



Katrina Onstad, *National Post*

A hot, sweaty Saturday and the marquee read *Maelström* and *waydowntown*. I loitered outside, thinking of air conditioning and wishing the movies

were showing in a different order, so I could revisit *waydowntown* (which I loved) and avoid *Maelström* (which I hated). Two young women stood scanning the posters. "Oh God," groaned the blonde, "Canadian movies." That "Canadian" sounded like a swear next to the word "movie" made me feel lousy, but I also understood her reaction. Even though it's hardly true in these cutback times, Canadian entertainment, like the new broccoli-rapini hybrid "broccolini," is stuck with the stigma of being government approved and good for you. Which means canoes and earnestness; which means boredom and suffering.

That moment outside the theatre stirred my already mixed feelings about reviewing Canadian movies. As a good CBC-reared, Trudeau baby, I'm always conscious of the conflicting pulls of home-team affection and my best objective faculties. Most critics feel a twinge of responsibility to nurture nascent filmmakers of any background, to make some room for the anti-*Lara Croft* release. When reviewing Canadian movies, I think the twinge gets stronger, and critics (subconsciously?) want to assuage the public's "Oh-God-it's-a-Canadian-movie" response; this is the only explanation I can think of for the inflated positive reviews some stinko Canadian films receive. But alone with my keyboard, it's quite simple, really. All films are held to the same standards. A movie is worth more space on a newspaper page if it provokes questions, makes your bones feel like you've been bodychecked, delivers the "Kiss Kiss

Bang Bang." I shudder to imagine a critical climate wherein one's truthful response to art is suppressed in favour of a national agenda. And yet often at the *Post*, a negative review of a Canadian film will yield all kinds of nasty phone calls, as if we have somehow let the team down. Canadian films aren't as fragile as the most sensitive and nervous industry cheerleaders seem to believe. Good Canadian films are simply good films, and easily internationally competitive (the Nunavut movie *Atanarjuat [The Fast Runner]* was the best film at Cannes this year, in my opinion). If the good Canadian films don't engage the public, it's because they aren't easily seen, a responsibility that doesn't lie only with critics but with theatre owners, broadcasters or marketers. Above all, I won't lie to the reader, maple-leaf brand or not. So I told the blonde that *waydowntown* rocked. And *Maelström*? I told her to read the reviews.



Geoff Pevere, *The Toronto Star*

If the nub of the issue is whether the compromising of already declining critical standards is worth treating Canadian movies as special-needs cultural products, perhaps we'd better evaluate some of the most common reasons for assuming compromising critical positions.

Reason One: It's hard to get a movie made in Canada.

Response: If mere existence were reason enough for praise, we should just dole out those ratings according to Telefilm Canada's annual production report. That way, we wouldn't even have to watch them.

Reason Two: In a colonized, branch-plant cultural context, Canadian movies deserve extra praise.

Response: No. In a colonized, branch-plant cultural context, the colonizing movies deserve to be hammered even harder.

Reason Three: If I dump on a Canadian movie, I may run into the filmmaker and he or she will not like me.

Response: Have you ever seen how short most Canadian filmmakers are?

Reason Four: If I'm hard on a Canadian movie, the producers will ban me from attending further screenings.

Response: Right. As if there's any producer in this country who can risk losing potential press coverage for the sake of a grudge. Even Robert Lantos is above this.

Reason Five: If I piss too many people off by writing bad reviews of their Canadian movies, my future as a major Canadian screenwriter may be in jeopardy.

Response: Name two major Canadian screenwriters.

Reason Six: I may no longer be invited to cocktail parties at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Response: You are pathetic. Get a life.

Reason Seven: I live next door to someone involved in making the movie.

Response: Keep a very close eye on your cat. Or move: Toronto housing prices are through the roof lately.

Reason Eight: I'd really like to sleep with someone involved in this production.

Response: Then try and do so before publishing the review. No one in the movie business expects lasting commitments anyway.

Reason Nine: I believe I'm supporting Canadian culture by being extra nice to it.

Response: No, but you are being extra Canadian by assuming so.

Reason Ten: What if I go to heaven and St. Peter is wearing a T-shirt for a bad Canadian movie?

Response: Then you've really gone to hell. Abandon all hope.