

Genies hail fantastic year for Canadian filmmaking

Continued from C1

Pied Piper through the narrative, heightening the sense of unreality.

■ *The Hanging Garden* (11 nominations, plus the Claude Jutra Award for new director): Magic mingles with the commonplace in Thom Fitzgerald's utterly original story of a man who returns to his Nova Scotia home, 10 years after he successfully committed suicide — or so it seemed at the time. Is the real ghost the adult fighting old family demons, or is it the teenager still hanging from a tree in the garden?

■ *Karmina* (11 nominations, plus special Genie for make-up): A very youthful 142-year-old vampiress named Karmina flees her stuffy Transylvanian home for adventure and romance in Montreal, in this dark comedy by Gabriel Pelletier. Karmina becomes human again through an herbal concoction created by her godmother Esmerelda, who used to cavort with René Lévesque. But the undead want Karmina back.

■ *La Comtesse De Baton Rouge* (10 nominations) — Circus freaks and ghosts cohabit Andre Forcier's surreal romantic tragedy, about a young Montreal filmmaker, Rex, who falls in love with bearded lady Paula, the countess of the title. Rex has to compete for her affections with a cyclops, and he shoots himself out of a cannon to prove his love.

■ *Kissed* (eight nominations): Oft cited as an example of Canadian kinkiness, Lynne Stopkewich's meditation on necrophilia is less about titillation than it is about transubstantiation: melding flesh with "the light." Molly Parker's death-loving character, Sandra, seeks the serenity of the realm beyond life: "It's like looking into the sun without going blind," she says. "I'm consumed."

■ *Cosmos* (two nominations): Another Quebec look at the absurdity of existence, this six-director anthology follows the exploits of a cabbie named Cosmos and his odd fares, who range from a serial killer to a disturbed artist who brandish-



SURREAL TRAGEDY: Geneviève Brouillette is the bearded lady and Frédéric Desager the cyclops in *La Comtesse De Baton Rouge*, which received 10 nominations.

Rita Zekas interviews Genie nominee Hardee T. Lineham, C7

es an electric haircutter as a weapon.

With the exception of *La Comtesse De Baton Rouge*, which was nudged aside by *Cosmos*, all of these movies are up for the best picture prize at Sunday's Genie ceremony at the Westin Harbour Castle hotel.

Our current filmmakers, and the people who fund and laud them, clearly have no qualms about putting reality on hold in the name of art.

This is a departure from an earlier generation of filmmakers, who felt honour-bound to tell true-to-life Canadian stories.

Canada used to be the world's documentarian, with the distinction of making the first non-fiction film, *Nanook*

Of The North, in 1922. This was followed by the creation of the National Film Board in the 1930s, and its emphasis on fact-based films.

Today's Canadian movie-makers could claim to be the world's mythmakers.

Egoyan refers to *The Sweet Hereafter* as "a dark fable," which he made all the more so by weaving the lost-child story of *The Pied Piper*. His blurring of dates within the film also contributes to the feeling of being set free from boundaries of time and space.

For *The Hanging Garden*, writer/director Fitzgerald dispensed with the standard concepts of past and present.

"Maybe my reality is a bit different," Fitzgerald said in an interview.

"I live a lot in the past myself, but also in the future. So it seems like the here and now isn't always the most important

Hereafter four times over.

And no one — not lately, anyway — has accused Hollywood studios of having an excess of imagination. The only reality they understand is rooted in the bottom line.

It's easier for Canadians to make quirky small films, and to gain attention with them. The world's film festivals encourage filmmakers to push the envelope, and so do the various funding agencies who want to be represented at festivals, says Bart Testa, who teaches film and film criticism at the University of Toronto.

"The kind of people who get to make films is pretty much determined by what Telefilm Canada is willing to fund, what the Arts Council thinks is important and so on," Testa says.

"Certain kinds of films are going to attract the money, and the others are going to have to wait.

"We're in a period now where we're rebelling against the realism and virtue that Canadian films were historically bound up with."

It's true. At this year's Cannes Film Festival, Telefilm officials were distributing pamphlets and stickers trumpeting Canada's fascination with the weird and wonderful. It's hard to imagine a federal agency championing a movie like *Kissed* at any other time in Canadian history.

But today's so-called *avant-garde* filmmakers are nowhere near as edgy as they're made out to be, Testa adds. The most recent movies by Egoyan and David Cronenberg (including *Crash*, which Testa found boring) are the most mainstream

of their respective careers, despite their reputations for innovation.

He cites Michael Snow, Bruce Elder and David Rimmer as examples of filmmakers who are much more likely to have their work shown in art museums than in movie theatres. Anyone who sat through all 46 hours of Elder's *The Book Of The Dead* would really understand the word "challenging."

Egoyan, for his part, seems to agree. In his introduction to fringe filmmaker Mike Hoolboom's new book *Inside The Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film In Canada*, he seems to be apologizing for his new mainstream appeal.

"Where does my world (commercially conceived and distributed feature films) meet the visions and ideas of the experimental filmmakers discussed in this collection?" he writes.

But Egoyan later uses "we" to discuss and defend experimental film, and it seems appropriate that he still wants to be on the outside of the mainstream.

Judging by this year's crop of Genie contenders — by turns amusing and infuriating, thought-provoking and confusing, but never stale — Canadian filmmakers do their best work when they try to break the mold, instead of just fitting into it.

The 18th Annual Genie Awards gala will be held Sunday at the Westin Harbour Castle hotel and will be televised Monday at 8:30 p.m. on Bravo! the cable arts channel.

