

## Toronto 2000

By Gerald Pratley

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### TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL MARKS ITS 25th ANNIVERSARY

*Stardom* (2000) aka *15 Minutes & Fandom* Canada-France co-production (102min in French and English and with English sub-titles)

D: Denys Arcand; sc: Jacob Potashnik, Denys Arcand; lp: Jessica Pare, Dan Aykroyd, Charles Berling, Robert Lepage, Thomas Gibson, Frank Langella, Camille Rutherford

A small-town girl becomes a famous model in this stinging satire, a biting comedy, a perfect parody of the mindless people who inhabit television; not forgetting the foolish fashion designers, the shams who call themselves artists, and the crafty politicians and synthetic media types, mixed with the public's obsession with celebrities. It is a broad and detailed canvas only a genius such as Arcand could fill with telling images and knowing performances. Yet above it all and throughout it's an appreciation of beauty, of women, and of what life can sometimes be like when dirty hands are not in evidence. Furthermore it is also one of the very few English-track films to so clearly, easily and joyfully name its Canadian settings beginning in Cornwall, Ontario. Unbelievable, a Quebec film, at that, naming Cornwall, the snow is there with people pursuing their daily life. And the opening shot of a small army of hockey players skating into the camera moving back from them accompanied by "The Drinking Song" from *La Traviata* is a wonderfully funny moment of cinema.

Throughout, the film has energy, drive, good humour and pathos, and speaks out clearly about hypocrisy, gossip and scandal mongering, in Arcand's unsettling truths, with Montreal, New York, Paris and London, all seeming new and vibrant again in Guy Dufaux's captivating photography. And there is sympathy too for the naive hopefuls entering the shallow worlds of glamour and excitement. And yes, fame is fleeting and morality is hard to keep clear, and the emptiness of one's soul is often the ultimate price to be paid. This marvellous film towers above any other Canadian movie made since Arcand's own *Jesus of Montreal* and Lepage's *Confessional*. *Stardom* is a film of insight and depth, flawlessly played by a splendid cast.

#### **Alexander Nevsky Lives Again**

Indisputably for me the best hours I spent at the 25<sup>th</sup> annual Toronto International Film Festival were at the historic Massey Hall in company with Eisenstein, Prokofiev and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Michael Lankester and the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, with a full house to welcome *Alexander Nevsky* on a restored 35mm print with a strip-screen below to carry new sub-titles which in the original prints were difficult to read set as they were against the white backgrounds of snow and ice. What a stunning, superb and deeply-moving afternoon this was.

Over the years, music critics in the papers and journals of the time, were always favourably inclined toward the music of recognised contemporary concert composers such as Copland. Whether or not their scores were good for the films was seldom mentioned because the critics didn't know how to relate film music to its true purpose of translating drama or comedy. But when a Rózsa, Newman, Steiner, Raksin, North, Herrmann, Waxman or Korngold et al, came along they were treated with condescension. It was interesting then to read the reviews of the music critics of the three Toronto Papers about the Nevsky, Eisenstein and Prokofiev work so marvellously presented at its showing.

Once again it was the case of the critics knowing their music history but not that of motion pictures. This doesn't stop then however from letting their readers think they do. Here's the gist of what they wrote. The *Toronto Star*, after admitting that the score and story "offer a lesson in how to galvanize patriotic sentiment with images and music" remarked that "even Stalin managed to get the message." Stalin already knew what the film was about. Eisenstein's *Nevsky* is then called "one of the great propaganda films." How I dislike the misuse of this term. I was brought up through the years of warfare to believe correctly that propaganda was a means of spreading derogatory ideas relating to evil events and causes. There is nothing evil in the way *Nevsky* used history to raise the morale of the Russian people who were about to face yet another invasion by the Germans. The statement is then trotted out, repeated by others, which in twenty years of teaching

history I must say I missed, that Prokofiev's original score was poorly recorded by Mosfilm in 1938 using 'a scratch' orchestra of around 30 musicians or so implying that money was in short supply. As Russia was always generous to its favoured artists the difficulty was probably due to the recording techniques of the early sound period which Mosfilm had not yet left behind. Their cinemas did not install sound until sometime after Europe and North America.

The score he is then analysed on firmer ground and quite brilliantly so. But when music critic becomes film critic we read the absurd comment that Eisenstein and Prokofiev "achieved the remarkable transformation of cliché into archetype."

The *National Post* begins with the irritating statement that *Nevisky* is a "blunt exercise in propaganda," which never sounded so good, and continues to say that it was not much of a film in its time lacking the sophistication of GWTW. Really! Going on to praise the music, and complaining that the TSO was too loud trying to match the hideous levels of today's action films. This is foolish, the orchestra and choir were simply breathtaking, sending shivers down my spine and bringing tears to my eyes.

And finally there was *The Globe and Mail*. After the strange statement about "its peculiar numen as a sinister patriotic emblem of the Soviet Union" rambles on about the greatness of Eisenstein and Prokofiev and their "obsequiousness and politics in Stalin's terrifying regime, devoting much of the review to how great they were under their freedom guaranteed by Stalin, at the height of their creative powers and further that, their film has now risen above its political time warp and "loaded patriotic time, by the two creative geniuses who found the perfect symbiotic agreement" with a 200% work of art; but wait, it has "dated quickly as a visual-sonic artifact, coming down to us (all teachers please note) as an archival treasure grainy to see, scratchy and hollow to hear." Well, I have used *Nevisky* prints for many years and while some were slightly worn I could see the visuals extraordinarily well and hear the music and the dialogue very well too. In summing up *The Globe* thinks the music is great and film is great, and likes the idea of symphony orchestras playing the score "unencumbered by the film." Isn't this a case of double speak? Well, I hope this masterpiece with its powerful score and memorable visuals and haunting faces, will be around for another 60-odd years. Returning once again perhaps to the acoustically superb Massey Hall.

## References

**And a closing tribute to Toronto's festival with this memory from one of *KINEMA*'s readers**

Dear Editor:

This year as we salute the first quarter century of brilliant accomplishments by the Toronto Film Festival, it is perhaps fitting to recall and to do honour to its noble forerunner and near neighbour, the Stratford Film Festival.

The Stratford Film Festival, one of the earliest film festivals ever held in North America, ceased its years of distinguished operation the year that Toronto's own opened as The Festival Of Festivals.

During its final years and under the direction of Gerald Pratley, the Stratford Film Festival premiered signature works by some of the world's foremost directors of cinema: Akira Kurosawa, Louis Malle, Andrzej Wajda being among those whose works this writer recalls with particular delight. Their films were introduced by brief and insightful talks by Mr. Pratley, then Director as well of the Ontario Film Institute. Mr. Pratley also led early morning seminars in which directors, producers, members of the crew or cast of the films being shown often participated, further enriching each year's ten day festival.

For some of those of us who habitually attended, the Stratford Film Festival was an introduction to the vibrant art form of film, for others a laboratory for further study. We can all feel gratitude to the staff of that forerunner of Toronto's current Film Festival in our celebration of the latter's silver anniversary year.

Yours sincerely,  
Katharine Alling

## Author Information

Gerald PRATLEY, OC, LLD, started his career as film critic with the CBC. In 1969, he founded the Ontario Film Institute which he directed until 1990. He has written several books and numerous articles on film, including *Torn Sprockets*, a history of Canadian cinema. He taught Film History in universities in Toronto and Waterloo, Canada and holds three honorary degrees from Canadian and US universities.

**Gerald A. Pratley** (1923-2011) was born and educated in London, England, and came to Canada in 1946. He started working in Toronto for the CBC as a scriptwriter. He was drawn toward working in motion pictures, and became, in 1948, the CBC's first film critic and commentator.

Gerald Pratley broadcast three programmes a week, *Pratley at the Movies*, *The Movie Scene*, *Music From the Films*, and others, until 1975. During this time he also became the first post-war chairman of the Toronto Film Society, chairman of the Toronto and District Film Council and co-founder of the A-G-E Film Society and correspondent for international magazines such as *Films and Filming*, *Film In Review*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Quarterly* and *International Film Guide*. During the 1950s he wrote for *Canadian Film Weekly* and *Canadian Film Digest*.

He became known as a speaker on all aspects of motion picture art and industry, and was invited to teach film history at the University of Toronto, York University, University of Waterloo, Seneca College and Ryerson Polytechnical University, with individual lectures being given at many other Canadian and US universities and colleges. He has served as a member of various judging panels of competitions and festivals, being one of the members of the first Canadian Film Awards in 1949.

From 1970 to 1975 he was the director of the Stratford (Ontario) International Film Festival, and from 1969 to 1976 he was Chairman of the International Jury of the Canadian Film Awards. He has attended all the world's leading festivals of film, and in particular, for 30 years, the Cannes Festival as CBC correspondent. He has written six books, *The Films of Frankenheimer: Forty Years in Film*; *The Cinema of John Frankenheimer*; *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*; *The Cinema of David Lean*; *The Cinema of John Huston*, and *Torn Sprockets*, a history of the Canadian cinema.

Gerald Pratley has served on the Advisory Boards of the film departments of Ryerson Polytechnical University and Humber College, and as a member of the programme committee of TV Ontario. In 1968 he became the founder-director of the Ontario Film Institute of the Province of Ontario, an organization which has distinguished itself in archival holdings and public service and is known since 1990 as the Cinematheque of Ontario. He taught Film History courses at the Department of Film and Photography, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto and the University of Waterloo.

In 1984, Gerald Pratley was made a Member of the Order of Canada and in 2003 **Officer of the Order of Canada** for his service to Canada through film appreciation. He holds Honorary Degrees in Letters and Fine Arts from York and Waterloo Universities (Ont., Canada) and Bowling Green State University (Ohio, USA).

In 2002, Gerald Pratley received a **Special Genie Award** from the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television in recognition of his lifelong dedication to the promotion and his exceptional support of Canadian cinema.

He died on 14 March 2011 in Ontario, Canada.