

the National Screen Institute (NSI), in order to avoid any confusion in the future, renamed its festival FilmExchange, the all-Canadian film festival.

Festival director Bill Evans says FilmExchange is the largest festival dedicated to 100 per cent Canadian films, and this year's program included 14 features, 40 shorts, seminars, luncheons, invited guests and an opening night that featured SnowScreen, a hand-carved mound of snow shaped into a screen for a free outdoor showing in Old Market Square, in the heart of the Exchange District. Screened were the works of top Winnipeg animators Cordell Barker (*The Cat Came Back*), Richard Condie (*The Big Suit*), and *Strange Invaders*, Barker's 2002 Oscar nominee.

Guy Maddin's visual stunning and innovative *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* (see Take One No. 36) was only one of the few films to be shown that hadn't played in earlier festivals. It was screened as a fundraiser for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet two days before its premier on CBC-TV. Other galas included the multi-Genie winner, *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, Robert Cuffley's *Turning Paige*, Carl Bessai's *Lola*, Denis Chouinard's *Tar Angel*, Helen Lee's *The Art of Woo* and Dwayne Beaver's *The Rhino Brothers*. A series of industry events were offered at the Fort Garry Hotel, which served as festival headquarters, where delegates, mostly young and enthusiastic filmmakers from the thriving Winnipeg film community, could benefit from insider knowledge from the likes of director Gary Burns (*waydowntown*), producer Sandra Cunningham (*The Sweet Hereafter*) and writer Karen Walton (*Ginger Snaps*). Atom Egoyan talked at length with Geoff Pevere, *The Toronto Star's* movie critic, and Jacques Bensimon, the newly appointed Government Film Commissioner, gave a lunchtime address.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the festival was the closing night gala screening of Paul Gross's curling saga, *Men with Brooms*. The timing was brilliant as the Men with Brooms promotional tour coincided exactly with the dates of the festival. The tour swung into town Friday with Gross, Peter Outerbridge, James Allodi, Leslie Nielsen, Michelle Nolden, Kari Matchett and Alliance Atlantis PR staffers. On Saturday, Winnipeg's Granite Curling Club, the oldest in the country - formed in 1880 just 10 years after the province was founded - was the site for a media-staged event, two ends of celebrity curling with the cast and some local heroes, including Winnipeg mayor Glen Murray and Manitoba Premier Gary Doer. Afterwards everyone retired to the bar upstairs, presentations were made, and the assembled were told once again that Winnipeg is the curling capital of the world. The Alliance Atlantis PR types were working the room, making sure the media got the choice bits and understood the unique effort they were putting into promoting the film. Outerbridge told one *Winnipeg Free Press* reporter, "Everyone here has been involved with a Canadian film that was really good and had huge critical acclaim, then it went into the theatre for a week and disappeared. Canadian films don't get buzz. So let's give this movie a lot of buzz and let's tell everybody about it. If it works, then maybe it will start a trend."

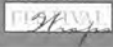
The screening that night was packed and the audience buzzed. If Winnipeg is, indeed, the curling capital of the universe, then the film could not have found a better, more forgiving audience. From the opening strains of "The Land of the Silverbirch," a campfire song everyone seemed to know, to the closing beavers and a



Leslie Nielsen and Paul Gross.

standing ovation, it roared its approval. They simply got it, loved it and laughed at every corny curling joke. In the 30 years I have spent watching Canadian films, I never have experienced such a joyous reaction. Gross stood up after final credits for a Q&A and the handsome leading man had them eating out of the palm of his hand. When one fan asked a few questions from the second balcony, she shouted, "Do you have a date for tonight?" Then, in a move that brought the house down, she ran down the stairs and planted a kiss on his cheek as flashbulbs popped.

After the festival, *Playback*, the Canadian industry biweekly, reported that the attendance nearly double from last year, which is a good sign that the festival organizers at the NSI are on the right track. They're making an effort to court the local and national press, and by offering a 100 per cent Canadian film festival they can carve out an important niche in the growing Canadian festival circuit. Surprisingly, it hasn't been done before. Not surprisingly, it's being done in Winnipeg - in February.



FILM • VIDEO • TV

Images Festival of Independent Film and Video

TORONTO 4/11-20/02

By Stephen Lan

Morose existential cowboys, ruminations on fleeting love, fast chopsticks that kill, kill, kill, and a giant slug named Laura hitchhiking to Winnipeg - it looks like Canadian filmmakers have more up their creative sleeves than pallid adventures of an all-male curling team. Now in its 15th year, the Images



Libby Hague's *Our Town*.

Festival of Independent Film and Video brought together another full plate of abstract video art, personal diaries and homemade porn from around the world to Toronto in April. The festival also dedicated a retrospective to Richard Fung, a Toronto video artist, theorist and activist, which included his early important works as well as an excerpt from his latest film, *National Sex*.

FESTIVAL

Images

The festival opened with its usual bang, featuring a strong program of short films, which included the sumptuous *Passage* by Iranian-born, New York-based photographer/installation artist/filmmaker Shirin Neshat, and the Oscar-nominated *Copy Shop* by Austrian filmmaker Virgil Widrich. Two Canadian films also formed part of this selection: Julie-Christine Fortier's *Line Up* and Steven Woloshen's *Babble on Palms*. The babble in question is the type of language originated by NFB animator Norman McLaren – colourful patterns of hand-drawn dots and lines dancing across an unidentified hand partially blocking the view of landscape shots in the background.

Other noteworthy Canadian films were spread out over the festival's 25 appetizing programs. They ranged in theme and genre, from the intimate and personal – Sarah Abbott's and Jeremy Drummond's quietly devastating *My Heart the Prophet* – to the thoughtful and philosophical, Daniel Cockburn's clever and witty *The Other Shoe*. Libby Hague's *Our Town* tells the story of six-year-old Molly who "only wants a prince, a magic carpet and a happy ending." Using watercolour drawings of children skipping rope and riding their bikes against the scrolling background of a suburban development complex, *Our Town* initially seems like a playful caricature of childhood innocence. But underneath the veneer of suburban complacency lies an unforeseen suicide that rattles the normalcy of a family and the peacefulness of an entire neighbourhood. With the advent of such a tragedy, Molly doesn't get her happy ending after all.

With the number of touching personal stories and thought-provoking anecdotes featured at the festival, Images wouldn't truly be an experimental film festival without including a few films that toss away the whole notion of narrative. In *Static Discharge for Bleeding Eyes*, Jowita Kepa slices, inverts, flashes and reverses the negative image of an unidentified man with a minimalist soundtrack of white noise pulsating in the background. A fascinating example of image and sound manipulation, *Static* proves that sometimes telling a story without actually telling any story can have a major dramatic effect. At the other end of the abstract spectrum, Ian Toews went for the more au naturel approach in the self-explanatory *Japan: Kessai Line Single Take*. By simply allowing his camera to roll from the window of a fast-moving commuter train, Toews captures the Tokyo landscape whizzing by at high speed. The result is a spectacular display of a "living" abstract canvas.

The equally Japanese-themed *Sand* was by far one of the oddest Canadian films programmed at Images this year. Using black-and-white animated drawings and voice-overs speaking in Japanese (with English subtitles), Percy Fuentes strings up vignettes of fragmented stories, ranging from childhood memories of listening to records while sitting on the roof to arguments about the death of punk and how Blowout Comb was the slickest hip-hop album of the 1990s. In terms of narrative, *Sand* may not make a lot of sense, and yet it strangely stands out as one of the most intriguing and creative Canadian films featured in the festival.

The festival wrapped up with the Queerest of the Queer program, which included four noteworthy Canadian films. *Les Amants* by Nessa Palmer and Chang Wan Wee is a short but sexy film about two lovers taking the French kiss to the next erotic level. In Mark Costner's *There Is Absence, There Is Lack*, a lone modern-day cowboy walks all over town holding a



Virgil Widrich's *Copy Shop*.

window frame in search of its perfect fit in an imperfect world. Following closely in the footsteps of Richard Fung, but with his own tongue-in-cheek style, Vancouver-based filmmaker Wayne Yung has always been one not to shy away from addressing head-on issues of queer sexuality and Asian identity. In his latest, *Chopsticks, Bloody Chopsticks*, Yung works in co-operation with gore filmmaker Shawn Durr to create a split-screen diary of an Asian serial killer getting back at his white ex-boyfriends. High in camp and fun, *Chopsticks* nonetheless carries serious undertones of queer Asian politics.

Those who tenaciously stuck till the tail end of the festival were regaled by an unexpected treat. Scott Treleaven's *The Salvation Army* may have been the last film programmed at the festival, but it certainly stood out as one of the boldest and well-crafted films in terms of the Canadian selection. Narrated by Treleaven himself, the film is based on fairly recent real-life events. The Salvation Army, as the filmmaker explains, is a group of friends, a queer cult, a pack of wolves and sex-crazed hyenas. It starts with three friends with deeply personal agendas to condemn fascism, elitism, classicism, racism and sexism. Based on their common ethos, the group members start a zine, sharing their beliefs and views of the world. While it was meant to be a half-joke, some people begin to take the Salvation Army too seriously. Letters of support from all over the world start pouring in. Then, a young boy from New York contacts the group, begging to do anything to be initiated into the gang. The coup de grace comes about when an unlabelled videotape arrives from San Francisco, containing footage of a boy tied up and lying unconscious on the ground. Had he been raped? Was this a joke or the consequences of an initiation rite? More importantly, should the tape be handed to the police, and if so, will the Salvation Army be held accountable? Creepy, disturbing, honest and ultimately poignant, *The Salvation Army* is crafted with homemade porn, re-enacted footage, as well as the clip of the video sent from San Francisco. Clearly influenced by Derek Jarman and Kenneth Anger, Toronto-based Treleaven has finally emerged as a strong talent to keep a close eye on.

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