



SHARON MCGOWAN's and PEGGY THOMPSON's *The Lotus Eaters*: Genie Award for best screenplay

# Local Heroes at NSI

**D**on't be misled by the grand title. The National Screen Institute is as down home as a weenie roast. That's probably due to the gregarious nature of its founder, Jan Miller, the Ottawa-raised Edmonton resident who started the filmmaker training program 10 years ago.

Miller was an actress who wanted to learn about the film business and didn't want to travel to Los Angeles or Toronto to do it. With the help of the National Film Board, she set up a workshop that started as the Local Heroes Film Festival (now the Local Heroes International Screen Festival), which has evolved into the multi-faceted National Screen Institute. "I wanted to talk to directors and producers who'd made movies with roots in local stories, on small budgets, and find out how they did it," Miller recalls. "It was meant to be a one-time event out of the NFB office, but people really got turned on by it." Filmmakers like Robert Altman, John Sayles and Bruce Beresford were lured to Edmonton in the dead of winter by Miller's persuasive pitch. What began as a per-

sonal quest in 1984 became a full-time job for Miller two years ago.

The Local Heroes Festival draws the crowds, but the Drama Prize program, a director-writer-producer film and television training program, (formerly Drama Lab) is the backbone of the National Screen Institute. The intensive program encourages professional development in people already working in the film and television businesses. "It's an opportunity for filmmakers to move forward, to learn all aspects of the industry without having to uproot their lives," says Miller. "Every step of the filmmaking process is covered in as realistic a fashion as possible. Participants must bring a third of the production cash to the table, sign contracts, and are guaranteed that their work will be premiered at Local Heroes."

Six filmmaking teams from across the county are chosen annually. Each team is given a \$6,000 cash incentive and \$3,600 in service sponsorships; mentorship with industry players within their communities; workshops in Edmonton; and active involvement in the sought-after Pitching Workshop at the Banff

Television Festival.

The underlying theme is consistent. The NSI believes by making short dramas that are regionally based, the budding filmmakers support their communities and encourage others. Miller is passionate on the subject of putting filmmaking opportunities in the hands of people who would otherwise be at the mercy of federal funding agencies. "We've had some incredible success stories. The proof is in the pudding and the pudding is edible now," she says. With 24 finished projects in four years, Drama Prize alumni are everywhere. Calgarian Tom Dent-Cox is co-producing the CBC drama *North of 60*, Winnipeg's Kim Johnstone has made two feature films (*The Last Winter*, *For the Moment*), Torontonian David Wellington wowed audiences at the Cannes Film Festival with *I Love a Man in Uniform*, and Vancouverites Sharon

McGowan and Peggy Thompson won a Genie best screenplay award for their film, *The Lotus Eaters*.

The Drama Prize program isn't limited to film or English-Canadians. Miller is proud that the program is tough to get into, but emphasizes the NSI's commitment to training for television and points to a 20 per cent francophone involvement. The NSI has branched off into other programs. It launched New Heroes on the Block for teen-agers two years ago which expanded into a two-week summer camp this year. Students have their work shown at the Local Heroes International Screen Festival in March.

The NSI has flourished as a well-balanced alternative in a city that's truly off the beaten path. The current crop of successful, low-budget independent productions from Australia and England shows "local heroes" are a hit with audiences. The National Screen Institute aims to put Canadian filmmakers in the same league ●

Valerie Gregory is a film critic for the *Edmonton Sun*.