

# The History of The \$100 Film Festival

By James Beattie Morison

As we are now looking forward to the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual \$100 Film Festival, I would like to take you back to the early days of the Festival. While, in this story, I talk about myself and what I did, the success of the Festival comes from the many people who took inspiration from the spirit of Festival, and made their own contribution. Some of these I mention by name, but many more I have not. Speaking for all of those who have had fun at the Festival I thank those who made it happen.

## The Prehistory of the \$100 Film Festival: The Odyssey of James Beattie Morison

I cannot tell the story of the \$100 Film Festival without telling some of my own story. I was born and raised in Winnipeg and I got interested in making films after I saw Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey." To this day this remains my favourite film.

For my first films I used my father's regular 8mm camera. Coincidentally the poster for the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual \$100 Film Festival used the same make and model of camera. Later I bought myself a super 8 camera.

I often describe the films I made then as "two minute back yard monster epics." These films had titles like "The Monster Who Killed," "The Monster Who Killed Goes on Vacation," "The Monster Who Killed Celebrates Christmas" and "The Terror in Room 24." The Monster was my brother in a nightshirt with a pillow case over his head. My most ambitious film was "The Smiling Corpse," a film heavily influenced by H.P. Lovecraft. For this film I shot three rolls of Super 8 film and produced a final film running about 8 minutes. These films had limited artistic merit, but I enjoyed making them.

I stopped making films after I graduated from University. This was partly because I was devoting so much time to my career. However, I also felt I had reached the limit to the films I could do with the equipment and the knowledge I had. I decided that until I had something more substantial to say that I would not make any films.

After working for an engineering consultant in Winnipeg I moved to Calgary. I worked hard at my engineering career and enjoyed it very much and gave little thought to film making. After several years of work I began to feel the need for an outlet for my creative impulses. My hope was to make a film, but I thought that making a film was an unrealistic goal.

That didn't stop me from taking some film classes at the University of Calgary, Mount Royal College and SAIT. In a class at SAIT, taught by Wayne Bernier, I made a short 16mm film: "Extra Special Care." The rule for films made in the class was that they could use no more than three rolls of film. Making this film showed to me that I could make a film with more substance without spending millions of dollars. In a class taught by Gord Pepper, I happened to overhear him talking about the CSIF to another student. I joined the next day.

The CSIF exposed me to films very different from what I had seen before. This experience changed my own ideas about film making. I began to see making a film as a more realistic goal. I worked on two of my own projects at the CSIF "Sam and Vic" and "My Most Difficult Case." By early 1991 neither of these efforts had produced anything. The failure of these projects discouraged me.

## **Bring Us Your Ideas**

It was at this time that Denise Clarke phoned me. She was a member of the CSIF Board of Directors. She invited me to attend a meeting to discuss ideas about how to encourage more people to make films at the CSIF. The CSIF was facing an uncertain future. Some people were saying that in five years everyone would be working in video and nobody would be making films. She encouraged me to come with my own ideas.

A few days later I set aside time to think of ideas. I spent a couple of hours scribbling down my thoughts. Nothing really got me excited.

Eventually, I asked myself why aren't people making films? Then, to make the issue more personal, I asked myself why I wasn't making film? My first answer was that films cost tens of thousands of dollars to make. Video was much cheaper. My second answer was that the quality of work achieved by other film makers at the CSIF intimidated me. My third answer was to express the fear that if I made a film, would anyone come and see it? Making a film is itself an achievement, but that was not enough. I wanted to make a film that would connect with people and make them glad they had seen it.

After a few minutes I didn't come up with anything, so I retreated to reminiscing about the films I had made. I thought about my "two minute backyard monster epics," but then my thoughts focussed more on two of my films "The Smiling Corpse" and "Extra Special Care." I thought it would be enjoyable if I could show these films some place. I thought: why doesn't someone start a film festival?

Now I had an idea that excited me. I started to think of the rules for the festival. Anyone could make the kind of film I had in mind with three rolls of film. Three rolls of super 8 would cost about \$90. I rounded that off to \$100 and had a name: The \$100 Film Festival. By now I felt I was on to some thing and started to develop the idea further. I came up with the idea of an audience favourite award, which became a central feature of the festival.

At the meeting I sat back quietly and listened to the discussion. I didn't really want to speak up. Near the end of the meeting, the chairperson asked each person there to say something before closing the meeting. I decided not to bring up my idea for the \$100 Film Festival, and just say something supportive of the ideas discussed instead.

Just before my turn came, Stephen Hanon got up to speak. He offered to edit a newsletter for the membership. After what Stephen said I felt I had to volunteer to do something, so I when I got up I talked about "The \$100 Film Festival." As I remember it two people, Stephen Hanon and Michael Willis, reacted with real excitement to the idea. In the following weeks, especially as word got around, many people more began to encourage me to organize the festival. Stephen Hanon in particular was very supportive, as was Gord Pepper.

## Year 1: The Monster Who Killed Rises Again

In the fall of 1991 I started the ball rolling by setting a date and sending out a notice with the rules. While I called the festival "The \$100 Film Festival," in the rules, I set the limits based on the number of rolls of film shot. Three rolls of colour sound film, four rolls of colour silent film and five rolls of black and white film seemed reasonable limits to me. I made the pledge that I would try to show every film submitted. The Festival kept this pledge for seven years.

The First Annual \$100 Film Festival was set for in April 24, 1992 at the CSIF theatre. At the time the CSIF lived in the basement of an old church on 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I recruited a jury to program the festival that included Marcella Bienvenue, Martin Rumsby and Ron Sadownik. Allan Belyea, who was then a brand-new employee at the CSIF, did most of the work of organizing and publicising for the festival. He recruited Patrick Brooks, who designed the floating directors chair that became the Festival's Logo. Michael Willis was the projectionist.

Film makers submitted seven films to the Festival. I talked to many people who had thought of making films, or who tried to make films. Although they did not have a film to enter, the idea still excited them. Some of these films were completed and screened in later \$100 Film Festivals.

As the Festival date approached, I attended the jury's screening of the films and I sat in on their initial discussions. The jury gave an award to every film submitted. We felt that anyone who finished a film deserved an award, and that since our objective was to encourage film making, we should give everyone an award. It also ensured that I got an award.

After the Festival Gord Pepper said, it was like a scene from a Fellini film. Allan Belyea described the crowd as a "don't tell the Fire Marshall crowd." We had close to 90 people in a 30-seat theatre. Even at that we turned away people at the door. The master of ceremonies, Nowell Berg, said "no mater how good any of the future festivals are, we will know that this was the best."

I remember the seven films quite clearly.

- "Grave Delusions" by Howard Horowitz ( 6 min's 30-sec) was a horror film about a man trying to save a woman from a threat in a grave yard. Howard had just recently joined the CSIF and this was his first film.
- "You Know What They Say" by Pete McGowan (2 min's 43-sec) was about a tense conversation between two women, with much left unsaid, until the end. Pete was a filmmaker based in Edmonton.
- "Before the Collage" by Allan Belyea (5 min's 45-sec) was the story of a romance. A juror felt this film was praiseworthy because looking at a relationship in this way was rare for a man.
- "A Weekend in Calgary" by James Beattie Morison (2 min's 18-sec) grew out of a camera test. I used a camera with an intervalometer to produce a time lapse version of a trip from Calgary to Lake Louise and back. The addition of the title and "Pipeline" by the Chantays transformed this test into a statement about the pressures of living the Calgary lifestyle. I was pleased at the positive response of the audience, and I still get comments about the film, over 10 years since it was last shown in public.
- "The Wandering Jew" by Robert Manning ( 8 min) was the most controversial of the films, with the jury spending more time discussing it than all the others combined. This film succeeded at times in achieving an epic feel that suited the story. Robert, was the only

- filmmaker not attending the festival.
- “Tender” by Greg Danyluk (6 min’s 22-sec) was the story of a young doll threatened by the corruption of the big city. Chosen as the audience favourite, this film has retained its popularity. The Puppet Film Festival recently showed it. Greg was another new film maker who had joined the CSIF. He, like myself, attended the University of Manitoba and graduated in Civil Engineering.
- “left brain right brain” by Jeff Langille (2 min’s 40-sec) was the jury favourite. More abstract than the other films, it was a challenging and stimulating film. Jeff Langille was a filmmaker based in Vancouver.

## **Year 2: New Faces, New Directions**

With the success of the first festival we knew there had to be a second. At the first Festival people were already talking about the films they were going to make for next year. I recruited Geo Major, Philip Letourneau, David Jones and Donna Burwood as volunteers to help with the Festival. Philip and David have both been involved with every Festival since then.

Unfortunately, in early 1993 I had to bow out because of work commitments. Geo Major took over as the head of the Festival. Geo called on me several times for advice and kept me informed about the progress of the festival.

While I regretted having to leave the Festival, I also felt that it also started a tradition of the Festival bringing in new people with new ideas. At first I thought of the Festival as “my” Festival. However, in time the Festival developed a life of its own, with the people who make it happen bring new energy and ideas. The Festival belongs to no one and everyone.

For the Second Annual \$100 Film Festival we moved to the Fort Calgary Theatre, which had 150 seats. In its second year the Festival received 20 film submissions, with most of them from Calgary Filmmakers. I did not make a film for the festival, so Donna Burwood gave me a "try again next time" award.

The Festival was very lucky with publicity in 1993. First local CBC radio picked up on the Festival and interviewed several filmmakers. They gave out some free tickets, with the stipulation that the people had to come on air after the festival and do a review. The CBC local TV news covered the festival by showing Allan Belyea working on his film. The CBC National News later showed this report. Finally, CTV’s morning program interviewed two of the filmmakers, Ewa Snyaticka and Clarence Boudreau.

All the publicity resulted in a big public response to the festival and the tickets quickly sold out. We added a second screening on the Sunday night and in the end the Festival made a slight profit. My personal favourite was "the last time I saw you" by Janice Starko, a reflection on the death of a close friend.

About a week before the Festival Geo Major called me in a panic. He had bought a glass plate as an award for the audience favourite. It suddenly occurred to him, what would we do if we had a tie? I told him not to worry as a tie was very unlikely. The night of the festival when they announced the audience favourite it was a tie! Afterwards I asked "how close was it?" Geo said “They got the same number of votes, you can’t get any closer than that.” I felt foolish, until a minute later when someone else came up and asked the same question. Geo had to go buy another plate.

The two audience favourite films were "In the Fast Lane" by Howard Horowitz and "H.U.S.H" by Ewa Snyaticka. "In the Fast Lane" was about combining two popular Canadian sports. "H.U.S.H." was a dystopian vision about a future where art was outlawed. "H.U.S.H" was also the jury favourite. The second Festival also saw the first 16mm films, "The Big Frame" by Andy Jaremko and "Turtle Heads React" by Gary Burns, although they were not part of the competition.

### **A Bright Future: 11 years and counting**

The \$100 Film Festival began as a way to inspire people to make films. After 10 successful years the \$100 Film Festival has built a tradition of support for film makers in Calgary. Many films have been made that would not have been made if the Festival did not exist. Many people have made films that would not have made films if the Festival did not exist. In other Cities similar festivals have started.

I believe a film maker must have a vision. You need to have something to say that you want other people to hear. The \$100 Film Festival is about helping film makers realize their vision. The Festival is there to celebrate film making.

When I started the Festival people told me that film was on the way out. I thought that the Festival would last at most five years before video would make it obsolete. I was wrong. Film may someday become obsolete, but there are still many things that can be done in film that cannot be done otherwise. The Festival can continue to celebrate film for many more years.

The future will bring new challenges, but this is a Festival that was a response to challenges. The future holds opportunities too. As long as the Festival can give people the opportunity to make their mark they will make the Festival vital.