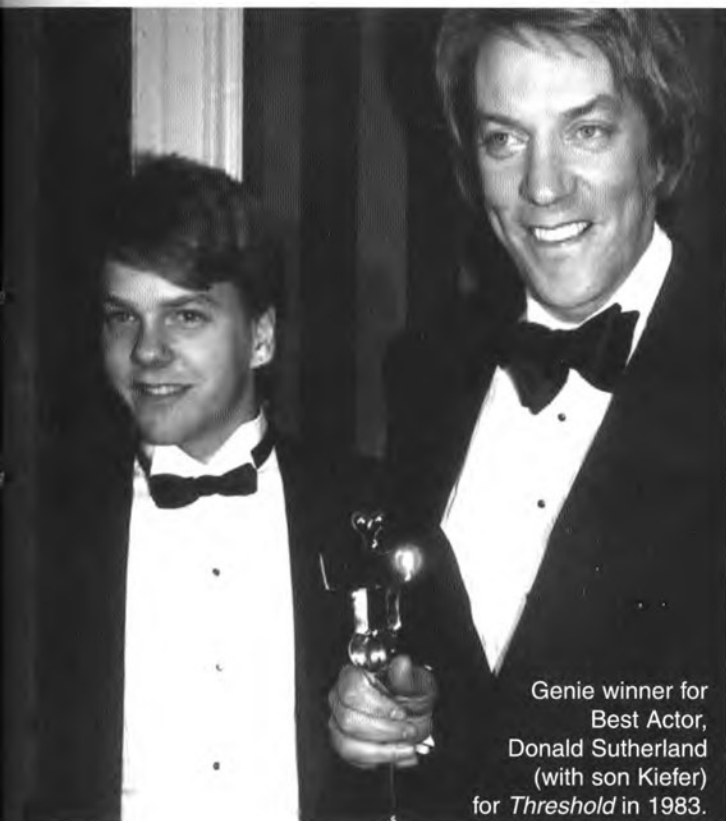


# How a Genie Came Out of an Etrog: The Academy Turns 20

By Paul Eichhorn



Genie winner for Best Actor, Donald Sutherland (with son Kiefer) for *Threshold* in 1983.

The Canadian film scene has changed a lot in 20 years. In 1979, the Academy of Canadian Cinema (later to become the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television) was established. Tax-shelter moviemaking was all the rage and a record 50 Canadian films were made that year. How ironic that no Canadian film awards were given out. The old Canadian Film Awards were retooled by the newly formed Academy and renamed the Genies (a name chosen mostly because of its bilingual nature). The first Best Picture Genie (an Etrog with a prominent bellybutton) went to *The Changeling*. Another big Genie winner was *Meatballs*, a huge box-office hit in Canada and the United States. All of this seems like ancient history today. The most recent winner of the Best Picture Genie—now minus a bellybutton, much to the chagrin of its creator—was *The Red Violin*, a critical and box-office success across North America. What a difference two decades makes.

The Academy was, and continues to be, a key player promoting all of this change. It's the mover and shaker behind the Genies, the television Geminis and the Quebec television award, Prix Gémeaux (first presented in 1986). Maria Topalovich, current Academy president and CEO, has witnessed this evolution from the frontlines through her work with the Academy. "We were very much a catalyst for all of this change," she explains matter-of-factly. "When Canadian film made great strides in the 1980s, we helped to build an industry. The Academy is an apolitical lobby organization that has unified the industry. From gaffers to producers, from east to west, we represent the industry with one voice."

Topalovich says one of the Academy's strengths—and that of the Genies—is its ability to evolve with the Canadian film scene. For instance, during its early years, there were Best Foreign Actor/Actress categories. These were terminated after 1984. The awards also moved to a full jury system to select honorees in 1991. More recently, the Claude Jutra Award was created for first-time feature directors. "The categories are always being refined. These changes are very much supported by the industry."

The Genies grew out of the Canadian Film Awards (CFAs), which presented the statue, dubbed the Etrog after its creator, the sculptor Sorel Etrog. The CFAs began in 1949 as an ad hoc industry event without peer voting and was more like a bowling banquet for the film community. The CFAs grew as the industry grew, but for many years craft categories such as director and actors were not honored. In a haphazard way, the CFAs also recognized outstanding work in TV. Ironically, the CFAs were never televised.

Topalovich points to marketing Canadian films as one of the major successes that has come out of the Academy's work on the Genies. She says the Genies have increased public awareness of Canadian film. "Several major broadcasters are now providing airtime to promote the Genies. And films that receive the Best Picture Awards all receive better results at the box office." Topalovich says a nominated film on average receives six months of Genie-related promotion with \$50,000 spent on each film. "We've helped to build an audience and Canadian films are doing better today as a result." But she's quick to emphasize that more needs to be done. "It's a developing industry. We have the talent but we need more support to market the work that is being done."

According to Topalovich, performing this marketing role has become more difficult in recent years as the Genies have been plagued by a lack of funds. Unlike the TV Geminis, which have the lucrative support of several corporate sponsors, the Genies have primarily been supported by the Academy and government agencies. The exodus of these agencies, such as the Ontario Film Development Corp., in recent years hurt the Genies. Low budgets is one reason the Genie telecasts have sometimes been nothing more than a recap of winners with film clips. "We're trying to come to grips with this," explains Topalovich. "We need long-term funding and government agencies should be supporting these awards. The Genies cost money and need to get more funds."

A lack of funds doesn't appear to be getting in the way of the big show planned for this year's 20th anniversary. As the Academy marks two decades, Topalovich is looking forward to a special celebration that will air live on CBC-TV on January 30th. The two-hour broadcast will focus on past winners and the award's history since 1980. Who knows, maybe *Porky's* director Bob Clark (a Genie winner in 1980) will chitchat with fellow winner Atom Egoyan about filmmaking. How times have changed in Canadian film.