

'Perspective Canada' films mark turning point in Canadian cinema



By WYNDHAM PAUL WISE

There is a great deal of optimism generated in the press and media these days about the so-called "rebirth" of Canadian cinema. Piers Handling, former associate director of the Canadian Film Institute and one of the three who programmed this year's "Perspective Canada" series at the Festival of Festivals, spoke recently on CBC radio about the maturity and "coming of age" of Canadian films.

Yet *Why Shoot The Teacher?* (1976) and *Who Has Seen The Wind* (1977) were once described in similar terms.

The industry then plunged straight back into adolescence with the tax-shelter "boom," which virtually destroyed a distinctive national cinema. Now, four years after the collapse of the Canadian feature film industry, and with the singular success of last year's critical hit, *My American Cousin*, Canadian cinema is indeed experiencing a cautious return to respectability, if not maturity.

The Festival's third annual tribute to filmmaking in Canada includes a number of films that give rise to such precarious optimism. Leon Marr's *Dancing in the Dark* and Deny Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, have received the critical stamp of approval from the French critics at Cannes this spring. Also included, and highly-praised, are Léa Pool's *Anne Trister*, Anne Wheeler's *Loyalties* and Donald Brittain's *The Final Battle*, part of *The Champions* series that will be broadcasted on the CBC later this month. An encouraging sign of recovery in the industry is the number of films that should receive wide distribution after their screening at the Festival.

Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, winner of the International Critics Prize at Cannes, is a sumptuous talkfest from the director of *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973) and *Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe* (1983). Described elsewhere as a hybrid of *My Dinner With Andre* and *The Big Chill*, *Le déclin* focuses on four men and four women as they gather for dinner. The women work out at the University of Montreal's physical fitness complex while the men prepare the food at a beautiful chateau in the Laurentiens. They talk endlessly about men and sex, women and sex, food and sex, friendship and sex, until they finally meet, eat, and talk more about sex.

Beautifully shot by Guy Dufaux, who has worked extensively with Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Arcand keeps his camera on the move, following and probing his characters, catching spontaneous moments of honesty and fun.

The acting is uniformly excellent from a cast of some of the best talent in Quebec, with outstanding performances from Pierre Cruz, as a divorced intellectual who has fallen in love with a young student, and Rémy Girard, as a promiscuous married professor who has "laid half of Montreal."

The film is an odd mixture of high brow comedy and existential despair and Arcand manages to maintain this difficult course with deceptive ease. Already a hugely popular hit in Montreal, *Le déclin* opens in Toronto tomorrow (September 12).

Dancing in the Dark, Leon Marr's first feature film, has been invited to the New York Film Festival and was included in the prestigious Directors Fortnight at Cannes. The film, set in an obsessively clean and orderly suburban house, is about a "simple, ordinary domestic failure," Southern Ontario style. It has also been hailed as the most impressive and assured debut by an English Canadian director in years.

Marr has been compared to Ingmar Bergman and Alain Resnais, and Martha Henry's performance as the troubled housewife has been described as "electrifying." This is a rather heavy load for a modest budget melodrama to carry.

Dancing in the Dark is certainly a very fine first feature and fits well into its Ontario milieu of repressed sexuality as much as *Le déclin* is about French Canadians and their ability to talk frankly about sex. However, this in itself is not enough to make *Dancing in the Dark* a great film and it likely won't have much life beyond the festival circuit and its scheduled screening on the CBC later this season.

The predominance of female directors at this year's Festival is another aspect of the resurgence of Canadian cinema. First there was the youthful Sandy Wilson and her *American Cousin*, and now the Swiss-born Léa Pool returns



DANCING IN THE DARK: Martha Henry stars in Leon Marr's first feature film as a troubled housewife. The movie which was invited to the New York film festival and included in the prestigious Directors Fortnight at Cannes has been hailed as one of the most impressive debuts by an English-Canadian director in eons.

with her second feature, while Anne Wheeler from Alberta moves into features from a decade of work in shorts and documentaries.

Loyalties is set in the village of Lac La Biche in Northern Alberta and deals with the dark secrets of a British couple who move into the community and become involved with a local Metis girl. The wife, played by Susan Woolridge, the tragic Daphne Manners from BBC's *Jewel in the Crown*, and her relationship with Tantoo Cardinal, the half-breed maid, provides the emotional pivot upon which the film turns. Both performances are impressive as is the directorial debut by Wheeler, who displays a fine sensitivity to her characters and small town Canadian life.

Anne Trister is only the second feature from Léa Pool (her first was the critically acclaimed *Le femme de l'hotel*) and already she is considered a major talent in Quebec cinema. The film, somewhat autobiographical, starts in Switzerland with the death of Anne's father then moves to Quebec where Anne, a young Jewish artist painfully aware of her roots, becomes involved with a 40-year-old woman psychologist. Again, as with *Loyalties*, the emotional relationship between the two women becomes the pivotal point of the film, and again the performances are first rate.

Donald Brittain's *The Final Battle* makes up the final installment of his three-part study of the political careers of two of the most influential men in recent Canadian history, Pierre Elliott Trudeau and his arch-rival, René Levesque. Their final battle is, of course, the Quebec Referendum and Brittain covers familiar territory with professional skill. Perhaps not as impressive as *Canada's Sweetheart*, his docu-drama about the controversial labour leader Hal Banks, *The Final Battle* once again confirms Brittain as Canada's premiere documentary filmmaker.

Also included in this series are two film produced at York. *Passion and Gasoline* is a 20-minute short about a pyromaniac who secretly wished he could have been a fireman. He blazes his school, his place of work and finally himself after inadvertently killing a man with a leg of beef during a bungled robbery. Directed by Mark Forler in a quirky, off-beat style, it is not very well made. However, next to *Welcome to the Parade*, a feature production by fourth year students Stuart Clarfield (director) and Peter Gentile (producer), *Passion and Gasoline* seems like an original gem.

Parade follows the adventures of a York student, who, at 22, is finally forced to leave home

by his parents who don't care for his dope habits. He takes up residence at the Hotel Isabella and becomes involved with a hooker and cocaine. Instead of being the sensitive study of alienated youth that Don Owen portrayed so brilliantly 20 years ago with *Nobody Waves Goodbye*, this film offers a callous, selfish dopehead who gives up his comfortable suburban lifestyle and a brand new Camero for a taste of the "real life." When he screws up, he comes running home to Daddy.

Director Clarfield, who is also responsible for the film's dreadful script, has little, if any, ability with actors (the acting is uniformly bad) and no feel for people or sense of place, especially when he gets to his downtown locations. The woman who plays the prostitute looks and acts like an arts undergrad, and when our hero

gets sent to the Church "at the corner of University and Bloor" to transact a dope exchange, you know you're in trouble. The Church is actually at the northeast corner of Avenue Road and Bloor.

Honourable mention should go to Jack Darcus' *Overnight* ("We may be cheap and dirty, but we're Canadian"), Yves Simoneau's *Pourvoir intime* (a cracker, bullet-paced thriller with a pungent political subtext) and Bruce Pitman's *Confidential* (stylish suspense thriller in the tradition of the hard-boiled detective drama). And with new works by two of Canada's best avant-garde filmmakers, David Rimmer and Joyce Weiland, the 1986 "Perspective Canada" series may represent, yet again, another turning point in Canadian cinema.

Greenaway's follow-up lives up to expectations

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

From the moment the film begins, a scene with two children pulling a black and white spotted dog towards a huge neon sign saying "ZOO," the audience is aware that everything director Peter Greenaway uses in his film, *A Zed and Two Noughts* (a 1985 film showing at this year's Festival of Festivals) must be taken figuratively. What Greenaway has constructed in his much awaited follow-up to 1983's critically acclaimed *The Draughtsman's Contract* is a highly literate, self-conscious and self-contained fictional world, populated with people who are images as well as characters, and what's more, appear conscious of the fact.

The plot—if one can talk about plot in a film which subverts the very idea of narrative progression—follows the attempts of two young zookeepers (Oswald and Oliver, the two "noughts") to come to terms with the deaths of their wives, killed (in front of the same neon sign) after their car is knocked off the road by a low-flying mute swan.

The two brothers (played stylishly by Eric and Brian Deacon) become obsessed with the arbitrary nature of their wives' deaths, and with the whole process of decomposition. They begin to film the decomposition of various dead animals they find at the zoo; first lower

life forms, then amphibians, birds (a swan), and a zebra. At the same time both strike up an affair with Alba, a french woman whose relationship with Oliver and Oswald's wives is never made clear, except in so far as we know that she was the driver of the doomed vehicle, and that she sacrificed a leg in the process.

At first, the brothers blame Alba for the accident:

Oliver: "You're responsible."

Alba: "How? I'm not a pilot, I could hardly have anticipated swans."

Oliver: "You were wearing feathers and you were driving a white Mercury, you were asking for trouble."

This snippet is representative of all of the dialogue Greenaway gives us, in fast and furious fashion. Greenaway stacks his images so high and makes them so obtrusive in the narrative that their arbitrary nature almost becomes the narrative. This is the kind of foregrounding of structure and ritualization of process common to much metafictional writing, and, recently to films by English speaking filmmakers like Greenaway, Roeg, and Alan Rudolph. While what normally forms a film's subtext is discussed through wordplay on an active basis, the film's plot becomes progressively more absurd. Oswald and Oliver's "Zoo" is unlike any other zoo known to man. As their decom-

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