

# SPLICE

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Birth of a Family. Photos courtesy of NFB.

# Our Man in Winnipeg

## The NFB and Saskatchewan

BY MARK WIHAK

The publicly funded National Film Board of Canada has developed a worldwide reputation for its documentary and animated films. Founded in 1939, the NFB was created in response to Hollywood's dominance of our movie screens, with the intention of bringing Canadian stories to Canadian audiences. In recent years, the NFB has made much of its outstanding catalogue of films available for free downloads and online viewing.

While we celebrate the NFB's accomplishments, some of us have also felt frustrated by the NFB's modest engagement with Saskatchewan filmmakers. Since shutting down their Regina and Saskatoon offices in the early 1990s, the NFB has had a thin presence in Saskatchewan, with a Winnipeg-based producer making forays across the border to meet with Saskatchewan filmmakers. In 2011, a Saskatchewan-based Producer was hired by the NFB, but that office was shuttered after a couple of years, and once again Saskatchewan filmmakers are being



served through the Winnipeg office, which is a part of the NFB's North West Studio, with its main office in Edmonton, and Calgary filmmaker David Christensen serving as Executive Producer. The North West Studio's territory includes Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut.

Despite the NFB's modest track record in Saskatchewan, there are reasons to be hopeful. At the moment, the NFB is involved in two projects with Saskatchewan filmmakers, Tasha Hubbard's *Birth of a Family*, and Robin Schlaht's interactive project *Convictions*. And we have a new Producer in Winnipeg. I first encountered Jon Montes at the 2016 Yorkton Film Festival. Jon followed up with trips to Saskatoon and Regina in June, and had a busy few days in Saskatchewan, meeting with a number of filmmakers and

organisations and checking out the old NFB office in the Soundstage; he promises to be a regular visitor.

Originally from Newfoundland and Labrador, Jon got his start in film working for the St. John's International Women's Film Festival before moving to Toronto for graduate school and more festival work there at the Regent Park Film Festival and TIFF. St. John's NFB producer Annette Clarke brought him back to associate produce the feature doc *Danny*. After working on a few more projects in St. John's, he moved to the NFB's Montreal office, working on animated and documentary projects, and he jumped at the opportunity to be a Producer at the NFB's Winnipeg offices.

**What is your role with the NFB and your responsibilities?**

I produce films for the North West

Studio. That means working closely with filmmakers to find creative ways of telling engaging stories and making sure those stories get made in the most interesting way possible. I'm not a director and that's not my job. As a creative producer, my job is to push you as a director to articulate your point of view in as clear an essence as possible. Of course, budgets, administration, and paperwork come with the job, but it's the creative storytelling part of it that make those bearable.

Even though I'm based in Winnipeg, our studio's main office is in Edmonton and we cover a huge geographical territory: Right now, I'm looking primarily at Saskatchewan and NWT, two areas where I'd love to see more NFB projects get off the ground.

**What type of projects is the NFB interested in being involved in?**



The Grasslands Project. Photo courtesy NFB.



Oof that's a big one. We work principally in documentary, animation, and interactive storytelling. Because we're a public producer, we have the ability to work outside some industry constraints. We don't shape projects according to broadcast norms and we're not limited to only working on projects we think will sell. Everything is on the table, from micro-short animation and documentary to feature length to VR. Ultimately, I'm interested in stories that change the way we see ourselves in the world. Usually – especially in our documentaries – there is a strong social issue context to our films. But we can only understand that context through story, often intensely local and character-driven. That's the hook I'm often drawn to, what does the micro say that illuminates the macro in a new light?

***Should filmmakers pitch you at the development stage even if they feel the project is ready to go into production?***

For sure! We're not a film funder, we're a creative producer. That means we prefer to come into the filmmaking process at the ground floor of creation. If you're coming to the NFB to round out your production financing, it's a tough sell. If

you're approaching us at a very early stage to work with you as a creative collaborator, then absolutely we should talk.

***What can the NFB provide at the development stage?***

It's in development that we start drilling down into the hard questions of what the story is, why we're telling it, and how we're approaching it. Those are three simple questions, but are really at the heart of our work. We'll work with you throughout development to answer these questions and can support that process by building interesting creative teams that will help us see the story in new and exciting ways. Depending on the project, we'll usually begin to do some shooting (or animating or designing) to start articulating how the project will work on a visual and emotional level. It can be a long process, but the resources we commit in development go a long way to sharpen what we do in production.

***What are you expecting to see at the pitch stage and how should filmmakers approach you?***



Honestly, pitches scare me. It's so much pressure to expect someone have a fully formed project that's ready to go! And if it's all ready to go, what room does that leave for me to contribute creatively as a producer? I really appreciate pitches that are just a way of starting a conversation, which is where, as a creative producer, I can start working with you. All I'm hoping for in that kind of conversation is an idea or a story that might have legs and that speaks to the filmmaker or creator who is bringing it forward.

***Can filmmakers pitch you a specific content and form (i.e. can they pitch a documentary film, or an interactive project or an animated project)?***

Totally, though we tend to look for story first, not form. As my colleague Alicia Smith puts it, "We are technology agnostic, meaning, we will use whatever technology suits the story best." Sometimes that's virtual reality, sometimes that's linear documentary, and sometimes it's scratch on film animation. Form always follows story, and we spend a lot of development time talking about this. It's also in development that we start thinking concretely about what the goals of each project is. So if we're making films for a group of people with limited internet connection, for example, maybe it doesn't make sense to tell the story as an interactive project. That's a long-winded way of saying yes, you can certainly pitch content and form, though you should also be open to exploring other possibilities as you tell your story.

***What's the difference between working with the NFB on a co-production and working on a project where the NFB is the sole producer?***

Creative collaboration is key for the NFB and something we expect as either the sole producer or a co-producer. So as a creator, you can always expect me, whether I'm the only producer or one of two or more co-producers, to be asking you about story, pushing you on form, and looking to find creative ways to challenge how we understand the project as storytellers.

You can find the more granular details of financing, copyright, and distribution on our corporate site, but co-productions usually mean that our financial contribution won't exceed 49%. Co-producers



have to secure the majority (51% or more) of financing. That can come through broadcast licenses, crowdfunding, etc. Copyright is divided up pro rata, and we negotiate distribution rights based on what makes sense for the film on a case-by-case basis. If we're the sole producer on a project, all copyright and distribution rests with the NFB.

***Can you outline what is available to emerging filmmakers through the Filmmaker Assistance Program (FAP)?***

The Filmmaker Assistance Program (FAP) is a fantastic – if sometimes overlooked – program open to emerging filmmakers. While we don't provide cash funding, filmmakers can apply for post-production support, either from the NFB or from a post house. We can pay for a mix, film transfer, colour correction or other post-service, up to a max of \$5000. Preference is given to projects in documentary or animation, but we also fund drama as well. As you can imagine, we have a limited envelope for this, so it can be a competitive selection process. You can find out more on our website or email Esther Viragh (e.viragh@nfb.ca), our fantastic Production Supervisor, for more details.

Jon seems eager to engage with Saskatchewan filmmakers in a way that we haven't seen from the NFB for quite some time. Don't pass up the opportunity to say hello to Jon when you get the chance, and if you have an idea for a project you can reach him at: j.montes@nfb.ca and/or 204-983-5852.





# THE THIRD ANNUAL SIFAS

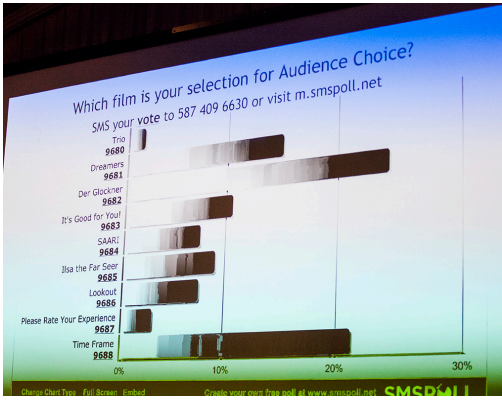
**T**he Saskatchewan FilmPool Cooperative was proud to announce the winners of the Third Annual Saskatchewan Independent Film Awards (SIFA) which took place on November 24, 2016, at the Artesian on 13th in Regina. The evening of entertainment and screenings celebrated and showcased the best of Saskatchewan's independent filmmakers to a packed house.

Opening greetings were delivered by the Honourable Ken Cheveldayoff, Minister of Parks, Culture and Sport on behalf of the Government of Saskatchewan. Jon Montes, a producer from the National Film Board of Canada, also spoke. Local improv performers and comedians Andrew Parry and Cameron Chomyn hosted the event, and T.B. Judd provided pre-show music.

**Congratulations to all the winners and nominees!**







**Best Student Film:**

SAARI by Ella Mikkola

**Best Acting:**

Charity Bradford in *The Land of Rock and Gold*

**Best Feature Film:**

VOUS ÊTES IÇI by Mark Wihak

**Best Technical Achievement:**

Ella Mikkola, Picture and Sound Editing for SAARI

**Best Short Film:**

*Der Glockner* by Chrystene Ells and Bery Hi

**Audience Choice Award:**

*Der Glockner* by Chrystene Ells and Bery Hi (chosen by audience vote)

