

# New Generation RISING

**An emerging batch of filmmakers is digging up the roots of Canadian cinema—with surprising results**

By **STEVEN FRANK** TORONTO

**M**ANKIND IS LOSING ITS COLLECTIVE soul. Or so moviegoers could well conclude after sampling the top Canadian offerings at the 31st Toronto International Film Festival. The preponderant theme this year is loss—loss of identity, loss of historical (or personal) memory, loss of heart and the resulting spiritual disintegration. And that adds up to good news. Or a refreshing change, anyway, from that perennial Canadian filmic motif, the dysfunctional family.

There is an absence this year of films by many of Canada's topflight directors, such as Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg and Deepa Mehta. But filling the void nicely is a strong, new generation of directorial talent like Reg Harkema, whose second release, *Monkey Warfare*, is one of 37 Canadian features at this year's festival. *Warfare* is an assured tale about two erstwhile guerrilla activists from Vancouver lying very low in Toronto. Played to restrained and hilarious perfection by Don McKellar and Tracy Wright, the no-longer-dynamic duo falls into an unromantic and listless funk—until a mysterious young dope dealer (Nadia Litz) arrives to heat things up, metaphorically and literally. The results will charm, even if there's no grand message to impart. "I'm not trying to teach

anything," says Harkema, who also wrote the screenplay. Maybe not, but some versions of the film carry a post-credits instructional video on how to (safely!) make a Molotov cocktail.

If ambiguity is your thing, check out *Away from Her*, the directorial feature debut of actress Sarah Polley. Her screen adaptation of Alice Munro's *The Bear Came over the Mountain* portrays a seemingly solid and contented couple (Julie Christie and Gordon Pinsent) torn apart by Alzheimer's. Polley captures Munro's magic in weaving a multilayered tale that alternates between hope and the ultimately tragic loss of a person's identity. The film plays with the notion that even when memories fade, love is transcendent. "I strongly believe that there is such a thing as emotional memory that goes beyond being able to recall events," says Polley.

If there's any hope in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, it's as obscure as the Arctic sun in winter. Directors Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn can't quite reproduce the vitality of their first feature, the critical hit *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, but their return includes camera work that is even more mesmerizing than in their first film and a message that is more vital. Kunuk and Cohn present what they identify as the moment in history (1922) when the Inuit of the Igloodik region lost their connection to the past. It's a tale of how shaman Avva and his family—the last of the

local clans living a traditional Inuit life—are forced to choose between starvation and forsaking their customs for Christianity. The film explains how a fiercely self-reliant, good-humored people can slide into tragedy. As Cohn puts it, "How did Avva become today's drunk?"

There are similar cautionary messages in several strong Canadian documentaries. The most absorbing is *Manufactured Landscapes*, in which director Jennifer Baichwal showcases the work of Edward Burtynsky, a photographer who, through pictures of surprising beauty, records the devastation man has wrought on the planet. Baichwal and wunderkind cinematographer Peter Mettler follow Burtynsky to China (and elsewhere) to focus on the often shocking effects of rapid industrialization and urbanization on nature and the human psyche. You may have seen documentaries on China's transformation, but you have never seen the country as vividly as this.

The theme of disenfranchisement also



COURTESY OF THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL (4)

The preponderant theme this year is loss: **LOSS OF IDENTITY,**

figures heavily in *Radiant City*, a sly doc by filmmaker Gary Burns and journalist Jim Brown. Using nearly every trick in the documentary makers' book (and one trick, which we dare not detail here, that is highly untraditional), Burns and Brown present the case that the suburbs are spiritual wastelands sucking the humanity out of human beings. In another strong documentary, *EMPz 4 Life*, the imperative is not "What's going wrong?" but "How can we stop a near disaster from getting much worse?" Allan King brings his cinema verité style to a struggling black community in suburban Toronto where an ex-con, Brian Henry, tries to help at-risk youths stay in school and out of jail. It's not an easy ride for viewers. There are no interviews or voice-over explanations. The camera just rolls, and through expert editing, this master docmaker takes the viewer on a roller-coaster journey through hope, anger and despair.

*Remembering Arthur*, a portrait of the influential Montreal filmmaker Arthur Lip-

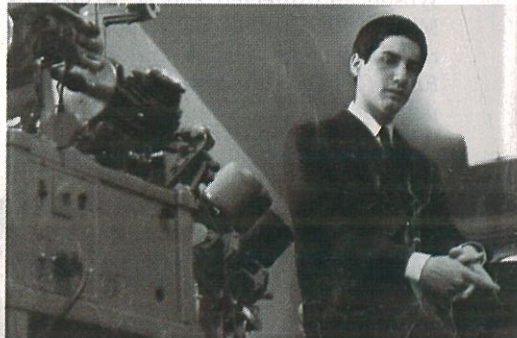
sett, elicits a similar emotional effect, but it does so using a more conventional style. Lipsett knocked the film world for a loop or two in the 1960s and '70s with his rapid-fire juxtapositions of sound and images, starting with the groundbreaking *Very Nice, Very Nice*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1962. This documentary, made by Lipsett's longtime friend Martin Lavut, describes Lipsett's rise to fame and then painstakingly chronicles his descent from mental illness into despair and eventually suicide.

The darkest vision among the Canuck offerings comes in the brightest, funniest package. Andrew Currie's *Fido* is an original send-up of the zombie genre. In this variation, space dust has transformed the earth's

**LAYERS OF THOUGHT** A dark subtext permeates many of the top Canadian entries at the festival this year, including, clockwise from left, feature films *Away from Her*, *Fido* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, and the documentary *Remembering Arthur*

dead into walking, grunting cadavers that devour live humans. To deal with the problem, mankind has developed collar-like devices that pacify the creatures into harmless servants, slaves and, sometimes, sex objects. O.K., maybe pacified zombies overrunning the earth isn't so subversive—look around any large urban center in Canada today—but Currie has fun with the concept. Old people, for instance, have to be imprisoned lest they suddenly die, zombify and start eating passersby like so much sushi.

Did we mention that Billy Connolly plays the eponymous zombie? (The talk-a-lot Scottish comedian only gets to grunt.) Or that Carrie-Anne Moss, known for tough-as-nails roles in films like *The Matrix* and *Memento*, is cast as a (sort-of) sweet mom? Currie demonstrates that he is part of a rising legion of Canadian filmmakers trying for something more difficult and delicate than what we have generally seen. The moral, at least in *Fido*, may be that cutting a few roots can help you grow. ■



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