



John Greyson's *The Law of Enclosures*

For all the above reasons, Winnipeg's Local Heroes Film Festival has a certain refreshing charm that sets it apart from its much larger, much glitzier festival cousins in the big cities to the east and west. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the uniqueness of Local Heroes is that it is organized not by a cinemathèque or a group of film buffs, but by the National Screen Institute-Canada (NSI), a national training organization that is mandated to develop the skills of emerging filmmakers and provide them with the breaks they need to succeed in the highly competitive world of film and television. In fact, organizers see the festival as a place where new filmmakers have the opportunity to showcase their works, talk shop, mingle with industry veterans and perhaps make the deal that will cement their careers or meet the mentor who will help them develop their next film. And for the industry wearied veterans, the festival provides an opportunity to meet the filmmakers of tomorrow and scout for new talent. The formula appears to be working - over 450 registered delegates from across Canada braved the cold for a late February romp in Winterpeg.

The feature-film program of the third annual Local Heroes Winnipeg had a decidedly made-in-Manitoba flavour, with four of the six films either produced entirely or co-produced by Manitobans. The biggest buzz surrounded the Canadian premiere of Noam Gonick's *Hey Happy!*, still fresh from its screening at Sundance. The post-apocalyptic rave-scene film played to a sold-out Winnipeg house (with a long line of disappointed people turned away) and, according to Gonick, received a far more receptive response from its home audience than it did at Sundance.

Also from Manitoba was *Kanadiana*, directed by first-time feature filmmaker Jon Einarsson Gustafsson, a native of Iceland who now resides in Winnipeg. Set in the bitter cold landscape surrounding Lake Winnipeg, *Kanadiana* is a film noir, *Fargo*-esque thriller that tells the story of two brothers who head north to lie low after a diamond heist, and wind up

following a runaway waitress who unknowingly ends up with the diamonds stashed in the back of her truck. The film has previously screened at the 2000 Montreal Festival des Films du Monde, San Juan's Cinemafest and Planet Indie in Toronto. John Greyson's *The Law of Enclosures* and Colleen Murphy's *Desire*, both of which opened at the 2000 Toronto International Film Festival, were co-produced by Winnipeg's Buffalo Gal Pictures and completed the Manitoba component of the festival. Also screening were Toronto filmmaker John Fawcett's campy teenage-werewolf tale *Ginger Snaps*, a definite hit with Winnipeg audiences, and from Newfoundland, Rosemary House's *Violet*, starring Mary Walsh.

But the heart of this festival was the short films. Sold out daily, the Showcase of Canadian Short Films screened just under 40 shorts from emerging and established filmmakers. The line up included the premier of new films produced through the NSI's Drama Prize Program, which annually provides \$44,000 in training, cash and services

LOCAL HEROES FILM FESTIVAL, EDMONTON

(3/16-23/01) BY JACK VERMEE

When I left Edmonton in 1985 for what I expected to be the sunnier cultural climes of Vancouver, I had no idea what I was actually leaving behind. Naively, I believed that Vancouver, being bigger, would probably be better. It wasn't, at least not back in the mid-1980s. Still the West's best-kept secret, Edmonton's cultural life encompasses everything from a burgeoning movie industry (writer/director Anne Wheeler and producer Arvi Liimatainen got their starts there) and a fantastic theatre scene (the Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival annually attracts more than 100,000 patrons and is justly famous worldwide) to a community of sculptors whose work was championed by no less an authority than New York art critic Clement Greenberg. And because on the prairies these things matter, Edmonton also has the best bar scene west of Toronto, not to mention the best folk music festival. Need more convincing? If you look at voting patterns you'll see this enlightened cultural attitude reflected in the fact that Edmonton has

to six teams of filmmakers from around the country to make a short film. The Winnipeg Film Group also had the opportunity to showcase its latest crop of shorts, always an eclectic array of experimental works produced by its members.

Beyond the screenings, Local Heroes is very much an industry event where filmmakers can take part in a daily line up of intensive workshops and master classes catering to writers, directors and producers. Among the notable names leading the master classes were writers Edward Kay and Semi Chellas, directors Sturla Gunnarsson, Don McKellar and John Greyson, and producers Christine Haebler, Damon D'Oliveira and Niv Fichman. The festival also provided an opportunity for the NSI to showcase its core training programs. In addition to announcing the latest Drama Prize teams, the NSI launched a third round of its Features First Program which develops scripts from first

and second time writer/director/producer teams to a production-ready phase. The Genie Award-winning *My Father's Angel* and *Violet* were among the first features to be developed through the program.

The NSI also unveiled a new initiative, the NSI Global Marketing Program. Recognizing the imperative for film and television producers to sell their programs to international buyers, this program is aimed at teaching Canadian producers the skills required to successfully market their projects at major international markets and festivals. Canada's provincial film agencies and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade are lending their support to the new program.

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consistently bucked the Alberta-wide trend, refusing to embrace the extreme right-wing, cutback mentality espoused by Ralph Klein's Big Blue Machine.

For the last 15 years, Edmonton has also been the home to the Local Heroes Film Festival, an institution in itself that has been likened to the Telluride of 10 years ago by *Variety*, no less, for its anti-hype attitude and easy atmosphere. A celebration of the spirit of independent filmmaking, Local Heroes has played host to such directors as Paul Cox, Krzysztof Zanussi, Werner Herzog (particularly memorable for advising would-be filmmakers to steal cameras and learn how to pick locks and forge documents in order to get films made), Costa-Gavras, Bruce Beresford and Iceland's Fridrik Thor Fridriksson, as well as the usual Canadian suspects—the three Ms (McDonald, McKellar and Maddin), Patricia Rozema, Lynne Stopkewich and many others.

The 15th edition opened with the homecoming of Wheeler and Liimatainen, whose *Marine Life* kicked off a festival that delivered 38 features and a handful of shorts over a week. The *de rigueur* champagne reception followed the sold-out screening where Arvi could be found in the corner counselling younger filmmakers and dispensing advice.

That image of Liimatainen giving the benefit of his experience to newcomers serves as a perfect example of what separates the Local Heroes experience from the norm. The usual barriers between filmmakers and the public that exist at most film festivals are nowhere to be found in Edmonton. Daily afternoon "Pub Chats" feature guests and interested audience members drinking and talking film at Sorrentino's restaurant in the festival's host hotel, the Varscona on fashionable Whyte Avenue in the heart of the Old Strathcona district. Post-screening revelry continues at the Savoy or the Black Dog pub located on a two-block stretch of Whyte Ave. that has

more bars per block than any city this side of Berlin or Prague. It's common (more like a dead certainty) to find guests, festival staff and anyone else who cares to join in hunkered down at the bar until the wee hours, enjoying Edmontonians' legendary friendliness, openness and capacity for ale.

For many – me included – the highlight of the festival was the chance to meet and talk with self-titled "filth elder," John Waters, who blew into town to give a sold-out presentation of his Shock Value talk. As friendly and forthcoming as he is intelligent and urbane, Waters had the audience laughing out loud and giving him a standing ovation by the end. At his press conference he entertained the media by calling *Patch Adams* the "scariest" movie he'd seen in a long time and listing *Dancer in the Dark* and Volker Schlöndorff's *The Legends of Rita* as two recent favourites. Festival boss Bill Evans was all smiles after that event and was doubly happy by the festival's end, citing the sold-out, closing-night international premiere of Lyndon Chubbuck's Canada/U.K. co-production *The War Bride* (with Anna Friel, Brenda Fricker and Molly Parker) and overall attendance figures approaching 10,000 – a new high for the fest – as reasons for his happiness. He was probably a little relieved as well, because the brouhaha that surrounded the future of the festival was finally settling down.

When the NSI – the festival's organizing body – announced in February that it was pulling out of Edmonton to concentrate on training filmmakers and putting on the Winnipeg edition of Local Heroes, the Edmonton media were angry. After all, Edmonton had supported the Local Heroes festival from the beginning; the NSI's move to Winnipeg and subsequent decision to shutter the Edmonton fest was seen as a betrayal. The good news is that the NSI has handed over the reins to a three-year-old organization known as the Edmonton

International Film Festival Society, a coalition of arts representatives, under the interim chairmanship of Josh Keller, that was formed when it began to look like the NSI's long-term plans might not include Edmonton. Keller told the *Edmonton Journal* that the 2002 edition will "follow the concept that has been successful over the past years," which is good news for Edmonton and film fans of independent cinema throughout the West.

And it is good news for Bill Evans, who will be moving to Winnipeg in May to assume leadership of the Winnipeg fest. Evans took the brunt of the media heat, despite the fact that he's been one of the strongest champions of Canadian and international cinema in Edmonton for many years, first as a filmmaker, then as programmer at the Metro Cinema art house and finally as Local Heroes director. As a former Edmontonian, a frequenter of both the Metro and the Local Heroes festival, and a friend, I would like to thank him for his work and wish him all the best.

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Anne Wheeler's *Marine Life*

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