincing as a woman ensnared in a tangled skein of conflicting, and at times bitter emotions. This is a tale of psychological suspense with both characters like dark moons orbiting ever closer around one another. The film's only fault is that it brings you

right to the brink of what one feels will be the final confrontation and/or resolution of the pent-up emotions of the characters and then dissipates that with a premature conclusion. Just one step closer and the characters could have blazed with the full intensity of the passion, frustration, grief and anger of their combined experiences.

The next night saw the world premiere of a new Canadian-Dutch co-production called *Mindshadows*. Chris Zimmer of Halifax's Imagex and Rolf Orthel of the Dutch Filmproductiemij De Nieuwe Unie teamed up to back Peruvian-born director Heddy Honigmann in a drama based on the bestselling Dutch *Hersenschimmen* by J. Bernlef. The film was shown in a capacity house at the spacious Hyland Cinema as a benefit for the Alzheimer's Society. It features a powerful performance by Dutch actor Joop Admiraal as Martin Klein, a retired Dutch businessman living with his wife Vera (Marja Kok) in a small rural Cape Breton community. Their life, and his mind, begin to come apart as he becomes more and more disoriented and fragmented through the onset of Alzheimer's Disease. His struggle to understand what is happening to him and to keep some semblance of mental continuity is most convincingly portrayed by Mr. Admiraal. Deeply sombre, the film dwells perhaps too long on certain details, making it seem longer than its 107 minutes. Moreover, despite the presence of his wife, Vera, throughout the film, we never really get an opportunity to see the impact of the changing mental state of her husband on her. Beautifully shot and edited, it was uncanny to see a film set and shot in Cape Breton with such a beautiful European aesthetic sensibility and a deft feel for light, sound and nuance of emotion.

The same evening the Wormwoods featured Michael Brun's *Deep Sea Conspiracy*. It was shot on the south shore of Nova Scotia around Chester under the

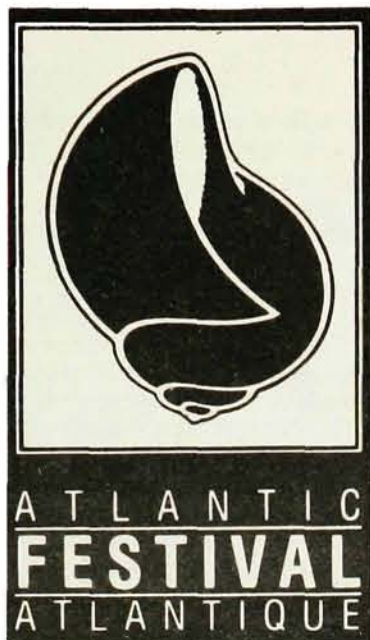
working title of *The Puracone Factor*. It is a thriller/adventure film with a relatively high-budget for this region (in the vicinity of \$2 million). The plot concerns Kate Simpson, an oceanographic researcher studying communication in Orca (Killer) whales. A naïve scientist, she doesn't realize that sinister wheels are turning behind her back. Returning from a three-month stint on a Navy frigate, where she has been sent to test some of the results of her research, she finds her institute closed, her boyfriend gone and her whale vanished. The credible (at least to the 'escapist' clientele that the film is aimed at) plot leads us from luxury yachts to Politbureau backrooms to the Soviet fishing fleet to, at last, the wreck of the *Fury* in which evil plots having to do with the miracle substance 'Puracone' makers to see some of this year's more-discussed films from other parts of Canada. I didn't make it to screening of *The Last Straw* but certainly all the others were received with keen interest.

A further 24 short films and 38 videos were screened at the festival.

Nigel Markham's and Charlie Tomlinson's *Albert* (neither cinematographer Markham nor actor Tomlinson want to claim credit as director) is a quirky, eccentric look at an odd character who crosses the border of sanity during a weekend-long soliloquy with his budgie. Adapted from the stage, it is coherent and disturbing but perhaps just a trifle too odd in its byzantinely convoluted dialogue.

In *Ballad of South Mountain* director Hubert Schuurman brings sympathy and sensitivity to his analysis of rural poverty in the Annapolis Valley. Never patronizing, he examines two families, involved in a program to help them acquire better housing, with substantial insight into their circumstances and culture.

Mary Jane Gomes and Emil Kolompar bring their interests in community issues and organizing to *Finest Kind*, a documentary which examines a fishing co-op



in Petty Harbour, an outpost in Newfoundland. Clear in its analysis and varied in its portrayal, it is an important addition to films which examine the socio-economic circumstances of this region.

Ex-Cape Bretoner Stefan Wodoslawsky's NFB documentary **Give Me Your Answer True** about ex-Nova Scotian Donald Sutherland received its world premiere at the Festival. Shot over a period of five years, and complete with clips from scores of films Sutherland has been involved in, it is a warm, intimate, humorous, sometimes rambling, sometimes insightful look at one of Canada's best-known sons. Wodoslawsky treats his subject with affection and irony, with admiration and candor. It is an entirely successful and entertaining documentary.

John Nesbitt-Sculptor is Neal Livingston's portrait of a talented, yet strangely remote artist, who lives with his wife, painter Ann Richardson, in rural Cape Breton. There is a curious quirkiness to these figures as if, after all the years they have spent in the remote wilds of the province, their personalities had melted into one indistinguishable unity. Yet Livingston never quite grasps this. As a result, despite certain occasional insights, we never really are able to discern the impetus which drives their life and their art.

Fred Hollingshurst has directed a fine historical documentary called **The Last Chinese Laundry: The Chinese in Newfoundland**, a genuinely captivating ethnographic film telling a little-known story of some of the immigrants to Newfoundland as well as charting the ascendancy and passing of a traditional institution of early Canadian communities.

Glen Walton's **The Nova Scotia Song** is a documentary of the career of folklorist Helen Creighton, collector of, amongst many others, the "Farewell to are being hatched. The film has clever sections, some complex underwater special effects, a passable mechanical whale, and is well shot. The villains are just a bit too one-dimensionally villainous and the plot strains credulity at times but it's entertaining, suspenseful and, despite a murder or two thrown in to quicken the pulse, never particularly violent. In the company of a box of popcorn and a good friend it's not a bad way to spend a late night. Patricia Talbot in the lead role of Kate is intelligent, charming and succeeds in making her character believable and at times even captivating. There are also good cameo performances by John Dunsworth as Mark and Susan Stackhouse as Peggy.

The last night of the festival brought out a capacity crowd to the Hyland to see Robert Frank's first fully-scripted drama **Candy Mountain**. Frank, well known as a documentary filmmaker and photographer, teamed up with Rudi Wurlitzer of the nickelodeon family, to write a semi-autobiographical tale about Julius, a young musician of questionable talent on the trail of Elmore Silk, a legendary guitarist hiding in the wilds of Cape Breton. Lots of nice ideas here and plenty of

wacky offbeat opportunities with a cast that includes Tom Waits, Dr. John, Leon Redbone and Rita McNeil.

I'm sad to report that with all this potential talent the film goes nowhere. Frank seem tangled up with romanticized Jack Kerouac *On The Road* imagery. Neither the characters nor the plot ever assume any life - they seem like faded romantic caricatures of a bygone time. Waits is hopelessly miscast as a cigar-chewing urban fat-cat and Leon Redbone as a gun-toting hillbilly. We get precious little music from either of them and none of Waits' wacky **Down By Law** humour. Publicity material for the film tries to maintain that "the glue that holds the narrative line together is the music". Sadly, **Candy Mountain's** unstuck.

In addition to these productions which could be termed 'Atlantic' in some sense or other, the festival also presented Atom Egoyan's **Family Viewing**, Patricia Rozema's **I've Heard the Mermaids Singing**, John Smith's **Train of Dreams**, and Giles Walker's **The Last Straw** as an opportunity for local audiences and film-Nova Scotia" song. Helen Creighton's voice is strong and clear in her recollections and there is some evocative camera work using historical photos. However, the presence of folksinger Clarey Croft as



• Frances Knickle as semi-punk Gloria

a sometime dry interviewer and sometime buccaneer singer is cumbersome and distracting. Croft's questions are turgid and seem to get in the way of Ms. Creighton rather than assisting her in her tales.

The Pass The Hat Disappearing Hat Trick is a short film by Kimberlee MacTaggart looking at Toronto street entertainers. It is pleasant and entertaining but lacking an insightful edge.

Au Rythme du courant by Pamela



• Kevin O'Connor and Tom Waits sparkle with their usual zest and vitality in **Candy Mountain**



• Jon Pederson directs **Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday...**

• Shooting **Shadows** - Joop Admiraal, Goert Giltay, Hedy Ho, director Hedy Honigmann and Jan Wich





Gallant is an Acadian whimsy that is delightful and leaves one feeling as if awakening from a dream which has finished too soon!

The New Brunswick Filmmaker's Co-op under the directorship of Kevin Holden has produced **The Spectre of Rexton**, an enterprising 24-minute historical drama. It is strong on all the technical aspects of the production (cinematography, sound, costumes, sets, etc.) but very weak in direction, writing, and acting. This production could have gone much further with a better screenplay and slightly more mature actors.

Two Tides is peripatetic director Doug Pope's newest half-hour drama set in a verdant Annapolis Valley. It has intensity, thought and composition but its structure is staccato and rushed. The drama speeds ahead of itself obviating logical connections. Time never actually seems to pass but events run, colliding into one another. The thoughts of the director and words of the actors overstep the filmic aspects of the production.

Zucchini by Jim Maunders is an 11-minute film which combines animation and live-action. Its shows promise but needs more visual and structural coherence.

Off To Work is, according to director Neal Livingston, "an ambient rock video" Well...maybe. A pastiche of im-

ages from Livingston's previous films, it can perhaps be regarded as a new musical-art form best left undiscovered.

Visions is an extravagantly overlong 61-minute videotaped performance of Moncton's Dance Art Studio by Christopher White. Worthwhile as a documentary record for the choreographers of the steps, it ought not to masquerade as a production to be watched by audiences.

In addition to screenings the festival featured a number of Trade Seminars directed towards filmmakers in attendance

at the festival. A Directors Workshop featured the directors of the five feature films in competition at this year's festival, Bill MacGillivray, Robert Frank, Jon Pedersen, Mick Brun and Heddy Honigmann, in discussion about their experiences and their approach to film. For my money one of the most interesting events was a series of panel discussions (really a single one continuing on different topics throughout the day) on the distribution and marketing of films. Present were Joe Beaubien of L'Association Québécoise des distributeurs et exportateurs de films et de la vidéo, Karen Jaehne of Spectra film in New York, producer Don Haig of Film Art, André Bennett, president of Cinephile, Gill Bériault of Telefilm and Michael Donovan of Salter Street Films. I've been to a large number of discussions on the financial aspects of film production but this discussion, which included an examination of sample contracts, seemed to be more topical and insightful (down to the nitty-gritty important details) than any I've been to in a while. More than the 'rehashing of platitudes and gripes that everyone's familiar with in any case' school of seminars.

Interim festival director Elizabeth Clarke told me she was delighted with this year's Atlantic Festival Atlantique. Its financial footing is more secure than it

has been for some time with major sponsors such as First Choice, Air Canada, Telefilm, MacLean-Hunter, and the province of Nova Scotia onstream. Attendance was superb at the 'gala' shows and not bad at screenings of even some of the shorter films, although I found myself in some almost-empty screening rooms for some of the video programs. The festival was able to create an involvement by the general public which had seemed impossible in previous years. Also, the scope of the festival, with screenings of significant films from outside the Atlantic region, seemed to open up the festival from the purely parochial 'Atlantic' viewpoint which had at times seemed ready to swallow it up.

Ms. Clarke feels that there is scope to further elucidate the mandate of the festival. That there is opportunity for defining a field of interest such as the 'Atlantic Rim', akin to the 'Pacific Rim' concept, to encompass a sphere from which the festival can draw material and to which the festival can address itself. In this year's festival there is certainly a solid base on which to build an Atlantic Festival tradition. In one fashion or other both filmmakers and the public have been responding to Brian Hannington's challenge. We not only need the festival—we want it.

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SCRIPTSERVICE has been made possible through the generous support of the Foundation to Underwrite New Drama for Pay Television (FUND) and Telefilm Canada.



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