



Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story, courtesy NFB

The Banff Television Festival

By Coral Andrews-Leslie



The Banff Television Festival (BTF) continues to expand on its powerful mantra globally. Also key to Banff's undeniable success is its collaboration and cross-fertilization, achieved through marketing and branding industry wares as it continues to extend its activities and events to a worldwide audience.

Evidence of this is the acquisition in 2003 of The International New Media Festival, in Brundell, PEI. The Banff Television Foundation now also manages for-the-journalist/by-the-journalist News World, an annual forum for the international broadcast news industry. This forum is significant, especially in light of recent war coverage and demands answers to such questions as: “How perforated is the line between hard news and entertainment?” “What is the ‘real’ news?” “What is ‘embedded’ journalism?” “How involved does the viewer have to become in the information-gathering process?” These emerging issues will be debated by the world's best journalists in candid Q&A panel discussions at the 9th annual News World Conference to be held in Dublin, Ireland, October 2003.

In partnership with News World, Banff Television Foundation president and CEO, the visionary Pat Ferns, has created The World Congress of Arts, Producers and Performance. This will be an annual forum for arts professionals to share ideas and discuss key issues in Canadian arts programming. The inaugural conference will take place at Ottawa's National Arts Centre in November. “This event will in time be piggy-backed with the Governor General's Awards,” notes Jim Byrd, BTF executive vice-president and COO. Byrd was instrumental in putting the BTF on the global-strategy map. “The World Congress of Arts, Producers and Performance is

the same idea as News World, an opportunity for those in arts and performance programming to get together and celebrate the stuff that they do, bring attention and focus to it and raise the issues surrounding it, because this is a genre that's threatened around the world,” he says. “It's not cheap programming. It requires a commitment from the viewer. There are challenges for the producers in this area, but at the same time the arts programming really is the arts and culture of a country. That's what drove us to create this forum for them.”

Front and centre on the BTF agenda this year is the State of Television series. Part of its criteria will be to examine the increasing difficulty of producing Canadian drama, very timely in light of the recent cutbacks in funding from the Canada Television Fund. This year's panel features moderator and BTF board of governors chair Trina McQueen who has been conducting a study of Canadian drama and will chair a broad-based discussion of her recommendations for the future of this genre. Byrd says that of all the categories in BTF's program competition, the drama category is probably one of the most “hotly contested.” Every country around the world seems to have its own style when showcasing its own drama. Byrd is hopeful that Canada will soon follow dramatic suit through some innovative networking mechanism.

Another aspect of television programming that will bear panel scrutiny at Banff this year is the phenomenal growth of reality television, as industry leaders, chaired by CBC media watchdog Mark Starowicz, examine the fluctuating reality programming trend line. Small-screen executive producer and funnyman James Burrows, known for decades of legendary sitcom brilliance in programs such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, *Cheers*, *Frasier* and *Will and Grace*, is calmly waiting for the end of the reality television world. “I believe in

cyclical television," he says. "That's just the way it is. This is faddish television. All these shows are imitations of other shows. Eventually people will tire of it. Comedy was dead in 1982 when *Cheers* went on-air. It, and *The Cosby Show*, started a whole new trend. Then comedy died when *Seinfeld* went off the air and everyone was talking about dramas. And now everyone is talking about reality television. As long as you do good shows, people will watch."

Burrows prefers well-executed shows that use actors to the utmost, citing the examples of John Ritter in *Three's Company* or Ray Romano in *Everybody Loves Raymond*. He also loves cutting-edge shows like his own *Will and Grace* and Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, nominated this year in the comedy category for BTF's Rockie Awards. Burrows is one of four Lifetime Achievement Award recipients as part of this year's "Tribute to the U.S.A." with fellow honorees HBO's Sheila Nevins, PBS's Peter McGhee and renowned British documentary filmmaker, broadcaster and producer, Sir David Attenborough.

Other Banff 2003 highlights include the 50th-anniversary celebration of Japanese broadcasting network NHK, which has been instrumental in developing high-definition and digital television. The Banff 2003 Award of Excellence goes to *Sopranos* creator David Chase, and the Sir Peter Ustinov Award will be given for outstanding comedic contribution to Rick Mercer. Past winners include Kelsey Grammer, John Candy, Steve Smith, Tracey Ullman, and last year's uproariously popular recipient, John Cleese.

At the scenic Banff Fairmont Springs Hotel, the 24th Rockie Awards, which are presented at the beginning of the festival, are a breath of fresh mountain air. Canadian contenders include Paule Baillargeon's *Claude Jutra, portrait sur film* in the Arts/Documentary category, the made-for-television movie *100 Days in the Jungle*, directed by Sturla Gunnarsson and the short drama *Not a Fish Story* by Anita Doron. Out of 900 entries from 39 countries, three Canadian productions were nominated for Sports Programming: *The Circus Is in Town: 50 Years of Hockey Night in Canada*, *The Hockey Nomad* and *Nos Amours: The Saga of the Montreal Expos*, a BTF sports programming first. "At the Oscars, three or four films get all the attention," Byrd says, "At the Rockies, the range of programming is from around the world and the quality is superb. No one program gets to dominate. It's a whole catalogue of really interesting top-notch programming, and I think that continues to be one of the main attractions of these awards."

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