

montreal: year one

Serge Losique aimed his festival, not at the local public, but at the world-wide film community. Whether or not he was successful will be measured next year. What follows is a brief account of that festival and then *Cinema Canada's* first docu-drama, "The Garden Path."

by Connie Tadros

The World Film Festival of Canada... The Montreal Festival... Losique's Festival... What it all amounted to was an excellent beginning for a festival which aspires to become great. Maurice Bessy, the general director of the Cannes Festival commented that Montreal, the meeting point for three traditions – the French, the English and the American (he didn't mention Canada) – was the obvious place for a festival of major proportions. His support was crucial to the success of the festival in its first year.

Having read all the festival articles I care to read, I will make this one brief. The largest part of the program included 85 recent features, produced either this year or last. An official selection included 28 films from 26 countries, a special events selection included 26 films from 14 countries. As well, both France and Japan were present with a dozen films each, and Canada was represented by 8 films. All the films in these national selections were produced in 1977 or 1976.

The program was witness to the fact that Losique loves film; it included the most recent works by Bresson, Duras, Herzog, Yamamoto, Risi, the Tavianis, and Oshima, among many. And it was a pleasure to be exposed to films from Brazil, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, Roumania, Australia, Kuwait and – imagine – Andorra.

There were a few retrospectives. Both Gloria Swanson and Howard Hawks were present, and some of their old films were shown. Too, there was a selection of films involving Canadians in Hollywood, and still another to honor Laurence Olivier, Frederico Fellini and Henri Langlois. The place of the retrospectives among the more recent films was minor, and they were not well attended.

Losique was well organized, and did a proper promotional job prior to the festival's opening. He held regular press conferences months in advance, and published both the list of films and a guest list weeks early. This allowed the press time to plan. Neither were there any important changes made to either list. Both the films and the guests came on time.

The guest list was most impressive. And all the stars and film directors were given the chance to meet the press in regularly scheduled press conferences. It was a heady experience to see Ingrid Bergman, answering questions in

four languages; Gloria Swanson, Fay Wray, Eddie Constantine and Richard Thomas were there. Important foreign guests included James Card (George Eastman House), Pierre-Henri Deleau (Directors Fortnight) Jean Drucker (president of the S.F.P., responsible for all TV production in France), heads of the Japanese and Mexican cinémathèques Mme Kawakita and Mr. Gomez-Gomez, vice-president of MGM, United Artists and Universal, Maurice Bessey (veteran head of the Cannes festival), among others.

Most importantly, over forty film directors came with their films; most of these were from abroad. They included Howard Hawks, Ridha Behi, Stan Brakhage, James Bridges, Georges Chamchoum, Edgardo Cozarinsky, Zale Dalen, Jean-Luc Godard, Ted Kotcheff, Igaal Niddam, Krsto Papic, Julien Pastor, Nicolas Sarquis, Khalid Siddik, Jean-Daniel Simon, Robin Spry, René Vienet and the Taviani brothers, Paolo and Vittorio.

Losique learned, as others had before him, that having theatres in 2 widely separate parts of the city was impossible, and that the quality of the projections became appalling when the festival organizers didn't control the projection conditions. These mistakes won't be repeated.

There was a film market. Films were shown each morning in 2 different theatres, and many deals were reportedly made though final figures are not yet out. Zale Dalen, for instance, found his market experience valuable in terms of selling **Skip Tracer** and also in terms of taking on heavier marketplaces in the future.

Certainly, Montreal's bilingualism made it a hospitable place for the foreign guests, many of whom were visiting North America for the first time. In many cases, local consulates welcomed visitors with receptions for festival guests and the press. The atmosphere was promising. As one Ottawa mandarin commented, "Now *this* is a festival!"

On the opening weekend of the festival, 2 important symposiums were held. The first, on production in Hollywood, fielded a panel of 3 vice-presidents, one each from United Artists, MGM and Universal. The following day, a Canadian panel talked about production conditions in Canada. Rather than go on, trying to capture the essence of these panels and of the festival in general, **Cinema Canada** thought it would try its hand at a more creative rendition of the experience...



What follows are notes for a modern-day morality play. The play's structure is that singularly Canadian art form, the docu-drama.

All the characters in the play are real and did indeed appear in Montreal during the World Film Festival of Canada, with the exception of Franco Brusati and Emile de Antonio who were in town the week before the festival opened. All the quotes are exact. **Cinema Canada** has allowed only one composite character into its little play; that character is in fact a group called *People-In-Search-of-a-Film-Policy*. These people were also present, but may have been more isolated than they appear in the following drama. **Cinema Canada** takes full responsibility for the juxtaposition of the dialogue.

The context of the play is not Canadian but international. An alternative title would have been "Broad is the Way but Strait is the Gate."

Part I: The Old Days, or, It used to work...

In the darkness, a solitary piano plays and takes us all back...

"You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by"

The music fades out. It is the opening night of the Festival and Ingrid Bergman leaves the theatre, weary. She has just seen **Stroszek** but it isn't her kind of film. She shakes her head as she thinks of Bruno S. and muses, "It was a nice time when we had stars, because you went to see your favorite star. Sometimes the pictures weren't so good, but your love for certain actors and actresses was such that you overlooked the mistakes they made. Today, the audiences don't have that kind of love and admiration for the people who work."

And the thought occurs to her that, though films may still be the same old story, "a fight for love and glory", the fundamental things just don't apply anymore. Films have become, in her words, "ugly".

The *People-In-Search-of-a-Film-Policy* overhear her. Catching up to her, they take her by the arm and want to know more. "We all know it, and we talk about it all the time," she replies. "Everybody says, 'We can't have all this violence, we can't have all this pornography. It must finish. We now have hit the bottom.' But we don't seem to have hit the bottom. I suppose we can make worse pictures. We can make worse and worse and worse..."

Together, the small group sits by the edge of a fountain at the old Expo site and wonders what has happened. What have the studios - Paramount, MGM, Universal, United Artists, Warner Bros and 20th Century -- become, and where are the stars? Why doesn't it work any longer?

Bergman confided that she too had joined the ranks of those who no longer leave their homes to go to the movies:

Or, who leave mid-way through a show, disappointed and deceived.

The People resolved to find out why the fundamental things no longer applied.

Part II: The Majors Today, or, Distribution made us do it...

The next morning, the People gather in a conference hall. Under bright lights, a symposium on Production in Hollywood is underway. Mike Medavoy, a vice-president from United Artists, takes the initiative. "Hollywood is a business. Making movies is a business like any other business. Even though it is an art, nobody calls it the motion picture art. They call it the motion picture business. And it's tough."

The People consult each other. They are sure that *someone* has insisted on the cultural and artistic aspects of this business.

Referring to his fellow panelists, Sherri Lansing and Peter Saphier, vice-presidents respectively of MGM and Universal, Medavoy continues, "I have certain relationships, Peter has certain relationships, and Sherri has relationships. Those relationships are the ones that get pictures made."

Peter Collinson, that abrasive British director, agrees. "The key is, that if I know you, or if I get an introduction into either of your offices with the right property, with a big enough star, you'll listen to me. And there is no other way to get a deal."

The People sat up. Collinson, Collinson... isn't he that chap who has never yet had to work in Hollywood? And they recall that he belongs to a new breed of international directors - sort of third-world specialists - who make their films in Australia, South America, South Africa, Israel, Iran... and Canada.

And just as the People are wondering why it should be so difficult to make a deal, Medavoy speaks up again. "We only make 15 to 20 pictures a year. We're in the business of saying, 'no', because we can't get hurt by saying no. On the other hand, we also have to say 'yes', because we can't be in business without saying yes. We have this enormous distribution outfit. It takes us a minimum of a million dollars a week to stay open. We have to make from 15 to 18 pictures a year to support our distribution outfit."

"If you understand the motion picture business, you understand that you're dealing with one very important factor, and that's distribution. The fact is, whoever controls distribution, controls the film business. The exhibitors accuse us of setting the prices and everything, and then turning whatever product we have over to them. That accusation has some merit."

"Well", the People say to each other, "he's nothing if not candid. So distribution is the key!" And the gist of what the People say to each other - quickly, so as not to disturb the conference - is that though distribution doesn't open the door to the public enjoyment of films much anymore, and certainly doesn't inspire artistic quality in production, it does keep the machine turning, and we've all gotten used to that.

In the back row, sprawled out, Ted Kotcheff listens to the goings-on with mixed emotions. *Sotto voce*, he comments, "The distributors are working in the dark. They don't know why a film like **Rocky** or **Cuckoo's Nest** should be the big successes that they were. Nobody knows what constitutes a success. If anybody did know, we'd all be rich and all the film companies wouldn't be failing. In fact, the attrition rate

in films is extraordinary. Nine out of ten films are wiped out completely. They don't make a single penny."

Meanwhile, up on the panel, Sherri Lansing is trying to explain why the Majors insist on the old formulas, even though they no longer work. "I think that we tend to cast movies with stars to minimize our risk. And I'm beginning to think that that isn't the correct way to do it. I have not seen a movie, recently, which was poor, and which had a star in it, attract a mass audience. On the other hand, if the movie is good and is done with total unknowns, like **Rocky**, they come in droves to see it."

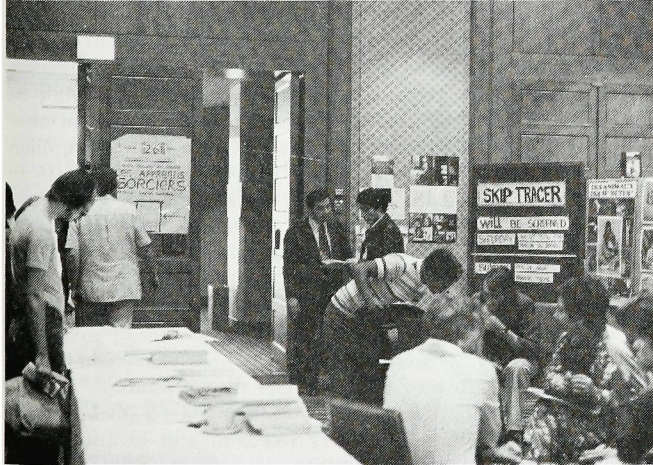
The People are befuddled. They wonder why, if the star system no longer works, does everyone insist on it? Collinson ran up against it when casting **Tomorrow Never Comes**. He berates the members of the panel. "I was in Los Angeles with \$700,000 to buy stars and actors. I have to tell you, that is an enormous problem. Nobody's a star these days unless he's picking up between \$700,000 and a million dollars. The Majors need the stars. They need them to convince the exhibitors that the picture they're selling will have an audience."

The People start wondering how the Majors manage. They say they don't produce many films, that they don't know the formula anymore, and that distribution is the tail that's wagging the dog. What do they do, then, with the bad films - the nine out of ten - which they produce?

Medavoy steps up to explain the system. "If a picture falls far short, and there's an enormous expenditure on the film, the best way of getting the money back as quickly as possible is to give the public a rather quick, expensive advertising campaign and attempt to recoup part of the cost."

John Kemeny, rich from his experience with **The Shadow of the Hawk**, paraphrases, but not too loudly, from the back of the room. "If they have a major financial interest at stake, it is a normal business practice to push the picture. If you make a film on a reasonable budget and it's handled by a Major, it shouldn't lose much, even if it's a disaster. There is a good chance to recoup. But you need the Major. They ram it down the throat of the exhibitor."

photo by Malka Dalphond



A busy press office and part of the film market exhibition hall.

In the back rows, where the People are sitting among some Canadian distributors, there is a feeling of restlessness. The Majors have been saying all morning that they will produce good scripts for the Canadians. They have also been saying that he who controls distribution can get control of production. Unfortunately, the advice doesn't seem to translate. André Link, a Canadian with more production and distribution experience than most, speaks up. "The Canadian distributors are very weak. Why? Because the American Majors, who command the biggest share of the melon,

distribute foreign films as well as their own productions in Canada. Therefore, the Canadian distributors can not act in the same capacity as counterparts in other countries. And this seriously inhibits their investment position. Since 1967, we at Cinepix have produced about 20 films and distributed over 40 Canadian films. There are some other Canadian firms who have done likewise. But we do not have the financial resources to act as a producer-distributor. I think that that something has to happen."

The People look at Robert Lantos. He reaches for the microphone and says, with passion, "The basic question is, how do we go about getting a piece of the action? The answer to that, which from your point of view is very logical, is 'See me, send me the material and, if it's good and if you make the grade, you'll get a piece of it.' All things being equal, that would be a good answer and a fair solution. However, all things are not equal. Medavoy has said that if you want to have financing, and if you want to have control, then establish your own distribution. In Canada, you can do that, and it won't get you any of those things, for the simple reason that 80% or more of the market in this country is already controlled by you gentlemen... the Majors."

The symposium ends on a hostile note. The People ask for Medavoy's phone number (hadn't he said, after all, 'call me?'), but he only gives his assistant's number. They ask if they can get in touch with his Toronto office. He says to bypass it and call straight to New York if it's anything important. The three vice-presidents promise to be present at the symposium on Production in Canada the next day. The People think to themselves, "They won't show." And the People were right.

Part III: The Stifling of Opportunity, or, It doesn't only happen to Canadians...

The People-In-Search-Of-A-Film-Policy wandered out into the afternoon sun and saw a group of men sitting in a café. They all spoke with accents and were heated up after the symposium. The People listened in...

John Simon, film critic for *New York Magazine*, was going on about just how ignorant vice-presidents of the Major companies can be about foreign films. And how unfair they can be to films which they don't like. He said, "I'm worried about things: like when the Deauville Festival requested a certain film from one of the Major distributors, and the distributor didn't happen to like that film, he just didn't send it to Deauville, even though it was his. He refused to send it!"

Franco Brusati, an Italian director and playwright, sighed with understanding as he put down his Campari. "Quite often," he said, "the producer just doesn't answer letters by people who write and want to buy my film." The People remember that Brusati had made **Bread and Chocolate** which had been fabulously successful in Italy, and which was still playing on the Champs Elysée in Paris 6 months after its release there. "I'm not surprised at all that **Bread and Chocolate** hasn't been shown in Canada yet. There are people from New York who are trying to buy it for the next season. They phoned me, saying that they are desperate because they can't get it away from the production management. The rights are held by the C.I.C. which is the official distribution chain of Paramount, and the producer is Verona Films which is also the Italian Paramount."

Brusati looks at the blue sky. "Why," he wonders, "should they be interested in distributing my film? They have their own American films so why should they worry about foreign films? They will make money with their own films."

The People turn toward the third man sitting at the table. A young French fellow, Pierre-Henri Deleau, is the director of the Directors Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival. He has seen, over the past years, more of the independent production of young filmmakers than almost anyone else. To boot, he is not a filmmaker himself, and so has no personal axe to grind in what is amounting to a rousing condemnation of the Majors.

photo by Malka Dalphond



Savoring the cocktail fare: a timid Jean Lefebvre, John Kemeny, Serge Losique and David Novek.

The People hear him sum up the situation. "It's very simple. The American influence in France is simply a question of power and money. All the American features are shown in French theatres because they have some very good features, and because they have power over distribution in France. The trouble is that we have difficulty selling French features in America. But they have no trouble getting American films into France. That means that there is a complete unbalance between the two countries."

The People finish their Cokes and think that the men in the café put it well. There seems to be a 'situation', and the 'situation' is world-wide. It has to do with the domination of distribution by the Majors. "But what," they ask, "can be done about it?"

Part IV: Production for Television, or, If you can't get your foot in the door, move on...

The People-In-Search-Of-A-Film-Policy get together the next day and think things out. One good idea seems to be to avoid the mistakes which have already been made: to not trip down the Hollywood garden path in search of gold. They decide to go back to those who have spoken out and see what is

going on elsewhere that works. Getting films produced and getting them to the people is, after all, the goal.

Ingrid Bergman is still breathless after three days of incessant interviews and official receptions. She bemoans the fact that she hasn't time to comb her hair, but she sits down with the People, nevertheless, to try to answer their questions. "What works?"

"Well", she answers, "Ingmar Bergman and Roberto Rossellini have started to film for television. Bergman does it because it's interesting for him; you get so close to a person and must concentrate on faces and on emotions. As for Roberto, he really thought that movies were no good any longer and so he turned to documentaries. He was always a teacher at heart and wanted people to have more knowledge of what was going on in the world." She too had done some television work and had found it more taxing than either film or theatre. But it is the medium of tomorrow. At least in Europe.

Brusati concurs. Although he and others of his generation will probably stick with theatrical films and live plays, he knows that television is one of the elements destroying the Italian film industry for the moment. "Why should people pay a lot to go to the cinema when they can stay at home and see between 12 and 30 films in one week?" he asks realistically. "On the positive side, however, one must realize that television is reaching an immense audience in a very short time. That's probably what Rossellini meant when he said that those who produce for television have a very big responsibility, trying to create messages which can reach a large audience."

Deleau seems less upset when he speaks with the People. In fact, he seems rather ecstatic about the possibilities of television. "There is no good theatrical cinema in Germany. All the theatres show erotic features or bad films, like Spaghetti-Westerns and the like. All of the good German features, like the work of Herzog, Fassbinder and Schlöndorff, are coproduced by television. It's only because of television that they can work."

The People move on, and catch up to Kemeny and Kotcheff who seem to have other things to discuss. But they find the time to confirm what the People have already heard.

Kotcheff tells about his experience in Great Britain. "One of the things which caused the demise of the British film industry was the fact that films made for British television were so incredibly good. They were far superior to anything you would see in the cinema. In fact, I still think that some of the finest films I've seen in the last five years were made for British television."

Nodding his head in agreement, Kemeny picks up the conversation. "The theatrical market is changing rapidly. There is a shift towards television, and television can afford to pay more and more. The Majors are spending unbelievable amounts to outbeat each other. Television is gaining enormous importance."

The People press Kemeny for details. And he tells a story. "It's not very rare now that we, the film producers, are bidding like crazy for the rights to a book based on the stolen galleys which someone has xeroxed in the middle of the night for \$100. In the meantime, television picks it up and they are laughing at us: they can afford it! It's not rare that a new book is bought for \$300,000 to \$400,000 and turned into a mini-series for television. This is a new phenomenon. They are ready to spend up to \$6,000,000 on ten segments."

Kemeny leans back into his chair as if he sees the end in sight. "In another 20 years, we won't be going to the theatres. We will be home watching television."

The People-In-Search-Of-A-Film-Policy get together that evening. It's beginning to sound like what's needed is not a theatrical film policy, but one oriented towards television. The television! With all those commercials? What next?



The old guard meets the new: Howard Hawks is flanked by the Taviani brothers whose made-for-TV film won top Cannes award.

Part V: Alternatives to American Television, or, We can do it our own way...

The People are waiting for a last chat with Messrs. Kemeny and Kotcheff. They think back to a conversation they had earlier with Emile de Antonio, that radical American who made **Point of Order**, **Millhouse: A White Comedy** and, recently **Underground**. He had taken McLuhan to task: "Whoever owns the medium owns the message and that's really what it is all about. The facts say that in the US, there are more television sets than telephones or bathrooms. The fact that the poor listen to television an average of 7 hours a day doesn't in any way heighten their perception. It doesn't indicate that the medium is the message. It's simply a tool, a way of indicating that the message is totally owned by the people who own the society." And the People think that, for most Canadians, the message is in fact owned by those who pay for the programming south of the border.

Kotcheff has worked for American television, and so the People ask him about it. "Television in the United States is geared to selling products. The programming is meant to keep the commercials apart. They don't want anything that's contentious, that's in any way difficult. They're looking for endless climax: no slow shots, no contemplative material, just climax after climax after climax. It's not a very satisfying experience."

Nevertheless, and strange to say, Kotcheff is optimistic, and reminds the People that though American television is related to commercials, European television isn't and Canadian television needn't be. "When we have the introduction of Pay TV and the audiences are able to pay for the kind of

films they want to see, I think there will be a renaissance of filmmaking. But that renaissance will be via television. The movie house is a dinosaur of the past."

And Kemeny too, reminds the People that we aren't really talking about today's TV "You'll have the cables which run 2 or 3 first-run features. And the new cassette players, Betamax and RCA which you hook up to your television. You can take home educational material, feature films or whatever, and see whatever you want. Then there is the new large television screen which they are building into living room walls. You have the cinema in your house!"

"In the future", he goes on, "maybe there won't be any theatres. The Majors are diversifying. They're into pin-ball machines and publishing. Even Coca-Cola. They buy football clubs and whatever. They know the change is coming, but no one likes to talk about it. It's like rushing your own death sentence."

The People-In-Search-Of-A-Film-Policy thank the men for their time and ideas, and walk out into the sunshine.

It seems to the People-In-Search-Of-A-Film-Policy that the evidence speaks for itself. The Film Policy should probably not dwell unduly on the state of the industry as it presents itself today. The myths and illusions of Hollywood are crumbling under the weight of inflated production costs, sweetheart distribution deals and a theatre ticket, the price of which the public is no longer willing to pay.

If only the People can convince the government to look forward: to the importance of television and of Pay TV, to a new role for the theatres, to a shot in the arm for production which does not follow the 'Hollywood feature' syndrome. What about a renaissance of shorts and documentaries, of animated films and a refreshed sort of feature?

The People leave the Festival with renewed courage. Sentences of briefs to be written dance before their eyes. Will anyone listen? If only... If only... □