

Donald Brittain's
**The King
chronicle**

At first glance, the life of Mackenzie King might seem to offer a wealth of material for a fascinating, if quirky, story – 22 years as prime minister of Canada while, at various times, consorting with prostitutes, parleying with Hitler, getting regular advice from the dead, and having a dog for closest confidant.

But Donald Brittain's six-hour, three-part docu-drama, *The King Chronicle* (co-produced by the National Film Board and the CBC), lies steadfastly two-dimensional on the TV screen and refuses to come alive.

Brittain's recounting is based on King's 12-million-word diary, but the diary, instead of revealing the inner life of an eminent public figure, is, according to Brittain's own description, "stuffed with sanctimonious self-importance." King's contemporaries called him "dull and devious"; in Parliament he was known as a bone-crushing bore. (Alliteration, you can tell, is one of Brittain's favorite stylistic devices.)

To make a dull subject interesting is a tempting but dangerous challenge for any artist. Dullness cannot be simply represented, but must be somehow transformed, through contrast or context, into something of dramatic import. Valuable as *The King Chronicle* is as a record of people and events that shaped Canada's destiny in the 20th century, it is ultimately defeated by its pudgy, implacable subject.

King, it seems, was a Dale Carnegie-style opportunist, who, except for his guilt about sex and his lack of "image," might have been quite at home in our own decade. As a young man he flirted briefly with ideals of social justice, visiting the slums of Chicago, recording his pity for the poor. But this was a brief dalliance on his way to a political career, for it was politics – perhaps not so much the exercise of power as the maneuvering required to reach such a position – that enchanted him.

At 26, he was a deputy minister: by 33 an M. P., and minister of Labour in Laurier's government the following year. He became prime minister in 1921, beginning a career of leadership that depended on offending as few Canadians as possible while cautiously pulling away from British dominance. King actually took the British on in fierce debate at the little-known Imperial Conference in London in 1923, and set Canada on an independent course in foreign policy. He would not allow the Canadian press to report on these events, however, because he was afraid of annoying diehard imperialists at home.

King's success at the conference was proof



PHOTO: RON DIAMOND

Forsaking his dog, MacKenzie King (Sean McCann) consults with spiritualist Emma Wreidt (Kay Tremblay)

that he could rise above the wishy-washy when inspired. For him as an individual and for Canada as a country the conference was pivotal – but even so, a conference is a conference, and Brittain's extended attention to the proceedings is far too much for all but the most avid of Canadian history buffs.

King lost the 1930 election, having "reduced the crash of '29 to a tedious debate over federal-provincial jurisdictions." He sat opposite R. B. Bennett in Parliament and saw numerical significance in the Conservatives' seating arrangement; a visit to an Ottawa medium meanwhile, assured him that he would be restored to power. And so he was in 1935, with the catchy slogan, "King or Chaos."

Equivocal as ever, he committed Canada to the war effort in 1939, but was vague on the most volatile domestic issue, declaring: "Conscription if necessary, but not necessarily conscription."

When he visited Canadian troops in 1941 they refused to listen to his address, shouting him down with an assortment of four-letter insults. While this is certainly based on historical fact, the dramatic rendering is shocking and almost incredible, perhaps because the viewer has not been prepared, and much of what has gone on before is dry and passionless. What had King done to evoke such a display of naked animosity?

It calls to mind an earlier scene in which King, then leader of the opposition, visits the Byward Market and beds a prostitute. Lunging and grunting, he climaxes; wincing and cringing, the viewer averts his gaze. You get so used to seeing

King snug and respectable in his three-piece suit that his sweaty flesh is somehow an affront. Granted that King led a double life, too often the *Chronicle* does not succeed in making it psychologically or dramatically probable, so some of the transitions just don't work.

This is also the problem with the other aspect of King's private life, that is, his faith in mediums. Ironically, these scenes don't seem shocking enough. To an audience jaded by *Poltergeist*, *Witchboard* and the like, King's mediums seem like harmless, dotty old ladies and the spirits themselves so faint and vague that it's impossible to imagine that King seriously believed in them.

There is a level on which *The King Chronicle* is a success – and that is, as a chronicle. Painstakingly, Brittain takes us through the events of King's life and times, intercutting the dramatized re-creation with actual footage of events. Canada moved decisively toward nationhood while King was prime minister; *The King Chronicle* faithfully records the political machinations and backroom business that went on. It also deals with some of Canada's moral failures during this time, such as the internment of the west coast Japanese-Canadians (touched on rather lightly) and the refusal to aid Jews fleeing from the Nazi oppression.

The advantage of using drama in the telling of history ought to be that we can get inside events and characters in a way that a simple piecing together of the facts would not allow. But Brittain is an inveterate editorialist; he cannot restrain himself from interpreting and

commenting and insulting. His punchy prose and newsreel narration style are intrinsically contrary to the fictional mode. At the end of the *Chronicle*, the viewer will certainly know more about the facts and quirks of King's life but will have none of the satisfaction that comes of being involved in compelling fiction. Brittain refuses to embellish the known. So why didn't he make a straight-on documentary?

Ralph Friesen •

THE KING CHRONICLE *d. / w. / narr.* Donald Brittain. *p.* Adam Symansky. *d. o. p.* Savas Kalogeras. *cam.* Susan Trow. *pic. ed.* Rita Roy, Roger Hart. *asst.* René Pothier. *p. des.* Robert Hackborn. *art. d.* Denis Boucher. *orig. treatment* Ronald Blumer, Donald Brittain. *cast.* Marsha Chesley. *sd. rec.* Hans Oomes. *sd. ed.* Les Halman, Bill Graziadei, Raymond Vermette. *re-rec.* Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll. *M.* Eldon Rathburn, Milan Kymlicka. *m. rec.* Louis Hone. *m. ed.* Julian Olson. *p. man.* Marcel Malackett. *loc. man.* Céline Daignault. *cont.* Claudette Messier. *gaffer* François Warot. *grip* François Dupéré. *makeup* Geryl Wraith. *tech. coor.* Richard Bujold. *a. d.* Joanne Malo. *i. p.* Sean McCann, Gary Reineke, Marion Gilsean, Robert Benson, Richard Farrell, Patricia Collins, Michael Kirby, Jason Dean, Albert Millaire, John W. Carroll, Doris Petrie, David Hughes, Christopher Newton, Stephanie Morgenstern, Trevor John, Harry Hill, Arthur Grosser, Barrie Baldaro, John Bayliss, Christina Kaya, James Bradford, Les Lye, John Friesen, Jean Belcourt, Donna Farron, Terence La Brosse, Damir Andrei, Gordon Jocelyn, George Merner, Tom Harvey, Marion Gilsean, R. H. Thomson, Kay Tremblay, Daved Gardner, Sandy Webster, John Friesen, Shawn Lawrence, Robin Bowditch, Robert Welch, Doris Petrie, Jim McNabb, John W. Carroll, John Koensgon, Henry Ramer, Nicolas Hrtschan, Helga Schmitz, Babs Gadbois, Jack Rider, Henry Ramer, Len Watt, Gordon Jocelyn, Gerard Parkes, Robert Higden, Philip Pretten, Dean Hagopian, Terry Haig, Norris Domigue, Tom Harvey, Barry Edward Blake, Doris Petrie, Mark Brennan, Yves Dubreuil, Chuck Collins, James Rae, Bob Girolami, Aline Vandine, Steve Michaels, Richard Zeman, Bernie McManus, Teddy Lee Dillon.

Jacques Leduc's
Charade chinoise

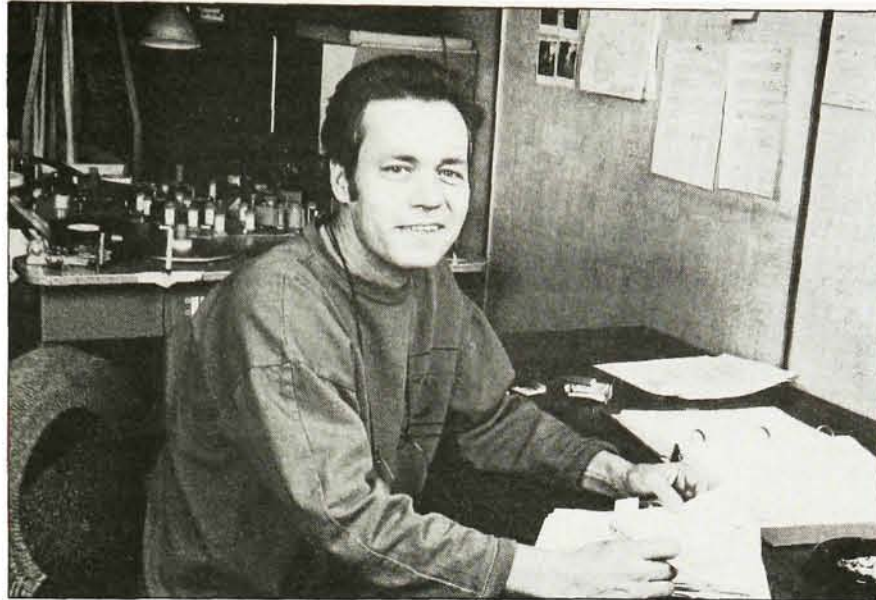
Looking back at the past always contains some traps. Reminiscence is a mode where nostalgia may overrun the necessary objective analysis of the facts, and may sometimes be a way to obscure the present.

Jacques Leduc's latest documentary feature *Charade chinoise* promotes itself as an assessment of Quebec's militancy during the '60s and the '70s. As Leduc puts it, in a voice-over commentary on his film, it tries to "strike the right hour" and to convey an "assessment of delusion." The occasion for this assessment is an organized St-Jean Baptiste's weekend in the Eastern Townships. Leduc brings together a dozen old militants, men and women who have just turned 40 and are trying to make sense of their previous commitments in the face of today's pervasive individualism.

Leduc incorporates two of his earlier films, *Notes de l'arrière-saison* and *Le Temps des cigales*, into *Charade chinoise*; they provide the focal point of the film because they embody the most precise statements about the participants' earlier commitments. The two films are screened by the participants on a Saturday morning as the rain falls. The weather is an occasion for Leduc to quote George Bernard Shaw: "Everybody's talking about the weather but nobody's doing anything about it," and to comment on current documentary film practice: "documentaries are not fashionable anymore; they imitated life and became as unpredictable as life itself."

Notes de l'arrière-saison is structured around a group of men discussing their political commitments and the concurrent provincial election which brought Robert Bourassa back to power. Providing a counterpoint to these elements, Leduc directs his attention towards Sylvie, a young student and militant in the NDP campaign. The men play down their involvement in socialist or "indépendantistes" movements by describing them in terms of utopian and illusive endorsements. They also assess the failure of communism in the world and some of them, by their very professional and institutional involvements, acknowledge the necessity of displacing the energy they put into struggling for radical reform within a "rich society" to helping Third World countries, Leduc caricatures a conception of any actual youth militancy in the use of Sylvie's character and the playing down of her commitment to the NDP electoral meeting where the greatest concern seems to be problems with a microphone.

In *Le Temps des cigales* which follows, emphasis is put on several women's portrayal of themselves as militants. Their testimonies and the assessment of their militancy are more



Conforming to nostalgia for the politics of the '70s, director Jacques Leduc

personalized than those of the men in *Notes de l'arrière-saison*. Whereas the men rely on the general and international political climate to assert their withdrawal from militancy, the women, because of the very nature of their feminist and socialist awareness, are less ill-at-ease with those commitments. This accounts for, as one of them says, "the difference between theory and practice." Ultimately, it is the difference between the men and the women as they appear in *Charade chinoise*. Countering these deeply personal portrayals is a young stock broker. Leduc makes him the antithesis of the women and their politicization in his concern with stock broking and holidays at the Club Med.

Somewhere between the two – Sylvie the NDP militant and Marc the stock broker – Leduc suggests a conception of today's youth as the conformist stratum of our society. The sympathetic and sometimes tender portrayals of the men and the women who have put their youth to serving political cause are counterbalanced by a mocking representation of today's youth. The choice of these two figures is a questionable one. It seems guided by a desire to criticize an apparent contemporary political void by investing it in stereotypic versions. In fact, between a softened socialism (Sylvie) and a rapacious capitalism (Marc), Leduc leaves us with the impression that there is no hope for true radical change and that youth is no longer the carrier of the will for change.

The discussion that follows the screening of those two films is symptomatic of this flattening-out of the present. Sylvie is astonished by the way she has been portrayed and talks of herself as seen in *Le Temps des cigales* as a "prefabricated picture of herself," as an "accessory-image to a generation." Indeed, if this is true, and if we acknowledge that Leduc contains Sylvie's astonishment, we must face Leduc's overall strategy which ultimately denigrates Sylvie's testimony. He never permits

her remarks to threaten the rampant nostalgia which pervades the film.

In fact, this nostalgia is never better illustrated than in the barbecue scene where the filmmaker has requested the participants to bring objects with them that portray their posture vis-à-vis the "question nationale." If the fetishization of Quebec's *indépendance* is made obvious by standing here in symbolic forms, it is also a pretext in which the nostalgia is foregrounded. It is evident in a discussion between one of the old militants who speaks about the FLQ (Front de libération du Québec) to the astonished young stock broker, learning about these events from the past. Once more, as a supposedly representative character of the youth, Marc ostensibly illustrates the ignorance and lack of concern of his generation. In *Charade chinoise* empowerment seems like the privileged area of a previous generation. One participant in the film states that militancy is a way "to create identities through revolt." An affirmation which Leduc seems to believe, to the point of denying the possibility of revolt in any succeeding generation. It is a strange vision of history that one gets from *Charade chinoise*, as if everything was bound within the past and never to occur again.

Charade chinoise develops its arguments through many formal devices which echo the '70s militant films. The director's voice-over becomes the unifying point of these devices, commenting as he does on documentary practice and on filmic representation. The best examples of that self-reflexive attitude are found in verbal connections continuously made between the weather conditions and the shooting conditions. We are made aware that the presentation of the two films to the participants are only possible because of the use of a generator. Once more, when the exterior barbecue scene is scattered by an electrical breakdown, Leduc has chosen to replace the missing images, those impossible-to-shoot, with

an animated sequence by Pierre Hébert which basically illustrates *le passage du temps*, the flow of time. These mechanisms of self-reflexion are integrated into the film to convey the idea Leduc assigns to a coincidental reality that is "stronger than cinema itself."

Leduc makes clear near the end of *Charade chinoise* that one of his preoccupations in making the film was "failing to change the world, how far can we go on filming?" (*A défaut de pouvoir changer le monde, jusqu'où peut-on filmer?*). He sees the failure of political causes through the participants of *Charade chinoise*, but he also makes this judgement on a filmic practice which is no longer the carrier of these political causes: "I miss this way of seeing, the way of seeing possible change."

If *Charade chinoise* incorporates some devices from '70s militant films, namely the consciousness-raising group encounter and the attitude of self-reflexiveness, it does not use them to elevate the discourse. They are – in fact the discourse itself is – infested with, and handicapped by disenchantment. The impossibility of change felt by the director; the dead-end of political causes and of a certain kind of documentary film practice, bring the film itself to a dead-end. This idea is best summarized at the very end of the film in an exchange between the director and one participant when the latter says: "[this experience] was both intimate and eccentric (*flyée*) but of no use to anyone... This is perhaps the NFB's vocation"; Leduc responds: "Perhaps."

The title, which refers to a riddle, finally becomes a pretext to the apparent and inescapable helplessness of a previously idealistic and militant generation. It is not that the topic in itself is without relevance. It is mainly the attitude of the filmmaker towards it where the predominant sentiment is one of vexation and a blasé facade is the result. It is sad to see a director like Jacques Leduc who has always shown a progressive attitude in dealing with historical subjects simply falling into a trap of conformism. It is a conformism of nostalgia which seems the dominant mood these days with the NFB's French production unit. In their apparent or seeming preoccupations with the passing of time and the loss of youth, perhaps they could use some new blood.

Alain-N. Moffat ●

CHARADE CHINOISE d. Jacques Leduc, Jean-Marc Ptotte p. Eric Michel cam. Jean-Pierre Lachapelle, Jacques Leduc, Pierre Letarte, Roger Rochat, asst. cam. François Vincelette, Nathalie Moliavko-Vizotski, Michel Bissonnette, Michel Bernier, light François Warot, sd. Richard Besse, Claude Beaugrand, Esther Auger ed. Pierre Bernier assl. d. France Dubé animation Pierre Hébert mus. René Lussier, Jean Derome, Robert Lepage, Bernard Buisson studio rec. Louis Hone mix. Hans Peter Strobl, Jean-Pierre Joutel man. Michel Dandavino admin. Joanne Gallant, Monique Lavoie l. p. Diane Jutra, Pierre Renaud, Jean-Yves Vézina, Gaétan Tremblay, Jean-Serge Baribeau, Jean-Marc Ptotte, Marc Rivet, Sylvie Roche, Lina Trudel, Micheline Toupin, Nicole Thérien p. c. National Film Board of Canada colour 16mm running time 90 min.

Gilles Carle's
Vive Québec

There was reason for the trepidation which filled the room. The curtains parted and the lights went down at the screening for Gilles Carle's latest, *Vive Québec*, a film about the history of Quebec City.

Over the past year cinephiles have been biting their lips in anticipation of Carle's follow-up to *La Guêpe*, a very disappointing film which featured a lacklustre Cloé Sainte-Marie. *Vive Québec* was well covered by the French media while it was in production. Pictures of, again, Sainte-Marie dressed as an Iroquois-priestess-punk were splashed across the newspaper pages. What was this duo going to do with the history of Quebec City? Dressed like that?

One-third into the film, and we still haven't seen the Indian Punkarella. And, though she is anticipated, the trepidation seems to have eased away. The film is charming, strong, witty, and rich, though not necessarily in the images one would expect from a film about one of this country's most beautiful cities. It is rich in information and rich in humour, with ebullient people telling us more about the modern Québécois by their manner, than about their ancestors through their stories.

This is not to say that the images are poorly done. The photography is clean and appropriate for the film that Carle has made. It is a film full of laughter and smiles – a gift to the people of Québec.

There is a woman who talks about "les filles du roi", and the prospects for these 777 women sent to the New World to even out the number of men and women. Lots of unattached men in a foreign land. She smiles. The nun from the Couvent des Ursulines, her severe face breaking into a smile, explains that "it's easier to turn a Frenchman into a 'sauvage', than a 'sauvage' into a Frenchman."

A group of Indian children giggle in a vignette where a nun encourages them to sit up straight while they eat their pea-soup.

Le Directeur of Snow Removal for the city, from behind his desk, has a hard time stopping himself from laughing. He tells us his crews have a traditional *esprit de corps*, just as the city has a traditional 10 feet of snow annually.

These are the Québécois of today, and the style of Carle's film reflects this charm. It is something of a documentary-cum-variety-show that doesn't waste time with what it wants to say. The pacing is rapid. It is a cacophony of ideas, stories, and songs. And, if this combination of formal documentary style, with songs, and skits may sound a little tacky, it is. *C'est québécois*. It's a part of the Québécois make-up that is not overlooked.

Chloé Sainte-Marie flashes her heavily mascaraed eyes from under her wildly punkish



Chloé Sainte-Marie in a role that suits her talents

hair, and she suggestively sings about the beginnings of Canada with a style that would make Patsy Kline roll in her grave. The club where she sings is empty except for one man, smoking his cigarette. Finally a role for her talents! She is very good at being bad, being *québécois*.

Though Sainte-Marie is billed as the lead actress in this film, she is relegated to something of a punctuation mark in the sentences and stanzas that are the interviewees, the real people. Amidst documentary sequences where the French / English struggle is put into perspective, our actress – wearing a peasant dress now – belts out "*Chamaille, chamaille! La maudite chamaille!*" (the goddamned squabble). We begin to see a detailed picture of the arrivals of Champlain, Cartier, and the battle between Montcalm and Wolfe.

We learn those old schoolbook stories, but, refreshingly, through the oral tradition it becomes alive. There is a historian, a nun, a specialist in marine navigation, a novelist, cineaste, and musicologist. We see how deep both the bitterness and the pride run. The Québécois are proud of their language. Normand Clermont, historian, overflows with excitement as he explains how the Québécois have something that the French don't. It is their ability to be imaginative with their language. A Québécois can be speaking to a Frenchman and not be understood at all. He laughs like a little boy.

Carle uses quick, witty subtitles and title cards to make quips, and to convey information that might otherwise be lost due to the frenetic editing. This is often amusing and suitable, but the film does become a little too frenetic at

moments. We have the sensation that the film is about to lose its footing, and we feel the need for a rest. Carle does provide this needed moment of pause after the first third of the film with a shot of three people on an icy sidewalk. They fight their way with determination against the powerful blowing snow and wind. This comic bit may only last for all of 30 seconds but it is a good break.

There should have been a little more of this, because as the film bolts towards the end, where Carle presents the Quebec-born opera tenors, our optic nerves begin to feel a little worn.

And, speaking of worn. It was a little surprising when the film started to roll out onto the screen. The sound was crackling, and the image was all scratched for about two minutes into the film. I thought that we were about to see the work print, or some old footage from an NFB

film that had been run through every high-school projector from Hull to Bonaventure. The distributors and screening houses should be a little more careful. One doesn't market a record with a scratch in it, nor display a painting with a tear in the canvas.

Gilles Carle has come back to the screens with flying colors – mostly blue and white. *Vive Québec* is something for the people of Quebec, something for all of Canada, and for the world. And, as the film comes to an end, one has to agree with the men's choir that proudly sings, "*Québec est merveilleux!*" It is.

Kirk Finken •

VIVE QUÉBEC d./sc. Gilles Carle p. Claude Sylvestre composer François Guy d.o.p. François Brault light Maurice de Ernsted art. d. Jocelyn Joly, sound Serge Beauchemin ed. Christian Marcotte, Dominique Sicotte p. m. Louis Ricard asst. d. Louis Ricard, Carle Delaroche-Vernet cont. Stella Goulet docu. Danielle Pigeon cost. Nicole Pelletier Michèle Pelletier dresser Catherine Célinas myth-makeup Mikie Hamilton makeup Suzan Poisson hair Constant Natale, Martine Baron, wigs Gaëtan Noiseux props Ronald Fauteux scenic painter Gilles Desmarais asst. cam. Daniel Guy, René Daigle, Luc Lussier, Philippe Martel, Jacques Bernier, Jocelyn Simard, Séraphin Bouchard light tech. Raymond Lamy 2nd sound crew Jean-Guy Bergeron, Esther Auger, Joseph Champagne, Dominique Chartrand, Pierre Bouchard, Claude Beauchemin grip Mart de Ernsted, Aurèle Dion, Louis Rouillard, Danis Fréchette, Stéphane de Ernsted prod. sec. Nicole Des Rosiers, admin. Gilles Lenoir sound ed. Roger Boire mixing Alain Rivard props. Louise Bilodeau, Lyne Charlebois p. understudy Francine Borsanyn man. under. Lise Laflamme chauffeur Jean Chouinard del. of Québec Michèle Allard asst. dir. gen. of city hall, Québec Jacques Alméras comm. of intern. rel. Claude Bédard cam. in Paris Sepp Thoma, J.B. Duliscouet, Marcel Neu makeup Elen Loubeyre tenors Guy Bélanger, Léonard Bilodeau, Roland Blouin, Benoit Boutet, Pierre Boutet, René Boutet, Yves Cantin, Réginal Côté, Claude Duguay, Richard Duguay, Claude Gosselin, Michel Laflamme, Claude Robin Pelletier, piano Rachel Martel music cons. Renée Maheu music arrang. Gaëtan Essiambre musicians François Guy, Gaëtan Essiambre, Gérard Masse, Denis Létourneau, Yvon Sarrazin funds TFC, SGCQ, La Société d'Édition des Programmes de Télévision(France), La RadioTélévision Suisse Romande in assoc. Société Radio-Canada. p.c. Les Productions dix-huit/Les Film François Brault l.p. Chloé Ste-Marie, Marie-Thérèse Fortin, Pierre Labrie, Joanne Doucet, Anne Laurence, Claude Talbot, Frank Fontaine, Gill Champagne, Orania Gros-Louis, Ozalick Stouit, James Rock, Lucien Jourdain. Colour 16mm, running time 89 min. dist. Cinema Plus.

Gauge	
T A L E N T A G E N C Y	
Actors, Models Special Talents and Characters	
509 • 63 ALBERT ST. WINNIPEG • MB R3B 1G4	(204) 943 • 0082 FAX 943 • 5711

The 1988 Genie Awards

What can one say about the Genies this year without sounding redundant? One can say congratulations *Un Zoo la nuit* (13 times) and one can say, "Right on Rock!" but Megan Follows said it first.

One can say, "Gee! Gordon Pinsent looks great in a tux," and one can say, "For a brilliant actress, Martha Henry sure is a tacky dresser!" One can say, "There's Larry King! He is the King of Kensington!" And one can say, "Who does Donald Sutherland think he is... tonight?"

Despite a well-planned production, this television viewer was left paying more attention to his tortilla chip on Genie Night.

Conceptually, Canada's premier award show failed to entertain and educate (read: promote Canadian films which can rarely afford other effective means of promotion). Like a movie script rewritten one too many times, the show was desperately predictable, high in style but low in creative substance. The direction was technically clean and, inasmuch, impressive - a brisk pace, the presentors moving in and out through highly polished doors of a cinema lobby set. But these presentors brought very little to the podium unless you had just been released by the terrorists or your name happened to be Jean-Claude Lauzon.

Host Megan Follows and Gordon Pinsent did what they do best. And their scripted spontaneity was nice and cozy. In fact they are the embodiment of nice and cozy. My complaint is not that the entire production-variety aspect consisted of a trite (frighteningly lifelike) Brian and Ronnie puppet routine intended to floor me with laughter.

My complaint is that while Chevy Chase casually picks his nose in front of a galaxy of stars on a stage representing megadollars, we can't seem to get it together. We are far too serious, too formal with our no-nonsense production. Give me back the outrageous, the glitches, the

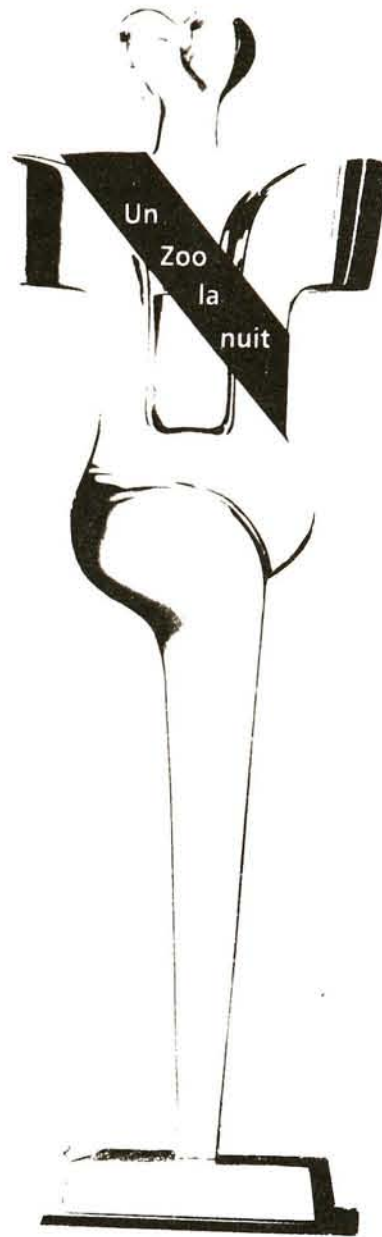


Jean-Claude Lauzon, Guy Dufaux, Roger LeBel, Sheila McCarthy

errors, scandal, (I'll take) dramatic irony. THIS IS ENTERTAINMENT!

I missed the embarrassing freelance dancers, this year, the overweight matinee singer, the odd prop failure. There was not one drunken presenter or award-winner... well maybe one.

In putting together a show like the Genies, the



least one must do is create the illusion that anything can happen. This is the spirit of live showbiz isn't it? - President Reagan's televised press conferences are more exciting than this year's Genies.

We are not interested in a predictable Canadian awards show nicely blocked, nicely

timed, nicely staged in which one might have guessed that one film would bag 75 per cent of the awards. The lesson here is, if you can't entertain us you can't hope to educate us (read: promote your movies). There were, however, one or two bright moments that made more than a few Canadians sit up and drop their tortillas. The greatest moment came halfway through Rock Demers' (Air Canada Award) five-minute tirade against Canada's budding military industrial complex when most Canadians who were not already watching the Genies tuned into what they thought would be The National. Demers' televised assault on the Mulroney government could not have been better timed. Sheila McCarthy (Best Actress), simply had to stand at the podium to effuse raw stardom, and I particularly liked the historic and auspicious denouement of Jean-Claude Lauzon's struggle to be loved by the Toronto media. Thanks for your support, he said, upon receiving Best Director, "and that's no bullshit."

Jean Chantal •

1988 GENIE AWARDS p. Morgan Earle. Joan Tosoni *hd. writer* Briane Nasimok *writers* Charles Lazer, Martha Kehoe, John Pellatt, Allan Novak *line p.* Bob Gibbons *mus. d.* Paul Hoffert *p. sup.* David N. Rosen *tech. p.* Raymond Beley *unit man.* Faith Hanks, Kim Hester *p. acc.* Hennie Pal *set des.* Jim Jones *asst. set des.* Ken Lamb *light.* Ross Viner *cost.* Shirley Lisanti *cost. asst.* Neil Needham, Pam Woodward *set dec.* David Owen *sc. asst.* Dale Turner, Elaine Brown, DJ Anderson *stage man.* Peter Rutherford, Shane Strachan, Mike Brannagan *switcher* Barry Duller, Tony D'Agostino *cam.* Dave Doherty, Tom Farquharson, Mike Gyll, Dave Hacala, Ross Menzies, Mark Milne, Ross Murray, Don Spence *stag. crew. ld.* Wally Sinclair *stag. coor.* George Box *audio.* Simon Bowers, Dave Ripka *p.a. audio* Bruce Graham *graphic* John Simons *makeup* GERALYN Wraith, Beverly Schechtman *hair* Judi Cooper-Sealy, Anita Miles *prod. sec.* Pat Kerr, Betty Orr *film res.* Netonia Brennan *pub.* Tamara Pipa, Elayne Mock *VTR ed.* Pat Hamilton *VTR op.* Brian Nemmett, Rick Urbanski, Mike Weir *chr. gen.* Angela Paquette *trans. coor.* David Stetson *hosts* Gordon Pinsent, Megan Follows *presenters* Denys Arcand, Brigitte Berman, Genevieve Bujold, Nicholas Campbell, Kim Cattrall, Marie-Josée Caya, Maury Chaykin, Guy Chiasson, Matt Craven, Johnathan Crombie, Jennifer Dale, Karen Elkin, Denis Filiatrault, Megan Follows, Martha Henry, Leo Ilija, Jeremy Irons, Jean Leclerc, Carl Marotte, Hollis McLaren, Christine Pak, Gordon Pinsent, Kate Reid, Jackie Richardson, Craig Russell, Linda Sorensen, Jessica Steen, Donald Sutherland, Alan Thicke, John Vernon, Al Waxman, Kenneth Welsh, Sandy Wilson.

FOR YOUR NEXT AWARD-WINNING CREW...

Call us at 416/536-4827

NABET 700 Association of Film Craftsmen
National Association of Broadcast Employees & Technicians

1179A King Street West, Studio 102, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6K 3C5

Guy Maddin's
**Tales from
the Gimli Hospital**

John Paizs can now measure his successes by the number of disciples and competitors he has spawned. The Manitoba film scene is currently in a Paizs-phase.

Tales from the Gimli Hospital by Guy Maddin is one of several recent independent films that share Paizs' offbeat sense of humor, his go-it-alone prowess, and his "prairie postmodern" sensibility. But Guy Maddin is no Paizs-clone. *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* is darker, more disturbing, and often funnier than anything John Paizs has yet done.

Regional cinema is often a hotbed of ethnic eccentricity. John Paizs is a Hungarian-Canadian glutted on '50s American popculture. In contrast, Guy Maddin is an Icelandic-Canadian, and his absorptions are more international. *Tales* is like something you might get if you crossed Ingmar Bergman with Luis Buñuel, leavened it with dollops of von Stroheim, von Sternberg, and Monty von Python, and tossed in a pinch of Hans Christian Andersen, Esther Williams and Al Jolson. It's a wild farrago of a movie, a first feature, done in black and white for a mere \$200,000, with all of the beauty marks and blemishes you'd expect from this sort of venture. And many surprises and provocations you most definitely would not expect.

Maddin took his initial inspiration from a book called *The Gimli Saga*, a kitschy, self-promotional bit of oral history. Gimli, Manitoba, is the largest Icelandic community outside of Iceland. Founded in the 1870s, Gimli (with a hard "g" as in gimlet) takes its name from ancient sagas. It means a secure or protected place, or the promised land, or paradise. Of course, if there is any hint of this grandiosity in Maddin's movie, it is there only ironically. His Gimli is a dank place wracked by a mysterious pox-like epidemic, where animals and patients share the same barn-hospital (based loosely, I'm told, on actual practices in tougher times). The only vista is an empty, rock-stream beach; otherwise this is a "placeless" place of confining darkness and eerie shadows cast by some unseen light.

Icelandic literature, according to Maddin, is always about cold and asexual fishermen who spend their time untangling nets, and being sad in a stark environment. Maddin long ago decided that there was something comical about all this austerity and that the only way to treat it was straightfaced but with no respect—to deal with it the way Buñuel deals with Catholicism.

So, through a frame-story interlocutor named Amma (played by Margaret-Anne MacLeod), an earth-mother who looks like a narwhal in a white pointy bonnet, Maddin takes us back to "a Gimli



Snjofridur (Angela Heck) and Gunnar (Mike Gottli) admire a fish fashioned from birch bark

we no longer know." It's a place where women sleep on briar-patch beds, where men clean themselves with dirt and help each other to shave their eyebrows, and where people sweeten their coffee by holding sugarcubes between their teeth when they sip. His hero is an archetypal Icelandic fisherman, Einar the Lonely (Kyle McCulloch). Einar shares his ramshackle smokehouse with a cat, vainly trying to make himself attractive to some frolicking women by squeezing fish goo onto his hair. Then a mysterious pox puts him in the hospital. As feathers waft through the air, Einar watches a sinister doctor (Guy Maddin himself) perform surgery with a rusty sickle while three nurses try to distract the patient with a Punch and Judy show. Einar passes out when they move the puppet stage to the foot of his bed. He soon feels as if he is invisible and mute, for the nurses pay more attention to a blackfaced minstrel and to Gunnar (Mike Gottli), a pudgy storyteller who spends his time cutting fish silhouettes out of birch bark. Finally, Gunnar befriends Einar and begins telling him about the fair maiden, Snjofridur (Angela Heck) who died when he rejected her on their wedding night. Before Gunnar can finish, Einar interrupts and confesses an even more horrendous sin. He once sexually defiled a young woman on an Indian burial platform. When Gunnar finishes his story, Einar discovers that the fair maiden on the platform was Snjofridur. Gunnar goes blind with jealous rage (the nurses paint his glasses black while he is still wearing them), but still he tries to kill Einar. They both stagger into a darkened forest where strange rituals and erotic dances take place. There they engage in a deadly kind of buttocks-grappling.

Amma has been telling this story to her two grandchildren in the Gimli Hospital while their mother lies dying, unable to drink, unable to drink her 7-11 Big Gulp. As she finishes this tale about the strange consequences of jealousy and storytelling, Amma realizes that her daughter has died. She assures her grandchildren that their mother is now in heaven watching over them. Sure enough, as the camera cranes up from the hospital and through the clouds, it discovers their mother in a white cassock, halo and angel wings, smiling down solicitously.

The trailer for *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* has already become a cult classic. Played at midnight screenings for the past two months, it has provided the kind of uninhibitedly interactive audience response once reserved for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Whether the film itself achieves this sort of stature remains to be seen. It has a sensational opening reel—zippy, teasing, and outrageous. The sound track is quirky and hummable, including Paul Whiteman's 1929 classic "I'm a Dreamer, Aren't We All" and Ilon Massey's "Spring Love is in the Air" and a batch of campy Icelandic songs from scratchy old 78s. And the movie wends its way through a veritable thicket of emotions. It is sad, amusing, tender, disgusting, mysterious, sweet, sick, sexy, and insulting.

Tales is fascinating stuff, full of riveting images and delirious sequencing. Several of the scenes are touched by genius: original, true, and precisely rendered. A wedding performed across a river because the minister is afraid of the pox is heartbreakingly amusing. A honeymoon between two passionate people reluctant to touch each other's sores is breathtaking in its emotional inflections. And when three

inseparable young sisters disappear, only to show up floating down a river in three small caskets, dead, the moment is as touching and reflective as any in recent memory.

This is not a flawless movie, however, nor am I convinced that, overall, it really works. The frame-story, for instance, could be better integrated. A magenta-tinted dance fantasy is almost totally wrongheaded. This and several other scenes in the second half of the movie look like the filmmaker was more concerned with simply amassing bizarre incidents rather than with confronting and developing the full implications of the story. In the end I couldn't help asking: "What is this story all about and why is it being told?"

Tales from the Gimli Hospital is not as complete and coherent as Maddin's equally bizarre short film *The Dead Father*. But it is lively, different, personal, serious, and ambitious. Guy Maddin is already being touted as Canada's answer to David Lynch (whose influence he vigorously denies). What is unusual about them both is their seeming willingness and ability to put their psyches on the screen, secret phobias, dark obsessions and all. They both make movies that are exhilarating and disturbing experiences.

Gene Walz ●

TALES FROM THE GIMLI HOSPITAL

d. /sc. /ld. o. p. /ed. Guy Maddin. *d.* Kyle McCulloch. *art d.* Jeff Solylo. *story cons.* George Toles. *makeup* Donna Szoke. *proc.* Mid Can Labs. *sd.* Clive Perry, Wayne Finucan. *studios* neg. Dawna Finn. *aid* Manitoba Arts Council, Winnipeg Film Group. *market aid* CIDO (Canada-Manitoba Cultural Industries Development Office). *l. p.* Kyle McCulloch, Michael Gottli, Angela Heck, Margaret-Anne MacLeod, Heather Neale, Caroline Bonner, Don Hewak, Chris Johnson, Donna Szoke, Kyle McCulloch, Ian Handford, Greg Klymkiv.