

The 20th Banff Television Festival "Excellence" vs. "the Market"

By Katherine Gilday

No matter how many times you make the drive from the Calgary airport, there's still that exquisite moment where the mountains suddenly materialize in the distance. By rights, the conversation in the delegates' bus should come to a hushed stop—but it doesn't. Many people don't even bother to glance out the window. I can't help myself, though. I always find the first view breathtaking. It's one of the things I like most about coming to the Banff Television Festival—the mountains approaching with their promise of bracing new perspectives, lofty aspirations, a purification and reinvigoration of purpose. Only, all too soon, the monumental landscape has a way of congealing and turning into a cliché, a painted backdrop. And so for the rest of the trip I find my mind flip-flopping between these two very different versions of the view: sublime nature vs. a kitschy picture postcard; an odd experience, but excellent training, as it turns out, for the week to come.

The Banff conference has always prided itself on straddling the realms of creativity and commerce, on remaining a festival that celebrates excellence as much as a market for doing business. Back in the early days of the event, when there wasn't much commerce to speak of, this was an easier stretch. But in this 20th anniversary year, with close to 2,000 delegates expected, the registration fee in four figures, and Canada loudly being proclaimed as the second-largest exporter of TV programming in the world, the straddle has turned into a major gymnastic manoeuvre.

It's my fifth time here and this year (joy!) I don't have to try to sell anyone anything. My next documentary project is already funded and apart from a few vague commitments, I'm at liberty to attend the festival and just take things in. At the moment, the observer role feels about right. I've got some things to figure out for myself about the relation between "excellence" and "the market." There's never been more work for documentary directors like myself in television, yet never has the work felt less connected to making documentaries.

Monday

I'm late making it up the hill to the Banff Springs Hotel for breakfast with CRTC chair Françoise Bertrand who's discussing the agency's just-released overhaul of Cancon rules. I find a place in the packed room in time to hear her explain why the CRTC has taken "expenditure" out as a criterion for broadcasters—it's too difficult to use because of "creative accounting." The new rules increase Canadian programming

but relax the rules about what qualifies—finally, long-form docs have made it as Cancon. But the CRTC's overriding priority is clear as can be—to keep growing the industry as is. I leave with some final comments from Mme. Bertrand ringing in my ears: "The next leap will be the cultural mandate" and "high-quality programming." Does it really work in that order, I wonder? And does this mean that for the moment, we're focusing on mediocre programming?

On to the opening ceremonies in the main conference ballroom. Veteran broadcaster Laurier LaPierre (*This Hour Has Seven Days*) hits some surprisingly sombre notes in the opening address written for him: "We, like most of the world, rich and poor, worry about how we can remain culturally distinct in the embrace of globalization and the American colossus. Like them, we worry that purely commercial strategies applied to culture will leave us with nothing of our own, but plenty of theirs...."

With "the sermon" delivered, the assembled dignitaries are free to celebrate the occasion and our industry's place in the global economy. Pat Ferns, the nimble ringmaster of the festival, tells us that over the last four years program entries and delegates have doubled and there are delegates from six continents here today. Festival board chair Trina McQueen announces a \$1.8-million "donation" from Alliance Atlantis (to meet a CRTC requirement) to fund a new course for the training of senior television executives—as the application form reads: "to better meet the challenges of the evolving global marketplace." The course will focus on such things as "market positioning," "branding" and "risk management"—I search in vain for a mention of television "programs." Then it's time for the keynote speaker, philosophy professor and self-styled "media pundit," Mark Kingwell. First a video clip from a past festival with the inimitable Dame Edna gushing to Moses Znaimer: "I want to interview some world-famous Canadians, Moses, I do. I hope they'll be born soon."

Kingwell gives a provocative deconstruction of "eight persistent myths about television" that "form a kind of force field of deflection around television, a buffer of protective nostrums." I find myself revelling in this elegant dissection of the rarely examined, mainly unconscious norms that "condition our choices in television, making some things possible and others unthinkable." Particularly relevant in the context is the myth that "television is controlled by individuals." He tells us: "The field is structured, and that structure is internalized by anyone who holds a high position in the television world...the rules of

the game...are what run the field, not the individuals who put the rules into play." But there's a good chance the speech flies right by the very people it most applies to. Later, a commissioning editor tells me it was sheer agony waiting for Kingwell to get to number eight.

I take a break to go for coffee and chat with people I know in the delegates lounge. The pitching melee is in full swing around me, as primal and ferocious as the official program is ceremonious and staid. Everywhere you look people are huddled in tight meetings or scanning the room with eagle-eyed intensity for someone they need to connect with. Lots of the independent producer/director types I usually see here, though, seem to be absent.

But this is my day for exploring the laws of "excellence," so it's back to the conference room for stage interviews with Honorary Award winners—first, former SCTV comedian Martin Short. He surprises me with his acerbic wit and trenchant observations. On SCTV: "I mean the reason that show was so purely good—and because I joined it late I can be very objective—was that no one was second-guessing any market out there, they just were playing to their own within-the-room sensibility." Then David E. Kelly, creator of *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice* informs us that he still writes all the scripts for both series in longhand on yellow legal pads.

After lunch, an inspirational master class with writer/producer Tom Fontana, creator of the groundbreaking series *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and *Oz*, powerfully reinforces the idea of good television coming out of a creatively centred "within-the-room sensibility." Fontana makes it clear from the beginning: "I don't know how to talk about being a producer without talking about being a writer. You're fooling yourself if you don't realize television is ultimately about money," he tells us, "but you can use the best of your instincts to figure your way around the money."

Later that day, Kelley brings his beautiful wife, actress Michelle Pfeiffer, to the Rockies Award show to watch him receive his Astral Award of Excellence. But for me the high point of the evening comes when Canada wins its only Rockie. High Road Productions gets it in the sports category for its compelling feature doc about wrestler Bret Hart (*Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*), directed by Paul Jay. In a graceful speech, executive producer David Ostriker outlines all the Banff locales where the different broadcasters agreed to come aboard. It's a nice moment—briefly, the two halves of the festival come together.

For much of the awards show, though, I puzzle over the program. What strikes me (actually, now that I think about it, this has hit me every year) is how few nominations there are for Canadian programs. Out of 81 nominees, there are only three all-Canadian productions nominated and 10 international coproductions in which Canadian producers feature to varying degrees. Compare this to 22 for the United Kingdom and 18 for the United States, and that's not counting their many additional coproductions. Maybe there's some reasonable explanation I'm not aware of, but if Canada really is the second-largest exporter of TV programming after the United States, isn't this an oddly low score? Or is it just a matter of waiting for Mme. Bertrand's next leap?

Thursday

At 8:30 in the morning delegates are wearing that pinched, desperate look that comes from running out of people to have meetings with. The general consensus, though is that this has been a less frenetic festival than in past years with fewer pitches and more real business being transacted. This could have something to do with the syndrome I think of, somewhat melodramatically, as "the case of the disappearing filmmaker." But lots of people I've talked to have noticed the absences.

Individual program makers seem less relevant to the proceedings, anyway. The Banff festival has instituted a new showcase for distributors—Selling the World—in recognition of "the increasing importance of consolidated production/distribution companies." Marie Natanson, CBC's executive producer for independent docs, attended the one for docs early in the week and tells me she was troubled by having projects explained by distributors rather than by their makers.

Despite the ingenuity and formidable wit of master of ceremonies Pat Ferns, I find the "market simulation" depressing. Brazilian author/scientist Dr. Marcelo Gleiser, in company with producer Nicholas Goldzahl from the respected French production house VM Productions, pitches a sophisticated three-part doc series on cosmology—*The Dancing Universe: From Creation Myths to the Big Bang*. Relatively young and photogenic, Gleiser's credentials are impeccable. Professor of physics and astronomy at Dartmouth, an experienced presenter of science shows in his own country, he speaks English well, along with four other languages. And the concept has proven mass appeal. His book on the subject is a bestseller in Brazil. But the big guns are not impressed. Chris Haws, of the American Discovery Channel, explains Gleiser's personal approach to the subject matter is a problem since his main concern would be how to "version" the program and "take you out" so he can package it with other hosts. Ron Keast of Canadian ACCESS likes the subject matter but wonders "whether anyone will care or be able to connect with what you people are talking about." The head of production at BBC Wales says the BBC is looking for a landmark series but fears this may be just a "hillock." Somehow he and just about all his colleagues, on little evidence, and at a ludicrously premature stage, have decided that the "stylistic approach" is not up to snuff. Maybe it's because the presenter is an academic—or maybe it's because there are no sexy video clips. The whole session is a walking illustration of the keynote address. So when Paul da Silva of Vision TV says he loves the project and is willing to give it a good licence fee, I feel like jumping to my feet and cheering. At last, someone is actually excited by an idea.

I walk away, thinking about how pitching and the market seem to work on rules diametrically opposite to the principles the creative heavyweights at the festival have been espousing. That night at the western barbecue, I find myself in dire need of very loud music. The laws of excellence vs. the rules of the game—there's a roaring in my head from the week's accumulation of cognitive dissonance. And it's going to take all the noise the high-spirited troupe of young fiddlers, Barrage, can muster to blow it out. ●