

# It's Time to Rethink Perspective Canada

By Geoff Pevere

**IS** it time to reconsider Perspective Canada, the Toronto International Film Festival's annual Canadian premiere showcase which was inaugurated in 1984? Not because the program is not successful – on the contrary, it may be the 25-year-old festival's single-most imitated programming innovation – but because it is. Where the Perspective Canada program (which, for all its success is still regularly misidentified as “Canadian Perspectives” or “Perspectives Canada”) was once a novel innovation, and Toronto was the first major festival to designate an all-maple branch of its activities, similar programs are now a staple of just about all the country's larger festivals: the Vancouver, Montreal and Halifax events all have Canadian showcases. This means that while it remains maddeningly challenging – if not impossible – for Canadian movies to get a theatrical run on the regular commercial exhibition circuit, it's only the truly misbegotten strip of homegrown celluloid that doesn't secure a festival slot somewhere between St. John's and Vancouver.

In fact festivals are often the only place Canadian movies experience anything approaching a theatrical validation, even if that validation is as fleeting and ultimately artificial – given the specialized and often well-papered nature of the events – as a festival showing. This is how, one assumes, it is possible to experience that dizzying kind of festival-specific dissonance: the kind created by the watching of the worst Canadian movies in the most lavish circumstances. In festivals, everything gets hyped, including Canadian movies that would otherwise be lucky to see the light of a late-night, quota-filling cable slot. (Strangely, the reverse also occasionally comes to pass in Toronto: some of the country's most interesting recent movies – like Allan Zweig's *Vinyl* or Louis Bélanger's *Post Mortem*, for instance – for reasons which only become more perplexing because of the presence of the significantly less interesting films – were not invited to the party.) And all this hype because they're Canadian, which everyone will tell you is good except those without an interest in saying so, the regular moviegoers.

This is why it may be time for the Toronto International Film Festival to reconsider the form and function of Perspective Canada. Having achieved the hardly chopped-liver goals of

increasing the promotional profile of Canadian movies; boosting the early careers of, to name a few, Atom Egoyan, Don McKellar, Guy Maddin and Gary Burns; hosting SRO premieres of even the most dismal never-to-be-seen again Canadian productions – the festival needs do nothing more to demonstrate its passionate commitment to the domestic motion-picture enterprise. Except maybe get tougher. Here's my suggestion. (Or, to be perfectly honest, my spin on a suggestion presented to me by this publication's editor, Mr. Wyndham Wise.): Why not limit Perspective Canada to 10 features and 10 shorts? Think about it. While shrinking the program would invariably heat up the entry competition – not to mention, it must be admitted, the pressure on already underpaid and harried programmers – it would restore a sense of occasion to the event by conforming it as the country's most prestigious and selective. It would increase the cachet of the films programmed and reclarify the program as the country's most high-profile Canadian movie premiere showcase. Moreover, because of the intensified competition, press and industry interest in the event would grow keener, and the issues surrounding the program's more dubious inclusions of the past (which I will be too resolutely and politely Canadian to mention here, but which mark the inevitable compromises a larger program invites) would no longer apply.

The program would thus be free of the dubious responsibility to be somehow “representative,” which is fine for bureaucracy but dampens commercial movie festivals. If the program is understood to be small and selective, only those films which the programming committee feels are truly outstanding would bear consideration. And the rest may (politely, of course) run along. This would not only distinguish the Toronto Canadian program from the rest of those in the country, it would restore the festival's reputation as the leading venue for new Canadian cinema. Besides, if fairness is the issue – and only in this country would it be in an otherwise totally elitist event like a film festival – there's always those other festivals out there. All Canadian movies would get a moment in the spotlight somewhere; it would simply shine brighter, and on fewer, at the festival that started it all in the first place. ●