

arts

Novelist Doris Lessing maintains that Orwell was no prophet



Celebrated novelist Doris Lessing.

By JASON SHERMAN

Either Doris Lessing was thoroughly bored by the innocuous questions asked of her when she spoke at Vanier College on Monday, or she came prepared to discuss only some of her ideas. It was likely the former which turned what mediator Deborah Hobson kept referring to as "this great event" into a rather uninteresting and disappointing hour-and-a-half with the highly-respected, much-studied British author.

Lessing's appearance was ostensibly the third and final in a series of lectures on George Orwell's *1984*, although the capacity turnout owed more to the living writer's presence than Orwell's book.

In fact, Lessing sounded something of a death knell, casting aside all analysis of *1984*'s supposed prophecies as so much rubbish. "The whole thing is absurd," she said. "It's become one of those great labels which people don't even think about."

She pointed out that the book was in fact a warning about the dangers of socialism. Orwell, she said, grew up in abject poverty and joined the Communist party out of despair and disgust. He "needed to believe in something perfect," and, like most socialists then, was willing to "believe the lies." It was when Orwell became disillusioned with the movement that he wrote *1984*.

Lessing said there is a loathing in the book which is overlooked because the object of Orwell's loathing has disappeared: the bleakness. "The academic world is focused on *1984* like a bunch of hypnotized rabbits. It's as if nothing exists outside it," Lessing said, and then launched into a discussion of "the power of words to stop your thinking."

She said that the English language is one which keeps writers constantly on the lookout for words which pigeonhole remissions, which trigger responses the author does not intend.

And this, essentially, was the end of her talk. The fact that this first half was by far the most illuminating and interesting was aided a good deal by a series of questions designed to either

demonstrate the asker's own knowledge of a certain topic or their reverence for the author ("If I may be so presumptuous to ask such a one as thyself."). There was, for example, the question about Lessing's "feelings" on English translations of South American writers, a fascinating query which somehow led Lessing to an anecdote about the writing technique of Salman Rushdie.

Another participant questioned Lessing about the storytelling ability of certain authors, including internationally-renowned author Italo Calvino, who Lessing had surprisingly not heard of, but who, the questioner explained to Lessing's and the audience's mutual benefit, had had a best-selling novel in Winnipeg. There was one rather impertinent fellow who not only insisted on interrupting Lessing at every opportunity he was afforded, but came equipped with his own awe-inspiring lecture on a scientist he believed matched Lessing thought for thought.

Most of Lessing's answers sounded like one or the other of "But how can I possibly answer something like that?" or, her favorite, "That seems to be an either/or question." It is sad to report that at a university that would like to be considered an important centre of learning, a talk by a major writer could excite questions no more interesting than "Who are your five favorite writers?"

Lessing did manage to say some interesting things about her own writing, but nothing that isn't available in any good book of criticism on her. For the most part, she looked disappointed. For the most part, she was justified.

Canadian Images film festival

By W.E. OVERTON

Perhaps the greatest problem in Canadian cinema is the difficulty in seeing Canadian films. There are many good films made every year and most Canadians will not even know of them, let alone have the opportunity to see them. A few make it to television, some are talked about and seen, but an incredible number of good ones remain in obscurity.

It is ironic that Québec's film industry is internationally recognized while it continues to be ignored by the rest of Canada. Film cops are operating across the country and producing interesting films that have no means to reach a large audience. The Maritime region is becoming particularly active. With the restrictions on the opportunities to view Canadian films it is fortunate that once a year we have the opportunity to see films from across the country at the *Canadian Images* film festival in Peterborough.

This year's festival lasted six days, having been expanded from the four-day format of other years. There was, as one might expect, a proliferation of live action and animated shorts and videos. Jane Wright's three-hour travelogue video, *The Mississippi Tapes*, drew a lot of attention, York University professor Scott Forsyth and former York student Eli Necakov cowrote the amusing documentary *Street Writers (Lucky To Be Here)*, about poets who sell their works on the streets of Toronto. The popular Canadian features for 1983 were represented in the Genie Awards Nominees program and they included *Videodrome*, *Maria Chapdelaine*, *The Wars*, and *The Terry Fox Story*.

Flamenco At 5:15, *Boys And Girls*, and *The Profession Of Arms*, Canada's three nominees for Academy Awards, were also shown at the festival.

It was a special treat to have screenings of nine films from the British Film Institute. For the occasion Peter Wollen, a British filmmaker/theorist and codirector of *Crystal Gazing*, took part in a panel discussion with Canadian filmmakers Peter Mettler, William MacGillvary, and Anne Wheeler. The seminar was chaired by York professor and festival programming coordinator Seth Feldman and was about the "neo-narrative filmschools in Britain and Canada." Other seminars dealt with "Women In Québec Film," documentaries, video, and film in Ontario. If there is a crash course in Canadian cinema, *Canadian Images* must be it.

Here is a closer look at some of the featured films:

- *From The Rhythm Of My Heart* is a beautiful film by veteran director Jean-Pierre Lefebvre. It was constructed from footage of his family and journeys across Canada on visits with filmmakers. Shot in black and white with an old, spring-wound, 16mm camera, it chronicles a search for new images; images, perhaps, to describe the turmoil he was experiencing over the several

years it was filmed. In the film he tries to understand the cycle of birth and death which seemed to have been accelerated all around him during these years.

It is a very simple film and there is little, if any, editing; one reel of film is attached to the next. The voice-over narration is personal and penetrating while the music is appropriately simplistic.

From The Rhythm Of My Heart is a unique film that shows the possibilities inherent in turning the camera back on the person behind it.

- Twenty-four year old Toronto filmmaker Peter Mettler's first feature *Scissere* is a grand experiment in altering the narrative structure of film. It takes its form from the perceptions of a young man leaving a psychiatric clinic and responding to the cluttered stimuli of the outside world. While standing and facing an oncoming crowd, he constructs in his mind histories of three of the people coming toward him.

Mettler, a graduate of Ryerson, began the 90-minute feature as a project for his graduating year. The film was shot in both color and black and white, and was made on the remarkably low budget of \$23,000. Made in 1982, *Scissere* has since been shown in Canada, the U.S., and Europe.

- Winnipeg's John Paizs is the creator of an absurd trilogy which follows the exploits of a catatonic hero.

Summer In Greenland is about the tensions in suburban Greenland when the residents gather for a barbeque the day before the annual parade commemorating the first day of summer. Anxiety mounts when Nick, the hero, engages in a game of dare with the local heart-throb.

Nick goes to university in *Oak, Ivy, And Other Dead Elms* and he is quickly accepted into a clique who wear bow-ties, idolize Glenn Miller, and want to take the college out of the 1980s and return to the college life of the '50s. *The International Style* sees Nick in the guise of a cat-burglar. In this film he captures the heart of the sister of one of the world's richest men, but not before he burgles the brother.

Paizs writes, directs, and plays the role of Nick in these films. Each of them is about 30 minutes long, and he has produced one a year for the last three years. They are very amusing, relying very heavily on the interesting characterizations of the supporting actors to compensate for a speechless lead actor. Sets become more sophisticated as the trilogy progresses, culminating in the pastel-colored parody of *Citizen Kane*'s Xanadu in *The International Style*. The leaps in setting from one installment to the next are initially alarming, but the silent Nick soon provides a touchstone that puts the audience at ease.

- Andre Forcier's *Au Clair De La Lune* is pleasingly bizarre. An absurd albino named Frank pairs up with Bert, an ex-bowling champ who wants to make a comeback. Bert believes that Frank has powers that will cure

A scene from *Scissere*, a film by Peter Mettler.

his arthritis. The town they live in is terrorized by patrols of cars which leave trails of sparks behind them as they patrol for the person who has been slashing all the tires in town—the cars make the sparks because they do not have tires on their rims. Frank is the only one who knows that the tires are being destroyed by the daughter of the local tire store owner, in an obvious attempt to aid her father's declining business.

This film derives humor even from the small town Québec setting. Frank lives in Bert's car because it has become derelict from tire slashing. By the time Bert moves in with Frank, the car has electricity and heating. Still, he adds something to the décor with his three aquariums of tropical fish.

This enjoyable film is often hilarious. One unforgettable shot has a piranha, covered with seasonings frying on a pan on a Sterno stove in the car. *Au Clair De La Lune* richly deserves its Genie award nomination.

- The British film series was particularly interesting because it gave Canadians a chance to see two of Peter Greenaway's early films. His film, *A Walk Through H* is an interesting precursor to his more popular *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and is constructed on the same obsessions. *A Walk Through H* is a narrative based on a set of works on display in an art gallery. The works, watercolors, drawings and paintings, all created by Greenaway are treated like imaginary maps, and they are followed on camera while the narrator tells his stories. Intercut with the narrative describing the perils of exploration are brief live action shots of exotic birds, in flight, and in the water. For some strange reason these shots fit smoothly into the film. The soundtrack was composed by Michael Nyman, who was responsible for the music in *The Draughtsman's Contract*.

Greenaway, even while working with very unusual themes, leaves a personal stamp on his films. His drawing ability and his interest in precise, determined images is central to

both films. But there is also a debt owed to old themes and conventions. The narration in *A Walk Through H* is handled like an account of an early explorer's voyage to uncharted regions. It is a highly interesting and unusual film that deserves a wide release.

- In the "Women In Quebec Cinema" program there was a neglected documentary. Diane Letourneau's *Les Servantes Du Bon Dieu* is about an order of nuns in Quebec whose sole duty is to serve priests. They perform the duties of servants; cleaning house, cooking, and sometimes acting as secretaries. This order does no teaching, it only serves. They maintain a retirement home for priests as well as being sent out to work for them.

The most interesting thing about this film is the contentment of the sisters. It is evident from the questions asked of them that the director was expecting them to be unhappy in this demeaning situation, but they exude a surprising enthusiasm for their work. Most of their jobs are menial but many of the nuns speak with affection for the tasks that they have been performing for 20 and 30 years.

When they are asked about men, they talk about the boy friends they had before they entered the order as if it were yesterday, and they all seem to adore the priests. Many of the women interviewed were still working at demanding tasks well into their 70s; even the sisters who were older still performed simpler jobs.

Throughout the film there are interviews with the priests who treat the nuns like servants and do not even let them eat at the tables they serve. The priests provide scriptural justifications for the role of these nuns in the church, citing the work of the women who attended Christ and the disciples to leave them free to teach. *Les Servantes Du Bon Dieu* is a contradictory film; one cannot help feeling pity for these women who seem perfectly content. It seems a little long but the cinematography is well considered.