

THE 9TH ANNUAL Wendy Michener Symposium

Anniversary of

The following are excerpts from **The 9th Annual Wendy Michener Symposium: A Salute to the 100th Anniversary of Motion Pictures**, held at York University, November 9, 1995. Named in honour of Canadian arts writer and broadcaster Wendy Roland Michener, the Symposium provides a public forum for discussion of issues and developments in Canadian cultural life, past and present. The presenters included Peter Morris, film historian and current Chair of the Department of Film & Video, York University, who discussed the advent of film in Canada; Gerald Pratley, writer and critic and former Director of the Ontario Film Institute, who spoke about the growth of Canadian postwar film culture; and Helga Stephenson, Chair of Viacom Canada and former Executive Director of the Toronto International Film Festival, who traced the birth and coming of age of the Toronto film festival, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 1995. Due to the nature of his slide show, we were not able to include Robert Gutteridge's presentation on the "picture palaces" and other early screening venues in Toronto. The 9th Annual Wendy Michener Symposium was sponsored by the Faculty of Fine Arts and Winters College, York University. The presentations have been edited for length.

A Salute to the

100th Motion Pictures

Toronto-born Mary Pickford, "America's Sweetheart," makes a triumphant return to the city of her birth in 1915, with Douglas Fairbanks.



Photo courtesy of City of Toronto Archives

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Peter Morris



Photo: Alex Neuman

I think that to begin the story, one has to begin with the technology because, in the early days of film, there was a conflict of technologies. Although the Lumière brothers are credited with the first public film screening in December 1895, at the time, in fact, there were other inventors and other machines, not the least of them the British one by Robert Paul and the American Vitascope machine which was marketed, though not invented, by Thomas Edison.

They were not compatible technologies. It's a bit like, in more recent times, the conflict between videotape formats VHS and Beta, or even more recently the conflicts between IBM technology and Macintosh technology. The machines were not compatible.

The early film shows were nothing like we're familiar with. Most of the early film screenings were in fairgrounds, exhibition grounds, summer pleasure parks or similar kinds of venues. They were seen at the time as one of the novelties of the age—the late 19th century with all its wonders of mechanical inventions. In fact, Dr. Roentgen had discovered X-rays about a month prior to the first Lumière film screening in Paris. Early movie shows often competed for public attention with exhibitions of X-rays. Of course, X-rays didn't make it into the 20th century as one of our big entertainment industries, though the movies did. Many people involved with the early inventions thought that movies were a kind of passing show biz fancy; movies would pass exactly as X-rays did, as a form of entertainment. They thought that movies should be exploited as quickly as possible, before the public interest in them waned.

Although the first film lasted barely a minute in length, the public interest, in fact, never did wane. The public remained fascinated by movies, and a century later we're still in the grip of the moving image culture which emerged so strongly 100 years ago.

In Canada, we may have invented Pablum baby food, the Jolly Jumper, and even Trivial Pursuit, but there were no Canadians among those numerous inventors vying for patents on early film equipment. Yet, Canada was treated to exhibitions of virtually every competing device in 1896. Beginning in the early summer of 1896, Toronto, Montreal, and other places (but Toronto and Montreal in particular) saw shows of the Lumières' Cinematograph, Paul's Animatograph and the Edison-owned Vitascope, as well as several other competing systems. All of them, apparently, attracted large audiences, even though the films themselves were really only very brief actuality scenes—running less than a minute in length—of people, places and events of various kinds.

The various competing systems ended up either destroying each other or reaching some kind of uneasy alliance over standards. As this happened, the situation for audiences also changed. Films were no longer the novelty item in fairgrounds. They were entering the time when those who produced films could predictably make some money out of them. That began to change the whole scene. In urban centres, film quickly found a home in vaudeville theatres. Movie programs lasted 10 or 20 minutes in total, which would include several films—about the same length as a vaudeville performance. So vaudeville theatres quickly moved into adding film screenings as part of their attractions.

Movies moved quickly from vaudeville to elegant theatres with comfortable seating.

(Below: Loew's Theatre in Toronto—circa 1915.)



Photo courtesy of The Ontario Heritage Foundation

There were lots of views of Canada on movie screens, but most of those films were by foreign companies, and that remains true today

—Peter Morris

Outside of the urban centres, it was the travelling showman who brought movies to people, often for the very first time. They were quite extraordinary characters, quite intrepid entrepreneurs. Many of them used sound effects or music in their performances, not least for the effect that they had, but also because the early projectors were extremely noisy. Some of these showmen travelled from town to town, carrying a box full of films. They would rent an empty shop, put in some folding seats, set up business, run the films for a week or two, and then move on to the next town.

There were others, particularly in the West, who travelled with what was then called a black tent, which literally was a tent of black canvas to shut out the daylight. These showmen often went into remote areas, Northern Ontario for example. There's a story of one intrepid movie showman who went to Cochrane (which is north of Timmins) where there was no electricity, but nonetheless still managed to show movies. I've never quite figured out how he did it. He must have done it with some kind of lantern device. In northern British Columbia, another intrepid character showed great ingenuity when he set up his movie shows in an abandoned mine shaft. This must have been an extraordinary experience to actually sit there in a crowded, unventilated mine shaft watching movies.

However, the heyday of the travelling showman didn't last very long. People were beginning to set up permanent movie theatres, first by converting existing buildings. Somebody would not only rent the shop, but buy the shop and set the movie theatre up in it. The first Nickelodeon opened in Pittsburgh in 1905. It had very elegant decor, comfortable theatre seats and was a huge hit with audiences. By 1906, similar movie theatres were being put up all across the country. The first in Canada was in Toronto, and then they sprang up in other places.

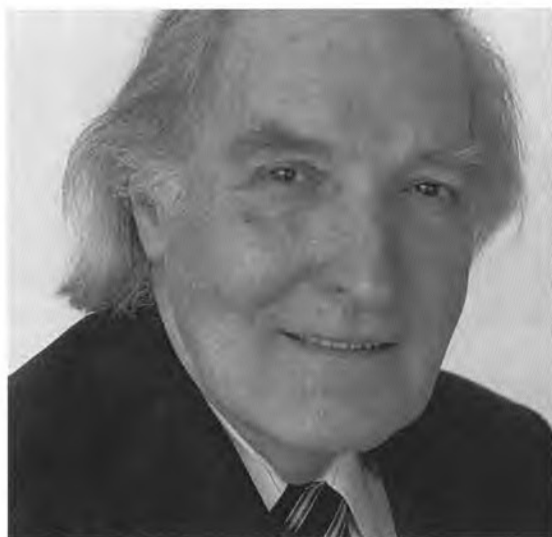
Let me now turn from the theatres to the films themselves. Among the first films that Canadians saw were views of Canadian scenes, which is a bit surprising to us. Niagara Falls, for example, was a huge

attraction to movie people. It was filmed no fewer than three times by three different cinematographers in the fall of 1896. The Rockies were also very popular. Films were often made from moving trains going through the Rockies. Winter scenes of Canadians having fun were also very popular. The Klondike Gold Rush was also filmed. There were plenty of news events, including a film of Canadian troops leaving for the Boer War and the visit of the Duke of York to Canada.

There were lots of views of Canada on movies screens, but most of those films were by foreign companies, and that remains true today. There were Canadians who made films but they made mostly news films, actuality films. There was a film made of the great Toronto fire in 1904; there were travelogue-type films. Which is not to say there were no narrative films about Canada in the early years; indeed there were. But all of them, until 1912, were made by foreign companies and a pretty clichéd lot they were, too. Canada generally was used because it had exotic scenery, and the same characters turned up again and again and again, to the point where if you'd seen even three of them, it became quite boring. The noble Mountie was often featured and, of course, he always got his man. There were vicious villains, who were usually half-breeds. It's not until about 1912 that the first Canadian companies made story films.

There was one in Montreal which made a film called *The Battle of the Long Sault*; another in Halifax which made a film based on the Longfellow poem called *Evangeline*; and there was a company in Toronto which made several dramas. Those early films had mixed success. Some were really quite successful and got very good reviews. Some of them never got released at all and the companies didn't last very long. It was not until 1914, during the First World War, that there was an upsurge in nationalism in Canada and something like a Canada film industry began to emerge. The years from about 1918 to 1922 were perhaps the most successful period in Canadian filmmaking until more recent times. But that's another story, and I'll talk about that perhaps some other time.

Gerald Pratley



I came to Toronto in 1946 and went to work for the CBC as a continuity writer before becoming a film critic and commentator. Shortly after that, I received a phone call from Dorothy Burritt and went to meet her and her husband, Oscar. These were two charmingly eccentric people who were just absolutely crazy about films, especially the classics. They had come from Vancouver where they had started the Vancouver Film Society and they were determined to get one started in Toronto, which they did. They asked me to join them because I had been a member of the London Film Society and was thought to be a reliable source of information. So, I found myself elected as the chairman of the Toronto Film Society (TFS), along with about eight other persons who formed the board, and I have to say I think there's only about three of us left.

We had our first showing in the Panda Studio on Church Street, which is long gone. We moved from there to the Royal Ontario Museum auditorium. For anyone to show films at that time outside the regular cinema circuits was very difficult because the movies were controlled by the studios in L.A. So, when setting ourselves up as a film society, we ran into difficulties with the business and with the censors. It was only because we incorporated ourselves as a membership society that we were able to show our films. The film companies, of course, were certain that they were losing money, and we were making it with our screenings, and we were looked upon with a great deal of suspicion for showing risqué French films. There had to be something immoral about individuals who wanted to go and see these French

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"postcards." So, we had to overcome constant obstacles to carry on, which we did. The Canadian Film Institute (CFI) had been formed in 1935, based on the British Film Institute, under the name of the National Film Society, which was then changed to the CFI after World War Two. It carried out valuable work through the years, obtaining prints from archives and other sources, and creating its own collection, which otherwise we could never have obtained at this time from distributors. The TFS was followed by the French Film Society at the University of Toronto, the Realist Film Society, A-G-E Film Society, and many others.

It was perhaps Nat Taylor who made the showing of these films possible in the commercial sense. He was an exhibitor and distributor, later a producer, who was married to Yvonne Taylor. She heard stories about great films at Cannes, Venice and New York and persuaded Nat, being a distributor, to obtain Canadian rights to show some of them. He owned a cinema called The International, uptown at Yonge and Manor Road. It's gone now, along with many others, but Nat decided to make it Yvonne's "art house," as such cinemas became known, and opened his new pattern of exhibition with Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*. This film

had been made in 1944, but hadn't been shown in this country because a Shakespearean film was considered by the trade to be "box office poison." *Henry V* was an enormous success and that set the pattern for specialized cinemas to follow. From time to time, of course, some of the films flopped and Nat rushed in Hollywood pictures to make up for losses. Several years later he built a cinema especially for Yvonne, the Towne Cinema, at Yonge and Bloor. It's long gone, too. In the late sixties, I was in partnership with him in running the experimental Little Cinema on Avenue Road. In a small, dual auditorium we ran subtitled films in one and French films without English subtitles in the other. It lasted just over a year.

After this came the film festivals—Stratford, Vancouver, Montreal—and although most people do not realize it, they were among the first film festivals in North America. I was not involved with the Stratford Film Festival in 1956 other than as program

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**LAURENCE OLIVIER and RENÉE ASHERSON in HENRY V:
In the 1940s, Shakespeare was considered box office poison.**



advisor to the late John Hayes. In those years, the Shakespearean plays were performed in a tent, before the permanent theatre was built, and those who attended the three plays over three days had nothing to do and nowhere to go during the daytime. With thoughts of Cannes in mind, it was decided to show films in the afternoon in a very run-down old commercial cinema called the Avon. This was really no way to present films, so when the money was raised a few years later to build the present theatre, we went to the committee to try to get them to include a cinema. How innocent we were. They said that if we didn't want to show films in the Avon then to forget about it. So, there were no films shown as part of the Stratford Festival again until 1969 when the Ontario Film Institute, supported by Bill Wylie, started the new film festival in the beautifully restored Avon. This lasted until 1976. Then you might say that Toronto took over.

What this very abbreviated history amounts to, of course, is that very large and appreciative audiences came to see films they could not see anywhere else during those years.

The major chains, Famous Players and Cineplex Odeon, are playing Canadian films like never before and backing them with money and expertise. —Helga Stephenson

Helga Stephenson



Photo: Nicole Norris

the Canadian films against the best of the international scene, they proved there was an appetite for Canadian film. They could fund it, they could show it to sell-out crowds, they could attract industry around it. And the Festival never looked back.

Having hung a major part of the Festival's hat on Canadian film, Clarkson then sought to broaden the mainstream base of the festival programming by wooing and winning, once again, Hollywood studios. It was natural for that sector because Toronto is such a strong part of the North American marketing schedules. They like the public, they like the presence of the press, and they like the launch potential of the festival. They could adjust their marketing campaigns to capitalize on the strength of the public reaction. Three cases in point are: *Jagged Edge*, *The Big Chill* and *A River Runs Through It*.

Canadians want to play their films in the festival for the same reason, but with another added incentive, the presence of the foreign buyers who came in droves after the success of *Diva* on the international side and *I Heard the Mermaids Singing* on the Canadian side. The Festival became a very efficient 10 days to do business with the emergence of the Sales Office, a brokering service for producers and buyers. The marketability of the Canadian film became a siren song which helped people like Bruce McDonald achieve international co-production status for his second film, *Highway 61*. Talent like his would always be recognized, but the Festival probably sped up the process by 10 years. Why do foreign buyers like Canadian films? They have a distinctive North American feeling, they have an attractive price tag and there is the potential of profit.

Foreign filmmakers want to play the Festival because it is the gateway to the North American market. Toronto already occupies a major role in that market, therefore it has achieved major credibility as a bellwether without the high stakes of the win-lose situation of launching directly into the American market. Producers are given the tools to maximize their presence in North America by their test-screening in Toronto. There is a growing conservatism about the North American market due to the high cost of taking a film to the public. Distributors can no longer afford to take the chance they once did. They need more guarantees, more safety nets to entice them to buy film.

Knowing that launching a film is more prohibitive than ever, it is my opinion that it is time to niche our own reality. It is time to have some independent theatres that play the films to their potential. It is interesting to note that the major chains, Famous Players and Cineplex Odeon, are playing Canadian films like never before and backing them with money and expertise. However, they have to service their major suppliers because times are getting tougher for them also. Therefore, the independent scenario, like Leonard Schein's magnificent operation in Vancouver, becomes an alternative to contemplate. There is an independent film world that could unspool in the major centres across Canada. Films could play split weeks, they could play longer, they could transfer, they could find their public. Their public could be developed. Another spin-off from the Festival is Cam Haynes's Cinefest (the Sudbury Film Festival) and his film circuit throughout Northern Ontario, now expanding into Southern Ontario. The Festival and others have proved that films, properly promoted, can perform to their potential and reach an audience. It is perhaps time to take the responsibility for our films and invent new ways to reach the Canadian audience.

Internationally, the strongest independent films that are doing business are the resolutely national films. What the world is now showing, is that it is a world of special interests, niches that can be international by being national. A great example is the triumph of the small British TV movies on our screens or the small Australian and New Zealand movies that have won the hearts of many a moviegoer. Each of the films is definitely tied to its country of origin; they do not try to be "international" yet they have achieved great international success. Canada has yet to score a hit in recent years in this market. However, that is not to say that it is hopeless. The markets are restless, constantly looking for the next fresh film that hits a nerve and the markets are opening. Everywhere. ■



JACK NICHOLSON and GENE SISKEL at the Toronto International Film Festival, 1984.