

THAT LITTLE IRREGULARITY UP ON THE PRAIRIE HORIZON
Part of a Six-Set Historical DVD Collection from the Winnipeg Film Group
(Beginnings 1976-1983: The Early Years)

by Patrick Lowe

*“This very strange event happened back at that little irregularity up on the prairie horizon – my birthplace, my winter city.” **The Obsession of Billy Botski***

“A painter needs a canvas, a writer a pen, but a filmmaker needs an army,” remarked Orson Welles, regarding what is probably the most complicated and expensive art form there is. And Winnipeg, Manitoba - better known for its jokes about long winters and summer mosquitoes – probably wasn’t the first place that Welles or anyone would marshal the necessary troops to make their celluloid visions a reality. In spite of the artistic reputations of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and The Guess Who, the city and province lacked the real funds and infrastructure for a working film industry or community, uncharitably described by one critic as the “cinematic boondocks.”

Then in February 1974, a certain “event” took place. At the Festival of Life & Learning at the University of Manitoba, writer & film critic Len Klady moderated a panel on filmmaking in Manitoba, alongside filmmakers Leon Johnson, Bob Lower, and Dave Cherniak. Naturally, the main focus of discussion was the struggle in getting local movies off the ground. It was at this event that Penni Jacques, then film officer of the Canada Council, suggested the creation of a local film co-op. This planted the seed, and after numerous meetings and debates at Klady’s house, the letters of incorporation were implemented, and in December of that the year, the Winnipeg Film Group opened its doors at the legendary Bates Building on McDermot Avenue in downtown Winnipeg.

Now 36 years later, the cinematic vacuum of the prairies has festooned. Thanks to the recent worldwide success of Guy Maddin’s ***My Winnipeg***, plus the many other prominent works of John Paizs, Shereen Jerrett, Deco Dawson, Sean Garrity, Jeff Erbach, and others, the Film Group gained a reputation for works the critics praised as edgy, bizarre, surreal, and off-kilter - the stuff film festivals thrive on. But for the first decade of the group’s existence, the struggle was not so much to find an international style, but to just to get some films made, period. With little funding available outside the Canada Council or the CFDC (Canadian Film Development Corporation), the membership managed to get a handful of short films made that reflected the many different pre-digital styles of independent filmmaking in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. And we’re talking a time when flicks had to be made the hard way: overbooked cameras, rusty tripods, antiquated light gear, dusty trim bins, arthritic Steenbecks, expensive lab costs, and no real venue to show their completed works (until the establishment of the WFG’s Cinematheque in 1982). Maybe if they were lucky, they’d get an award or a broadcast sale, but it wasn’t until Greg

Hanec's debut feature, *Downtime*, was accepted at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1985, did a reputation outside the city gates seem possible.

Re-watching those old 16mm prints of yesteryear made me feel like some 19th century anthropologist, perusing the skeletal remains of a lost civilization. With their browning images and scratchy optical tracks, the films may not be up to today's standards of hi-def clarity. All the same, it adds to the allure of this bygone era and the films on *Beginnings* stand very well on their own. The collaborative *Rabbit Pie* and Paiz's *The Obsession of Billy Botski* are flat out funny and visually striking comedies (forerunners of what Toronto Star critic Geoff Pevere termed "prairie post-modernism"). Earthy documentaries like Elise Swerhone's *Havakeen Lunch*, Barry Lank's *It's a Hobby for Harvey*, and Jancarlo Markiw's *Carlo* are sincere and heartfelt looks into various local subjects. Then there's the off-the-wall stream of consciousness animation of Ed Ackerman and Greg Zbitnew's *5¢ a Copy*, alongside Alan Pakarnyk's surreal and intricately designed *Daydream*. Other experimental works include Doug Davidson and Tom Morris's *Argentina* and Hanec's *Music* which both present highly personalized views of the sad world we live in. Then there's Jon Krockner's *38 Jansky Units*, in which....well, see it and decide for yourself.

I specifically didn't look for an overall theme for this collection. What I wanted this line-up of films to reflect was the organization's diversity in its initial years - a rather exciting time. A co-op venture like the Film Group should always contain a multitude of voices over a dominant house style, critical accolades notwithstanding. It is that spirit which will carry our organization forward just as our armada of pioneering members cut a pathway to make "that little irregularity up on the prairie horizon" the groundswell of talent we now have. So here's to the works of our founding filmmakers. And may our current bunch be just as fortunate in inspiring yet another creative wellspring in the years to come.