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ANIMATION REVIEW : Canadian Animation Is Still the Big Draw

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The National Film Board of Canada's Animation Festival, a program of 11 new films and five excerpts from older shorts that opens today at the Westside Pavilion, marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most important studios in animation history.

In the past five decades, the artists at the National Film Board (NFB) have produced more than 700 animated films and won more than 600 awards, including four Oscars. Although London has replaced the NFB as *the* center of creativity in the animation world in recent years, the Canadian artists are still doing imaginative and important work, as the festival amply demonstrates.

At least two of these films--Caroline Leaf's "Two Sisters" and Richard Conde's "The Apprentice"--may well be candidates for the Academy Award for animated short.

Leaf scratched the images directly onto 70mm color film stock for "Two Sisters," an intense, challenging film that explores the complex psychological bonds linking two isolated women, one physically deformed, the other emotionally handicapped. Leaf earned an Oscar in 1976 for her animated short "The Street." "Sisters" has won prizes at festivals in Annecy, France, and Los Angeles.

Conde was nominated for an Academy Award in 1986 for his uproarious "The Big Snit." His new film, "The Apprentice," the improbable story of a jester-in-training struggling to make his way in the world, displays the same razor-sharp timing and unabashed zaniness. Timing is a crucial factor in cartoon comedy, and Conde knows exactly how long to allow the audience to anticipate a gag or hold a drawing to achieve maximum hilarity.

Christopher Hinton takes a similarly freewheeling approach in "Blackfly," an illustration of a railroad worker's lament over the ubiquitous biting insects that infest the northern woods.

Three films continue the NFB tradition of visual beauty in motion. In "Strings," Wendy Tilby uses muted colors to explore a gently nostalgic romance between two aged neighbors who inadvertently discover their shared dreams. Suzanne Gervais and Jacques Giraldeau pay homage to Van Gogh in "Irises": They re-create his masterpiece, brush stroke by brush stroke, as the soundtrack juxtaposes the sounds of the countryside at Saint-Remy with the escalating bids in a modern auction house. The handsome colored pencil drawings in "Jours de Plaine" ("Prairie Days") by Andre LeDuc and Real Berard evoke the legacy of the Canadian prairie.

Les Drew skillfully juggled valuable information and gags in "Every Dog's Guide to Complete Home Safety" (1986), but the sequel, "Every Dog's Guide to the Playground," doesn't really tell the viewer much about playing safely, although Wally, the "badly drawn little blue dog" in the title, remains an appealing character.

Viewers may quibble with the decision to show two-minute excerpts from films as brief as "The Big Snit" and Cordell Barker's "The Cat Came Back." It would have been wiser to show them in their entirety and skip the excerpts from Brad Caslor's "Get a Job" and Martin Berry's "Juke-Bar"--neither of these hyperkinetic shorts has aged very gracefully. But these are minor flaws in an otherwise excellent program that should be seen by anyone who enjoys animation.