

Toronto International Film Festival 2021: Part 1

Stanley Nelson's *Attica*: A striking treatment of the 1971 prison revolt and massacre

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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 Toronto International Film Festival (September 9-18).

The 2021 edition of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), like every other global public event at present, took place in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year's festival was a "hybrid" affair, combining limited in-person screenings, outdoor showings at a number of venues around the Toronto metropolitan area and digital screenings available across Canada. Journalists could choose to attend in person or online.

Masks were required at all festival venues. Anyone refusing to wear a mask was given a refund. In August, festival officials announced that festival staff, audience members and visitors entering festival venues would be "required to show either proof they have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19 or proof that they have tested negative for COVID-19 within 48 hours prior to entering any TIFF venue."

The *Hollywood Reporter* noted August 11 that the change in policy came "as part of the latest update of COVID-19 protocols for talent, rights holders, press and industry ... and follows a rise in COVID-19 infections in Ontario amid the Delta variant."

Organizers hoped, the publication continued, "with proof of vaccination, mask-wearing, social-distancing and COVID-testing to get more Americans and other international filmmakers, media and other industry attendees" to attend this year's event than came to the "highly restricted edition ... staged amid the pandemic in September 2020."

The *Reporter* pointed out that "while TIFF touted the low incidence of COVID infections during the current summer season, and a successful vaccine rollout countrywide, infections are on the rise in and around Toronto. On Sunday [August 8], Ontario reported 722 new COVID-19 cases, up from the 689 infections on Saturday, and the highest number of new daily cases since June 5 when 744 cases were reported."

There can be no "innocent" policy adopted by any significant section of the political, media or entertainment establishment when tens of millions of dollars or more are involved.

On September 16, in the middle of the event, according to the *Canadian Press*, the festival's customer relations team was informed "of a positive COVID-19 test result but did not say when or how the case was discovered. The festival declined to confirm which screenings, or how many, were involved but note their health and safety consultants consider the case to be 'low risk' due to 'strictly enforced COVID protocols in place at all TIFF venues.'"

The news service added that accredited journalist Arianne Binette "received two emails from the festival on Thursday morning with notice of a potential COVID-19 exposure in two separate press screenings." Binette, a Toronto resident, asserted that "people were seated 'too close'" at one sold-out screening, "with one seat between each person and no

separation between rows."

While individual screenings may well have been overcrowded, in general, in the words of one commentator, the streets around the festival this year were "bleak and deserted." *Variety* asked plaintively, "Where are the movie stars?" The journal went on to note that the Toronto festival, "particularly in recent years, has become an important launchpad for award season contenders and premium studio projects. But the friendly streets of downtown Toronto were nearly empty." Venues "normally cut off to street traffic, stood with nary a fan barricade. Autograph seekers, paparazzi and onlookers lined up by the handfuls instead of the hundreds."

Taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant workers and many others, along with local small businesses, were hammered by the pandemic for the second year in a row. Infrastructure Ontario claims that the film festival normally "generates an annual economic impact of \$170 million for the city." The festival organization's own revenue fell by half in 2020, and layoffs occurred.

Interesting, striking films

The festival lineup this year included some 100 feature films, almost twice the number presented in 2020, but far below the more than 250 that had become the norm by 2019.

There were a number of perceptive, striking works. Stanley Nelson's *Attica*, a documentary treatment of the September 1971 prison uprising, the largest in US history, at the Attica Correctional Institute in upstate New York, was one of the most substantive and valuable.

The rebellion by some 1,300 prisoners ended with the September 13, 1971 massacre of 39 prisoners and hostages by New York State Police troopers, the wounding of 85 more inmates and the abuse and torture of still others in the hours and days following the protest's suppression. Leaders of the revolt were singled out by police and murdered in cold blood. The bloodbath was carried out on the orders of Republican New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, a member of the fabulously wealthy Rockefeller family, one of the most prominent in the US at the time, and with the firm backing of the Nixon administration in Washington.

The filmmakers make use of remarkable footage, some of it shot by state police surveillance cameras, stills and interviews with former prisoners, as well as with guards' family members, to paint a convincing and moving picture of the event and its participants.

The Attica uprising took place under politically and socially explosive conditions in the US and internationally. The height of the anti-Vietnam

War movement coincided with a militant strike wave by postal, auto, dock and other workers. The inner cities had been rocked by rebellions, including in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April 1968.

The US ruling elite had demonstrated its murderous ferocity not only against the populations of Southeast Asia, but against opponents of the status quo in the US, including Fred Hampton of the Black Panthers, murdered in December 1969. One of the final straws for the Attica prisoners was the murder of George Jackson, radical political activist, by guards at San Quentin prison in California, on August 21, 1971.

In Nelson's film, former inmates describe Attica as a hellhole, the "most strict prison," the "last place" a prisoner would be sent to, with wretched medical care and beatings by guards organized in "goon squads." One participant in the 1971 events described the upstate New York institution as a place where "people died" or were "crippled" physically and psychologically. In general, "It was a bad place to be."

On September 9, after one provocation too many, the prisoners revolted and took control of approximately half the prison complex. They issued a list of demands, centering on better medical treatment, fair disciplinary hearings, visitation rights, improved food, religious freedom and an end to physical abuse. We wanted "to be treated like human beings," explains one former prisoner simply.

Twenty-one-year-old Elliott "L.D." Barkley, only weeks from scheduled release, became one of the leading spokesmen for the prisoners, vehemently and eloquently denouncing the authorities' "ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States." Barkley would be murdered by state police during the quashing of the revolt.

The prisoners, well aware of what the authorities had in store for them, demanded the presence of the media. They also requested the organization of an observation committee, which included lawyer William Kunstler, *New York Times* editor Tom Wicker, Clarence Jones, publisher of the *Amsterdam News*, New York State Senator John Dunne, a Republican and chairman of the Senate Corrections Committee, and others.

Negotiations led the prison authorities to cede to 28 out of 30 demands.

In one telling sequence, several prisoners explain how little they came to think of Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party leader, who was asked to come, but "didn't stay long." An inmate scornfully notes that Seale "stayed three minutes."

While black and Puerto Rican prisoners, many of them having had contact with radical groups, played prominent roles, the prison population as a whole was 57 percent African American, 37 percent white and 9 percent Puerto Rican. Wicker later wrote that the revolting prisoners' self-organization, "not to mention the unity displayed by the prisoners, would have been impossible if there had been racial discord in Block D... the human security chains were interracial; the leadership committee features at least three white men." The documentary, while making the guards' racist violence abundantly clear, gives voice to black, white and Puerto Rican prisoners.

With the death of Officer William Quinn on the third day of the standoff from injuries sustained during the initial riot, the situation darkened. Now the authorities had their justification for an all-out assault. The prisoners' demand that there be no retaliation became a dead letter. There is "no amnesty for murder," one survivor of the revolt comments.

With the media whipping up hysteria against the Attica prisoners, the state police armed themselves with "every type of weapon ... They wanted to attack."

The observation committee made a direct appeal to Rockefeller to come to the prison. He categorically refused. One interviewee observes, Rockefeller's "No, no, no, meant death, death, death." Nelson (*Freedom Riders, Freedom Summer, The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution, Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool*) includes a portion of the

conversation, recorded on tape, between Rockefeller and Richard Nixon, in which the president congratulates Rockefeller on his hard line.

On the morning of September 13, helicopters dropped tear gas into the prison yard and hundreds of troopers with shotguns and other weapons attacked the unarmed inmates. While a loudspeaker proclaimed, "You will not be harmed," the police opened fire at "point-blank range." One prisoner, noting that he had seen some "nasty" things "on the street," recalls thinking to himself that "these guys are worse than you." They were "cold-blooded killers," in fact. Hundreds of bodies of the dead and wounded littered the yard. Former National Guardsmen, called in to support the police, describe an "unthinkable scene," a "war zone," a "pile of bodies."

It was "all about revenge." Prisoners were forced to crawl through the latrine trench, parade naked around the prison yard, make their way through a gauntlet of cops beating them with clubs, run barefoot over broken glass and more. Ringleaders and "troublemakers" were brutally dealt with in seclusion. This was "the naked fist of power," as one former prisoner puts it.

The film attributes Rockefeller's actions largely to his desire to show his toughness on law and order, necessary to his political ambitions. The issues went much farther and deeper than that. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained on the 40th anniversary of the massacre, "The crushing of the Attica rebellion was intended to intimidate all those who were seeking to oppose the policies of the ruling class in Vietnam and elsewhere internationally as well as within the US."

The *Bulletin*, the publication of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, argued correctly at the time that the "warning is clear. When Rockefeller and the capitalist class are faced with a threat to their system they will use all the brutal force at their disposal to crush it."

Hold Your Fire, directed by Stefan Forbes, examines another episode, a far less significant although still revealing character, from the same era. In January 1973, four young black Muslims attempted to rob guns from a sporting goods store in Brooklyn. They were seeking to defend themselves, ironically, against the "thugs" of the Nation of Islam, with whom they had come into conflict. When New York City police showed up outside the store, the four men grabbed the owner and a dozen customers as hostages.

A police officer died in the initial confrontation. The documentary notes that the gun that fired the fatal bullet was never identified. A 47-hour standoff then ensued, the longest in the city's history. Crowds sympathetic to the robbers gathered outside. The media meanwhile claimed that members of the Black Liberation Army, an underground radical group responsible for various violent acts, were murdering cops. Eventually, the four surrendered, one of them having been wounded by police. Frightened by the popular response to the Attica massacre and fearful of a social explosion in Brooklyn, the authorities here acted with more circumspection.

Once the four were in custody, the state again demonstrated its ferocity. The men spent decades and decades in prison. Two of them are interviewed in *Hold Your Fire*.

The theme of the film is the power of "words" and "deep listening." Forbes focuses on the efforts of Harvey Schlossberg, a New York city cop, a psychoanalyst and the "founder of modern crisis negotiation." Schlossberg insists that "Everything is resolvable by talking." However, far from learning to "listen," contemporary American police forces are armed to the teeth in a lethal manner that their counterparts in 1973 could only have dreamed about in preparation for massive social unrest.

To be continued



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