

The

BANFF

TELEVISION FESTIVAL:

Television

festival

In Pursuit of EXCELLENCE

By Fran Humphreys

Excellence in television. Twenty years ago nobody really believed such a thing existed. And then something funny happened; in an era when TV was seen as a cultural wasteland, some folks in the West decided to run a television festival. In 1979, the Banff International Festival of Films for Television was unveiled to a small but fervent delegate population. Alberta's premier, Peter Lougheed, "threw a warm blanket" over the room of international delegates, his wife, Jeanne, christened the "Rockie," and Jerry Ezekiel, programmer of the first festival, "knew this thing had a future."

While this reputation is unsurpassed, it was hard won. Many are not aware that Canada's premier television event was conceived in Edmonton in 1978. The Commonwealth Games International Film Festival (one of a number of arts events running alongside the sports competition) was such an overwhelming success that individuals like producer Fil Fraser (*Why Shoot the Teacher?*, *The Hounds of Notre Dame* and now president and CEO of Vision TV), Horst Schmidt (Alberta's minister of culture) and David Leighton (president of the Banff Centre For the Arts) had the idea that a television festival could be an annual event.

Ezekiel, now the Banff Television Festival's senior vice-president, was a passionate cinephile and the assistant director of the Alberta government's Film and Literary Arts Branch. He was more than a little reluctant. "Television was held in considerably low regard as an art form compared to cinema, and it was a prejudice I held as well," he said. "But I became a true believer after screening the first batch of submissions in 1979. We were really amazed at how great television could be."

The first festival, held at the Banff Centre, was an inspiration and a financial disaster. So much so, that no festival was recorded in the 1980 record book. Ezekiel credits Peter Lougheed with the festival's revival in 1981 and its on-going survival. Another factor contributing to the festival's future was a growing community of independent producers, led by Pat Ferns, who was present at the Commonwealth Games festival. Ferns became the chairman of the board in 1985 and the festival's president and CEO since 1996. "The industry in Canada was changing and in the early 1980s. The independents were discovering that there were the beginnings of a market, but productions couldn't be financed without co-production dollars," he says. "We knew we'd have to look for partners, and an international festival could attract the players."

In the early 1980s, the festival's first executive director, Carrie Hunter, and Jerry Ezekiel "wore out a lot of shoe leather at events like MIP-TV talking to people who had never heard of the festival, trying to get them to sit still long enough to listen," says Ezekiel. It was no easy feat to establish credibility when people could hardly justify travelling that distance for that amount of time and expense. But with the celebration of excellence at its core, the festival began to build a conference program with increasing sophistication. The architecture of the conference became the vehicle to get people to Banff and many nominees were attracted by the fact that they might win a prize. This spilled over to create the famous "marketplace of ideas" where many co-production deals have been born. "We worked hard to give them a special experience where they would leave here feeling inspired, having done good business, and they kept coming back," says Ferns. Indeed, they came back in droves.

Registrations increased 35 per cent, to more than 1,500 in 1997. This year's program competition received 989 submissions from more than 40 countries, shattering all previous records by another astounding 38 per cent. "It has become a must-attend event in Canada," says Ferns, "and our on-going challenge is to create an interesting, stimulating productive event to get the world's leading-edge practitioners to attend."

Pride? It's there in spades, but each individual holds different aspects of the festival dear. Now accurately defined as the "Olympics of Television" for its broad-ranging program categories and for providing an even playing field between genres, countries, public and private broadcasters, Ezekiel believes passionately in the medium and the importance in celebrating the best television programs in the world. "The best way to encourage the production of quality television is to draw attention to it on a world stage, holding it up as an example of what this medium can really achieve," he said.

For Ferns it is only slightly different. "For me, the pride comes from the clear initial vision. We stuck to our faith in what we created and resisted becoming a conventional marketplace of buying and selling programs," he says. "Our faith proved out, but at the same time we have never been content to be static, constantly building on the event with events like the CBC Keynote Address and the Market Simulation, which were inventions along the way that have now become traditions." And what does Fil Fraser, the visionary who initiated Canada's premier television festival, think of the event in 1998? "I am absolutely thrilled, delighted and amazed." ■