

By Barbara Goslawski

This year Canada's oldest artist-run centre, the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, turned 30. Founded in 1967 during the summer of love, it was a place where every independent film was welcome and everyone was treated equally. It was a place that supported artists and, for better or for worse, often paid little heed to the concept of making money. Somehow, even though the centre accepted every type of film into its collection, the CFMDC developed a reputation as one of the world's largest distributors of experimental film.

The history of the centre is like the history of filmmaking in Canada: short, sweet and chock full of tall tales of fistfights and public brawls. One of the many legends surrounding the CFMDC is the story that it started in a room in Rochdale College, that drug-filled den of iniquity that was the focal point of much arts activity in Toronto. The perfect locale for the birth of an alternative artist-run film distributor, it's too bad I can find no evidence for this version of the story. The CFMDC was actually founded in a living room in the Bloor and St. George area (close to Rochdale) by Jim Plaxton, Robert Fothergill, David Cronenberg and Lorne Michaels (of *Saturday Night Live* fame).

There is also some question as to how the centre originally acquired its collection of films. Not one month after establishing the CFMDC, Fothergill and lawyer Willem Poolman organized The Cinethon, a three-day marathon film screening.

They invited filmmakers from all over Canada and the United States and when the event was over they simply kept the films. The rest of the stories range from embezzlement and financial ruin, to various members of the executive board throwing pieces of furniture at each other during meetings. There were some nasty spats with the censor board, including court battles and a warrant to search the premises for one particular bit of so-called pornography. Then there was the infamous screening under the stars at Harbourfront where a number of families were introduced to that particular bit of pornography. Over the years there have been coups and countercoups, and accusations of favouritism, patronage and every other evil under the sun. All this came to a head as recently as this spring when a concerned member of the community at large was handing out flyers at the 30th-anniversary screening at the Images film festival declaring the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre to be an illegal organization because its bylaws had never been officially passed. This is not to say that the CFMDC has only attracted radicals. Over the years a who's who of Canadian filmmaking have passed through the doors of the Centre as either staff, board or member. A short list includes Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema, Philip Borsos, Rick Hancox, Mike Hoolboom and Wyndham Wise. From a tiny catalogue of 16 only films in 1967, the collection now includes 1,400 titles and almost 400 members.

In many ways, the development of the CFMDC over the past 30 years mirrors the growth of experimental filmmaking in Canada. In 1967, Canadians and Americans freely criss-crossed the border and programmers simply screened their films together without a thought as to

their  
place of  
origin.

Michael Snow  
and Joyce Wieland,  
two of the most  
famous Canadian artists of  
the time, had moved to New

York City where they fit in to the local arts scene so well that there are still people today who believe they are Americans. The film community in Canada was so small that it could scarcely be regarded as one and you had to go to New York in order to be accepted as an artist. No danger of that happening today, thankfully. Canadian experimental films have become world renowned and many art centres have either organized or are planning major retrospectives of our work. Now, instead of a ragtag group of individuals, we have a national cinema, and what began as a quirky little artist-run centre is now an internationally respected distributor.

Yet, with all that it has survived in the past 30 years, the present struggles may prove insurmountable. In recent years politicians in all levels of government have slashed arts grants. More specifically, provincial arts funding in Ontario (what's left of it) is still at the mercy of the Harris Tories, and with the creation of the megacity, a further reduction in municipal funding is likely. This will certainly affect not only the Centre but a large number of the filmmakers it represents. Even if the CFMDC survives additional cuts to its funding, it won't be of much use to anyone without new films to distribute. At a time when we should be celebrating the anniversary of Canada's oldest artist-run centre, it's a shame that we have to worry about its' future and the future of similar organizations. ■

The Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre is located at 37 Hanna Ave., Suite 220, Toronto, On., M6K 1W8 and can be reached at: Phone: 416-588-0725; Fax: 416 588-7956. The CFMDC catalogue is on the web at <http://www.cfmddc.org>.