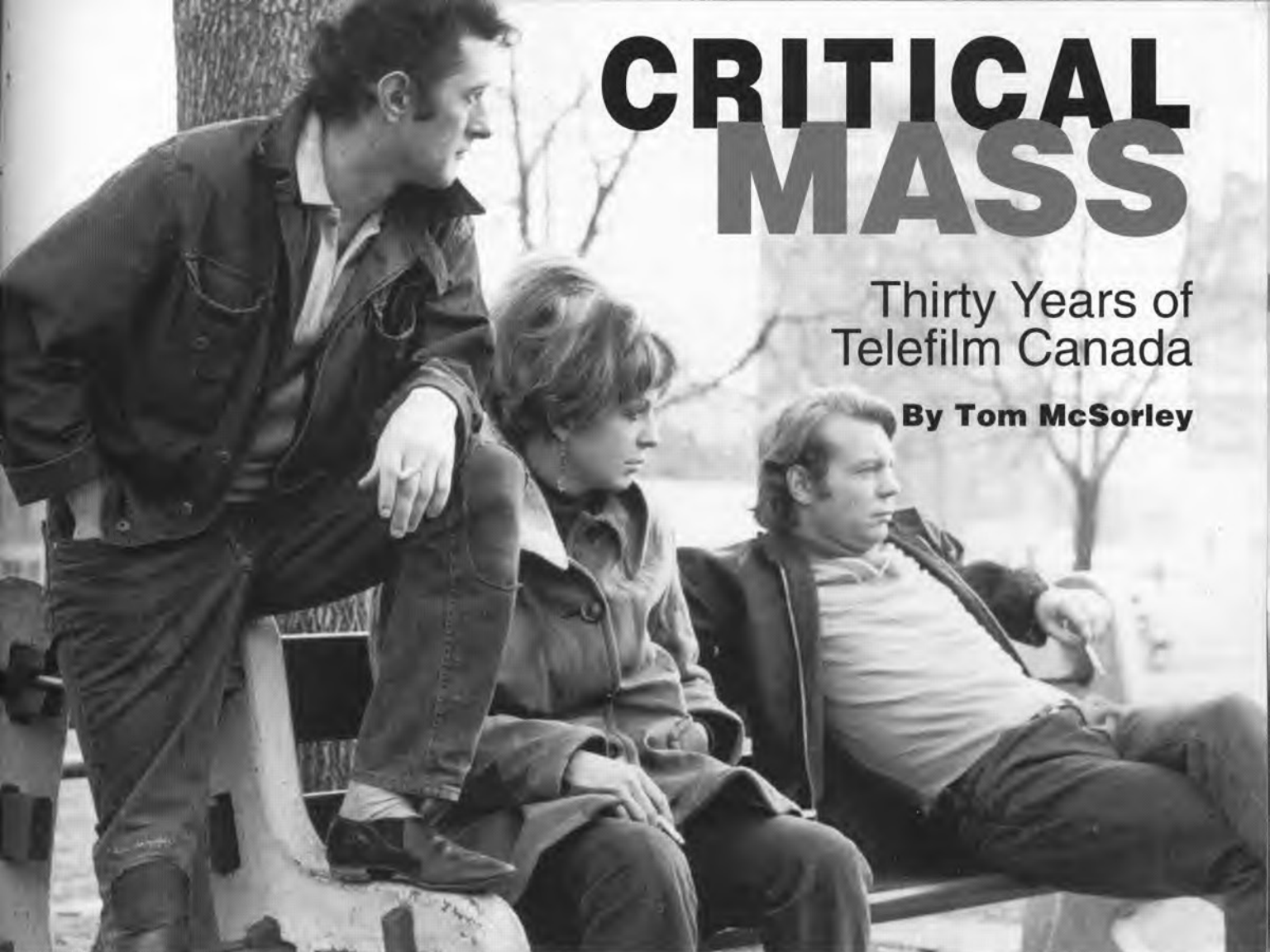


CRITICAL MASS

Thirty Years of Telefilm Canada

By Tom McSorley



Goin' Down the Road

"I really think it is only a question of time before Canada reaps her harvest from the motion picture industry."

Allan Dwan, 1920

Like dozens before him and literally thousands after, expatriate Canadian and prolific Hollywood director Allan Dwan thought it best not to wait for this apparently imminent Canadian motion-picture harvest while actually in Canada. With the Dominion's small population and colonial tendencies of quietism and deference (you know: "peace, order and good government"), not to mention the rapidly expanding and geographically insatiable American-dominated film

industry, Dwan must have known that in the Great White North cinematic seeds were few and the harvest would be modest. He was right. For most of the 20th century, for reasons that remain all too familiar, Canada has harvested its own motion pictures consistently below subsistence levels.

In one sense, the "question of time" has been interminable and dispiriting; in another, though, the long and difficult development of a Canadian motion picture "industry," nourished slowly by a nexus of state funded cultural institutions (NFB, CBC, the Canada Council, et al.) and private investment, has offered something of an answer to that question, something that may now even resemble a sustainable harvest. One of the most important, influential, impressive, infuriating, inscrutable and inspiring of these institutions is Telefilm Canada, which in 1998 celebrated its 30th year of support for Canada's film and television industries.

Founded originally as the Canadian Film Development Corp. (CFDC) by an act of Parliament in February 1967 after much debate about the problems of distribution in Canada, the first board of directors and chairman, Michael Spencer, of the new organization officially approved its mandate and bylaws in April 1968. Created to "foster and promote the development of a feature film industry in Canada," the arrival of the CFDC in the immediate post-Centennial glow of Canadian cultural nationalism is not surprising. What is surprising is a seemingly sudden and acute awareness that Canadians were not participating in the century's most popular art form and that, with two-thirds of the century already over, this was recognized as a problem.

Reflecting not only an increased cultural confidence, but also the increased agitation of restless documentary or short drama-bound filmmaking talents in the NFB and CBC, the establishment of the CFDC was, in true Canadian fashion, a response at once bold and timid. Its very

creation was bold in its attempt to actually produce Canadian images for Canadian screens; the nature of the creation was timid, for the CFDC was not empowered to redress the fundamental problem of American control of distribution and exhibition. The production of Canadian images was made easier, but the enormous impediments to delivering them to the eyes of Canadians were left intact. And so, the Canadian cinematic absence would continue; although, an increase in the

decades of operation, the Corporation injected \$1.6 billion into Canadian culture, providing support for—among other things—some 1,600 television programs and series (drama, children's programming, documentaries and variety shows), close to 700 feature films and some 50 products in the budding field of multimedia."

This extraordinary increase in the volume of production is not entirely attributable to CFDC/Telefilm Canada, but much of it is.

(Peter Pearson, 1973), *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Ted Kotcheff, 1974), *Le Vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort* (Jean Pierre Lefebvre, 1977), *The Grey Fox* (Phillip Borsos, 1983), *Loyalties* (Anne Wheeler, 1986), *Life Classes* (William D. MacGillivray, 1987), *Jésus de Montréal* (Denys Arcand, 1989), *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, 1997), *Last Night* (Don McKellar, 1998) and hundreds more.



The Sweet Hereafter
Over its first three decades of operation, Telefilm has injected \$1.6 billion into Canadian culture.

number of Canadian films produced, it was imagined, would force open the theatre doors a little. Wrong.

While sheer numbers do not tell all, they do reveal much. Between Canada's first feature film in 1913, *Evangeline*, and the establishment of the CFDC in 1967, a period of over five decades, only 237 feature films were produced and dozens of these were either feature documentaries, "quota quickies" or NFB fictional aberrations like Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Good-bye*. By contrast, 30 years later, in a context when nothing much has changed in cinemas but everything has on television, former executive director François Macerola (before his leap into Quebec provincial politics) can rightfully boast in Telefilm's 1997-98 *Annual Report*, "Over its first three

Incredibly, in 1997-98 alone, Telefilm was involved in a total of 506 new projects intended for screens big and small. Indeed, leaving aside television for a moment, it is as difficult to imagine the existence of a Canadian cinema without this crown corporation as it is impossible to write a history of Canadian cinema without an extensive discussion of its catalytic contributions, positive and negative. Its support ranges from early and forgotten films like *Le Soleil des autres* (Jean Faucher, 1968)—the first CFDC-supported feature—and *Love In a 4 Letter World* (John Sone, 1970), to the first works of David Cronenberg (*Crimes of the Future*, 1970) and such enduring films as *Goin' Down the Road* (Don Shebib, 1970), *The Act of the Heart* (Paul Almond, 1969), *A Married Couple* (Allan King, 1969), *Paperback Hero*

With the assistance of CFDC/Telefilm Canada in producing work in the odd circumstance of Canada, there have been innumerable international awards, a growing interest in Canadian films from audiences and distributors from Iceland to Australia, and a gradually accumulating and unmistakably Canadian presence in world cinema. There have also been embarrassments, failures and mistakes, such as the well-intentioned but largely execrable dalliances of the tax-shelter era [see Wyndham Wise's article, "Canadian Cinema From Boom to Bust" in this issue], and accusations that the organization is nothing more than an easy way for private producers to line their pockets with public monies for only dubiously Canadian films. It is important to remember, however, that unlike the NFB or CBC,

CFDC/Telefilm was and is still predominantly commercial in its outlook. Moreover, culture and commerce are not separate and the debate about their interaction is both interminable and infinitely complex; it cannot be resolved in any singular state or private film institution, especially in Canada. In addition, despite the increase in numbers of feature films produced, CFDC/Telefilm has not managed to persuade successive governments in Ottawa to change the persistent, systemic problem of American domination of Canada's theatre screens.

Given the intractability of Hollywood's hegemony in Canadian cinemas and the utterly colonial acquiescence to this by Ottawa, it is not surprising that in the early 1980s the CFDC shifted its emphasis from the big screen to the small, even changing its name in 1984 to Telefilm Canada ("Tele" before "film"). The shift was shrewd, given television's pre-eminence in the second half of this century. More importantly, however, is the critical reality that television in Canada, unlike movie theatres, is subject to government regulation, and producers can gain access to a delivery system to get their images to Canadians. Today Telefilm's investment in television outdistances what it spends on feature films, supporting such popular programs as *Due South*, *Traders*, *Black Harbour* and many others.

Part bank, part studio, part cinemathèque, part public relations firm, Telefilm Canada in its various activities aspires to and often achieves a Canadian motion picture gestalt: public and private sectors working together to create a continuity of opportunity and a community of artists and craftspeople making Canuck images move. Acting executive director Peter Katadotis observes that Telefilm is "a unique institution in the world. It supports development, production, distribution and marketing of Canadian film and television programming; the whole process, start to finish." Acknowledging that with such a multifarious set of activities with different demands and pressures, along with a reduction in operating funds in the past decade, the challenges are enormous. With its essential Feature Film Fund, its crucial work supporting Canada's major film festivals and promoting Canadian works at international film and television festivals and markets, its administration of the Canadian Television Fund (formerly the Canadian Television and Cable Production Fund), its Equity Investment Program, its international coproduction

initiatives and recent movement into new media, and its support for distributors and marketing initiatives, Telefilm Canada is literally everywhere.

But omnipresence does not mean omnipotence. Returning to the original intention of the CFDC in a pre-specialty channel universe—the development of a feature-film industry in Canada—Katadotis is aware that the real problems remain unchanged: distribution and exhibition. "The two failures of the Feature Film Fund, for example, are that it hasn't been big enough and that access to theatres remains a problem; Canadian films often still get better reception outside Canada than here at home. We've got to get more money into feature film and we're working on a new model, not unlike the Centre Nationale Cinématographique (CNC) in France, which ties levels of investment to box-office performance. This will put some tension in the system." Another concern for Telefilm, says Katadotis, is to have more classic and contemporary Canadian films made available on video. As he notes, "it's very complicated searching out the rights holders, etc., but Canadians need to have more access to their film heritage and video is a popular and effective way to do that." Still committed to the "cultural and training" dimensions of its work, Katadotis says that, even though its original purpose has morphed into a broader range of activity and media, the goals remain the same. "As the industry changes, so must Telefilm. We must preserve the existing public infrastructure, establish new Canadian and international partnerships and adapt our funds and programs to the challenges of the 21st century. And at the heart of this process, there must be content. Content that is distinctively Canadian and of indisputable quality."

One of Telefilm Canada's explicitly stated objectives is to "Increase the critical mass of Canadian television programs, feature films and new media works" (*Towards the New Millennium Business Plan 1997-2000*). Has this critical mass been created? Thirty years and a lot of good and bad work later, has Telefilm's efforts created a reasonably stable situation for Canadian image-makers? Perhaps now we say "yes." Unlike previous and debilitating decades, we can acknowledge that there is now the sense that the hopes of an entire nation do not ride on one film or one television show. That in itself is an achievement.

The gradual growth of a critical mass of film and television professionals, critics and audiences has involved much compromise and many failures, but it has also involved much commitment and investment in Canadian work by a multidimensional, flawed, but—it must be said—effective public institution. Those who argue for Telefilm's abolition in favour of the much-vaunted utopia of a totally private film industry should recall what private sector feature-film

Due South



production yielded in the first two-thirds of the century. At the end of the millennium it seems we have again reached, to relocate Peter Harcourt's phrase describing mid-1960s Canadian cinema, "the beginning of a beginning."

In a vastly different multimedia context and armed with considerably more experience, maybe this particular beginning will take hold. Although the primary delivery systems of moving-image culture have largely eluded Canada in the 20th century, perhaps we have developed enough critical mass not to be absent from those of the 21st. Almost eight decades later, maybe Canadian emigré Allan Dwan's wishful thinking has finally become prophecy. ■