

An Interview with Jacques Bensimon, Government Film Commissioner and Chairperson of the National Film Board

BY Wyndham Wise

Jacques Bensimon grew up in Morocco, North Africa, and arrived in Canada as a young adult. He became a freelance journalist then, due to the lack of film studies programs in Canada, completed his film education in New York. In 1967, he was hired by the NFB and eventually headed the program committee of the French production unit. Later he became responsible for reorganizing all of the international infrastructure for the Film Board. He spent two years in Africa, the first year travelling from Mauritania to Ghana and Nigeria. He then flew down to Nairobi, Kenya, to set up a film unit there, and for a year produced a film once a week. In 1986, he helped launch TFO, the French network of TVOntario, and specialized in establishing international co-productions. Moving on again, he became executive vice-president of the Banff Television Foundation and its chief operating officer in 2000. Then the NFB came calling.

Did your appointment as Government Film Commissioner come as a surprise to you?

It came as a complete surprise. To tell you the truth, like many people who left the Film Board, it stays within you. Once you have been an NFBer, it's very difficult to get that out of your blood. But I had been looking at the NFB from a distance, appreciating some of the things it did, not appreciating other things. When the Film Board came to me in Banff, I had already bought a house and we were committed to staying there. Pat Ferns [president of the Banff Television Foundation] is a man of vision, but he is always on the road, and we had to build a new infrastructure for the Foundation. I was happy to help put that in place. To tell you the truth, I went back to the NFB out of a sense of duty more than anything else. This place has given me so much – in terms of structuring me as an individual, as a filmmaker – and has given so much to this country, that when the offer was presented to me, it was like military service. I couldn't refuse.

Can a public institution like the NFB survive in a world of privatization and globalization? There are not too many examples to be found worldwide.

You're right, and the NFB has often been the exception to the rule. If you look at the equivalent of the NFB that Grierson helped create in Australia, it has been a model on its own as well. Honestly, the question would have to be turned back to Canadians. Do we want a NFB? That is the key question. Do we want, in this country, an institution that is independent from the political, financial and social pressures. That is the answer we need to seek. The British, for example, have proven through the BBC that you can have a very strong public broadcaster and at the same time you can rationalize and be efficient in finding new funds and new means to help the institution survive. We have to look at ourselves, in our souls as Canadians, and decide whether we deserve a NFB. So far, after 63 years, we have said yes. At times we have said yes on the edge of our lips and we have managed to cut \$30 million out of its operations. A society needs to define itself, in my opinion, not only through its private investment but through its public commitment. The NFB is not as essential as hospitals but it is essential to our souls, as Canadians, to our educational system, to our vision of who we are as a people.

What are your goals for your term in office?

It's essential that the NFB evolve within a world where it is not going to reinvent the wheel; but it has to refine its programming approach. It's got to be able to enter partnerships with others in the Canadian film and television industry. What we can't recreate is an ideal NFB where it did everything on its own. We have to enter into as many partnerships as we can. To that extent, we are talking to a lot of institutions, be it film schools, festivals or private companies, making sure the NFB is part and parcel of the evolution of the industry. Secondly, we need to find new means and new funds that will allow us to realize our vision. In order to do that, we have to maximize our revenues. I don't intend to do this in any crass way. I think we have to be very smart to fully maximize the revenues from what we are doing. I have worked with Arté, the French network, for example. There is no reason why the NFB shouldn't be able to sell its successes to the rest of the world and maximize its revenues. The third thing, by the time I leave, I want to make sure that the next generation is at the helm of the NFB, that they have taken over not only the filmmaking side of things, but the infrastructure, the human resources and financial sides. I would like to see this generation take a hold of this institution and feel about it the way my generation has felt, that it is a central Canadian institution. To me, the next generation is the key ingredient. These are some of the key goals that I would like to see realized by the time I leave office.

Will the Film Board continue to make films to fill the digital universe, or will it become involved with feature-film production again?

The Film Board has always been here to push the envelope, to push the film language, and this is where we excel, what we are good at. As someone who comes from a documentary background, it's artificial to say you cannot enter the world of fiction. If you look at Paul Cowan's *Westray* or Linda Ohama's *Obaachan's Garden*, you see that we have filmmakers in our midst who cross over into a world of fiction, to be able to go back to the films of Michel Brault, Gilles Groulx, Don Owen, which were on that thin line that separates documentary from fiction. I feel that the Film Board has a task to break those boundaries and enter into a form of narration and film lan-

guage that other filmmakers haven't shown us. I feel we shouldn't place artificial borderlines by saying the Film Board only does documentary or only does animation. That is why I want to open up fiction possibilities. But that being said, there will be strict guidelines on this process. We will not spend more than one million on a feature film and we will set certain targets in terms of days of shooting, days of editing and all that. The Europeans, through movements such as Dogme 95, have given us models, ways of pushing the envelope, of the film language, and doing so within our means.

It's been a good year for the Film Board, what with the success of Atanarjuat, Westray and the Oscar nomination for Cordell Barker's Strange Invaders.

Definitely. And it proves, as far as I'm concerned, that we need a very strong public producer and distributor of Canadian films. When you look at each of our institution's mandates, whether they be public or private, what falls between the cracks is that extra time that you need in order to be able to refine or define what you are doing, and I think the NFB has the capacity and the ability to do this. In the United States, this takes the form of grants for humanities. In Canada, it has taken the form of the NFB and when you have had 65 Oscar nominations, the private industry would have a hard time matching that.

When I attended grade school, back in the 1960s, we were shown a NFB film at least once a month in class. Now my children hardly ever see one. How will the NFB brand itself, to use the popular term for marketing, make itself more known to the Canadian public?

This is an essential ingredient of what I need to do in my job as Film Commissioner. There is no doubt it's a Canadian characteristic that we don't assert ourselves strongly enough. One of the key unresolved problems of the NFB, and Grierson even had to deal with it in his time, is the distribution of our films. It took different shapes, depending on the Film Commissioner. Grierson found two ways to resolve it. He made a deal with the Americans in order to be in their theatres, because even in those days they owned most of the theatres, and the second thing he did was invent the itinerant projectionist who used to go around to the schools and church basements and show NFB films. The Film Board changed and created its own library system. Then it closed that, and we stopped being in touch with the Canadian public. When the major cuts happened in the 1990s, the NFB first and foremost became a production outfit and not a distribution outfit. What happened was that from time to time you caught a glimpse of a NFB film on CBC-TV, but it disappeared from the Canadian consciousness.

We have a major task ahead. Beside developing young talent and refining our objectives in terms of programming, the key thing is to get back into the consciousness of Canadians. You will see a lot of things we will be putting in place in the next few months. For example, the storefront unit that we are building on the ground floor of the Toronto office. Our offices are right smack in the middle of Queen Street West, on John Street, with Citytv to the north on Queen and the Famous Players' multiplex Paramount theatre on the other side, on Richmond Street. We are going to do what we can there, and as someone at Citytv said, "Welcome to the corner." It's important that on a day-to-day basis, young people can walk into the NFB and see a film and be able to walk out with a DVD that they have rented. We have to re-establish that kind of relationship with Canadians, and if we are successful at doing it, the branding will come.

TAKE ONE



Images courtesy of the NFB.