

Seven days in June

Banff Television Festival '88

BY BOB REMINGTON

There is an absolutely devastating BBC documentary called *Fourteen Days in May* in which a British film crew follow a condemned black man through his final two weeks on death row in Mississippi. There are serious doubts as to the man's guilt, but clemency for a black convicted of raping a white woman and killing a law officer in Mississippi is about as remote as summer snow.

I paced the room as I watched life tick down for this young man, painfully wondering if the BBC crew had actually been allowed into the gas chamber itself. Fifteen minutes before he was to be executed, with his family around him in death's waiting room, a member of the BBC film crew stepped out from behind the camera and said goodbye. We were spared the inhumanity, but not the agony. In 90 minutes we had come to know the man and his executioners, and we marked our feelings with tears.

The scene took place in early May during the selection committee process for the Banff Television Festival. Five of us had come to Banff to screen some 450 programs submitted as possible candidates for competition in the nine-year-old international TV program competition. Our job was to whittle the number of entries down for the final jury, forwarding our choices without recommendation. The ultimate decision on winners would be the jury's alone.

A kind of tense camaraderie exists between the selection committee and the jury at a program competition like Banff. The committee has its favorites, which don't always gel with the final choices of the jury. I felt *Fourteen Days in May* should have been a finalist for a major prize like "best of festival" or one of the so-called "special jury awards" for programs of exceptional merit.

Not only did *Fourteen Days in May* fail to make the list of contenders for a major prize, it did not even win its category. Such are the dilemmas in any program competition. Out of respect for the integrity of the process, you can only shrug your shoulders, offer to buy a jury member a refreshment at the bar, and proceed to demand answers while refraining from wringing his neck.

There was no quibbling, however, on the Grand Prize winner at Banff. Without sounding self-serving (well, perhaps just a bit self-serving) I picked *Baka: People of the Rain Forest*, as the best

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Channel Four's Jeremy Isaacs, honoured with an award for lifetime achievement, with Banff foundation executive director Carrie Hunter

of anything I had seen in pre-selection. This independently-made program for Britain's acclaimed Channel Four was simply an outstanding example of debunking stereotypes. For two years, a film crew lived with the Baka pygmies of east Cameroon, coming away with a portrait of an almost Stone Age family who were people, not savages. Wonderful music, unobtrusive cameras, it was compelling anthropology that was as engrossing as any make-believe prime-time drama.

In the final analysis, the jury matched my choices in six of 10 categories. Not bad, given the vagaries of culture and taste that exist between a kid from Edmonton and seven jurors from around the world. It was especially gratifying to see Canadian programs running second only to British productions in the TV derby at Banff. Britain took six awards; Canada four.

The final count does raise one of my major concerns with Banff. There is a fair amount of America-bashing that takes place at this festival, and I wonder how much chance the *St. Elsewheres* and the *L. A. Laws* and *The Wonder Years* have in this arena. That's not to say American programs haven't won, or that Banff organizers have an anti-American bias. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Hill Street Blues* has its share of Rockies, and MTM Productions was honored last year with the festival's

outstanding achievement award.

While it is true that American television tends to paint everything with broad strokes instead of employing subtleties, one wonders how an absolutely top-rate TV movie like ABC's *God Bless The Child* or the eloquently written and charming *The Wonder Years* can come away emptyhanded. In the international effort to build dams against the rushing floodwaters of American culture, let's hope the gates will remain open for at least a trickle of America's best.

Despite this nagging concern, there's no doubt that Banff is a first-class affair. The festival has come a long way from the days when Dinah Shore was given an Award of Excellence and CTV entered *This Week in the CFL* as a documentary. Today, the Banff festival is mercifully short on star appeal. People go to see,

not to be seen. Peter Ustinov picked up this year's Award of Excellence, and Soviet TV smoothie Vladimir Pozner wowed delegates with some perceptive comments about TV news East and West. But, for the most part, Banff remains an invigorating think-tank that stimulates the mind, not the ego.

There is also a fair amount of backroom commerce taking place at Banff, although it is not, nor will it ever be, a marketplace like MIP. It was difficult to engage in any journalistic skulduggery at the festival this year, but not for lack of trying. Everyone I spoke with, including some closet critics of the festival in the past, said 1988 was one of the most productive business years at Banff.

Next year, its 10th anniversary, the Banff Television Festival can be excused for throwing itself a party.

Grand Prize / Best of the Festival (\$5,000)

Baka: People of the Rainforest
DJA River Films U.K.

Special Jury Award (\$1,500)

Foster Child
NFB, Canada

Tudawali
SBS/Barron Films, Australia

State of Welfare
VPRO TV, Netherlands

Quebec-Alberta Prize (\$5,000)

Ravel
Rhombus Media, Canada

Best Television Feature

Shadow on the Earth
BBC, U.K.

Best Continuing Series

Degrassi Junior High
Playing with Time, Taylor Productions, CBC, Canada

Best Social & Political Documentary

The Falklands War: The Untold Story
Yorkshire Television, U.K.

Best Limited Series

The Horse's Eye
Sveriges Television, Sweden

Best Performance Special

Music in Camera: Facade
BBC, U.K.

Best Television Comedy

The Comic Strip Presents... The Strike
The Comic Strip Ltd. U.K.



Baka: People of the rain forest

Best Children's Program

L'Homme Qui Plantait Des Arbres
SRC, Canada

Best Arts Documentary

Bopha!
Daniel Riesenfeld Productions, U.S.A.

Best Drama Special

Sweet As You Are
BBC, U.K.

Best Popular Science Program

Vista: The Greenhouse Effect
TVOntario, Canada

Congratulations Ron

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