

Once consigned to obscurity and certain death by a disinterested public and an ambivalent industry, Super 8, cinema's tiniest gauge, is enjoying a spectacular resurgence of popularity. Toronto has recently hosted a series of wildly successful, sold-out showcases for Super 8 films, beginning in the early months of 1997 with the near legendary "Three Minute Rock Stars" project. Organized by local artists Jane Farrow (*Cracker Barrel My Ass*) and Allyson Mitchell (*Cupcake*) at a bar in the city's hip Queen Street West district, the response to this screening exceeded all expectations. As Farrow remembers: "Over 500 people attended, it was free and they ran out of beer. The bar was so happy they donated \$100 to us to offset some of the costs."

That spring, the Images Festival of Independent Film and Video screened some of the same works, and in December 1997 Pleasure Dome hosted the only Canadian stop on a North American tour of the Super Super 8 Film Festival, a global showcase organized in the United States. Following on the success of these and other worldwide phenomena, Toronto, for the first time in 25 years, has a bona fide Super 8 film festival, *Splice This!*, and in the ultimate gesture of acceptance, New York's venerable Museum of Modern Art (in collaboration with the San Francisco Cinematheque) launched a 50-program retrospective early in 1998. "Big as Life: An American History of 8mm Films." is a mammoth series which will run over two years, with highlights repeated at both the San Francisco Cinematheque and the Pacific Film Archives.

What an astounding shift in fortune in just a few short years. As recently as 1996, rumours abounded on the Internet that Kodak, the largest manufacturer of Super 8 film stock, was about to cease production. As video grew to prominence among both consumers and commercial producers, industry observers saw the eradication of Super 8 as the logical next step, leading to the most dire forecasts about the medium itself. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Kodak progressively eliminated Super 8 film stocks and by 1995 had dropped all the sound stocks. At the same time, the companies manufacturing the cameras ceased production and all but a few small labs stopped processing the film. For a few years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, working in Super 8 became next to impossible. Filmmaker John Kneller, who worked at one of these labs, Exclusive Film & Video, explains that Kodak had decided that Super 8 was not commercially viable. He now sees a "renewed interest" pointing to, among other developments, the company's advertising its Super 8 stock, something he says it hasn't done since the late 1970s.

Why the sudden change? On the surface, there is the mainstream media's rediscovery of Super 8. At the same time as many artists and individuals abandoned it in favour of video, commercial filmmakers and advertisers came to recognize that Super 8 could add certain qualities to their aesthetic. Pleasure Dome coordinator Tom Taylor explains that Super 8 was "usurped by mainstream producers to signify the gritty realism of the underground or to evoke the nostalgia of the home movie." Oliver Stone's incorporation of Super 8 footage into his features, *Natural Born Killers* and *Nixon*, remain among the most famous examples, no doubt inspiring others to rethink the potential for this lowly gauge. Advertisers seized on what Kneller describes as the "gritty street-wise look," using Super 8's association with alternative culture to appeal to a new generation of consumers, particularly the hip-hop and skateboarding crowd. With this increased activity commercially, Kodak recently reinvested in Super 8, even introducing new stock. The Super 8 revival in the arts community is more closely tied to increased activity in the new-media sector.

As Liz Czach points out, it is the Internet that has "made the resurgence in some ways possible." Czach (a programmer for Perspective Canada with the Toronto International Film Festival who is writing her master's thesis on Super 8 filmmaking practices) explains that, as Super 8 materials grew scarce during its period of decline, those determined to work with it forged networks for information exchange. These networks eventually found a home on the Internet and today there are countless sites for advice on everything from the best places to obtain used cameras and parts to the venues and festivals that regularly screen Super 8. These sites are a continued source of inspiration for artists searching for affordable ways to make films. Further, the creation of new media has inspired a climate that advocates the mixing of media, what Kneller calls "a situation of multimedia." The Internet has contributed to an atmosphere of free expression and experimentation as old loyalties to one medium over another have dissipated.

While cinema will always be blessed with purists, there is now a growing number of younger artists, weaned on computer and video technology, whose worldview encompasses many media at once—a generation of imagemakers as opposed to filmmakers. It is their vision of cinema's future that makes Super 8's resurgence a cause for celebration. One, nevertheless, laced with a healthy dose of irony.

Toronto's Second annual Super 8 film festival, *Splice This!*, runs June 18 through 20, 1999.