

Yorkton '88

Awards controversy leaves bitter aftertaste

BY PATRICK DAVITT

Nowadays, whenever any of the national media mention Saskatchewan, it's usually because they want to mention the drought that has burned into the collective Prairie consciousness the image of farmers dragging their plows through soil that looks more like beach sand than rich, cropworthy loam. In such a milieu, it shouldn't have come as such a surprise when the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival had a crop failure of its own, in the burning heat of controversy.

Filmmakers from across Canada had planted the seeds of hope when they entered their films at the festival, hoping they would harvest a Golden Sheaf award or two. After the pre-selection committee separated the wheat from the chaff (sorry), there were but 77 productions left in the running for 22 awards. Seven of those awards were to be given as Craft Awards, and 15 more in various film categories.

A certain amount of controversy is to be expected whenever awards get handed out. But that's nothing compared to the fofoeraw you get when awards aren't handed out.

Confused? Good. You're not alone. And it gets crazier.

Not only were there six Golden Sheaf awards left over once the awards ceremony had ended Saturday night, they were one grand Prize short. And a new documentary award changed hands even before it was given.

Earlier in the week, Lawrence O'Toole, the jury chairman, told the *Regina Leader-Post* newspaper that there were going to be categories in which no awards would be made, explaining that they simply couldn't award prizes "that weren't deserved." And, true to its word, the jury - O'Toole, actress Marie Tifo, animator Wendy Tilby, filmmaker Peter Bryant, and documentary-maker Martin Duckworth - left six Golden Sheafs in their golden granaries on awards night. The six categories left out of the awards were: documentary under 30 minutes, experimental, fine arts, health/medicine, nature/environment and music video.

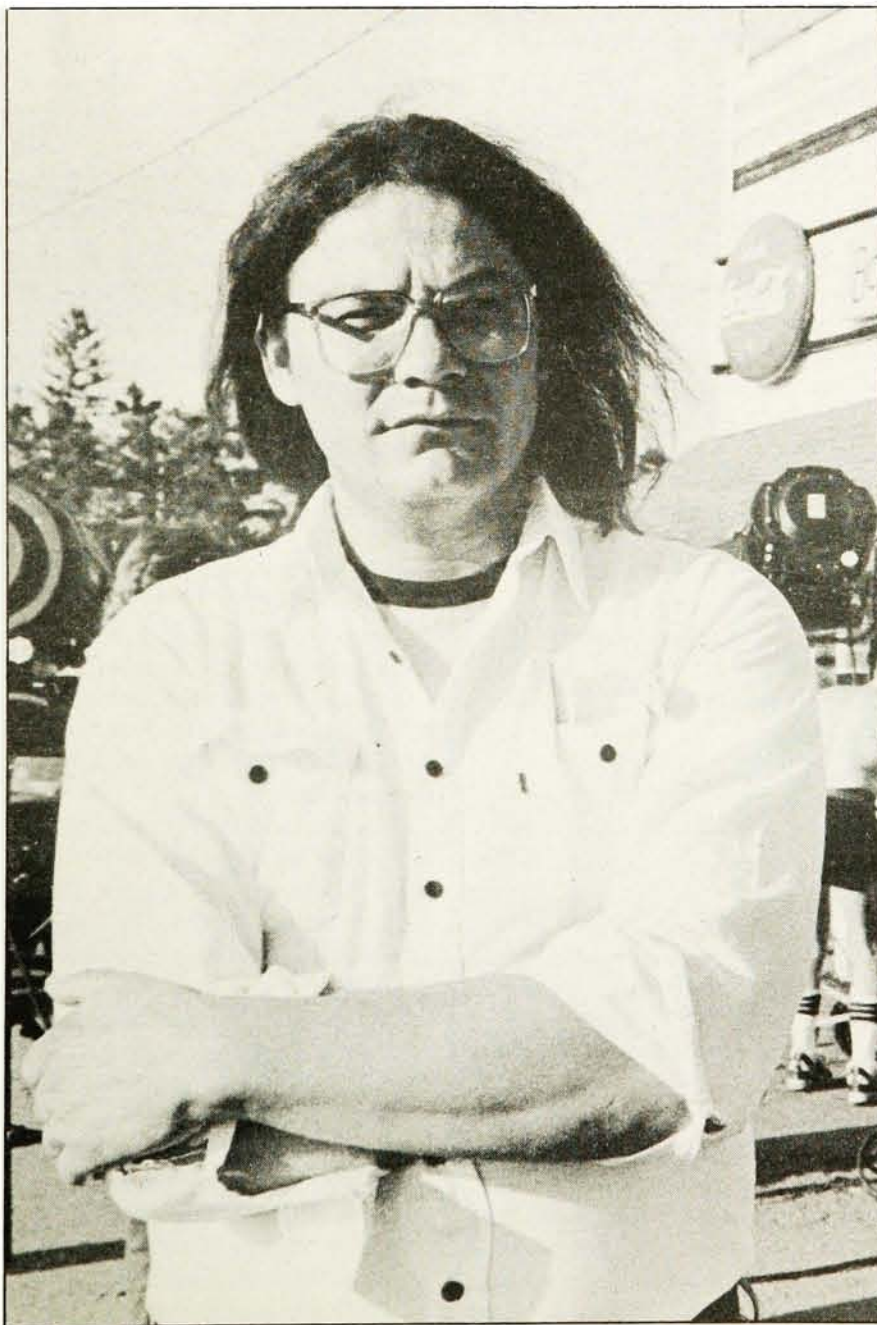
Ian Reid, the executive director of the festival, said the jury was within its rights not to give awards it deemed undeserved. "We hire the jury to do a job for us, according to the rules of the game. That's what gives a festival integrity, and that's what has given this festival 40 years of respect." He said the rules of the game include a

non-award provision, although it is used rarely. Last year's festival missed just one award.

O'Toole said he knew the jury's decision would leave entrants in the affected categories "very unhappy, but anybody who wins a Golden Sheaf here this year will know their film is extraordinary."

While the ceremony crowd was still buzzing - not to mention grumbling - over the missed awards, the jury threw another curve by splitting the Award of Excellence, the festival's top prize, for the first time in its history, dividing

GIVEN THAT ENTRANTS IN THE SIX UNAWARDED CATEGORIES HAD NO WINNER BY WHICH TO MEASURE THEIR OWN WORK, THEY ARGUED, THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SOME MECHANISM TO ALLOW THEM TO GET MORE OUT OF THE TRIP TO YORKTON THAN SUNBURNS, HANGOVERS AND PEROGIES.



Director Gil Cardinal went looking for his Métis roots in *Foster Child*, winner of the NFB-Kathleen Shannon documentary award

the award between the drama *L'Emprise* and *Foster Child*, a documentary. *L'Emprise*, a Les Productions du Verseau/Société Radio-Canada co-production, was the big winner at the festival, earning five Golden Sheaf awards in addition to its share of the top honour. The film won awards for best drama over 30 minutes, best performance (Geneviève Bujold), best cinematography (Sylvain Brault), best sound editing (Dominique Chartrand, Martin Fournier, Alice Wright) and best director (Michel Brault). Screenwriter Luc Héту collected all of the awards on behalf of *L'Emprise*.

Foster Child, a National Film Board co-production with independent director Gil Cardinal, was named best documentary over 30 minutes, and cinematographer James Jeffrey was given a certificate of merit for his work on the film. The film also won the National Film Board-Kathleen Shannon Award for documentary, but only after a last-minute emergency meeting involving the jury, some festival officials and Shannon herself.

The award, inaugurated this year, is given to a documentary production "that provides an opportunity for people outside the dominant culture to express their perspective." An early list of the awards, prepared in advance for deadline-conscious reporters who wanted to send dispatches to the east, said the Shannon award had been given to *Break the Cycle*, a production about domestic violence, produced and directed by Debbie Cartmer and entered by Esprit Films of St. Catharines, Ont. Festival officials confirmed that the award had originally been given to *Break the Cycle*. But after the meetings which ended just two hours before the awards were to be handed out, the Shannon went to *Foster Child*, a film about Cardinal's efforts to discover his Métis roots and cultural heritage. "The jury did change the award at the meeting, from *Break the Cycle* to *Foster Child*," said Catherine Degryse, the festival's public relations officer.

Jurors interviewed said the award was changed because its qualifications had been "misunderstood." Juror Duckworth said, "The criteria (for the award) were clarified, and we realized we had made the wrong choice." The criteria, as published in the festival program, said the winning production should be "an independently-made documentary production."

Break the Cycle was an independent production. Before presenting the award, Shannon said that the criterion should have read, "a film by an independent filmmaker." She said, "An

Patrick Davitt is entertainment editor of the *Regina Leader-Post* newspaper.

Coveting the Golden Sheaf

BY RON HALLIS

Lawrence O'Toole, one of the awards' jurors at the 1988 edition of the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival, has proven, at least to himself, it is possible to judge an entire film after seeing only the first five minutes. He and the jury admitted to a gathering of festivalgoers that they had not screened some of the "nominated" films beyond the first five minutes because it quickly became clear to them that they were not watching "award-winning material."

One wonders if Mr. O'Toole wrote his film reviews for *Maclean's Magazine* after seeing only the first five minutes.

At Yorkton '88, one's amazement was seldom left untended.

Six categories of nominated films were ignored at the awards banquet without a single word of explanation. Several filmmakers present were left sitting in stunned silence at their tables, having travelled halfway across Canada at their own expense to "share in this celebration of Canadian filmmaking" and experience a little "prairie hospitality."

I just spoke to a young Montreal filmmaker whose excellent film was nominated in the Experimental category and who tried to scrape together enough money to travel to Yorkton. He said he fell "a few dollars short." While he was trying to raise the money, he had no idea his category was being 86'd by the jury. Not only did he save himself some money but also the insult of seeing his fine film screened at 2:00 a. m. before an audience of four people in the Harvest Room of the Holiday Inn.

It seems the Canadian short film industry has grittily come of age. Yorkton has been dragged out into cruel world by Mr. O'Toole and fellow judges Martin Duckworth, Marie Tifo, Wendy Tilby and Peter Bryant. O'Toole, the so-called "New York Critic," has come home to roost doing invaluable service in protecting the purity of the "coveted" Golden Sheaf Award, although some may now argue that a "nomination" for said award has become a dubious honor, spotlighting some films for awards, others for besmirching.

Along with other filmmakers whose films were "nominated," I was warmly invited to the festival by its executive director, Ian Reid. He also informed me that the pre-selection committee had "loved" my film and the festival staff would be "honoured" to have me. I must admit I did end up feeling somewhat "had".

By the time the authors of films in the "doomed" categories had arrived in Yorkton, the jury had secretly made its decisions and didn't have the courage or consideration to

inform those whose films had been disqualified. We were informed by default that the first five minutes of some of our films were not as good as the first five minutes of films in the awarded categories or the first five minutes of films that ever would be given awards in any categories in the future. (The American underground classic *Twice a Man* by Gregory Markopoulos would have fared poorly at O'Toole's Yorkton, beginning as it does with several minutes of black leader accompanied by the sound of rain.) I was offered the following explanation from judge Martin Duckworth for the axing of the Best Documentary Under 30 Minutes category: "If the festival wants to give awards to films like yours they had better get another jury because this one wanted to see innovative use of the form. Your film was too traditional."

Unfortunately, the only clue to what constitutes "innovative use of the form" that Mr. Duckworth could give in his somewhat desultory contribution to the festival workshop on New Documentary was that it should be "reflective."

"The only thing new about documentary is that it's dying," he added. The workshop went on to become a collective carthartic lament on the old problem of funding and exhibition of independent documentary films in Canada. This workshop could have been a lot more interesting had it been announced at the outset that the venerable jury had already decided the films in the Best Documentary under 30 minutes category did not deserve adjudication.

For the filmmakers who make short documentaries and are totally marginalized, being snubbed at Yorkton '88 was just another low blow dealt by an arrogant and insensitive establishment.

In conclusion, I would like to make the following suggestions to the organizers of the 1989 Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival.

1. Compel the judges to make awards in all announced categories of "nominees" or state clearly on the festival application form that awards may not be made in certain categories at the discretion of the jury. By signing the application form the filmmaker accepts the conditions stated therein. Like a contract, it should work both ways.
2. Recruit judges with the stamina to watch all the pre-selected films from beginning to end or divide the judging between two sets of judges.
3. If the judges refuse to award in certain categories, the original pre-selection committee should be asked to break the deadlock so as to avoid the kind of insult to the creative process that happened at Yorkton this year.



Claude Gauthier and Geneviève Bujold in Michel Brault's *L'Emprise*, a drama about domestic violence

independent filmmaker should not be disqualified from institutional support."

Cardinal received financial support from the NFB to produce his film, and will now also get the NFB's \$1,000 cash prize that goes along with the Shannon award.

Neither Duckworth nor anyone else would say who "clarified" the criteria at the meeting to make *Foster Child* eligible. One festival official said it was Shannon herself, but she denied any knowledge of the proceedings that had led to the award change.

Meanwhile, the six unawarded categories had some entrants steaming, especially one disgruntled man who had come to the festival from Montreal. After the awards, he approached jury chairman O'Toole and said that the jury had been "sleazy" in not awarding prizes in all the categories. He declined to be interviewed.

By the next morning most of the disgruntled filmmakers had cooled off somewhat, but there remained a feeling that the festival should look at its rules and structure to allow filmmakers a greater opportunity for critiques of their work.

Given that entrants in the six unawarded categories had no winner by which to measure their own work, they argued, there should have been some mechanism to allow them to get more out of the trip to Yorkton than sunburns, hangovers and perogies.

At a forum held on the afternoon of the awards ceremony, several people said they got little sense of "feedback" during the five days of the festival. The members of the jury said that they had experimented with tape-recording their comments during the judging process, but had found the system clumsy, cumbersome and ultimately unworkable. They also said that written comments would have been far too time-consuming. After the festival, juror Peter Bryant of Vancouver said by phone that future juries should consider giving detailed critiques of selected films, reasoning that established producers like the CBC don't need the feedback as much as smaller, independent producers. He disagreed with the argument that a lack of awards meant there was no standard for filmmakers. "There have been winners in other

years, and they are excellent films," he said. "If anyone needs a standard they can look at some of those films, in any category."

At the forum, Duckworth suggested that the festival should either be moved to a larger centre or turned into a retreat, where artists and jurors could meet in seclusion for intensive and intimate discussion of the craft. "If it's going to be an award ceremony then it should take place in an electric atmosphere," he said. "If it's going to be a place where we can talk about films, then let's do that."

Besides the awards, there were several workshops and seminars, including a workshop on the New Documentary, led by Duckworth and Scottish filmmaker Timothy Neat, who also hosted a seminar-and-screening session on some of his films: *Time Is A Country*, *Hallaig* and *The Tree of Liberty*.

Vancouver animator Hugh Foulds gave a seminar on animation in the classroom, pointing out the advantages of using animation to motivate students, especially those whose academic skills were not as advanced as their peers. The seminar was run in conjunction with the Saskatchewan Society for Education through Art.

It appears likely that the festival will expand its screening facilities, perhaps cutting back on public screenings in favour of increased facilities in which festivalgoers can view films from the festival catalogue. There was such a facility at the festival (dubbed *The Marketplace*), but it was almost always full to the brim and lacked an organized waiting-list system.

One change that appears certain is a new award for debut films. This year's jury decided that there was an element of disparity in making novice filmmakers compete with established artists in the existing categories, so the five jurors will dig into their own pockets to create a cash award for next year's festival. If all goes well, the award will become permanent, with corporate sponsorship or with each jury contributing money for the following year's award.

Other award-winners were: *The Man Who Planted Trees* (directed by Frederic Back) for animation; *Inside Out* (Lori Spring) for drama under 30 minutes; *Les Enfants de la rue: Fernand* (Roger Tetreault) for instructional or educational; and *Shooting Stars* (Allan Stein) for sports and recreation.

In addition, the jury moved *A Child's Christmas in Wales* (Don McBrearty) from drama over 30 minutes to production for children, where it won; *Dancing Around the Table* (Maurice Bulbulian) from documentary to public affairs, where it won; and *Water for Tonoumasse* (Garry Beitel) from educational to promotional, where it won.

Other individual awards went to John Tucker for his original music in *Inside Out*; to Louise Dugal for her picture editing of *Oscar Thiffault*; and to Sharon Riis for the script of *The Wake*.

A view from the jury box

BY MARTIN DUCKWORTH

I have always viewed Yorkton as one of the few remaining bastions of the Canadian short film, which has been severely battered in recent years by the tightening grip of commercial TV. Unlike the other major showcases for Canadian shorts - Banff, and the Gemini and G meaux awards - Yorkton places artistry ahead of marketability by not requiring entries to have first played on television. So I felt really honoured when asked to sit on the jury.

But now that it's over, I have to say that I think for Yorkton to achieve its full potential, some major changes will have to be made.

If it is going to remain a national competition, I think it is going to have to move to a nearby city - Regina, Saskatoon, or Winnipeg - in order to generate the kind of razzamatazz that a competition needs - big crowds, stars, good press coverage, and a program full of the best productions of the year. This time there was a healthy number of great films in documentaries and dramas over 30 minutes, but a real shortage of good submissions in all categories under 30 minutes - drama, documentary, animated, and experimental; there were no film reviews in the press; the one big "star", Marie Tifo from Qu bec, felt quite out of place; and the attendance varied from 10 to 40 spectators per show, with most of them being professionals in the film industry from out of town. That is quite a letdown for a filmmaker who has travelled some distance to participate in a festival whose reputation was built on the basis of strong support from the local community (Jim Lysyshyn tells me that 1200 local people would keep two commercial theatres packed in the early years of the festival).

But do Canadian short-filmmakers really need a competition? I am starting to think not. If we are to play a role in preserving a distinctive Canadian culture, now increasingly menaced by the free enterprisers and free traders, what we may need more than anything else is a competition-free forum where we can assess one another's work and build networks of support. This is what the Grierson seminar used to do, of course, before it moved out of Niagara-on-the-Lake and Brockton and into Toronto in an attempt to turn itself into more of a "festival." There may have been bigger audiences, but the filmmakers lost the time and the space that they needed for critical exchange between screenings, and lost therefore their chance to build continuity and community.

I think that Yorkton could become the Grierson seminar of the West. There were two events in this year's festival that demonstrated that the possibilities for such a seminar are there.

The first was the barbeque outing at the

Wildlife Federation Clubhouse a few miles out of town, on the second evening of the festival. Baseball and volleyball, followed by the screening of Lorne Bailey's marvelously wacky film *The Milkman Cometh*, made everyone feel at home. I wonder now if the whole festival shouldn't be held in that Clubhouse, instead of in the soul-less Holiday Inn downtown. Holed up in that lakeshore lodge, surrounded by the magpies, the gophers, the train whistles and the open skies of the prairies, it's easy to imagine how 50 or more filmmakers, educators, students, community activists and journalists could stimulate one another enormously through critical exchanges between screenings.

The only subsequent event that fully capitalized on the spirit of community created that evening was a workshop held two days later entitled "Researching the Documentary." Organized by the Saskatchewan Women's Film Network, a couple of dozen aspiring young filmmakers were attracted from around the prairies to join us that Saturday morning to hear Brigitte Berman (*Artie Shaw*) and Barbara Evans (*Prairie Women*) make very practical suggestions for preparing for a documentary shoot. Chaired by Kathleen Shannon, the workshop was a model of how useful film gatherings can be when put into the hands of those whom it is intended to benefit. Maybe the Saskatchewan Women's Film Network should be asked to program the whole festival next year!

The trouble with the other workshops during the four days of this year's festival was that they were all designed to screen and discuss films by visiting luminaries. The only scheduled opportunity that the competing filmmakers were given for a critical exchange about their own work was at a gathering on the afternoon of the fourth day entitled "Film Critiques by Adjudicators." Here what could have been a useful discussion was stifled by the requirement that the winning films not be named until the award ceremony that evening. All we could do was talk in abstract terms.

Without a programme designed to build a sense of solidarity among attending filmmakers, and in the absence of any sign of interest in the film programme by the local population, it was almost inevitable that the only filmmakers to leave town satisfied would be the award winners. As a jurist, it was really a painful thing to have to face fellow filmmakers, comrades in the struggle to preserve a distinctive Canadian culture, some of them personal friends, and to justify the jury's decision that they were "losers".

What makes a film "good," after all, is only a matter of personal taste. A different jury would probably have come up with different

"winners." The five of us who were thrown together this year all happened to be "film-as-art" oriented. That diminished the chances of some excellent advocacy-type documents like *Break the Cycle* by Debbie Cartmer, about wife-beating, and *In Support of the Human Spirit*, by Jennifer Hodge, about the John Howard Society; some excellent presentations of events in the fine arts, such as *Guitar*, by Barbara Sweete, about the Toronto Guitar Festival, *Danny Grossman*, by Moze Mossanen, about the Toronto dancer, and *Chopi Music of Mozambique*, by Ron Hallis; some excellent television shows like *Eggbert*, about teenage pregnancy, from CBC's *Degrassi Junior High* series, *The Forgotten*, about brain-damaged victims of traffic accidents, from CBC's *Fifth Estate*, and *Greenhouse Effect*, about changes in the earth's atmosphere, from TVOntario's *VISTA* series; and some excellent information-pieces like *Au clair de l'ovule*, by Louise Mondoux, about new technologies in human reproduction, and *Nous sommes assis sur un volcan*, by Suzanne C t , Norman Thibault and Jean Gagnon, about Bishop Tutu's visit to Quebec. All these films serve a useful purpose, and are not helped by being considered non-winners.

Then there were the entries that showed great artistic promise but which were overshadowed by films made by people with more experience in the craft - for example, the animated film *The Crow and the Canary*, by Arnie Lipsey; the documentaries *Those Roos Boys* by Barbara Boyden, and *They Look a Lot Like Us*, by Bonnie Dickie; the experimental films *Gercure*, by Jeanne Crepeau, *Illumination*, by Mark Morgenstern; and *Waving*, by Ann Marie Fleming; and the short dramas *End of the Game*, by Michelle Bjornson, *Heartline*, by Will Dixon, *Meandres*, by Norman Thibault, and *Lamento pour un homme de lettres*, by Pierre Jutras.

Serving on a jury is, of course, a privileged experience. The intimate relations that develop between jurors as they share the strains and joys of their work are the same that bind a film crew together on location. By the time it is over, you have made friends for life. I will always cherish Wendy's ability to articulate the ebbs and flows of film language, Peter's strong sense of fairness, Marie's immediate response to the lights and shades of new insights, and Larry's ability to place contradictory things in order.

I see no reason why it shouldn't be possible to develop those kinds of close relations with all the filmmakers who present films at Yorkton, simply by placing them in the same comfortable room for a few days, and scheduling critical exchanges between them after each screening. Maybe the jurors could be kept not as prize-pickers, but as commentators and discussion-starters. It might help reinstate Yorkton as the pioneer festival it once was. ●