

Pictures in motion:

100 years of celluloid dreams

by Bojan Bosiljic

According to film historians, the first projection of a motion picture in Canada was 100 years ago this week. It was a demonstration of the French Cinematographe on June 27, 1896, at 78 Rue Saint-Laurent in Montreal.

La Presse reported that the contraption spawned a roaring trade for two months, presenting several minute-long filmed vignettes made by Louis and August Lumière of Lyons. They weren't epic sagas by any stretch. Featured were the arrival of a train, a small boat going out to sea and the demolition of a wall.

Before Germain Lacasse documented this screening in 1984, it had been thought that the Holland brothers of Ottawa had organized the first picture shows in Canada with demonstration of Edison's Vitascope on July 21, 1896.

The question now seems to be unavoidable for film lovers: Will the future of film be as dazzling as its past and present? A combined camera/projector patented by the Lumière brothers, the Cinematographe had been used for the world's first public projection of moving pictures at Paris' Grand Cafe on December 28, 1895. Lumière's *The Arrival of a Train*, filmed in documentary style, pointed the new art form toward realistic and valuable applications. It wasn't until a little later that Georges Melies introduced fantastic, poetic and mysterious components into film.

During its first few decades, film was considered an attraction at local fairs as a new technology. Soon the growing entertainment industry helped spawn cinema pioneers like David Wark Griffith, Fritz Lang, Cecil B. De Mille, Sergei Mikhailovitch Eisenstein and Charlie Chaplin. They created the new languages of iconography, narrative and genre models for film.

For 100 years, cinema has transcended boundaries and borders, colors and cultures. Film has become a mirror of our time, and has created its own destiny between action and contemplation, gravitating equally between art and commercial success.

In the final sequences of John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), a policeman saw the lead figure of the bird from the title and asked: "What is this?" Sam Spade, played by Humphrey Bogart, answered him ironically: "It is the stuff from which dreams are made of." Viewers need not know that this is, in fact, a citation from Shakespeare's poetic drama *The Tempest*. But several generations of film lovers feel that these words of Milan's exiled Duke Prospero describes the essence of film.

Film historians claim that more than 250,000 movies have been made over the past 100 years. Inside their metal canisters lie the modern chronicles of mankind. Unfortunately, many precious movies, especially from the silent epoch, have been destroyed thanks to much usage, and indifference.

Today, there are nearly 400 film festivals around the world. The biggest and most influential festivals are Cannes, Toronto, Venice, Berlin, London and Montreal. There, movies from so-called small-market film countries have an opportunity to be seen by the world.

Hollywood certainly holds a special place in film history. It has introduced technological innovations, hierarchy of stars and a system of financing by the 1930s which led to the creation of a film "industry."

Although hundreds of books have been published about Hollywood, it seems there is no better description of this mythic place



Canada's most significant early contribution to the cinematic canon was as the setting for *Nanook of the North*, the world's first documentary feature directed by American Robert Flaherty in 1922.

than this one from actor John Ford: "You can't say where Hollywood is. We don't know where Hollywood is, indeed!"

Although European countries have invested a great deal in film production and distribution over the past few years, their efforts have gained only modest results. Nearly 80 per cent of moviegoers throughout Europe are choosing to see Hollywood movies.

European film-makers recognize the medium almost exclusively as a means for expressing concerns about current events, their own personal worlds, attitudes and voices. They also consider themselves spiritual successors of Fellini and Bergman, uncrowned kings of "personal" films.

The Canadian contribution to the celluloid legacy has been significant in spite of domestic ridicule and government paternalism. In 1922, exotic snowy plains brought Robert Flaherty to the Hudson Bay area from the U.S. to film *Nanook of the North*. This ethnographic essay about the life of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic is considered to

be the first documentary feature film in the history of cinema. The film enjoyed enormous box office success and respect throughout the world.

But for accounting purposes, Canada has always been considered part of Hollywood's domestic market. More than 90 per cent of the films shown on screens in this country are from the U.S.

Also important (and considerably more interesting) is Canada's hidden contribution to the motion picture business: talent. The list of Canadians who have earned international fame in cinema is long and timeless. Directors Norman Jewison, Arthur Hiller, Ted Kotcheff, David Cronenberg, Ivan Reitman



and actors Christopher Plummer, Donald Sutherland, William Shatner, Dan Aykroyd, Geneviève Bujold and Jim Carrey come to mind to name just a few. Yet despite the recognized proof of talented film-makers and artists in Canada, one critical question remains: How will original Canadian made films find their way to Canadian screens?

A hundred years of cinema provokes a hundred more questions and doubts about its destiny. Born of technological discovery, the evolution of film has always depended on technological innovation. Film is the most influential medium at the end of our millennium, and is hard to separate from TV, videotape, videodisk and interactive CD. On the year of its centennial, though, it appears that the traditional format of 16 mm and 35 mm film tape is about to be abandoned in favor of video and digital production.

Cursed to ride the fence between art and entertainment, film may not survive in its traditional form, but it will still be worth a peek.