

Hollywood North: Creating the Canadian Motion Picture Industry

By Michael Spencer with Suzan Ayscough, Cantos International Publishing, 2003. \$29.95.

A Century of Canadian Cinema: Gerald Pratley's Feature Film Guide, 1900 to the Present

By Gerald Pratley, Lynx Images Inc., 2003. \$29.95.

REVIEWED BY CHRIS BLAKEMAN

Michael Spencer's *Hollywood North: Creating the Canadian Motion Picture Industry* is an informative and lively account of the history of Canadian cinema from an insider's point of view. Spencer was a member of the Canadian Army's Feature Film Photo Unit during the Second World War. He joined the NFB and rose to become one of its top planning executives. He actively lobbied for and became the first executive director of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) (now Telefilm Canada) in 1967. In this position he oversaw the difficult birth of a feature film industry until he was replaced in 1978. Since then he has remained active in the industry as a partner in Film Finances of Canada, a completion bond company he co-founded in the early 1980s.

Hollywood North is required reading for anyone interested in the political nature of filmmaking in Canada. Spencer recalls in great detail the machinations and Cabinet infighting that led to the creation of the CFDC. The book is a bit dry at times, but vital in understanding the role politics has played, and still plays, in an industry totally reliant on government support.

From the get-go, the industry has been dominated by politicians, wealthy lawyers, accountants and cultural bureaucrats, a particularly hideous term that has special meaning in the minefield of arts funding in Canada; and Spencer is an accomplished cultural bureaucrat. He is helped along with his memoirs by Susan Ayscough, a one-time film journalist for *Variety* and herself an important mover and shaker in the business. A good, brisk read with the occasional funny anecdote about politics and bird-watching trips, Spencer's real passion.

Calling *A Century of Canadian Cinema: Gerald Pratley's Feature Film Guide, 1900 to the Present* eccentric would be giving new meaning to the word. This guide is just plain weird. It is so full of factual errors and off-the-wall rants, it's hard to know where to start. Perhaps the title

would be a good place, since it's misleading. This is not a "feature film" guide, but rather a collection of notes Pratley has amassed over the years. For the most part it consists of made-for-television dramas that don't even qualify as features. Pratley excuses this in his introduction with a King Vidor quote, "A film is a film is a film"; which means nothing when the film in question has been written by a committee and ground out like sausage for television.

David Cronenberg, universally recognized as Canada's greatest auteur, comes in for particularly harsh criticism. *Dead Ringers*, the only Canadian film to make it on *Sight and Sound's* prestigious listing of the 100 greatest films of all time, is described as "the most absurdly overpraised film of the year." And this is polite compared to Pratley's assessment of Cronenberg's overall body of work: "A career of self-indulgent, nasty-minded mediocre movies." Atom Egoyan is another of his pet peeves. On *The Adjuster*, one of Egoyan's most accomplish early works, Pratley writes: "A cold, dreary, hermetic film about voyeurism (perhaps), with a silly censorship sequence, communicating to very few." This sort of comment questions his judgment about the subject matter at hand.

Pratley consistently gets his facts wrong. He lists *Wayne's World 2* as a Canadian film because it has a hack Canadian director and a Canadian star (Mike Myers), but it simply isn't Canadian. He does the same thing with Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park*. Yet, if he wants to go this route and include anything that is directed or written by a Canadian, then why isn't James Cameron's *Titanic*, Nia Vardalos's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* listed? Like I said, this is one weird guide, which reflects rather poorly on someone who has done so much to promote a film culture in Canada.

Chris Blakeman is a Toronto-based freelance critic and editor.

