



The Canadian Film Centre at 10

An Interview
with Wayne Clarkson

By Wyndham Wise

The brainchild of director Norman Jewison, the Canadian Film Centre has been a driving force behind the development of Canadian filmmaking talent over the past 10 years. Some of Canada's most celebrated filmmakers—John Greyson (*Zero Patience, Uncut*), David Wellington (*I Love a Man in Uniform, Long Day's Journey Into Night*), Mina Shum (*Double Happiness, Drive, She Said*), Don McKellar (*Blue, Last Night*)—have been trained at the Centre, along with over 300 other graduates currently working in the Canadian film, television or new media industries. To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the Centre has organized a coast-to-coast retrospective screening tour of 25 Centre shorts to be accompanied by a series of lectures and discussions with the filmmakers. Also, the Toronto International Film Festival will be screening a series of six Centre shorts—Don McKellar's *Blue*, Holly Dale's *Dead Meat*, Collen Murphy's *The Feeler*, Laurie Lynd's *The Fairy Who Didn't Want to be a Fairy Anymore*, Clement Virgo's *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*—paired with a feature film by the same director. Take One interviewed Canadian Film Centre director Wayne Clarkson in July.

You have been at the centre of major changes in the Canadian feature-film industry as the head of the Toronto film festival, the OFDC and now the Canadian Film Centre. What strikes you as the most important of these changes?

There are two things that occur to me. One is the significant growth in every capacity—numbers, quality and talent. That's not to say we don't have a long way to go. We do, and perhaps I should qualify that by saying we have not grown far or fast enough. But I think there is an increasing number of commercially successful, artistically hailed writers, producers, directors and actors in the theatrical-film business now. Secondly, there is the proliferation of provincial film development agencies. What is more, there is, obviously, Telefilm's Feature Film Fund, and the Distribution Fund has been important too. Then one looks at the advent of Perspective Canada in 1984 and thinks of the birth of the Canadian Film Centre, which opened its doors in 1988.

How do you see your role in all this?

If I take a personal pride in anything, it's my unwavering commitment to Canadian talent. As I get older, I get even more entrenched as the issues of globalization come into play. I don't mean to say that Canadian cinema has to be only about Canadian stories. At the festival, OFDC or Film Centre, there has been no evidence of that. Films that the OFDC financed were shot in Africa, in Mexico, in the United States, or coproductions, but it was always the Canadian talent that was of primary importance.

Before we get to the 10th anniversary of the Canadian Film Centre, I want to digress slightly and ask you about your time at the head of the OFDC. It seems to me that the OFDC had as its mission to create a film culture in Ontario?

I distinctly remember having, in the formative months, conversations with the principals—Bill House, Jonathan Barker, Tecca Crosbie and Wendy McKeigen—around the idea that we wanted to establish an agency that was filmmaker-friendly. I remember talking to the minister, Lilly Munro, and telling her that I didn't want to be in a government highrise. I wanted it street level. I wanted the doors open. I wanted writers, producers and directors to feel that it was their agency. So there was a

whole psychology to it. We did it unbelievably successfully because the time was right. It was at the height of the economy in the mid-to-late 1980s. There was momentum.

You were originally offered your current position at the Film Centre when it first opened, or at least when the idea was being implemented in 1987. Why did you turn it down?

Again, it was timing. I was chairman and chief executive officer of the OFDC. We opened the doors in April of 1986, and I was offered the position at the Centre only a year later. It was just bad timing. I still had things to do at the OFDC, so I had to decline what was, admittedly, a generous offer. In 1991, I was asked again and I accepted. I had done my time at the OFDC and the government had changed. It was time to leave.

However, in 1991 there was this nagging question of exactly what the Film Centre was doing. There were well-established undergraduate film programs at York University and Ryerson, so what exactly were they doing at the Film Centre? But you seemed to bring focus to it. That seems to be your major contribution to its development.

Like most visionaries, Norman Jewison was slightly ahead of his time, just enough to make it challenging. The Centre for Advanced Film Studies [the Centre's original name, Ed.'s note], which served professionals, not undergraduates, was a concept that didn't exist in this country. There was no context for it. Yes, there were fine film departments at universities, but even they were rather recent phenomena. (I had to leave this country to do graduate work because there was no place to go in Canada.) But the Centre was for professionals and that was an important, distinguishing difference. The Centre was unique. The NFB has always had an implicit training purpose, but never overtly. In my experience, it takes two or three years to start up a new organization. You know, I couldn't have done what Peter O'Brian did [O'Brian ran the Centre from 1989-91, Ed.'s note]. I couldn't, because the Centre needed the skilled credibility of a producer, a filmmaker. I truly had the advantage of Peter's groundwork. When I came here, there was no question about its commitment to Canadian talent.

There was a streamlining of the programs.

I think there was a certain rationalization of what was already established. If you look at the cornerstones, there was the Resident Programme, which was the advanced program for working professionals. It was film exclusive, not surprisingly in the early days. It was a fairly easy decision to expand the Centre's mandate into television. However, The Feature Film Project was a huge decision. The thought of making first-time, low-budget features was an intimidating concept.

And financially very risky.

That's what I mean. Hugely risky, and if a film was going badly, the Centre would have to step in and fire the talent. That's the worse thing a training institution could do.



Christopher Grismer's *Clutch*:
The latest film from The Feature Film Project.

And you never have had to fire the talent?

No, not yet, fortunately. It's an extremely well-designed program, thanks to Alex Raffé, who was instrumental in designing the framework on which The Feature Film Project is based. And to this day, with rare exceptions, it still holds.

Didn't that program change the direction of the Centre? It became something like a ministudio, developing and producing features.

It some ways. But if you look at the American Film Institute or the Sundance Institute, I think they are remiss in *not* making features. For example, Sundance is training filmmakers through the institute and its programs. Then they've got a theatrical launch through a fine festival and they're involved with broadcasting through

An Interview with **Wayne** **Clarkson**

the Sundance channel. So what's missing? Why are they afraid to get into production? What I think is brilliant about the Feature Film Project—to sound like an accountant—is that it is incredibly cost effective. I mean, filmmakers are trained through the Centre where they can make a short dramatic film for \$12,000 and a chance to move on and make a feature. And if Clement Virgo's first feature [*Rude*] is not the box-office hit we all desperately want, the risk is only \$500,000.

This leads to another area I would like to ask you about. Once your films are made, how can they be seen by the Canadian public? Currently the Minister of Heritage, Sheila Copps, is soliciting responses to her film policy review. Historically, distribution of Canadian features has been limited by foreign, market-driven forces. Flora MacDonald tried to change the situation in 1988 with her Film Importation Bill, but that died on the order paper. What can Copps do, or what should she be doing?

Politically, there is an opportunity for change today that has not existed in probably 10 years. It's one of those windows of opportunity that is going to close in the not-too-distant future. I say this because Shelia Copps is an incredibly strong, committed minister. She's very vocal and active. I've met her numerous times. I have immense respect for her. The timing is right. So the question is, what needs to be done? The amount of money committed to theatrical production and development has been in decline year after year. It's worsened in this province by the demise of the active role that used to be played by the OFDC in the production of features. There needs to be more money in the system—privately and publicly. There is now \$100 million new money available for production through the Canadian Television and Cable Production Fund, but I think there also has to be a rationalization of the money that already exists. When you look at the budgets of the NFB, Telefilm or the CBC, the commitments of the private broadcasters—whether it's Baton or WIC, pay television or speciality channels—there is a lot of money in the system, regulated or legislated. I also believe we need to make more movies. There

is conflicting opinion about how many movies we're making in Canada, but in terms of movies intended for theatrical release, we're probably making less than 40. Do we really expect five great filmmakers to come out of 40 films? I read an article just recently about the Sundance festival. They screened 800 independent movies and selected only 100. Of the 100, 10 got picked up for distribution and will probably end up on our screens in downtown Toronto. So from 800 films to begin with, the audience only sees 10. This critical mass is crucial. You make 800 films to find 10. You make 40 to find one or two at the most. So let's make 100 features from coast-to-coast by whatever means.

But how do you get these films distributed and into the theatres?

Let's go to the theatres first. We so often hear the problem is with the exhibitors, but I saw what happened with *Rude*, and I can honestly say that with that film—and all the other films we have been involved with—I have no criticism of the exhibitors. With the specific case of *Rude*, I know what Cineplex did when it released that film. They went overboard with five theatres in the Toronto area alone. So, then you get to the issue of distribution. That's where Flora MacDonald tried to do something, and I think anything that strengthens distribution in this country is crucial. But, do you do that through legislation? Flora tried and we all know the results when Mr. Valenti came to town. I think it is necessary, and I have said this before in my OFDC days, that we start a chain of theatres, independent theatres, which have as their primary motive the exhibition and promotion of Canadian and foreign-language films. I start with the premise that we are, cinematically, foreigners in our own land. Let's take advantage of this through a collective group of independent cinemas that foster an awareness of Canadian features. And I would take it one step further. I believe that something akin to an independent film TV channel, something like Channel 4 in Britain, is a crucial thing to do.

Do you think that it is feasible?

I think it's absolutely feasible and I think it's not that far in the future. Right now you can watch The Golf Channel, which is huge, or The Weather Channel. If 10 years ago someone said to you that what we need is a weather channel that is going to show weather reports all day, you wouldn't believe it. But it is now one of the most lucrative channels on TV.

To conclude, I would like to shift the focus back on the Film Centre. What lies ahead?

We've expanded into television with a three-month Television Residents Programme. In 1997, we opened the doors of a new media training facility called MediaLinx Habitat, and we're developing some innovative content for the web. We're expanding the Short Dramatic Film Programme. Next year we're going to add a new building to the property for production purposes. We need more shooting space, mostly for our training workshops. When I look into the future, I look to the British Film Institute model, the Sundance model. I ask myself why there can't be closer ties with Toronto International Film Festival Group? There is a synergy there. Why can't those two organizations make a joint application to the CRTC for an independent Canadian film channel?

With the domination of television—the so-called 500-channel universe—is film becoming extinct as an art form?

I call it a loss-leader. Contrary to what Moses Znaimer says—"Some day, we'll all be working for television"—the reverse is true. Where would TV be without movies? Where would video stores be without movies? The theatrical experience is what launches everything else. Will it be around in another 100 years? I don't know. It hasn't quite reached the plateau of "high art," like the Courtauld Collection of Impressionistic paintings at the AGO, but it is certainly getting there.

Thank you for your time. ●