

Artistry in Motion: Canada's NFB at 50

Canada's National Film Board (NFB), which marked its 50th anniversary last May, has a precious legacy to celebrate. For Canada, it has provided a moving picture of an elusive nation. For the world, it pioneered the documentary, refined the art of animation and created dozens of technical innovations. Over the past year, the NFB has basked in a well-deserved birthday glow. It won an Oscar for special achievement at last March's U.S. motion picture Academy Awards. It was honoured at film festivals and major retrospectives the world over. And last June in Montreal, it hosted its own party: North America's first major documentary film festival.

The NFB is the oldest active government film production agency in the world. And no other government film body has racked up such an impressive reputation on at least three levels: for artistic quality, for thoughtfulness, and for independence from governmental influence as well as the whims of fashion.

Of course, not every moviegoer is ecstatic about the film board's contribution. A taxi driver in Toronto voices an alternative opinion as he scorns the organization for making "intellectual" pictures that "average people" find irrelevant and dull.

However, one can't help but wonder if such critics have actually seen many NFB productions. Have they seen, say, *The Big Snit*, a free-wheeling animation film about the not-so-different subjects of global nuclear war and domestic quarreling. Like



many other board prize-winners, the film is thought-provoking. But its content is no more "intellectual" than its title or wacky images.

In a different vein, have the skeptics seen *Train of Dreams*, the 1987 drama that portrays a teen-age prison inmate in terms as blunt and streetwise as its protagonist? Have they seen the trailblazing documentaries on such tough topics as incest and

The First Emperor: a \$7 million Canadian co-production filmed in the oversize format known as Imax.

pornography? Or have they sampled the products of Studio D — the board's world-renowned women's studio grounded in feminist culture, politics and values?

True, some of this work can be considered "intellectual" or at least "serious" and "reflective." But few of the NFB's films are solemn and

none are elitist. For five decades now, NFB filmmakers and administrators have clung proudly to the board's original mandate: to interpret Canada for Canadians and for the world. It's a broad mandate, but one that has produced an enormously wide range of activity.

In fact, the NFB reaches an awesome quantity of "average people." In 1988, "over a billion people saw our films around the world," says Anthony Kent, an employee of the board's international wing.

The structure of the NFB is a very canny mixture of centralized and decentralized offices. The headquarters building, located in Montreal, houses production facilities, divided into English-speaking and French-speaking departments. The board also has branches in 12 Canadian cities, 6 of which have their own production facilities as well as distribution and marketing operations. The films are marketed internationally through offices in Paris, London and New York.

What these offices distribute is a prodigious number of movies: more than 17 000 have flooded from the NFB's busy cameras so far. Of those, more than 6 500 are full-fledged original productions. The rest are such things as adaptations, revisions, newsreels, and multilingual versions of existing films.