

# VANCOUVER International Film Festival

(9/23-10/10/04)

By Dale Drewery

The festival's local card was Francis Leclerc's *Mémoires affectives* (*Looking for Alexander*), another entry in the recent spate of Quebec existential let's-get-obsessed-about-mortality movies (a Denis Villeneuve specialty). This one starred the ubiquitous Roy Dupuis. But the local star of the festival was undoubtedly Ryan Larkin, the infamous NFB animator who, after making a number of exhilarating shorts in the 1960s and early 1970s (including the Oscar-nominated *Walking*), faded into a life of severe substance abuse, homelessness and panhandling on Montreal streets. A tribute was given to Larkin with a screening of his early films, followed by two NFB movies, Chris Landreth's 14-minute documentary/animation hybrid *Ryan* (a short the NFB is pushing for Oscar consideration) and Laurence Green's *Alter Egos*, a fantastic documentary about Larkin and the making of *Ryan*. Green manages to unearth some fascinating Canadian film



Chris Landreth's *Ryan*

history here, including the fact that part of Larkin's trouble was dealing with his own homosexuality. It's a thoroughly engaging documentary, one that is as much about the struggles documentary filmmakers face as it is about Larkin himself. Larkin was present at the affair and occasionally heckled the screen when he saw or heard something he didn't like.

The intimacy of the evening made for an incredible festival experience. After the screenings, the audience was invited to meet with Larkin and the filmmakers in the courtyard of the Ex-Centris cinema complex. There, the filmmakers mingled with the public and a number of noted members of Montreal's film community, from SODEC's Harry Gulkin to Daniel Cross (director of *S.P.I.T.*) to NFB veterans Barbara Doran and animator George Ungar. The sense of community was tremendously powerful, as was the sense that the public was having a unique opportunity to connect with cinema in a way that serves as a reminder of what these festivals really should be about. As FCMM grows (and it will grow considerably if Telefilm and SODEC choose it as the new recipient of government funding), a key challenge will be for organizers to maintain this spirit of intimacy and community, something that has sadly been almost completely lost at larger events like TIFF.

Forget the parties, put down that martini, the West Coast film industry has more serious things on its collective mind. "B.C.'s filmmaking community," says Trade Forum producer Melanie Friesen, "is facing some of the toughest market conditions yet." A more robust Canadian dollar, increased global competition, better tax credits in other provinces and U.S. financial incentives to keep American production at home have all taken their toll. The film industry in this province is down 25 per cent over last year, and those who work in it are searching for new ways of doing business. This is where the 19th Annual Film & Television Trade Forum comes in. For four days in September (22-25), amid the bustle of the Vancouver International Film Festival, 1,000 delegates, guest speakers and the media talk about everything from adapting material for the screen, to international co-productions, to the business of low-budget episodic television.

One of the most interesting discussions centered on the rapidly growing DVD market and the implications for filmmakers everywhere. As of June of 2004, DVD sales in Canada have risen by 100 per cent over last year, and the majority of people with DVD players say they'd rather watch movies at home on DVD than see them in theatres. "The DVD is sexy," says Martin Wragg, Canadian V.P. and managing director of MGM. "It's suddenly become a product that you are proud to own as opposed to something that you have in a box hidden away." Read VHS. Although the format still accounts for 24 per cent of Home Entertainment sales, Wragg is hardly a fan. "If you look at it, a VHS is not a particularly attractive piece of kit," he says with his Scottish lilt. "It's big and it's clunky and it falls to pieces."

"The adaptation rate for DVD is amazing," says Linda Sanderson, V.P. of purchasing at Rogers Video. "We got into it at the very beginning, around 1997, and all of a sudden 2000 hit and it's been a wild ride ever since. DVDs went from 10 per cent of our rental business to over 90 per cent, and they account for almost 100 per cent of the movies that we sell." In fact, the DVD market is moving so quickly it's starting to drive the film business. "Home Entertainment is making its own product," says Wragg. "*Species 1* and *2*, for example, were theatrical releases and very successful for us. So we just made *Species 3*. It had a \$5-million budget, but it was made as a straight-to-DVD release."

Insight Film & Video CEO Kirk Shaw is doing his best to ignore his insistently ringing mobile. The Vancouver production company is one of the busiest in the city. Last year, among other projects, they completed 10 movies, four of which went straight to DVD in the U.S. "What we've seen happen," Shaw explains, "is that the DVD companies are willing to pay larger amounts [in distribution advances] for bigger names. So that there is more pressure to get a better cast ensemble that will draw the public to the product."

Shaw believes that the DVD market is about to undergo a significant change. "I think we are going to see sponsored collaborations," he predicts,



Kevin Pollock in Gary Yates's *Seven Times Lucky* the winner of the Citytv Western Canada Feature Film Award at VIFF.

"like Proctor & Gamble and *Playboy* movie releases. Certain publishing companies, for example, own the space beside the cash register at every Wal-Mart and they're filling it right now with magazines. I think they'll soon fill it with DVDs that somehow relate to the magazine." Most importantly,

they must appeal to the public. "When DVDs first started coming out," says Sanderson, "the titles that sold the best were the big action ones, with huge explosions on screen. We call them testosterone movies." Males made up the vast majority of the audience, and the product was marketed accordingly. "In the old days," recalls Wragg, "the joke was, if you wanted to sell your video to a guy, you put a tit, a gun or a helicopter on the cover. All three, and it was a blockbuster."

Linda Sanderson has some thoughts on what makes a DVD sell. "If the consumer hasn't heard of the movie before, or they don't know the actors, they need a reason to take a chance on it." In other words, package the film so that looks like somebody actually put some thought into it. One of her favourites is *The Butterfly Effect*. "It seems like people lean towards a darker palette with rich reds and gold." So, forget white, which for some reason or another turns people off, and think sex appeal. "Even though people are not inclined to look at the extra features, it is a big selling point, so give the DVD added value with something that people wouldn't get if they went to a theatre to watch it."

Include material on the making of the film, interviews with cast members, even outtakes. "Create something of a buzz around the product and be every bit as creative as you were with the production of the film," says Sanderson. Particularly for films with a limited publicity budget. And last, but hardly least, "Practice aggressive pricing." The fastest growing section of the market is DVDs under \$15, a price that allows the public to buy even more of them and continue to feed their seemingly insatiable DVD appetite. "You now see them in grocery stores, pharmacies, even truck stops," says Martin Wragg. "Anywhere that has a door that opens and human life form that goes inside should be able to sell DVDs. And even if it's not a human life form, but they have some cash in their pocket, that'll do as well."

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OTTAWA INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION FESTIVAL

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