Animation spans artistic spectrum

1992 FESTIVAL OF ANIMATION
At the Somerville Theatre.
Through April 23.
By Carlos Rodrigo

As Mellow Madness' annual animation festivals go, the 1992 installment is one of the strongest. For the second year in a row, all three shorts nominated for an Academy Award in the previous year — "Blackfly," "Strings," and the winner, "Manipulation" — are on the program. The balance between artistically impressive films and those which simply have appeal to the audience's sensibilities is far better than it has been in recent years. And if nothing else, the 1992 Festival of Animation offers an opportunity to see for themselves "Deep Symmetry," quite possibly the coolest thing ever put on film.

Animation fans who saw the Canadian Animation Festival at the Coolidge Corner Theatre last fall were already exposed to two of the three Oscar nominees. Christopher Hinton's "Blackfly" is a fairly funny short, drawn in the fast and loose style of such other Canadian films as "The Big Soot" and "Getting Started." "Blackfly" attempts very successfully to lend humorous images to a song written by a complaining worker who is struggling in the woods of Ontario to help build a power plant.

"Strings," by Wendy Tilby, is a much more visually pleasing, but less entertaining, short that acquires a uniquely fluid appearance from its method of creation, which involves painting images on pieces of glass. In "Strings," a woman is shown preparing for a bath while her neighbor and his three friends practice with their string quartet. Tilby shifts the focus of her narrative back and forth between the two apartments with a hypnotically subtle rhythm, and her reuse of strings — strings on the musical instruments, strings on model ships in a bathtub, etc. — is a good job of suggesting the unseen bonds that exist between the two neighbors.

"Manipulation," the winner of the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Subject, is clearly the best of the three nominees. In the film, an off-screen animator draws a rather plain character on his sketch pad. The animator then begins to toy with his creation by manipulating the character and his environment until the point at which the drawing begins to exercise some manipulation of its own. The subject of "Manipulation" is very reminiscent of that of the classic Disney Film Animation, Page 13

Patrick Swayze stars as Max Lowe, an American doctor in one of the poorest quarters of Calcutta in City of Joy.

Swayze shines in the thoughtful, yet overly optimistic City of Joy

CITY OF JOY
Starring Patrick Swayze, Om Puri, and Pauline Collins.
By Robert Cavaciocchio

City of Joy is based on Dominique Lapierre's true account of the experiences of the lives of the underprivileged in Calcutta, India. The book is billed as "an epic of love, heroes, and hope in the India of Mother Teresa." Unfortunately, the film moves too fast to be effective at creating those emotions. As usually happens when long books are condensed into two-hour movies, too much is lost in the transition for the story to be complete.

Still, City of Joy is not a failure. Given the inherent limitations of film, it is a pretty good job. As always, the visual medium doesn't simply restrict; it also allows creative freedom along different dimensions. Director Roland Joffe takes advantage of this opportunity from the outset. Even before the opening credits roll, we're treated to a stylized, sinister scene in which American doctor Max Lowe (Patrick Swayze) decides he doesn't have the strength it takes to deal with the sights he's forced to confront every day. Music, lighting, camera angle, and slow-motion footage combine to make a powerful image out of Swayze's escape from the opening room. This is by far my favorite sequence. There are other stylistic shots in the film, but nothing that hits so dramatically and so effectively.

"Max Magi," as he later comes to be called by some of the City of Joy residents, goes abroad "looking for enlightenment." He winds up in Calcutta, in a slum district known as the City of Joy, where he is soon beaten and robbed. This means he's also stranded until he can get some money sent to him, and thanks to the complications involved in getting things into and out of Calcutta, this process takes much longer than he would like. While there, he comes to know Joan Bethel (Pauline Collins), an Irish woman who runs a clinic that does what it can to aid the City of Joy residents in their struggles against poverty and disease. "I'm not very good at loving just one person," she tells him. "Seems so much better when you spread it around." When she discovers that Max is a "non-practicing doctor," as he puts it, she tries several times to convince him to help out at the clinic. But Max has become such a cynic that he refuses to see the value of hope in a disease-ridden society. Then an emergency arises, and though he claims not to see the point of bringing to the City of Joy another mouth to feed, Max nevertheless comes to the rescue of a woman in labor. Afterwards he's still reluctant, but Joan manages to persuade him to come to the clinic.

Hassai Pal (Om Puri) is a peasant who has brought his family to the city from a nearby village after losing his farm to moneylenders. After appealing to "the godfather," a local mafia racketeer who gets rich by extorting the poor, Hassai gets a job pulling one of the man's rickshaws. However, before long he must contend with a revolt against the godfather and the loss of his job, both of which would not have occurred if not for the interference of the American doctor. On top of that, he has to scrape up enough money to pay his daughter's dowry.

The result is an intelligent, thoughtful story about what it means to be right and what it means to be free. Some liberties seem to have been taken with the facts, but those aren't detrimental to the film. It is true that some details of the plot are occasionally glossed over, making the story difficult to follow, but on the whole these details are minor. The essence of the film is there.

The biggest complaint I have with the film is that it is far too happy. The point is that the people in the City of Joy never give up hope and always have another smile. Yet how can we understand this if we're not brought down with them and made to feel the horrors that they live? They must feel pain, and it's hard to see much evidence of that. Again, this may be because the film simply moves too quickly. Yes, terrible things happen to these characters, but (too often) it seems as if they're only in passing. Hassai rarely doesn't have much trouble finding work, and though he gets tuberculosis, it doesn't seem to be much of a problem. There's plenty of hatred toward the layers, but we don't see them much. And this may be my American bias, but I find it hard to believe either that every one of those impoverished people is schooled in English, or