

The National Screen Institute

Reaches Out to Local Filmmakers

By Cheryl Binning

Over the past 15 years the National Screen Institute (NSI) has become synonymous with giving many an emerging filmmaker their first break, providing the training and production money to make a short film in their local community through the Drama Prize Program and offering national exposure through film screenings at the Edmonton Local Heroes Film Festival.

Building on these strengths—professional development and fostering regional production opportunities—the NSI has spent the past 16 months reshaping its role in the ever-changing film and TV landscape. “The NSI board saw the opportunity to take a reality check and look at ways its programs could become more responsive,” explains the nonprofit organization’s executive director, Cheryl Ashton. “We are positioning ourselves as a national professional development-organization that is market-driven and reactive to the immediate needs of the industry.”

A palette of new programs and workshops has been created as the NSI sets out to deliver a full spectrum of industry training—from introducing youth to the art of moviemaking, to the production of short films and TV half-hours and the development of first features, to a catalogue of training courses intended to buff up the skills of working professionals. This past year also saw the Edmonton-based organization expand into Winnipeg where an office has been opened, many of the new workshops piloted and a second Local Heroes festival born.

Unlike other training institutes with bricks and mortar buildings, the NSI is forging its niche in the ability to bring its initiatives right into the communities where its trainees live and work. This eliminates the high costs and work disruptions that professional development often requires and serves as a means to involve the local production community in the training process. Furthermore, in delivering the programs into the regions, workshop material is tailored to meet the needs of the wide-ranging filmmaking climates across Canada where experience and access to funding, services and expertise vary widely. The most recent of the new NSI initiatives is the relaunch of Features First after a year-long re-evaluation and tweaking of the original cycle of the program. In keeping with the original intent, Features First 2 will take five teams of emerging filmmakers through an individually customized skills training and feature-film project development program. The focus is on tailoring the program to meet the specific needs of each project and team member. By the end of the eight-month process, the

feature-film projects will have completed the development phase—a screenplay honed with the aid of an experienced story-editor, preliminary casting, budgeting, financing, packaging and marketing plans created—and the projects ready to seek financing or be well on their way to full financing.

But just as pivotal to the program is upgrading the skills of the participants and integrating them into their local production community, says former Ontario Film Development Corp. head Alex Raffé, who is executive producer of Features First 2. This will be accomplished through short-term, locally monitored placements and internships which address the particular skill deficit of each participant. By the end of the program, Raffé expects that the emerging filmmakers will be able to tap local resources to move their own features forward, as well as find work within their chosen discipline, in their region.

“A lot of people go to film schools and training courses, have an extraordinary experience for six months, and then go home where they find themselves suddenly all alone,” says Raffé. “We think it is key to accomplish the professional development as much as possible in the local community of the participants. So at the end of the day, when the program is over, the participants have people to turn to in their region and chances are these relationships can turn into jobs so the filmmakers find themselves actually working in their discipline in their community.” Involvement in the local industry is also invaluable to the feature film being developed, she says. “Instead of letting filmmakers work on their project in a vacuum, if you constantly push them out into the real world to test it, test it, test it, they get better, they get tougher and they get stronger.”

While the first installment of Features First was available only to Atlantic and Western filmmakers, the new program has been opened up nationally to all filmmaking teams with some experience in short drama or television. Eligible projects must be at second-draft stage and ready for a final development phase. The call for entries is set for September with team selection taking place in November and the program underway in January. Raffé will choose the five teams with input from a national advisory committee composed of members of the film industry with various skill sets. The advisory committee will act as mentors for their home teams, aligning the filmmakers with local resources and helping to facilitate some of the mentorships. Telefilm Canada (West), Alliance Atlantis Communications and provincial funding agencies have also come on board as sponsors.

Another of the NSI’s most recent initiatives took place this past summer with the expansion of the Edmonton teen TV camp, NHTV, into five cities across Canada—Toronto, St. John’s, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Ottawa. Renamed Movie Camp 1.0, the program offers 13-to-19-year-olds the chance to learn the basics of moviemaking from local film and TV professionals and then, using scripts chosen from submissions by local teens, the kids produce five-minute movies on video. The flagship Drama Prize Program also continues, awarding six writer/director/producer teams from across Canada a year of training and mentorship, as well \$11,000 in cash and services to make a short film to be premiered at the Local Heroes festival. As with all its programs, participants produce a short in their home region, allowing them to forge connections in the local industry. This past call for entries saw 106 emerging filmmakers enter scripts, up from 73 the previous year. The projects came from as far away as the Northwest Territories, as well as representing all the western provinces, central Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. A program aimed at developing emerging episodic TV writers, directors and producers is also in the works. Totally TV will be a national competition, similar to Drama Prize, in which teams will produce half-hour episodes of

an anthology series executive produced by the NSI and broadcast nationally.

Beyond its role in fostering emerging talent through its national competitions, the NSI is taking steps to ensure it can meet the needs of filmmaking professionals who must continually upgrade their skills in an increasingly competitive and maturing industry. Over the past six months the NSI has been concentrating its efforts on piloting a slate of regionally focused workshops, developed in tandem with leading experts in that particular field of the industry, with the plan to roll out the programs nationally over the next year. "We are creating workshops that have a market driven, client focused approach," explains Ashton. "They are designed to be skill and time specific, to fit the training needs of the moment. We want to have the mechanism in place to deliver training anywhere, anytime." From a catalogue of workshop templates, local film agencies and training organizations can then work with the NSI to identify the professional development needs of that particular community.

The NSI is also looking at opportunities to meet demand for its programs through alternative delivery systems such as the Internet. The first project, expected to be up and running next spring, is an on-line version of the Drama Prize Producers Resource and Workshop. It will include a resource guide for new producers, with detailed breakdowns of all aspects of putting together a production. The on-line producers program is tied to the NSI's recently launched Web site—www.screenradecanada.com. A partnership with Telus, the database is designed as a resource tool on the Canadian film and TV industry, listing recently produced projects, acting, writing, directing and producing talent and features directories of awards, festivals, industry organizations and broadcasters.

Beyond its role as a training provider, the NSI is unique in that it hosts its own film festivals—Local Heroes Edmonton and Winnipeg. The long-running Edmonton festival, traditionally focused on the craft of short filmmaking, was revamped this past year into a showcase of international independent feature films with greater emphasis on a general public audience. The Winnipeg festival—now entering its second year—is focusing exclusively on Canadian short films and features and offers a heavier industry slant through its workshop slate. The Winnipeg Festival will unspool Feb. 29 to March 5 and Edmonton will run April 7 to 15. The various facets of NSI programming—national development and production programs, regional workshops, and the exposure and coproduction opportunities available at the two festivals—will feed off each other, says Ashton, and offer a continuum of training that targets every stage of a filmmaker's career, from the complete novice to the well-established professional. ●



Chameleonesque Toronto

Adaptable Affordable

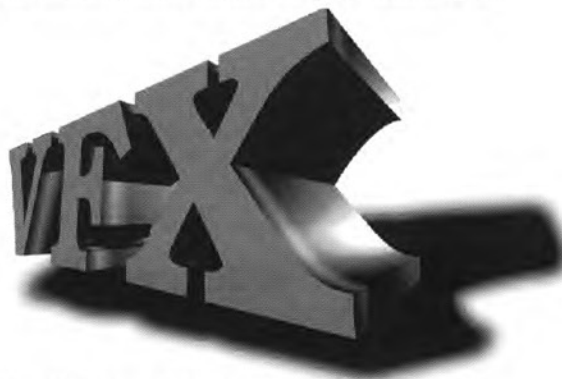
 **TORONTO** Film & Television Office Economic Development,
Culture & Tourism

Rhonda Silverstone, Film Commissioner

Phone (416) 392-7570 • Fax (416) 392-0675

Internet: www.torontofilmpermits.com • E-mail: info@torontofilmpermits.com

DIGITAL MEDIA CENTRE



- ▶ **VFX/Compositing 12 week full-time**
Houdini/Digital-Fusion
September 1999 & January 2000
- ▶ **3D Animation 16 week full-time**
Maya/SoftImage
November 1999 & March 2000

Seneca College of Applied Arts & Technology

Tel: (416) 491-5050 ext 4351

Toronto, Canada

<http://dmc.senecac.on.ca> dmc@senecac.on.ca

 Royal Credit Line for Students and OSAP funding available

@

Seneca



the industry standard for
3d and greenscreen compositing