

In Response to John Harkness's "Three Modest Proposals for the Canadian Film Industry"

I read with some amusement John Harkness's "Three Modest Proposals for the Canadian Film Industry" (*Take One No. 7*, Winter 1995). Having served as Director of the Festival of Festivals, Chairman and CEO of the Ontario Film Development Corporation and most recently as Executive Director of the Canadian Film Centre (three institutions which Mr. Harkness suggests should be either temporarily closed, ignored or dismantled), I was understandably motivated to respond.

I am confident, as Mr. Harkness himself states, that his ill-considered proposals will be ignored. However, I do not believe, as he prefers to, that he is ahead of his time. Rather, like the race driver who is about to be lapped, he may appear to be in the lead when in fact he is well out of the race.

I have no doubt that Renoir, Lean, Hawks, Welles, and others of that generation didn't go to film school, quite simply because the institutions did not exist. Yet a list of contemporary filmmakers who do have the benefit of formal training includes Polanski, Forman, Zanussi, Szabó, Campion, Scorsese, Coppola, Lynch, and Tarantino to name but a few. Canadian filmmakers are noticeably absent, not surprisingly given that until recently there were no advanced training centres in Canada. (If one were to accept the implicit training role the NFB has played over the years, the list of Canadian writers and directors would be extensive.)

Several years ago, an article appeared in an American magazine which stated that more students were applying to university film departments than ever before and that it was more difficult to get in to a USC or UCLA film program than it was to study law at Harvard or Yale. Hollywood is the beneficiary of these thousands of aspiring writers and directors graduating each year. Yet, Mr.

Harkness begrudges the same opportunity to the mere 15 writers, producers and directors who annually complete the Centre's Resident Training Program. His position is all the more confusing given that he attended film school himself; one which presumably he wouldn't recommend closing for five years. I would strongly argue that what we need are more film departments, training centres, apprenticeship programs and aspiring filmmakers, thereby increasing the critical mass of available talent. The most committed and talented, with a measure of luck, will ultimately succeed.

As for the Canadian Film Centre, which Mr. Harkness treats with particular vitriol, his statements belie his skills as a researcher. Gail Harvey has indeed been busy, but she is not the most prolific of the Centre's graduates. Paul Quarrington has written numerous scripts of which three have been produced, *Camilla*, *Whale Music* and *Perfectly Normal*. Don McKellar, who graduated from the Centre the same year as Quarrington, has written and/or performed in *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, *Exotica* and *Dance Me Outside*. Over the last four years more than 20 feature films have been written, produced or directed by graduates of the Canadian film Centre. A considerable accomplishment, given the Centre is only seven years old.

Contrary to Mr. Harkness, I believe film festivals serve as a valuable and inexpensive launching pad for independent films which lack the marketing resources of the major studios. Numerous films have been discovered at festivals like Toronto, Berlin, Cannes and acquired international distribution. A recent example being Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (Ms. Shum is another graduate of the Centre); *Roadkill*, *The Grocer's Wife*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and the films of Atom Egoyan are others. It is principally as a result of their success at film festivals that these films have any hope of being screened in Windsor, Sudbury or Saskatoon.

Mr. Harkness's final assault is directed towards government funding for feature films. Suggesting, with fear and trepidation, that all such funding should be terminated. His proposal reveals a shocking ignorance of the history of film production in this country. There indeed was a period in Canadian film production when Telefilm and provincial funding agencies did not exist (although the modestly funded Canadian Film Development Corp. did), when the Darwinian forces of the market place reigned supreme. It has become known as the Capitol Cost Allowance years, and the catastrophic results have been well documented.

Based on false hearsay, Mr. Harkness suggests that only fashionable liberal causes are supported by the well-educated cultural bureaucrats and anything audacious or unsettling is ignored. Films such as *A Winter Tan*, *Naked Lunch*, *Exotica*, *Black Robe*, *Roadkill*, *I Love a Man in Uniform*, *Zero Patience*, *Twist*, and *Masala* are bold, risky, unsettling and entertaining films which were selected on their merits and not because of their political correctness.

Mr. Harkness announces in his first sentence, "After looking at it for a long time, I've decided that Canadian cinema is just fine." He got that part right. Regrettably he didn't quit when he was ahead.

**Wayne Clarkson, Director
Canadian Film Centre**

Congratulations on printing what will surely be a controversial viewpoint on the current Canadian film industry. As an independent Canadian producer, I heartily agree with Mr. Harkness that we must satisfy an audience or our efforts are in vain... Let's see the government agencies pump money into film and videotape distribution and exhibition, and let audiences, not bureaucrats, decide what a film's measure of success can be.

**Julian Grant
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The Canadian Film Centre's annual Festival schmooze: WHERE'S HARKNESS?

