

Kids' cancer camp improbable setting for entertaining film

MONTREAL
WORLD FILM
FESTIVAL

CONCORDIA Students win three awards

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international jury, who were especially impressed with entries in the animation and fiction categories.

Students from the hometown Concordia University film studies program made out like bandits.

The \$1,000 Norman McLaren Award offered by the NFB went to Gerard Betts of Concordia for *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Best animation award was shared by Erick Roy for *Le Bain* and Teresa Lang for *License to Kill, Part MCMXC*. Both are Concordia students.

Best experimental-film honors went to Andrew Watt of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto, for *Soleils Couchants* and the best-documentary prize was awarded to Concordia's Claudia Morgado for *Oda a Las Chilotas*.

Special mentions were made to *From Within*, an animated film by Diane Hartmann of the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, and to David Oiy of Ryerson. See Bob Run.

the kids and counsellors.

"These kids were all basically terminally ill or had cancer, and they were all talking about it. I figured if they could do it, what the hell am I worried about?"

"I sailed out of there and said 'let's do it.'

Things moved quickly after that. A rare \$2.7-million allegiance was formed among Cinepix, Telefilm, CBC, the NFB, and the federal Department of Communications.

A film treatment of Schreiber's book was completed, and a search organized for young actors to play the roles of cancer victims.

"Not one of the actors who auditioned said they were worried about being in a movie like this."

Walker and colleagues eventually settled on a uniformly strong cast which included Zachary Ansley, Nicholas Shields and *Degrassi High* Gemini winner Stacie Mistysyn.

Aided by a script and direction that steers remarkably clear of the shoals of sentimentality, they reinforce the central theme of Schreiber's book and the concept of cancer camps — hope helps, despair doesn't.

The 21st Canadian Student Film Festival, under the World Film Festival umbrella, has wound down with a flurry of awards and words of praise from the three-member in-



JOHN GRIFFIN

"But Dunning told me he was planning on retiring soon and wanted to leave the world with one significant film. Of all the motivations in making *Princes*, that's been one of the most dominant."

Another was his feeling that Walker needed a serious theme for his next project. "Comedy is a trap; you can get hooked on making people laugh."

But the biggest turning point came in August 1988, when he visited the Hole in the Wall Camp, a retreat for terminally ill children in Connecticut funded by actor Paul Newman.

"God, did I dread it," Walker remembers. "I could hardly bear the thought of going. But I forced myself into it, and it was a truly extraordinary experience."

"I'm so sick of saying it, but there's no better way to say it: I came out of there wearing a suit of armor. It was so inspiring to meet

The prospect of sitting through a film about summer camp for kids with cancer was excruciating.

Imagine what it must have been like to make.

But actually sitting down and watching Giles Walker's *Princes in Exile* in official competition at the festival proved a positive, inspirational and surprisingly entertaining experience.

They were emotions Walker hadn't expected to experience, either.

When local producer John Dunning handed the acclaimed Montreal film-maker a novel by Mark Schreiber called *Princes in Exile* in 1987 and told him to read it, Walker opened the book and scanned it.

"The first word was 'Cancer,' Walker recalls. "I closed the book."

Walker, who'd made his reputation at the helm of offbeat sex comedies like *90 Days* and *The Last Straw*, wasn't keen on tackling the subject.

For one thing, he was still dealing — many years later — with the loss of his first wife to leukemia. For another, he wasn't sure what Dunning had up his sleeve.

This, after all, was the man behind *Meatballs*. Walker wasn't at all convinced he wanted to make "Meatballs with cancer," let alone any film about the subject.



Nicholas Shields (centre) stars in Giles Walker's inspirational *Princes*: script skirts shoals of sentimentality.

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