

Solange De Santis

The National Film Board

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TORONTO – Anyone who's watched the Academy Awards telecast over the years and hasn't gone to the refrigerator during the reading of the nominations for best documentary and best animation has grown used to hearing these words: "Produced by the National Film Board of Canada."

Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, the NFB, as it's called, is an utterly unique entity on the world film scene – a *government agency* that has consistently turned out hard-hitting documentaries and astonishingly creative animation along with advances in film technology and, at one point in its history, feature films. Today, it does these things – except for the feature films – on an annual budget (C\$65 million, or US\$XX million (FILL IN ACCORDING TO CURRENT EXCHANGE RATE), in fiscal 1999) that would barely pay for a single James Bond movie.

Since the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles began handing out its Oscars in 1927, the NFB, or filmmakers associated with it, have been nominated 63 times. Oscar awards total nine, plus a technical achievement award for the development of a device that reads the optical information stored on the edge of movie film and a special Oscar in 1989 in honor of its 50th anniversary. (RAY – THE REASON FOR THE WORDING IN THIS GRAPH IS THAT SOMETIMES THE NOMINATION, OR THE OSCAR WIN, HAS GONE TO THE DIRECTOR, SO THE ACADEMY DOESN'T COUNT IT AS AN NFB WIN, WHILE THE NFB DOES. RATHER THAN GET INTO A NUMBERS TIFF, THAT'S HOW I CHOSE TO WORD IT.)

"It is the most-nominated foreign production company. It vastly outnumbers any other," said Ellen Harrington, special events and exhibitions coordinator with the Academy who organized a 60th-anniversary tribute evening last month (November) at the Academy's theater. The Museum of Modern Art in New York also ran a retrospective this year and Laurence Kardish, senior curator of the department of film and video, noted that the NFB has gained an international profile while maintaining its importance in Canadian life. "I can't think of another national film organization that's been so important to the culture of a country as the NFB has been to Canada," said Kardish, who grew up in Ottawa.

Since the Canadian taxpayer is on the hook for C\$55 million of that C\$65 million budget (C\$10 million is earned from sales), the NFB's output – indeed, its very existence – has been criticized, debated, attacked and defended throughout its much-decorated history. Canadians feel remarkably possessive of the film board since they have seen its films in classrooms, libraries, union halls, hospitals and church basements as well as in theaters and on television.

"I remember sitting in geography or history class, hearing the whirr of the projector, sitting and watching 'City Of Gold,'" said NFB producer Silva Basmajian, mentioning a well-known NFB film about the Yukon gold rush that broke new ground for its use of still photos in storytelling. "It was part of my growing up. The lights would go down and we would fall asleep," joked Karen King, another NFB producer.

Currently, "the film board has had to re-invent itself because of changing economics and changing viewing patterns," said Louise Lore, executive producer of the Ontario documentary unit. What she is referring to is a wholesale shakeup of the venerable institution in an era of government deficit-cutting and new distribution channels and technologies.

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The NFB's colorful history began with a vibrant Scottish documentarian named John Grierson who was invited to Canada in 1938 by then-prime minister Mackenzie King to assess the Canadian film business, then mainly the preserve of the 15-year-old Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau. King wanted to see the increasingly independent and prosperous Dominion reflected on the screen.

Legislation creating the film board was passed in 1939. With the country on the brink of entering World War II, the NFB turned out morale-boosting propaganda, yet even then, its films showed flair. Its first Oscar was won in 1941 for "Churchill's Island," a portrait of beleaguered Britain. Although it was bound to support the war effort, the NFB, as envisioned by Grierson, was set up as an entity that would receive government funding, yet maintain creative independence and "bring Canada alive to itself and to the rest of the world."

NFB films were distributed by the March of Time in the U.S. and the Famous Players cinema chain in Canada, but the film board also sent out dozens of itinerant projectionists across the giant Canadian landscape, to towns too small to have a theater. "They would fill up the trunk with 16mm prints and a projector and screen documentaries, newsreels, animated films. They were often snowed in and towed in," said Peter Starr, producer at the NFB.

While the NFB was winning Oscars, it was also turning out a wide variety of public-service films, such as one that promoted recruiting for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and another entitled "Tax Is Not a Four-letter Word," described as a "public-information film extolling the need for income tax through the use of a humorous animated cartoon." Many NFB public-service films were distributed worldwide. I still remember sitting in a darkened auditorium in the late 1960s, in Bishop Reilly High School in Queens, N.Y., watching "Phoebe," an affecting drama about the troubles faced by a pregnant teenager.

The NFB's independent stance sometimes led to films that took a radical viewpoint and brought down the wrath of government and citizenry. The 1982 film, "The Kid Who Couldn't Miss," questioned the war record of World War I air ace Billy Bishop and wondered about the need for heroes. Veterans groups were enraged and the Canadian Senate held hearings on whether the film should be withdrawn. One newspaper columnist called the filmmakers "a gaudy motley of artistic charlatans who belonged to the loony left ... pacifist-socialists ... chicken-hearted poltroons and geriatric hippies." The NFB stood its ground and the film survived.

"If You Love This Planet," an anti-nuclear weapons film that won the best-documentary Oscar in 1982, attracted the attention of the U.S. Department of Justice, which required the American distributors to label the film "political propaganda."

The NFB latest crisis occurred four years ago, when the current commissioner, Sandra Macdonald, was appointed and instructed to cut the budget from C\$80 million to C\$50 million as part of the federal government's effort to slash Canada's budget deficit. She closed down the feature-film unit, reasoning that Canada now had enough private-sector moviemakers. She also closed the NFB's feminist ("my least productive studio") and aboriginal units, but spread funding for those mandates across the organization. Employment was slashed to 250 from 600, a process Macdonald agreed was extremely painful.

However, she also streamlined operations, noting that 76% of the budget now "goes directly on to the screen," up from 66% four years ago. The number of films the NFB has released has risen to about 100, up from 85, she said. New distribution

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channels such as specialty cable channels and the Internet have increased the NFB's audience worldwide, she said.

This year, American viewers recently saw "Hitman Hart – Wrestling With Shadows" on A&E, a sensational backstage documentary on the world of professional wrestling. A haunting nine-minute animated film, "When The Day Breaks," won the Palme d'or for best short film at the Cannes Film Festival this year. Among the NFB productions that Macdonald hopes will get Oscar nominations next February are "When The Day Breaks" and "Just A Wedding," the continuation of the story of Nadia DeFranco, a girl with spina bifida who was the subject of "I'll Find A Way," which won an Oscar in 1977.

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