

Point of View

BY LINDA SIMENSKY

Through her position as vice-president at The Cartoon Network, Linda Simensky has been instrumental in launching a program featuring some of the finest animated work created at the National Film Board. Entitled *O Canada*, the show gives a rare international window to the artistry of such animators as Richard Condie, Ishu Patel, John Weldon and Janet Perlman. Tens of thousands of Americans are seeing *Juke-Bar*, *Get A Job* and *Blackfly* on their television sets, a situation that happens all too infrequently here. An acknowledged expert in the field of animation, Simensky offers here an unabashed love letter to Canada. It's nice to be recognized for something other than our hockey players. **MG**

Most Americans have never heard of the National Film Board and many never will. I, however, remember the exact day I became aware of the NFB. It was May 6, 1982. I was 18 years old and just finishing my freshman year at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I was a fan of animation, although animation to me at the time was Bugs Bunny, Rocky and Bullwinkle and other cartoons that I saw as a kid. This particular night I discovered independent animation. The arts center on campus was hosting a screening of the 16th Annual International Tournee of Animation, and while I was unfamiliar with the films being screened, I thought it looked to be a fun evening.

I remember being thoroughly amazed that night, discovering that this genre existed. I don't remember most of the films screened that night. However, I do remember the Canadian films from the screening: *The Sweater*, by Sheldon Cohen and Roch Carrier, and *The History of the World in Three Minutes Flat*, by Michael Mills. My pedestrian tastes at the time, perhaps due to my age, ran to the cartoon side of animated film and away from the esoteric. Perhaps that was why I was so interested in the Canadian films. They looked like they were cartoons, but were not just "for kids," and contained so much more than what I expected from a cartoon. A year later, as we watched the 17th Annual International Tournee of Animation, I pointed out the green NFB logo to my friends, and said "This will probably be a good film." That summer, I snuck out of work to see Ishu Patel's *Bead Game*, shown before a film at the Donnell Media Center. I remember thinking it was one of the best films I had ever seen and that it would be worth it if I got into trouble. (Fortunately, no one noticed I was out.)

I spent the next few years reading everything I could about independent animated film. This was entertaining on those long nights in the university library when I should have been studying for exams. There was not much to read on the topic of animation. Even as recently as the early 1980s, not much had been written about independent animated film. Since little animation had been released on videocassette, I actually knew very little about the genre. That didn't stop me from feeling like an expert, though. With such a dearth of information out there, having seen more than 20 independent animated films made me somewhat of an expert in college.

Fast-forward a few years. It is 1985, and I have an entry-level job at Showtime. My desk is conveniently located next to the closet where the tapes are stored. Showtime, like other movie channels in the early and mid-1980s, ran short films as fillers between movies. I happily watched every short that passed through that closet.

Around this time, I timidly called the NFB's New York office, and asked if they had any "information" on their animated shorts that I could read. Much to my amazement, they mailed me two magazines, published in 1978; *Frame By Frame*, about different animation techniques, and *Sequences*, which seemed to be an issue of a quarterly film magazine. This issue was subtitled "Animation at the National Film Board" and it contained the most information I had ever seen on the Film Board. I wondered how I would ever thank them. A year later, I moved over to a new job in the programming department at Nickelodeon. A tiny part of my job involved scheduling the filler that ran at the end of shows which were too short. I ran Cordell Barker's *The Cat Came Back* wherever I could fit it in. We received calls from viewers wanting to know when it would be running again. Too bad the filler didn't get the ratings.

At the time, the closest that the average American came to independent animated film was through *Sesame Street*. There is nothing equivalent to the Film Board in the United States. (Perhaps the National Endowment for the Arts grants are similar.) I was fascinated by the fact that the government encouraged animated films. It was hard to image an entity such as the Film Board ever existing in the United States. I imagined Canada as a sort of utopia where animators showed up just out of school, ideas in hand, and got to work. I became jealous imagining that Canadian elementary school students grew up watching NFB shorts while we watched old films about agriculture from the 1960s.

I observed in awe that among the best films at each year's Tournee of Animation were Canadian. And they were not just random selections, but really great films. The kind that people would always mention as their all-time favourites, like *The Cat Came Back*, *The Big Snit*, *Neighbours*, *Bob's Birthday*, and even slightly rarer films, as my brother's favourite, *The Irises*. In spite of watching the Oscars each year, the average American would still be shocked to find out that some of the most acclaimed short animation in the world comes from Canada. Eager to analyze this situation, I used my Master's Degree at New York University as my chance to write about Canadian animation.

By this time it was the summer of 1990. I wanted to write about nationalism and independent animation, loosely based on my theory that you could always just glance at an animated film and tell where it was from. I wanted to prove how the political and economic structures of a country influenced independent animated film shorts. To do this, I decided to use the United States, Hungary, Russia and Canada as case studies. Each country had a different level of state funding and government involvement, and each case study made a different point about state involvement.

Through my research I learned that the animators at the NFB were in an unusual situation. In my paper, I wrote about the importance that was placed on availability of equipment and encouragement of exploration and experimentation at the NFB. I concluded that the perfect situation for creating animation was when the government funded a project without controlling a film's topic or form. In the end, I determined that the NFB was not quite the utopia I had thought it was. Animators did have to deal with limits on funding, low budgets, occasional loss of creative control, set agendas for topics and the national deficit. Oh, well. I still thought the films were amazing. In the meantime, I continued to attend Ottawa's International Animation Festivals, and happily purchased NFB calendars, magnets, *The Cat Came Back* sweatshirts, *The Big Snit* pens and anything else with that familiar green logo. I began to notice there were fewer places to see independent short films other than festivals. The International Tournee no longer existed, and there were fewer annual screenings. Animators in the United States were getting jobs in television, or with feature films, and not as many people were making or even discussing independent animated films.

Several years later, fate brought me to Atlanta, home of The Cartoon Network. After nine years at Nickelodeon, I was ready for a new work experience, and I went down to Atlanta to be Director of Programming at The Cartoon Network. As an avid viewer of The Cartoon Network, I had all sorts of ideas about what shows the channel should acquire. I discussed with management my desire for a weekly show of short films. No one seemed too shocked by this idea. In fact, my boss showed me a box of tapes from the NFB and suggested that I see what we could run from the Film Board.

It was somewhat surreal for me to be given the task of watching hours and hours of Canadian shorts. It was a dream job, but oddly, not an easy job. I wanted very much to like everything and I didn't. I wanted to acquire films I saw as absolute classics—except that they broke half the broadcast standard rules we had. Nevertheless, I persevered, eventually creating the weekly show on The Cartoon Network called *O Canada*. It is now the American showcase for NFB shorts. While focusing on more cartoon-oriented family programming, we did manage to obtain a fairly random mix of shorts from different eras and different studios. Now a whole new generation of American viewers will become familiar with the names of Canadian animators we know so well. Everyone who watches the show will be able to recognize the NFB logo at 10 paces. We were able to run *La Salla* the week before the Oscars. And I think I've finally found a way to thank the NFB for that copy of *Sequences*. ■

Genie winner and Oscar nominee,
Cordell Barker's *The Cat Came Back*

O Canada

