

Festival WITAPS

Jennifer Podemski



ImagineNATIVE Media Arts Festival

(10/24–27/02)

By Tom Lyons

Image courtesy of the Big Soul Productions.

The third annual ImagineNATIVE Media Arts Festival screened over 50 works by Aboriginal filmmakers and videographers from around the world during its four-day run last October in downtown Toronto. Documentaries from New Zealand and Russia shared the spotlight with archival footage from the United States and a host of old and new works from Canada, including half-hour television dramas, animated children's shows, NFB documentaries and an independently produced dramatic feature. Also included in the program were taped submissions from Aboriginal radio hosts.

The festival's atmosphere was low-key and friendly, with filmmakers attending each other's screenings at the University of Toronto's Innis Town Hall, sharing speakers' duties at nearby industry seminars and showing up for the festival's closing-night party at the Film Lounge in Chinatown. Although it lacked an explicit political agenda, the four-day event was dominated by Aboriginal women filmmakers and Aboriginal women's issues.

Kicking off the festival at the Royal Theatre on College Street was veteran NFB director Alanis Obomsawin's latest documentary, *Is the Crown at War with Us?* Criticized by some mainstream reviewers as too one-sided when it premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2002, Obomsawin's unapologetically parti-

san look at the Mi'kmaq fishing dispute in Burnt Church, N.B., received a standing ovation from the opening-night crowd. A reminder that NFB Aboriginal films were not always this radical, or polished, was provided by a screening of NFB works from the 1950s and 1960s. *The Longer Trail*, a 1956 docudrama by Fergus McDonnell, a non-Native director, may have seemed progressive in its day, insofar as it disapproves of racial slurs. Seen today, however, the film—about a sickly Native boy from a reservation who learns to trust the friendly white doctors and social workers of the big city—seems like a paternalistic rationalization of the federal government's forcible relocation programs.

Two NFB documentaries from 1967, *PowWow at Duck Lake* and *Indian Dialogue*, both directed by David Hughes, took a step forward by allowing Aboriginal youths to vent their anger at government policies directly into the camera. One of the bitter young men seen in the films turned out to be Toronto television personality Duke Redbird, who shared his reflections on 1960s activism with the festival audience after the screening. Still young and angry was director Rebeka Tabobondung, whose 2002 independent documentary, *The Original Summit: Journey to the Sacred Uprising*, traced the connections between indigenous uprisings throughout North America and the recent

anti-FTAA protests in Quebec City.

Younger directors trying their hands at drama, rather than documentaries, had a more challenging time of it. Shirley Cheechoo's *Bearwalker*, which screened at Innis, was the first dramatic feature by a Canadian Aboriginal director (pre-dating *Atanarjuat*), and the film has the battle scars to prove it. Originally shown at Sundance in 1999 under the title *Backroads*, Cheechoo's harrowing tale of three sisters coping with sexual violence on a Manitoulin Island reserve was heavily edited by the film's American distributors who were subsequently unable to secure a theatrical release for their commercialized product. Disillusioned, Cheechoo secured a loan from the fledgling Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) to buy back the rights to the film. After re-editing, rescoring and adding a narrative voice-over, she changed the film's title to *Bearwalker* and sold it to TMN-The Movie Network, where it enjoyed a lengthy run in 2002 before moving over to APTN.

Most of the other new dramatic works seen at the festival clocked in at under 30 minutes, as young filmmakers pragmatically set their sights on half-hour television slots rather than wide theatrical releases. Pamela Matthews's tragicomic *Only the Devil Speaks Cree*, shown on Saturday night, depicted a young girl's dogged attempts to escape an abusive residential school in the 1950s. Warmly received, the film picked up the festival's Best Dramatic Short Award. It was followed by two 24-minute works from Big Soul Productions, the Toronto film and television production company established in 1999 by actor Jennifer Podemski and producer Laura Milliken. The first Big Soul short, *RepREZentin' in Fort Chip*, examined date rape and alcohol abuse on an isolated reservation in northern Alberta. The second, *Laurel*, traced the nightmarish existence of an inner-city prostitute, played by Podemski herself. The film drew hostile questions from some audience

members who felt it was unnecessarily violent and judgmental.

The Spirit of Annie Mae, a powerful new documentary from Catherine Anne Martin, the chair of APTN, closed the festival. The NFB film traces the life and death of Annie Mae Pictou-Aquash, a Mi'kmaq Native rights activist from Nova Scotia whose unsolved murder in South Dakota in 1976 provoked accusations that both the FBI and Annie Mae's fellow warriors in the American Indian Movement (AIM) were involved in the crime and its cover-up. According to Native activists interviewed in the film, Annie Mae was executed by AIM members who had been duped by FBI infiltrators into believing that she was an informant. At the time of her killing, scores of Aboriginal activists were being murdered on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, allegedly by an FBI-sponsored goon squad. In this bloody and paranoia-ridden atmosphere, the successful "snitch-jacketing" of an activist was tantamount to a death sentence. One of Annie Mae's daughters, Denise, attended the screening, as did Minnie Two Shoes, an Aboriginal activist and journalist who worked alongside Annie Mae in the 1970s during AIM's historic battles with the FBI in South Dakota and Washington, D.C.

"It's overwhelming to see how far we've come in this world of film and video and media," Martin told the enthusiastic closing night audience. "It took about 15 years before Annie Mae's daughters agreed that it was time to tell the story. But one of the things [we realized was that] if we were going to follow Annie Mae we'd have to follow her road. So we did. It took us about three years," she explained, recounting her sometimes frightening trips through South Dakota where some of Annie Mae's killers are still thought to reside. "I'm really honoured to have this chance to tell her story."

Tom Lyons is a Toronto-based freelance writer with the Canadian Press.

Catherine Anne Martin's *The Spirit of Annie Mae*



International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam

(11/21-12/1/02) By Henry Lewes

Canada was well represented last year at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam, both with films and the exuberant presence of Peter Wintonick, who ran a Master Class and chaired one of the evening discussions. Some notable risks were taken by a number of Canadian filmmakers. *In the Line of Fire* (made by Patricia Naylor for CBC's *Witness*) investigates the way in which journalists working on the West Bank are shot at by Israeli soldiers. *Seeing Is Believing* (Katerina Cizek and Peter Wintonick) deals with how lightweight videocams have become a powerful tool for exposing official abuse. Black-veiled women of Damascus are interviewed in *Veils Uncovered* (Nora Kevorkian) as they shop for sexy underwear in the

Image courtesy of NFB.