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New festival celebrates Canada's film and video independents

By HELEN LEE

It's hardly a secret that the images on the screens of most Toronto theatres are not produced by Canadians. So the task at hand for Images 89, the first full-scale showcase of independent film and video in Canada, is an ambitious one: filled with promise for Canadian artists and audiences alike.

Recognizing common goals but insisting on their differences, the historically fractious film and video communities are coming together with distributors, artist-run co-ops, curators and, yes, fans of Canadian independent film and video, for what hopefully will become — pending funding — an annual event. Running simultaneously at Harbourfront and the new Euclid Theatre, the five-day festival, showing over 70 new works, is innovative in its decision to program video and film together, on the same screen.

The festival, which combines evening screenings of thematic programs and retrospectives with daytime workshops, is the work of Northern Visions, a volunteer collective made up of local filmmakers, video artists and curator/critics. The nine collective members share deep roots in their communities, and the conviction that homegrown work needs more exposure. So, unlike institution-based or government-sponsored festivals, Images 89 comes to life as a widely based community response to the dire lack of Canadian images in Canadian theatres.

"It's so easy to go to a Hollywood film or a commercial theatre to see a regular feature," says festival director Annette Manguard, a Toronto-based filmmaker and one of the co-founders of Northern Visions. "But to go and see all this

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► film

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IMAGES 89: Festival Of Independent Film And Video
at the Euclid Theatre (394 Euclid, at College) and the Harbourfront Studio Theatre (235 Queen's Quay West) Thursday, May 4 to Sunday, May 7. \$35 seats pass: \$5/program; \$8/double bill. 971-8405.

new and exciting work, all together at once, by people with different and unusual ideas — people don't really get the chance to see and show the kind of work being done."

Test triumph

Last summer, Canadian independents passed a test run with flying colours. Images 88, a shorter, comparatively modest mini-fest of recent films and tapes, consistently played to full houses. The success of the preview proved not only that audiences for independents exist in healthy numbers, but that video and film can co-exist with some solidarity.

"I feel extremely positive that at last the independent film and video communities are coming together," says video veteran Colin Campbell, who has been producing acclaimed narrative tapes on gender, sexuality and stereotyping since the pioneering days of video in the early 70s. "Images 88 really broke down the barrier of viewing each other as the Other — and I love seeing the same screen with film and video back to back."

Campbell's uproarious semiotics spoof, Fiddle Faddle (showing Friday night at the Euclid), looks at the influence of cultural theory through the experiences of one wide-eyed participant at an academic conference. A takeoff on the Semiotics Of Eroticism symposium hosted by Toronto two years ago, the tape uncovers the "heterosexist and sexist climate of the conference. It's trying to cut through academia and its inability to come to a head with issues that video artists took up long ago."

Campbell's not alone in celebrating this inspired, if belated union of video with film. Other video producers who at first were skeptical of showing their work in a theatre context, preferring the cosy legitimating space of an art gallery (or the integrity of a small TV monitor), were won over by the fantastic resolution and image-definition of large-screen projection inaugurated at Images 88.

In an exhibition breakthrough, these projection facilities will be housed permanently at the Euclid Theatre, which will provide video programming on an ongoing basis — a first in Canada. As a project of DEC (the Development Education

Centre), the Euclid's far-reaching mandate also includes independent Canadian cinema, films and videos from the Third World, and multicultural, community-based programming.

"Probably one of the best things about the festival is that it marks the opening of Euclid," says Campbell. "It's a great way to launch the theatre, which will become such an important venue for independent film and videomakers in the city."

For the next few days, however, filmmakers will have to choose between the offerings at the Euclid and those at Harbourfront. Among the programs are two exceptional retrospectives. Curator Peggy Gale has put together a selection of videotapes by media brokers General Idea, the triumvirate responsible for FILE magazine and the Miss General Idea pageants and 1984 pavilion. And Ihor Holubizky presents a long overdue survey of the films of NFB iconoclast Arthur Lipsett.

The main focus of the festival, however, is the new. To ensure equitable representation from all regions, the Northern Visions board hired three guest programmers, each of whom organized several thematically organized programs.

Regional balance

Vancouver video artist Sara Diamond represents the West, choosing work that uncovers questions of history (in the program Under Construction), memory (Unsentimental Journeys) and the family (Childhood's End).

Ottawa-based Frances Leeming (whose animated exploration of feminine mystique, Orientation Express, was a favourite at last year's Images), looked at work from central Canada and the Atlantic provinces. Her programs also ponder issues of family (Family Secrets) and cultural history (Double Checking The Fictions), along with examinations of labour (Occupational Hazards) and Latin American refugees in Canada (Broken Pieces Of The Mosaic).

The focus of Concordia University professor Tom Waugh's selections, recent Quebecois film and video brochures issues of sexuality (Square Pegs & Triangles), cultural struggle (Distant Voices), housing (Gimme Shelter) and community action (Banding Together). Striving to make issues of race, regionalism, and gays and lesbians come alive in his programming, Waugh tries to extend the Quebecois context into other cultural realms, in part by including films from India.

"Programming is an extension of teaching," says Waugh, who is

known for extending the usual parameters of film scholarship. "In the same way I choose films for a course, I try to make challenging connections and oppositions."

"In the Gimme Shelter program, which explores both the local and global dimensions of the politics of housing and shelter, there's a lot more overlap than first appears between the kinds of things facing Indian peasants who are expelled from the land for military use, and what's happening in downtown Montreal. In fact, it's an exact echo of what's also happening in Labrador, which is also happening to indigenous peoples all over the world."

Diverse approaches

While these kinds of social and political issues have long engaged independent film and video communities, Images 89 also celebrates a diversity of approaches. The festival includes everything from personal documents to formally experimental works and straightforward documentaries — though most of the works are actually hybrids of these forms. But not to be discounted, of course, is the value of the festival as viable entertainment.

"It's going to be fun as well as worthwhile," stresses Manguard. "A lot of people are disappointed because they can't see absolutely everything."

Some of the most common misconceptions about independent work — that it's inaccessible, humourless or technically inept — are gradually being eradicated by events like Images. Strikingly varied in style, the films and tapes at the festival demonstrate above all the breadth of Canadian independent work. From the contemplative animation of first-time filmmaker Katherine Assals' Pretending We Were Indians, to Ron Hallis' intriguing documentary, Chopi Music Of Mozambique to Toronto-based filmmaker Anna Gronau's feminist exploration, Mary Mary, the virtues of independent production are obvious.

This healthy diversity is especially evident in the open-call programs. Juried by a four-person panel including Midi Onodera, Brenda Longfellow, Richard Johnson and Andrew Paterson, the final selection was distilled from 160 works submitted nationwide.

"It was difficult getting representation from some of the regions, like the east coast and the prairie provinces," says Onodera who like the other jury members, is Toronto-based. Her own film, The Displaced View, was programmed by Vancouverite Diamond for one of Harbourfront's Saturday pro-

grams. An exploration of Japanese-Canadian history through three generations of women in one family, The Displaced View is sometimes mistaken as straight documentary. In fact, it questions assumptions about the form.

Created family

But if people get more out of it than if they knew it was a created family that's fine. Onodera says. More accessible than her other, structuralist-informed films about ethnicity and sexuality, the film is one example of the work of independents who are beginning to establish themselves in Canada and abroad.

"In the open call, there were some really outstanding pieces that aren't being shown. We just had to make certain selections which is unfortunate because this work definitely hasn't been screened enough."

The situation for independent film and video makers, despite the excitement around Images, has been getting worse, Onodera believes. Besides increasing costs, diminishing venues and limited access to equipment, she also cites free trade, cutbacks by the Ontario Arts Council and the scarcity of criticism and writing about independent work.

Suggestions that Images itself be repackaged as a touring festival are met with cautious optimism — it could expand audiences and increase awareness about independent work across Canada considerably. But funding shortages, a chronic problem for any arts organization, are jeopardizing the very future of the festival itself. Telefilm, the federal government organ for the promotion of the film and television industry, sponsored one afternoon panel but not the festival as a whole. Having denied funding last year, Telefilm has already refused to fund Images 90.

This isn't a new (or surprising) problem. Since the usual grant-administering agencies have traditionally channelled money primarily into production film and video distribution and exhibition always come up shortchanged. So while the work is getting made, it's no wonder Canadians can rarely see the stuff.

Images is operating under a very, very limited budget," says Manguard. "We need a lot of people saying that the festival is important that it's different that it should be happening."

"Images will always remain a Canadian festival of independent work, and it's important to let Canadians see their work in a Canadian context."

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