

FESTIVALWRAPS



THE OTTAWA INTERNATIONAL ANIMATION FESTIVAL (09/19-24/00)

There is only one fall film festival in Canada that is truly unique. While Halifax and Vancouver remain locked in a struggle to establish themselves as being different from their overbearing forefathers in Montreal and Toronto, a festival takes place in our nation's capital every two years that no city tries to emulate. Sudbury's Cinefest may be funky and Calgary's festival certainly is new, but when it comes down to it, all of these cities and their festivals are still going after the same live-action/feature-film audience. Not Ottawa, which has been doing its own, very lively thing for a quarter of a century, as long as Toronto and Montreal have been enraging each other with their "two solitudes" approaches to film culture.

What has made Ottawa so different? In a word: animation. The Ottawa International Animation Festival only screens live actors if they are doing a guest cameo in a film where graphic design is the true star. James Earl Jones and Brad Pitt have never shown up in Ottawa, even though they have contributed to major animated features. Why would they? The stars of *The Lion King* and *The Cool World* are the folks out of the Disney and Bakshi studios who designed, drew and animated the films, not the actors who contributed

their voices and bodies to the final look of those features.

Ottawa's festival is geared toward the guys and girls in the trenches, the people who make the work and those who love it. Instead of Bistro 990's champagne-laden excesses, where Toronto's chattering classes meet the best and worst of America's indie scene, Ottawa offers *Chez Ani*, a late-night spot where artists and the *hoi polloi* drink beer and see new films by neophyte animators. Both Toronto and Ottawa offer picnics, but the capital city's is staged in a public park not at a reconvered horse farm, where only the old, the rich and the dead feel comfortable.

And, unlike Toronto, Ottawa's festival is still accessible to the public, the media and the filmmakers. There aren't any special screenings or parties that only a certain class of people are allowed to attend. Events are announced quite openly, if occasionally vaguely, by Ottawa's festival director Chris Robinson during his frequent visits to the main podium at the National Arts Centre (NAC).

Robinson, himself, cuts quite a different figure from his own titular boss, Montreal's Serge Losique, or, for that matter, Toronto's Piers Handling. For one

thing, Robinson is quite a bit younger than either of those well-known festival administrators and still exudes an air of the *enfant terrible*. He's cut a swath through the official rules and regulations of ASIFA, the international regulating body that holds the international animation community together. Yet, despite being a harsh critic of the boondoggling ways of an international administration that seems to resemble the Olympics at times, Robinson has been more than tolerated by the powers that be.

Ottawa 2000's numbers were augmented thanks to the simultaneous presence of the ASIFA annual general meeting. International animators and programmers came to the festival who otherwise might not have appeared at Ottawa this year. And, in an ironic twist, Robinson was elected to the ASIFA board, which was rather like letting the fox into the chicken coop. Apparently, Robinson's raffish, *Rat Pack* charm has worked its wonders on the conservative members of ASIFA.

It certainly has played well in Ottawa, where the festival has too rarely attracted local audiences. Thanks to canny programming and Robinson's youthful, innovative approach to the media, the attendance figures were up this year. So was the enthusiasm of the crowds, particularly during the evening competition screenings at the NAC. That's another thing about Ottawa, a festival where every rule of regular film programming seems to be reversed. The big draws here aren't the features that are often hopelessly compromised due to commercial considerations. Shorts are the hits here, especially new ones that appear at the nightly competition screenings. Judges sit in the audience looking at an impressive array of films ranging from TV commercials to animation for the Internet, from episodes of TV series to indie works. The types of techniques employed by the animators are also impressively diverse. In a single screening one could see puppets, pixilation, cut-outs, collage, clay designs and digitally assembled but hand-drawn animated works.

It all makes for wonderfully dense programs, with commissioned pieces vying with independent work for audience recognition. Take Competition Screening No. 4 for example: *At the Ends of the World*, a hilarious animated piece from France, opened the program. It's a witty

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study of a rural house built as a fulcrum on a triangular landscape and the slapstick events that transpire during one eventful afternoon; after this homage to Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, *The Periwig Maker* was shown. It is a small German masterpiece of puppet animation that effectively depicts life in plague-filled London during the 17th century, set to the words of the *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe; then, a very clever advertising piece entitled *Rally's G-Force* rocked the crowd with its dynamic cel animation; Paul Fierlinger's *Member of the Club*, the next short, is part of his series of animated documentaries about contemporary women. It won applause as did a tough piece on domestic violence called *Insurrection*; a couple of films later, veteran Vancouver animator Marv Newland's rude, sardonic episode from the hit TV show *The PJs* entitled "The Preacher's Life" again garnered full marks from the audience; three shorts later, David Gaïney's *Fishing* finished the evening nicely by showing off some clever computer effects while playing with ideas around daydreams and nightmares.

Competition No. 4 contained a number of the festival winners: "The Preacher's Life" won for best TV series; *Rally's G-Force* was the best commercial; *At the Ends of the Earth* garnered the Gordon Bruce Award for Humour; *Fishing* took The Best Computer Animation prize; Fierlinger's *Drawn From Life* docu-animation was recognized as the Best Commissioned Series; while *The Periwig Maker* was awarded The Best First Professional Film Prize. As one can see, Ottawa is very generous with its prizes. Other winners included Wendy Tilby's and Amanda Forbis's haunting depiction of mortality, *When the Day Breaks* (for Best Canadian

Film); Paul Driessen's very funny skewering of silent film clichés, *The Three Misses* (The Mike Gribble Peels of Laughter Prize); Barry Purves's beautiful musical recap, *Gilbert and Sullivan - The Very Models* (for Object Animation); and Michael Dudok de Wit's loving look at a personal relationship, *Fathers and Daughters* (Best Independent Film).

Ottawa 2000 found time and space to host an animation market where studios and schools could ply their wares and sponsor a host of seminars and workshops for animators. However, not all films are new at the Ottawa festival. Retrospectives are important to Robinson, who is an essayist with a knowledge of animation's history. A number of surveys were screened at Ottawa 2000, notably Edwin Carels' look at scratch animation and experimental films, "From Scratch"; Mark Langer's study of model animator, and latterly sci-fi film producer, George Pal; Pierre Hebert's fond look at fellow animator Suzanne Gervais; Robinson's study of Paul Fierlinger, "Dogs, Drinks, Dads and Dante"; and Marc Glassman's and Mark Langer's homage to jazz animation, "From Boop to Bop and Beyond."

A huge success this year, the inimitable Ottawa International Animation Festival seems to be going from strength to strength. It's a form that Canadians understand, having grown up in an environment that extolled great short films. Clearly, animation is here to stay and, like documentaries, is something that seems to be unique to our culture. ●

PAUL TOWNEND

THE VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL (09/22-10/05/00)

While in a cab on my way to the Opening Night Gala - Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* - my cab driver innocently asked me what I did for a living. Replying that I worked for the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF), prompted him to launch into an excited disquisition on the "subtle comedy" of John Candy (I'm not making this up). And he knew his stuff. Yes, it was festival time again in Vancouver, a two-week window on the world when the surreal and the sublime comingled to invigorating and disorienting effect.

Still reeling from my taxi driver's genuinely heartfelt eulogy to M. Candy, I found myself listening to festival director Alan Franey address the sold-out crowd at the cavernous Vogue Theatre. "Yes, we're tired



Ang Lee
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon