

# BANFF TELEVISION FESTIVAL

(6/8-13/03)

BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN

**IT WOULD BE UNFAIR** to say that the outstanding moment at the 2003 Banff Television Festival was the sight of Astral Media president, John Riley, at the podium in a wife-beater T-shirt introducing the Award of

weakened U.S. dollar. The festival itself shared that sensitivity when many of the geographically challenged international delegates did not attend, fearing that Banff was too close to SARS-afflicted Toronto.

It was a curious year for this awards-heavy festival that selected American television as its theme this year. According to one event programmer, decisions of that magnitude are made a year in advance, a lead time that does not easily accommodate exigent circumstances such as Canadian foreign policy suddenly

Achievement Award for Sir David Attenborough, the Outstanding Achievement Award/CFT Fellowship Prize went to writer Karen Walton, and accepting the Award for ACTRA having existed for 60 years was Don McKellar who said, with his trademark aplomb, "I'd like to thank the Banff Television Foundation for giving a Canadian actor a small part to play in a festival celebrating American television."

The Rockie Awards in the competitive category were wide-ranging: the big paycheck of \$50,000 went to *Chavez: Inside the Coup*, a production from the Republic of Ireland, in association with the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Finland. The \$25,000 NHK President's Prize for the Best High Definition TV Entry went to *Drawing A-Bomb Memories*, a Japanese documentary. On a lighter note, but interesting because of its social significance was the award to *Two Minutes from Paradise*, in the Short Drama category, a "Clueless meets *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*" a one-hour comedy about a rebellious daughter of a liberal Israeli family who finds her rebellion in a romance with an Arab boy. Director, Michal Keren said she could not have even found funding for this project a decade ago, but five years ago in a moment of optimism, the funding agencies green-lit the comedy. "It is the very first of its kind," Keren said, and its mere existence signals a non-political mending of fences in that part of the world.

Canada had a presence, but not an outstanding one. In six of the 15 Rockie Award categories, with a total of nine entries out of a total of 92 nominees for Rockie Awards, the only Canadian winner was *Le Mozart Noir: Reviving a Legend* (Media Headquarters in association with

CHAVEZ: INSIDE THE COUP.



Excellence to recipient, David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*; but it would also be true. The fetching ensemble of suit pants and a sleeveless undershirt along with the faux New Jersey accent, the imposing senior executive physique—it was the big podium finish before the evening actually ended.

Funding, or the Canadian Television Fund lack thereof, notwithstanding, the influx of Banff 2003's 1,800 delegates into the happy mountain town was an event happily welcomed by the locals who have been acutely aware of how tourism has been affected by the

taking a turn for the independent and the ensuing U.S. reaction. While the recipients of said Awards of Excellence—David Chase, James Burrows, Peter McGhee and Sheila Nevins—were choices of unquestionable calibre, there were awkward murmurings among some delegates. But Banff 2003 is a Canadian festival to the core and the volume level of said murmurings never reached a distinct level.

The awards list continued on to include: Rick Mercer for the Sir Peter Ustinov Comedy Award, the Lifetime

# festival wraps



CBC/BBC/TV5) in the Performance Program category. The other domestic nominees were *Henry's World: Darwin for a Day* (AAC Kids/Loonland U.K.) and *Ludovic: Visiting Grandparents* (NFB) in the Animated Programs category; *The Circus is in Town: 50 Years of Hockey Night in Canada* (CBC), *The Hockey Nomad* (Mercury Films/House of Fire Productions in association with CBC ) and *Nos Amours: The Saga of the Montreal Expos* (Adobe Productions) in the Sports category; *Claude Jutra: An Unfinished Story* (Production Docu 2 /Fox-Fire Films/NFB) in Arts Documentaries; *Not a Fish Story* (Avalanche films/Indio Pictures) in Short Drama; and *100 Days in the Jungle* (Imagination Films and Television Production/Sextant Entertainment in association with CTV) in the made-for-television movies category.

The Banff conference is a much loved, unique beast: not a festival of the Cannes/TIFF variety because there are no organized screenings, and not a market because there are no orchestrated sales. But business is done at Banff. "It's a cheap trip to Toronto," says Crawford Hawkins, managing director of the Western branch of the Directors Guild of Canada, moments before the Rockie Awards show was to begin, "because Toronto comes here." "I saw deals

being signed," said director Keren. "I am going to other festivals with *Two Minutes from Paradise*, and I know winning this Rockie is regarded with greater prestige than awards from other festivals."

Without question, Banff 2003 is a well-finessed pitch venue and delegates split into the "been here before" and the "this is my first time" categories. The former discuss their available time in terms of which days are still open while the latter count the number of meetings they've had on digits. To this end, Joe Novak offers what is effectively a "Banff for Dummies" seminar which gives first-timers with a project to pitch a functional "how to." "Arrive early," one first-timer said, noting that he changed his flight to get there a day before the festival officially started on Monday, June 9th. "I had two

meetings on the Sunday, and they were amazing. The lunches give me access to people I'd never ordinarily meet, but I haven't perfected the art of grabbing someone on the stairs and pitching them on the spot."

It was the seminars that generated the highbrow discussions. The thrust of the conference agenda followed themes of "truth or spin," "box office or broadcast," "documentary or reality" (which is becoming a definition issue given the proliferation of *The Osbournes*-type programming in the last year). Peter Mansbridge hosted a 90-minute international panel discussion entitled *The State of Television: War, Truth & Spin* that, while fascinating, thanks to CBC's Patrick Brown and BBC's Nick Frazer, also took 70 minutes to get around to the actual subject of spin.

To wrap up, Banff is not about definition, or at least no definition that any two delegates there could agree upon. What is not in question is the magnificence of the mountains, the peace and quiet of the town, the superb martinis at the Banff Springs Hotel and the fact that you hardly have to put a gun to anyone's head to get them to go there and talk about the business.

STEVE SMITH WITH RICK MERCER



CYNTHIA AMSDEN IS A MEMBER OF TAKE ONE'S EDITORIAL BOARD.