

True Patriot Love

Reel Canada uses homegrown films to instill cultural pride in high school students
by Andrea Danelak

High school is one of the most trying times in a young person's life, with questions of identity and acceptance often coming into play. Luckily, Canada has its own unique program that plays a role in helping teens answer those questions while also instilling a sense of national pride.

Designed to bring Canadian films into classrooms, Reel Canada is essentially a traveling film festival that visits high schools for one day, promoting Canadian films and culture in the process.

Executive Director Jack Blum says that Reel Canada, an initiative of several members of the national film and television industry, is well on its way to becoming a national event. Its advisory committee includes some of Canada's most prominent filmmakers and producers, including Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg and Sarah Polley.

The program consists of two components. The first allows teachers and students to screen films they choose from Reel Canada's catalogue of feature films, documentaries, animated programs and short films within a variety of genres, ranging from Academy Award nominees like 2005's *Water* and 2006's *Away From Her* to lesser-known films.

To present the films, Reel Canada is able to transform almost any space in the school into a screening venue, depending on the school's needs and capacity.

"We use auditoriums, weight rooms, drama rooms, whatever is available," says Blum. "What the students see is a movie theatre, and that transformation is very exciting for them."

Student volunteers also play an active role in setting up the screening rooms, taking tickets, presenting the festival guests or acting as "media" to document the experience for their school newspapers or videos.

The second component of the program brings in special guest speakers, such as actors, directors and producers, who present the films and then answer students' questions.

"It really makes a huge difference for the students to actually meet the director, writer or producer of the movie they have just seen," he says. "They feel, in some fundamental way, that the crew is theirs."

According to Blum, that sense of ownership is important to students. Canadian teenagers often face challenges in maintaining a cultural identity, which is not helped by the heavy promotion and over-saturation of foreign – mainly American – films. With Reel Canada, students are able to appreciate the variety of Canadian films available for viewing and the stories told by fellow Canadians, enabling them to find themselves in the stories.

"When we started Reel Canada, our major hope was to expose youth to well-made Canadian movies that they would not normally have access to in a theatre," says Sharon Corder, Reel Canada's artistic director. "We discovered that there is a whole Canadian cultural fabric they are not usually exposed to at all."

Reel Canada staff collected control group data regarding teens' attitudes toward Canadian-made films and also measures



Reel Canada Board member Atom Egoian with guests Jerry Ciccoritti and Nicholas Campbell at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School.

students' attitudes after the in-school festivals. Blum says the program is shown to have increased positive attitudes toward the films, as well as Canadian culture.

"Reel Canada really raises awareness of the great work being done by Canadian filmmakers," he says. "We realize we're competing with a huge Hollywood promotional machine. We wanted to make an impact and show that these movies deserve to be treated the same way as the movies being shown in the mall."

Blum attributes Reel Canada's success, in part, to the way it helps strengthen students' identities. "When students look at these films, there is a good chance that there is something that relates to them more accurately than something they would see in that multiplex at the mall," he says. "We feel like we have hit



Participants with Gordon Pinsent.

a sweet spot in terms of interest. 'Who are you?' – that's a very pressing question at that age."

It is for that very reason that Reel Canada only visits high schools, focusing on students between the ages of 14 and 19.

"Gathering material suitable for younger students is more difficult," Blum says. "We feel – and teachers have enforced – that the age group we're hitting is when students are asking questions about who they are. They are hungry for information, and we are filling that need."

Corder agrees. "High school is really a time of searching for identity. I think that the students are very receptive to seeing Canadian stories and seeing people who even look like them."

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Participants with Paul Gross

Reel Canada has received an extremely positive response from teachers at participating schools, and Blum and the rest of the Reel Canada crew hope to one day expand the program to impact as many Canadian teens as possible.

"Certainly on an anecdotal level, this has had a massive impact on some students' lives," he says. "We are growing very quickly. In the next two or three years, we would like to have a presence in five or six provinces."

Corder would also like to see Reel Canada added to schools' curriculums to make Canadian films more accessible to students across the country. "It really is exciting to see the kids' responses to these films," says Corder. "It is incredibly rewarding." 



Bon Cop Bad Cop's Colm Feore with some Reel Canada volunteers at Parkdale Collegiate.

For more information about Reel Canada, visit www.reelcanada.com.