

PRAIRIE POPULISM

The Winnipeg Film Group's 25th Anniversary

The Winnipeg Film Group (WFG) is celebrating its 25th anniversary on an international front with the screening of its films at the prestigious Galerie Jeu de Paume in Paris, no doubt a tribute to the film co-op's worldwide reputation for eclectic, experimental filmmaking. But closer to home, perhaps one of the WFG's greatest accomplishments is in providing a model for how a local, nonprofit, member-driven organization can play a crucial role all the way through the filmmaking process, not only providing filmmakers with the tools to get their films made but also ensuring their work is exposed to the wider community, the country and around the world.

The Galerie Jeu de Paume retrospective was part of a larger showcase of the cinema of Western Canada, held in conjunction with the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris. The films chosen were from the WFG's extensive collection, suggesting the range of filmmaking talent who began their careers at the WFG. Titles included: John Kozak's *Hell Bent* (1994); Guy Maddin's *Archangel* (1990), *Careful* (1992) and *Tales From the Gimli Hospital* (1988); John Paizs' *Crime Wave* (1985) and *The Three Worlds of Nick* (1982-85); Noam Gonick's documentary *Guy Maddin: Waiting for Twilight* (1998); and a collection of short films, among them Maddin's *Hospital Fragments* (1999) and *Odilon Redon* (1995), Gonick's *1919* (1997), Lorne Bailey's *The Milkman Cometh* (1988), Deco Dawson's *Triptyque* (1988), M.B. Duggan's *Mike* (1989), Cory Lussier's *Tenants and Landlords* (1994), Kathryn Martin's *Through My Eyes* (1997) and *Victorian Beach* (1995), Dean Naday's *Memento Mori* and Gary Yates's *Without Rockets* (1994).

This is just a small sampling of the long list of films from a co-op that had its modest start in 1974 when a small group of Winnipeg filmmakers banded together to share resources, support each other's work, and gather together on Sunday nights. Soon this informal group developed into a nonprofit arts organization with the mission to provide opportunities for all to make, view and discuss film, and create an environment where novices could try their hand at filmmaking.

A quarter of a century later more than 200 members are involved in the WFG, which has garnered a reputation for the originality of its members work—very artistic, very edgy, very independent and some say “filled with a sense of the uncanny.” Executive director Larry Derochers attributes the worldwide recognition of the Film Group to the very different styles of each of its artists. “As an organization, we support the individual visions of our filmmakers, but it has been their work that has created the reputation of the Film Group—the uniqueness of their vision.” Early on, the co-op realized that developing filmmaking talent required more than offering workshops and equipment; it needed to play a part all the way through the filmmaking process. And so the WFG has evolved into a multifaceted organization that houses film-training courses and workshops, production and editing equipment, hands-on film production and marketing funding, and provides studio space, a public theatre and a distribution division—all under one roof. Quite the feat for a non-



profit co-op that runs on an annual operating budget of \$460,000 and with a full-time staff of five.

Ensuring that WFG films are seen is just as critical as getting them made. “The co-op felt it was important for its members’ work to have legitimacy beyond Winnipeg,” says Derochers and so the WFG decided to tackle international distribution in 1981. The WFG’s distribution arm houses a collection of just under 300 films and sells its catalogue to broadcasters and distributors around the world, as well as submitting the films to all the international festivals. The WFG represents films of both members and nonmembers, and recently struck a deal with Saskatchewan Filmpool, a co-op in Regina, to represent its library. Derochers says that as more and more exhibition opportunities for independent films dry up in Canada, an international outlook will become more important for the co-op. Up next, the WFG is planning a tour of its films through South America in conjunction with the University of Buenos Aires.

To ensure that WFG members were exposed to an eclectic array of films and were able to premiere their films to the local community, the WFG opened the Cinematheque theatre in downtown Winnipeg in 1983. Under the guidance of programmer (and regular *Take One* contributor) Dave Barber, the Cinematheque screens an array of short films and features—from classics to the latest experimental work from Canada and around the world, as well as premiering all the WFG member works. Barber says he tries to ensure that at least half of the annual programming is devoted to Canadian film, and he helps create advertising campaigns for films that come to him with little promotion behind them. Developing audiences for an independent theatre is no easy feat. But as an independent exhibitor, Barber says the Cinematheque is free to experiment with its programming to capture new audiences, such as holding a Sunday morning Contemporary Breakfast Cinema, where theatregoers are given coffee and breakfast before watching an array of films from Canadian and international filmmakers.

With a solid base behind it, the future looks promising for the film collective and the Manitoba film industry it fosters. Over 45 films are currently in some phase of production. Not content with its past accomplishments, the WFG has developed a strategic plan for the next five years. This includes assisting senior filmmakers by upgrading camera and editing equipment and adding more advanced workshops to the course lineup to help filmmakers hone their craft and to assist them in creative decision-making issues. The plan also includes expanding the activities of the distribution division by taking on distribution services for more of the co-ops across Canada, and supplementing the Film Group’s core funding from government grants, with private sponsorship and foundation endowments.