

FESTIVALS

THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF WOMEN'S FILMS AND VIDEOS

Quantity
not
quality

Maureen Judge, A Venerable Occasion

by Jamie Gaetz

There's something almost morally wrong in having to separate art by women from art by men to give it due recognition. But the fact is that art by women is different, and the attitudes, perceptions, ideologies, and often themes and symbols that express those concerns seem to be uniquely women's concerns.

Because productions by women tend to project different images of women, as well as men, than those in traditional cinema (dominated by male filmmakers), they ultimately project a different image of the world. So it is not only important but essential that there be screening opportunities for these counter-traditional creators. Women are working in these mediums that so powerfully form our ideas of self, but since most of their work falls outside of the mainstream, festivals like Montreal's Silence, elles tournent! must exist.

Every festival has its high points and its low. Unfortunately for Silence, elles tournent!, the International Festival of Women's Films and Videos, held June 5 to 15, there were too few highs and far too many lows. In just its second year, the 1986 festival was an ambitious one — perhaps too ambitious — including approximately 73 films from around the world and 33 videos from Canada and the United States. But when you find yourself night after night in a darkened, but rapidly emptying theatre, thinking about all the other things you could be doing, it seems hard to justify the idea of a women's festival. Not because women are not doing fine work in both mediums, but for some reason not much of it made it to this festival. How some of what did make it got there remains a mystery to me, as I'm sure it

does to those many people who openly jeered, laughed or quietly walked out of numerous presentations.

Nine feature-length films from such diverse countries as Brazil, Sweden, West Africa, Belgium, New Zealand, Portugal, the United States, France and the German Federal Republic comprised the Public's Choice category. The prize was given to Agneta Elers Jarleman's *Beyond Sorrow, Beyond Pain* (Sweden). There were several excellent films in this category, particularly the festival opener, *L'Heure de l'étoile* by Suzana Amaral from Brazil. Amaral, who was present, is herself good subject material for a film — beginning film school at nearly 40 after having raised nine children. *L'Heure de l'étoile* is her first feature film which, she explains, is a parable for the situation of her own country, Brazil. Knowing that only adds to the film, it is one of the most eloquent expressions of the feminine condition I have ever seen.

Other categories were the Out of Competition (short and medium-length films), a special section of five films from Portugal (one of which was entered in the Public's Choice category), and nine films that have been shown before in a category titled 'To See and See Again.'

The Out of Competition category contained some of the best viewing of the festival including Mira Nair's *India Cabaret*, an India/U.S. co-production about female strippers in a nightclub outside Bombay, and the deadly double standard that envelops women in patriarchal society.

In the same section were four Canadian productions: Janis Lundman's *Matinale*, a rhythmic visual odyssey through a woman's morning routine; Maureen Judge's *A Venerable Occasion*, a hilarious half-hour most aptly described in the program as "a black-tie comedy on a most solemn event, and a satire on the preparations for a conventional marriage;" Patricia B. Rozema's *Passion: A Letter in 16mm* which captures the dichotomy confronting the professional "woman of the '80s".

One of the most remarkable, un-

forgettably painful productions screened at the festival was Midi Onodera's brilliant short *Ten Cents a Dance* (Parallax). The film is a series of three sexual 'encounters', none of which falls into the traditional definition of normal; the first consists of two women who proposition each other with bitterly empty promises, the second is two male homosexuals who satisfy one another in a toilet and then hurriedly exchange phone numbers, while the third is a man and a prostitute having verbal sex over the phone. The visual is static, with the subjects providing the only movement. The screen is divided into two equal halves, the effect of which accentuates the emptiness and falsity of each encounter. The power of text and form working together the way they do leaves the viewer confronted with questions about all sexual encounters and the inherent distance between individuals — "What I'm saying and what you're hearing can never be the same thing."

The festival paid tribute to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, the original liberated couple, in a 1967 Radio-Canada production, *Sartre-de Beauvoir* by Max Cacopardo, Madeleine Gobeil, and Claude Lanzmann (director of *Shoah*). It brought out the city's intellectuals and feminists in one of the largest crowds to attend a screening, though only half of that audience stayed to see Tina Horne's record of the 1985 Women's Conference in Nairobi that drew 14,000 women from 150 countries. *A Propos de Nairobi/Speaking of Nairobi* is a fascinating document encapsulating many of the concerns, attitudes and ideologies innate to the women's movement and the idea of women creating images of themselves in art. It is also a fundamental expression of the difficulty in grouping women into one movement, defying the individuality of experience and culture.

Several foreign filmmakers were featured in other sections and retrospectives. The work of Hungarian director Judit Elek was represented by 10 films made from 1963 to 1984. Three films by Elvira Notari, a filmmaker who was

part of Italian modernist cultural waves coming out of Napoli in the 1920s were shown, as well as *The Girl in the Armchair*, made in the U.S. between 1910 and 1915 by Alice Guy, the woman now recognized as the maker of cinema's first fiction film, *La Fée du choux* in 1896.

Animator Caroline Leaf of the National Film Board was also present with nine of her films encompassing 15 years of, as stated by Leaf herself, basically her life's work. Included were two of Leaf's newest animations which combine animated back-grounds with live figures. Of the two, *The Fox and the Tiger* (from a Chinese folktale) and *A Dog's Tale* (a Mexican one-liner), the second film is much more successful visually, but neither has the fluid beauty of her more traditional work.

Only two countries were represented in the video category, Canada and the United States, which contained some truly interesting moments, as well as some of the worst, of the festival. Several artists from Canada and Quebec (separated by language) deserve mention. Video cannot be critiqued according to the same criterion as film, it is a completely different art form, and what I liked about those that I mention here is the recognition of that and the utilization of the medium as such. *Pie Y Cafe* by Jan Peacock, *Relative Activities* by Paula Fairfield and *Hearts Beat* by Elizabeth VanderZaag left memorable impressions.

Comptines, an experimental video by Diane Poitras, was prompted by a news item from Belfast and, strangely for video, is even more compelling on a large screen than on a TV screen. Another, longer video, from Quebec, *Demain la cinquantaine* by Hélène Roy is an engaging narrative about a woman learning to cope with the upheavals of menopause. Actually an educational work in dramatic form, it combines and balances information and entertainment well, with a sensitivity for reaching women who may not know where or how to find information and support.

The festival closed with Paule Baillargeon's *Sonia* that played to an overflow house (and is reviewed separately); and a 28-minute film from Jeannine Gagné, *Entre Temps*. It was well-acted and technically successful, but I'm not sure *Entre Temps* expresses what it wants to.

One of the strongest points of this festival was the number and availability of the filmmakers themselves, who so openly shared their ideas and answered questions. It made for a special atmosphere of honest exchange; maybe even of common purpose. The weakness was the organization — with most Canadian and Quebecois films and videos seemingly scheduled in a lump at the end. Perhaps the 1986 Silence, elles tournent! was just too ambitious in terms of the number of works it included. One would hope from the 1987 festival a greater effort for quality rather than quantity. Perhaps a smaller festival if necessary, but one that demonstrates more selectivity than this year's did.

Montreal-based freelancer Jamie Gaetz is currently researching the impact of film criticism in Canada.