

## TAKE ONE

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**Mailing address**

151-2255-B Queen Street East, Toronto M4E 1G3, ON, Canada

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Phone: (416) 944-1096 Fax: (416) 944-8877

Email: takeone@interlog.com

www.takeonemagazine.com

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Another round of Genies have come and gone and the beat goes on. As predictable as the sun rising in the East, the press followed the ceremony with carping about low television ratings and, as one veteran TV presenter succinctly put it, "A show nobody watches about films nobody goes to see." Ouch. I guess I've been wasting my life watching and writing about films nobody goes to see. That's not something you want to take back to the next family reunion.

But in reality, 1999 was a banner year for Canadian films, and the films are getting better all the time. In 1999 there was a record 46 Canadian features released in Toronto alone. For 50 weeks out of 52 it was possible to see a Canadian feature in a theatre, and this doesn't include the many festivals featuring Canadian films and alternative screenings such as those presented by Pleasure Dome or Cinematheque Ontario. When I started writing about Canadian film in 1971, you would be lucky to find two features playing commercially during the year and zero press coverage. There were no festivals and no industry. So why hasn't the mainstream press paid attention to this impressive growth?

When the Academy of Canadian Cinema was launched in 1980 it was in reaction to the Canadian Film Awards, which were notoriously inconsistent and perceived as bush league. The tax-shelter producers wanted glitz and glamour for their dreadful films. The first ceremonies were held at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, the grand dame of Toronto theatres, with all the hype the promoters could muster. There was optimism and cash to spare. But as the tax-shelter era came to a crashing end in 1983, the promoters packed up their bags and left town and the Academy became the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television in 1985. The Genies assumed less importance. It didn't help that the Academy had to shift the dates of presentation to suit the CBC, from December to January and back again. (Of course, the CBC televising the Genies directly opposite the Super Bowl this year, the most overly hyped TV event of the year next to the Oscars, is testimony to its faith in the audience appeal of the show.)

As the industry evolved and matured since the mid-1980s, the Genies now share the Canadian movie spotlight with a variety of worldwide events. Starting in mid-January, there is the Sundance Film Festival which has become increasingly important for Canadian filmmakers. It is an invitation-only festival, and filmmakers chosen to screen their films are guaranteed good coverage back in Canada. Berlin comes in February, and while the festival has lost its edge since the Wall came down, an award at Berlin still guarantees good promotion for a film. Next comes the Oscars in March. A nomination for a Canadian film or filmmaker means worldwide coverage, and an Oscar win can make a career. Then there is Cannes in May. Since the films selected to be screened in the official selection come with a great deal of press attention, a filmmaker lucky enough to have his or her film selected is guaranteed extensive coverage. When Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* won the Prix de la Jeunesse in 1987, it launched her career the way no other prize could have. Next comes the opening-night selection at the Toronto International Film Festival, traditionally a Canadian film, and the opening night of the Perspective Canada section in September. No other events can come close to generating the international press attention that these two screenings offer. They are the true highlights of the Canadian film year. Then comes the Genies, an annual lightening rod for a lazy local press who wish to dismiss the obvious, that Canadian cinema is alive and flourishing.

W. P. Wise