

## TAKING CANADIAN FILMS TO CHINA:



## 加拿大 电影回顾展

In May of 1998, a group of Canadian filmmakers and academics were invited to Beijing, China, for a retrospective screening of eight recent Canadian features and five shorts from the National Film Board. Coordinated by Wang Rui, a senior research fellow at the China Film Archive and China Film Art Research Center, in collaboration with Seth Feldman, dean of fine arts at Toronto's York University, the group included *Margaret Museum's* director, Mort Ransen, and University of Manitoba film professor and author (*Cartoon Charlie*) Gene Walz. *Take One* asked professor Walz to record his impressions of this unusual cultural exchange for our readers.

Here is his story.

# A DISORIENTING EXPERIENCE

By Gene Walz

Travelling to China as part of the Canadian film delegation was as memorable a trip as I've ever taken, but not in the ways I could have predicted. It was, if you'll pardon the bad pun, a disorienting experience.

The China Film Art Research Center (CFARC, where the retrospective of the Canadian films was held) is a brand new, 13-storey building in northwest Beijing, seven or eight kilometres, I think, from Tiananmen Square. That's what the brochure says. How we got there from our hotel is anybody's guess. There is no such thing as a clear, direct car route to anything in Beijing. Our driver took us through areas that looked like they hadn't changed much since Marco Polo was there, on "roads" that would test the mettle of a Jeep.

With its white-tiled facade, tinted-glass windows, decorative red railings and curvilinear protrusions, the CFARC building would fit more comfortably in almost any North American city. It sure looked out of place where it was. Inside the building there are several large screening rooms, including one with a huge screen and plush seats for a thousand people. This is where the Canadian films were shown. There are also scores of classrooms and meeting rooms, a film vault with 25,000 Chinese and foreign films, storage areas for over 15,000 books, magazines and other study materials and plenty of offices. As well, it has western-style washrooms, complete with

separate stalls and good-old American Standard commodes.

It is all very, very impressive, and the washrooms were a comfort that I would later yearn for. Yet there was something eerie and vaguely disappointing about the place. Except for the occasional poster, the CFARC had nothing distinctively Chinese about it. It's got the same gleaming marble lobbies, the same industrial carpet, the same stackable plastic or wood-veneered furniture you see in Office Depot or Ikea. It even has the same split-leaf philodendron plants and miniature Norwegian pines in those white circular planters. This is not at all what I had expected. I wasn't looking for a bamboo hut with a rice-paper movie screen. Just something with more recognizable Chinese content. This generic, universalist stuff can be very disturbing.

Our official duties began on Tuesday, May 19, just after lunch. Seth Feldman, Mort Ransen and I were ushered into a formal meeting room and introduced to the minister of culture, the CFARC directors and various staff people. Chinese tea was served. Small talk ensued. And then the business cards came out. Exchanging business cards is a precise ritual. The presenter holds his card English-side-up by the top corners. He extends the card with both hands and bows. The receiver grasps the card with thumbs and index fingers and also bows. Then the process is reversed. I ended up with over a dozen cards, some of them duplicates.

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After this ritual, we were each presented with enormous bouquets of flowers and led on stage for the opening ceremonies. The place was almost full, unusual for a Canadian film anywhere! Lots of short speeches, chopped up and lengthened by the need for translation. By the end I felt a surge of sympathy for all those Miss America runners-up. Holding flowers while smiling and feigning interest is hard work even when you are not being evaluated for posture, poise and fetishized body parts—as I expect I wasn't. Mort Ransen's film *Margaret's Museum* opened the retrospective. We did not stick around to watch it. But every once in a while we'd sneak in to gauge the audience response—which was very attentive and engaged. The film was neither dubbed nor subtitled; an interlocutor translated everything as it went along. Still, people laughed in the right spots and gave the film a standing ovation when it was done. This, we were told, is very unusual in China.

That night we went to an upscale restaurant for a traditional banquet. Mort and I sat at a large circular table with the deputy director of CFARC, Liu Huaishan, a handsome and style-conscious man who wore expensive suits, fancy ties, designer glasses and Italian-style loafers. As he did not speak English, conversations with him were perfunctory. We talked with the six other Chinese at our table. Seth and Linda Hershkowitz, the cultural consul at the Canadian Embassy, sat at the main table with Chen Jingliang, president of CFARC, director of the China Film Archives and a secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Committee. He looked like a former street fighter—tough eyes, functional business suit, tie and a bad wig or a really horrible haircut.

The dinner consisted of about 20 platters of food beginning with duck soup and ending with duck's feet (a delicacy, but rubbery and tasteless, best drowned in sauce, any sauce). After gorging ourselves on beef, liver, battered chicken, candied fish, eel, several varieties of noodles and rice and plates of green vegetables (I violated the cardinal rule: if you can't peel it, don't eat it!), we discovered that this was all preliminary to the main course—roast Peking duck. The chef rolled the roast out on a cart and carved it personally for us. Then we were shown how to dip three pieces of duck meat into a sauce and wrap it in a crepe with leeks. It was exquisite.

After the feast, Seth went back to our hotel

and passed out. But Mort and I were just getting started. We took a cab to the Chinese bar scene in the Sanlitun district, out by embassy row. It took us 36 yuan to get there and 20 to get back. The cabbies would be right at home fleecing fares in New York. Sanlitun is like Paris café society must have been in the 1950s. Hundreds of hip young people, many of them westerners, were drinking Foster's, Budweiser or Labatt's Blue under umbrellas at outdoor sidewalk cafés, listening to music inside, or just strolling along, plugged into portable CD players or talking on cell phones. It was weird.

Late that night we ended up at a combination bar and grocery store run by a guy named Bernie from Vancouver. Bernie was brought to Beijing to set up the biggest sports bar in Asia. After securing the necessary 81 licenses and launching the place, he was replaced. This was not unusual in China, he complained. "They exploit outsiders and then discard them." Bernie also told us that "Chinese women prefer fat guys like me." Then he introduced us to his Chinese "girlfriend," a gorgeous architecture student with the enchanting name of Fang Fang Fragrance. In fact, she preferred skinny guys like Mort.

Seth and Mort and I missed the other screenings of the Canadian films. Selected by Wang Rui, a film scholar at CFARC and ambassador for Chinese films at universities throughout North America, the films included some very odd choices. *90 Days*, *Double Happiness* and *The War Between Us* were somewhat understandable, given the oriental themes and characters. *Léolo*, *Exotica*, *I Love a Man in Uniform* and even *Whale Music* each have their own claims to fame. *White Room* and especially *The Perfect Man* were less defensible.

We were asked questions about most of them at a symposium which was held in conjunction with the retrospective. About 30 people were in attendance, including several professors, researchers, both young and old, and one outspoken young filmmaker who complained boldly about government censorship in China. One professor, Zheng Dongtian, felt that Canadian films were "depressing," a not unusual appraisal, especially in light of the selections. Professor Huang Shixian saw them instead as restrained and cool. "There are lots of emotions but they are

presented coolly." Another unidentified participant said that he liked "the political dimension" of Canadian films. To which Mort replied that he had taken most of the political debates out of his film. Everyone agreed that Canadian films were better than *Titanic*, which was everywhere evident in Beijing.

Except for a perfunctory tour of the Beijing Film Studios, the symposium ended our formal obligations as members of the Canadian film delegation. For the remainder of our stay we had a car and a driver and a guide at our disposal. They took us to all the A-list sights in and around Beijing—the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the Peking Opera, The Ming Tombs and the Summer Palace. Our only duties were purely ceremonial: be genial and gracious sightseers.

We were exactly that—to a point, or at least Mort was. (Seth had to leave.) As I had contracted Mao Tse-tung's Revenge, the Green Papaya two-step, it was hard to be genial while trying to find a decent Chinese washroom. There is no such place, except in the western-style hotels. Washrooms in China consist of a series of holes in the floor of a large, fetid room. No commodes, no stalls, no toilet paper, no dignity. My mood oscillated wildly between curiosity, excitement, humility and dread.

What do I remember most about our trip? The contradictions of China. The extraordinary contrasts that are part of ordinary, everyday life there. During our time in Beijing we stayed at the Minzu Hotel on Chang'an Jie, the main street in the city. This place was so posh that they changed the rugs in the eight elevators every day: "Welcome, Tuesday" became "Welcome, Wednesday," etc. There was a pool, a weight room, expensive shops, a half-dozen restaurants and CNN on TV.

Yet literally across the back alley was a neighbourhood that looked like it hadn't changed at all since the Middle Ages. The narrow, one-storey brick huts had no electricity or water; people cooked on charcoal stoves just inside or outside the front door. (Thus Beijing is polluted worse than L.A., seeing blue skies only after an all-night heavy rain, and then for only a couple

of hours.) And the common washroom facilities at the centre of these *hutongs* (neighbourhoods) are identifiable by their noxious odours from 100 metres away.

Sure, there are vast social discrepancies like this elsewhere. But they don't exist cheek by jowl so calmly. We walked through these *hutongs* and never once felt that our lives or our wallets were in jeopardy. But they sure knocked us for a loop in other ways. Beijing can really turn your head around. For instance: walking along the Great Wall in the middle of nowhere, I bumped into a Chinese teenager talking on a cell phone. Coming home at one a.m., I passed 40 people, young and old, ballroom dancing to a ghetto blaster in the subway. Next to them was a family playing badminton. Walking the streets early one morning, I watched the changing of the guard: construction workers coming off the primitive bamboo scaffolds which surround enormous postmodern building sites, and going to sleep in shifts in the trailers stacked like building blocks on the many, many construction zones in Beijing.

Tiny children in the streets singsong "Hello. How are you?" or "How do you do?" (English has been the second language in schools for 100 years), but virtually every English-language sign in the country has some sort of blunder. Our hotel has a plaque that says it was "Built in 1959 to cremate the memory of the 10th anniversary of the revolution." The train station in Xi'an has a simple two-word greeting: "Howdo Youdo." Eating in Pizza Hut (I thought it would help "bind" me), I watched a young Chinese couple park their American sport-utility vehicle, buy some tea or spices from a small pile sold by a peasant on the sidewalk, and then come in and put ketchup and tabasco sauce on their pepperoni pizza. The big department stores on Xidan Street are as lit up, fancy and fully stocked as any North American mall—but with three attentive salespersons at every counter. Right next door there are old-fashioned, 2.4 x 3 metre storefronts cluttered with assorted goods and unlit until a customer walks in.

China is rushing frantically into the 21st century. In the past four or five years it has westernized itself in astonishing ways. Taking Canadian films there, I was happy to offer them an alternative to American glop. But I would sure hate to see the Chinese "dis-orient" themselves and start to crank out films like ours. In moving into the future, they need to retain more of their own past and present. ■

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Story board for Bill Lee and Mugwump at bar, c. 1990, by Stephan Dupuis. From David Cronenberg's *NAKED LUNCH* (1992). Collection of Chris Walas Inc., San Rafael. Photo Credit: Ben Blackwell. From the archives of The Film Reference Library.

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