

Saskatchewan Filmpool blows out 20 candles

By Gerald Saul, for *the Free Press*

Twenty years ago, the film industry in Saskatchewan was virtually non-existent. A few courses were offered through the University of Regina, but few people thought that a city such as Regina could support more than a couple of filmmakers: one to document the harvest and another to make television commercials for the combine and fertilizer companies.

In 1976, an eastern-based film company used Saskatchewan as the (suitable) backdrop for a feature film adaptation of *Who Has Seen The Wind*. Out of the ranks of the locally hired crew for that film emerged a group of young, enthusiastic and idealistic people who wanted to change the attitudes towards filmmaking in this province. They established a film co-operative called the Saskatchewan Filmpool. This month, the Filmpool is celebrating its 20th anniversary.

The Filmpool started very modestly. Originally, its mandate was to be an equipment-access centre for its members to have

movie cameras and related gear available for the production of their own films. Through the Canada Council, this new co-op — like many others emerging across the country at that time — was given money to buy a camera and tape recorder. However, in 1977 it was even more difficult to produce a film in Saskatchewan than it is today.

There was no SaskFilm, no Saskatchewan Motion Picture Industry Association, no Hollywood co-productions. In fact, even the Saskatchewan Arts Board was not to grant money to filmmakers for another five years. Therefore, the six original members of the Filmpool, plus the growing number of newcomers, were in the ironic situation of having the tools to make a movie but no money for film to put through the camera.

Eventually, the Filmpool found support through the City of Regina, the National Film Board and Sask Sport and began making some short films. Amongst these films was *Razor In The Wind* by Stephen

"There was a novelty factor to it, but

sure, and it's a lot of fun to be a part of it."

Surjik, which won the Golden Sheaf Award for the best short drama in 1983. Shortly thereafter, Surjik left Regina for Toronto to direct commercial films such as *Wayne's World 2*.

Since then, the Filmpool has grown both in its membership as well as its mandate. It now publishes a newsletter, holds screenings of non-mainstream films and hosts a large range of workshops. A few setbacks — most notably the well-publicized case of its former executive director defrauding the organization of over \$100,000 a few years ago — have caused this organization to occasionally stumble.

Members come and go as their need for the co-op's support and their ability to lend support back to the co-op rise and fall. However, the Filmpool remains strong because of its commitment to the belief that film can have value beyond the commercial market.

Don List is one of the original six members and the first president of the Filmpool. Even though he is no longer a member of the co-op, he still adheres to

its creative and co-operative philosophy. His company, Birdsong Communications, continues to make innovative independent films in Regina.

However, List is in the minority. In the past there was no doubt that the big cities held more opportunities for filmmakers, so many of our best have left. Now, through the support of organizations such as SaskFilm backing film-as-an-industry and the Saskatchewan Filmpool backing film-as-art, more of our creative talent is staying here.

On March 20 and 21, the Saskatchewan Filmpool will be celebrating its 20th anniversary with a series of screenings to be held at the Regina Public Library. On Thursday at 9 p.m., a selection of works from the vault, including some by List and Surjik, will be shown.

On Friday, five new Filmpool films will be presented and Thursday at 7 p.m. and Friday at 9 p.m. will feature Regina filmmaker Richard Kerr's drama *The Willing Voyager*...

Gerald Saul is a local filmmaker.