



OKEEDOKEE MR. JOHNSON: THE FILMS OF LEON JOHNSON

This essay on Leon Johnson by Chelse McKee was commissioned to accompany a screening of films entitled Okeedokee Mr. Johnson: The Films of Leon Johnson on Thursday, April 22 / 2010

The sound of wind rustling through trees may just be white noise to most, but to Leon Johnson, it's a career. Johnson, a locally residing sound mixer, has been in sound recording for over thirty years. Despite his success in the industry, his initial start in film was through the directorial door. Leon Johnson was born in Minnesota, attending both Concordia College and the University of Minneapolis before getting a B.A. in Political Science and History. He had only taken a few courses in film but had watched numerous National Film Board films in the Minneapolis library.

He finally decided to move to Winnipeg in 1972 because his wife was originally from here. "I also wanted to live in a smaller city," he added. "It wasn't that I didn't like Minneapolis."

He was also motivated to stay in Winnipeg because the NFB would be opening an office in the city soon. He had been intrigued by the NFB's films and was excited to talk about the idea of animation. He recalled going to a museum and seeing a Native example of animation, little sculptures in succession showing a bird diving for a fish. Thrilled by the prospect of working with that kind of animation, he agreed to live in Winnipeg.

Johnson began his segue into cinema via his graphic art film, *Okeedokee*. To make the film, he snuck into his old university in Minneapolis to use their film department. The

film, when completed, would be one minute long and consist of a single photo being blended into vibrant greens and purples resembling screen printing.

With the creation of *Okeedoke*, an experimental documentary filmmaker was born. Johnson went on to create more single-shot short films, mostly playing with the idea of voyeurism. One of his self-proclaimed favourites, *Park*, was true to life for Johnson. “That’s a recreation of something I actually saw.” The single-shot film involves a man taking a box from his car to an unknown location off-screen but returning repeatedly to the car, apparently with the nagging feeling that he’s forgotten something. The dialogue-free short has a frustrating allure that Johnson enjoyed taunting the audience with. He recalls, with delight, one event at the University of Winnipeg screening where a man and woman got into an argument about the film. “They got so – she was not buying this [...] they had such opposing views that they got into a fight, a physical fight. Well, it’s just one shot.”

Johnson’s love affair with the single camera, aside from its being the voyeur’s ideal tool, was also a product of financial constraints. “For single-take films, I think my main influence was my bank account. I thought it was possible to engage [and] entertain simply and I really didn’t have much to spend doing it.”

Other short films by Johnson include *Christmas in Brandon*, *Good Afternoon*, *Royal Tower* and *Le Metif Enragé*. Eventually Johnson was able to move from short films to making near-features, such as *You Laugh Like a Duck*.

Johnson recounted one delightful fact about *Good Afternoon*, *Royal Tower*. The film, which took five hours to shoot, featured a woman bouncing between calls and real complaints. The woman, Johnson mentioned, is now a long-haul driver. For those who have seen the film, this seems an oddly appropriate career choice.

Johnson hopes to do more short films with Randy Woods, who appeared in both *Park* and *Christmas in Brandon*. Woods was the sole subject of both films, creating the environment that Johnson would spy into. For *Christmas in Brandon*, Woods sat opposite the camera and spoke about a true experience involving too much alcohol, a dark Christmas, and Brandon's snowy streets.

One of Johnson's films that was not single camera was *Le Metif Enragé* featuring George Morissette. The film was shot like a fight during a reality program. It centred on Morissette forgoing a traditional fiddle contest. Instead, he read a poem about the Métis experience, much to the dismay of the crowd, who began booing and yelling at the stage. Johnson, a man who loves a reaction, delighted in the rising anger of the crowd, grateful he was catching the reaction on film.

Johnson, a proud voyeur with his single camera, admits that he just likes "poking around." He added that if he wasn't in film and sound, he would easily choose to be an archaeologist.

After trying to live on a filmmaker's income for a few years, he realized that that wasn't possible for him. Johnson was finally drawn into the world of sound by Hans Oomes, the man who would become his mentor.

Hans Oomes, a sound mixer from Montreal, had come to Winnipeg for the NFB to help in the development of skills here for the film community. Johnson was working as a boom operator on *For Gentlemen Only* when they met. "It was not my intention at the time to be in the sound department as a career, although I had boomed one feature the year before, *The Mourning Suit*," Johnson remembered. "I told Hans that he was sucking me into sound. He did not deny it [...]. It was an exceptional experience. Little did I know where it would lead. He just sucked me into this whole sound side and I kind of went that way. Just to make a living, 'cause there wasn't a living to be made in making [...] I

just went to it 'cause I was good at it and I have been taught really, really well by Hans Oomes.”

From there, Johnson would go on to achieve over 110 sound credits to his name, including films like *Capote*, *The Constant Gardener*, and *Seven Times Lucky*. Traveling to places like the Arctic and Mexico for his work, Johnson became a globetrotter with his microphone.

Johnson’s current project, *Todd and the Book of Evil*, is keeping him at home. When he tried to explain the new Space Channel program, he smirked at the concept of a book turning everyone gay, one episode’s adventure.

Eventually Johnson hopes to retire and have the time to focus on some personal projects, including directing more single-shot films and recording. Being an in-demand person for film hasn’t left him much time for on his own projects. He admitted that he already has ideas for a new film but, ever cautious, was careful not to say too much until after it is made. All he would divulge was that the project involved a single camera, two chairs, two people, a start, and an ending.

“I’ll wait till it’s made,” he repeated.

There are some films Johnson would like to return to that he didn’t complete during his filmmaking phase. He recalled one film which “didn’t really work” and which he was told by a friend not to show anyone. “It was way too revealing. I got way inside with one, basically a shot that got way too personal.” He explained further that the film’s subject was an incredibly happy woman. “If she had a peach, that was the best peach ever. If she had another peach ten minutes later, *that* was the best peach ever. Everything was documented and I got her to a point where she had to say that everything wasn’t positive. It took all day to do it but it ended up being three shots.”

Johnson worked in 3D films in the late '90s, he proudly declares, before 3D was the popular thing. Reveling in the 3D effects, he remembered his own time working on the 3D film *Mark Twain's America* for IMAX in 1998.

He recalled making a 3D film where the team had to shoot a scene about a cougar taking down a prey. But the cougar's tail had come into the shot, overwhelming the scene with its detail.

"You're not watching a life and death thing," Johnson said, adding that all the tiny hairs of the cougar's tail appeared in such detail that it took over the shot. "You're sitting there in some motel room or something watching this stuff and we're going 'man, that is so fascinating and not what you're supposed to be focusing on.'"

The known sound enthusiast and perfectionist on set enjoyed the challenge of recording sound for 3D, adding that it wasn't just recording sound but creating dimensionality with the sound. "You put [sound] within space. You don't have it just as sound coming at you." Johnson has been described by some as one of the best sound people in the country. For him, that kind of esteem is just a product of loving sound and caring for how sound affects a film.

"I don't think sound is generally used well enough," he said. "I don't think that most people listen. You know, I remember taking a microphone and going into a closed space and having only one mosquito, killing all the mosquitoes but one and seeing if I can record that one mosquito."

Johnson's name may seem familiar to some for more than just sound mixing. Johnson was also one of the founding members of the Winnipeg Film Group, begun in 1974. "We had no money; we had nothing, just a group of people," he recalled fondly.

Every Sunday, a group of local filmmakers, including Johnson, Len Klady, Elise Swerhone, Brad Caslor, and his wife Betsy Thorsteinson, would meet at Klady's house to watch films. Klady had access to Victoria Shipping's 16 mm collection and the group would watch the films projected onto Klady's bed sheet in the living room. That group would eventually help to form the Winnipeg Film Group.

"In that time, no one was making movies," Johnson said. "I'm happy I got involved and tried to get things happening when I had the chance [but] it wasn't about me. It was about what could be done with a group of people [...] what the Film Group allows us is to have a sort of an emerging group of people for ideas, directors, and producers and to work in the business."

"I was kind of surprised," Johnson said of learning that the Film Group was honouring him and his films. He described his films as "pretty old" and "really simple" but admitted he's excited.

"Just to see it all at one time. My wife and my son have never really seen these, so it's going to be kind of interesting for them. [...] Maybe [the event] will spark me to do some more things that I've been interested in doing there cause I've been making a living and I haven't been doing that kind of stuff."

Johnson expressed just one hope for the event.

"I hope I show up."