

FILM PAST AND FUTURE

Preserving Canada's Cinematic Heritage

By Cheryl Binning



THE facts are startlingly clear. Prints of *Evangeline* (1913), the first Canadian feature film, are no longer in existence. Neither are there any prints of the first Canadian feature shot with sound nor the first CBC-TV shows that aired in 1952. And it's not just these early works that have all but disappeared. Decent prints of Canadian features made as recently as the 1970s are no longer available.

What isn't quite so clear is who should take responsibility for preserving Canada's audiovisual past. Faced with the difficulties of raising financing in a small market and competing for screens and time slots against American fare, the Canadian film and television industry has concentrated its efforts on looking ahead, fostering growth and developing new talent. There just hasn't been much time to dwell on the past, with so much work still to be done.

Historically, government agencies, museums and archives are the keepers of Canada's cultural past and it was assumed that they would also take care of preserving Canada's audiovisual works. It wasn't until recently, as the industry began to mature and reflect on its beginnings, that it was noticed that much of its early endeavours was in a state of decay and many films had totally disappeared. Cam Haynes, who manages the Toronto International Film Festival Group's Film Circuit, says he first realized the dismal state of Canada's classic films three years ago when he set out to program a Canadian retrospective at the short-lived Niagara Falls Film Festival and could not find decent copies of *Goin' Down the Road* or *Mon oncle Antoine* to screen. He had to piece together several 16mm copies of *Black Christmas* to make one reel, and the print of *Face Off* was in such bad shape that it started to melt in the projector. "I really struggled to put together a program of 10 classic Canadian films. There were no remaining 35mm prints, just 16mm copies in really bad shape."

The alarm sounded that public agencies alone could not be responsible for saving Canada's audiovisual past; the industry had to get involved. "The idea of government agencies alone as the only way to take care of film preservation, is flawed," says William O'Farrell, the National Archives chief of moving image

and audio conservation. The National Archives currently houses over 200,000 videos and 250,000 films. However, O'Farrell says, the Archives, with a \$500,000 annual budget to deliver its preservation and storage services, as well as pay for stock, equipment and salaries, cannot take on the responsibility on its own. "Up until 1960, approximately 100 to 150 features were made in Canada. In the 1960s and 1970s, another 150 were produced. But between the 1970s and today, nearly 3,000 films have been made. The idea that the National Archives can save all of this material with government funds, is just not possible. "The industry needs to get behind private, public or non-profit organizations that take care of archiving their collective past." In addition to the CBC and the National Film Board, which have strong archival programs for their works, and the Cinéma-thèque Québécoise, which has played an important role in preservation of French-language film and television programs, there is a need for regional, non-profit archives so that filmmakers from St. John's, Halifax, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver have local options for storing their works.

The AV Preservation Trust of Canada was born out of *Fading Away*, a 1995 federal study that recommended the production community should become actively involved in the preservation of its past and establish a private/public initiative to take on the cause. "The National Archives, the National Library and individual cinémathèques were doing preservation work, but it was all government-funded. There was no private sector involvement," explains Brian Robertson, president of the AV Preservation Trust, a charitable organization mandated to raise funds to preserve and restore Canada's audiovisual heritage and educate the industry and the public about preservation. It also aims to increase public access to this heritage. "The Trust does not have the money to preserve all the films and it's not trying to," says Robertson. "One of the main priorities is to deal with the lack of interest in preserving works, particularly among the audiovisual industries."

The Trust has built up a long list of public and private partners, including the National Film Board of Canada, the National Archives, the National Library of Canada, CBC, Telefilm Canada, Astral Media, the Canadian Film Institute,



Gilles Carle's *La Vrai Nature de Bernadette*



Crawley Films' *The Loon's Necklace*

McGill University, Simon Fraser University, CinémaQuébécoise, the Toronto International Film Festival Group and ACTRA. Filmmakers on the advisory council include David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan and Norman Jewison. Yet, the list is still heavily weighted toward government organizations, and Robertson says there is much work to be done to get the film and television industry actively supporting preservation. "The private sector is sympathetic but it is not breaking down the doors to fund this initiative," says Robertson. "But we are beginning to change attitudes. It's a gradual process."

To raise awareness of the decaying state of Canada's audio-visual heritage and to raise funds for preservation work, the AV Preservation Trust inaugurated a MasterWorks program on National Heritage Day, February 19, 2000. The masterworks are 12 Canadian classics in the categories of radio, television, film and sound recordings, which are chosen for preservation through the combined efforts of the Trust and its partners. "The MasterWorks program is a calling card to the industry. It was created as an educational tool to make people realize that we have to ensure film history is available to future generations," says Robertson. The masterworks are chosen by a jury process based on their historical and cultural significance, critical and popular acclaim, and their preservation state. The films announced for restoration in 2001 are Phillip Borsos's *The Grey Fox* (1983), Gilles Carle's *La Vrai Nature de Bernadette* (1972) and the animated short *The Loon's Necklace*, produced in 1948 by Crawley Films and the first film to win Best Picture at the inaugural Canadian Film Awards in 1949. The television titles are *Cre-Basile* (1952), the first Québécoise sitcom; *Femme d'aujourd'hui*, a groundbreaking women's series produced by SRC between 1965 and 1982; and *SCTV* (1977-84), arguably the most popular Canadian sketch comedy show of all time.

The AV Preservation Trust's biggest coup in its ongoing preservation efforts is in the new feature film policy being developed by Canadian Heritage. Through its lobbying efforts to integrate archival planning into the pre-production process, the Trust has managed to secure a clause in the policy that makes funding contingent on striking two additional master prints. These two copies will be deposited at the National Archives. One copy will be frozen and the other made available for public access. The policy also provides the National Archives with an additional \$600,000 per year over three years to aid its preservation work.

The philosophy behind this clause is quite simply that it is far less expensive to keep a film safely preserved from the outset, and far more expensive after it has deteriorated. Restoration of a film can cost, at the low end, between \$100,000 and \$150,000, or as high as \$1 million. "Preservation has been discretionary up to now and look what's happened," says Catherine Hurley, executive director of the AV Preservation Trust. "These films are funded by taxpayers who have the right to ensure their invest-

ment is in safekeeping. It's the cost of doing business," says producer Christina Jennings (*Swann, Conquest*) of Shaftesbury Films in Toronto, who feels the new preservation requirement in the funding policy is something filmmakers recognize as important. She admits that she has misplaced the masters of some of her earliest films and welcomes the new requirement.

For the Preservation Trust, the new feature film policy requirement is only a small first step since television and audio-recordings are not covered by this program. Hurley says that the Trust aims to make archiving a condition of all public funding. It has also floated the idea of making the deposit of a master copy at an archive a legal requirement. "If it's mandatory, it takes the guesswork out of it," says Hurley. Indeed, all books published in Canada have to be deposited at the National Library.

Beyond promoting preservation, public access to Canada's audiovisual heritage is another area that has garnered attention of late. In 1988, the Film Circuit – a division of the Toronto International Film Festival Group that releases films through a network of cinemas in over 60 communities throughout Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta – was approached by the National Film Board to partner on the restoration and re-release of Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971). The film was re-released in 22 cities and since then the Film Circuit has worked with the National Archives, the AV Preservation Trust and other private sector partners to re-release a Canadian classic each year. Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) was re-released in 1999 and Gratien Gélinas' *Tit-coq*, which had not been widely seen since its original release in 1953, was re-released in 2000.

The AV Preservation Trust is also tackling access issues by developing a Web site that will be a portal for Canadians interested in linking to archives and cinémathèques, artist collections, rights holders, and to find information on various works, artists and availability of copies. It will also be a vehicle for the exchange of information between those involved in archiving and preserving audiovisual materials.

Today, with the proliferation of specialty channels around the world seeking content to fill niche upon niche, and with pay-per-view and video releases extending the shelf life of films, there is now an economic argument to be made for preserving film and television programs. In the coming years, the Internet may offer additional opportunities for repackaging old film and television titles. "These days secondary windows are a primary source of income and old libraries have far greater resale value," says O'Farrell. "The realization is beginning that asset preservation dollars spent now will generate dividends down the road." And with archiving becoming more of a commercial imperative, rather than just a cultural/historical exercise, the pendulum is likely to sway further toward industry involvement in preservation initiatives. ●