

# Proparms: Calling it quits

by Howard Goldberg

Proparms' budgeting problems were seriously compounded by the various producers' habit of exceeding the customary 30-day limit for payment. Said Rust, "No industry is infallible. Most production companies, in other countries at least, have the courtesy of informing suppliers of a cash flow shortage. Here the buzz words are 'We're waiting for a signature on that one.'"

In addition to chasing for payment, Rust found herself repeatedly having to fight production companies in order to secure compensation for lost, damaged, or stolen rental equipment. "The most dangerous time for our rented equipment," said Rust, "is that short period between the wrap-up party and the actual return of the equipment." On *A Man Called Intrepid*, the security service guarding all props and costumes was released one day prior to the scheduled return of equipment. During the wrap \$5,000 worth of Proparms weaponry was stolen. Five months later, only after repeated attempts to secure compensation, Astral Bellevue Pathé paid for the guns. In the meantime however, Proparms was forced to buy replacement weapons in order to honour contractual obligations.

In another instance a gun was returned with a clean crack down its antique wooden barrel. An accompanying note read: "We can't imagine how this could

have happened, your gun seems to have disintegrated." In short, the demoralizing pursuit of debtors was to be a nine-to-five activity for Rust as long as she hoped to regulate Proparms' own cash flow difficulties.

The personnel of Proparms was ultimately discouraged by what it considered to be a shameful absence of professional ethics in most Canadian productions. Elsener and Rust cite cases where inadequate consultation at pre-production resulted in lower quality work and panic calls in the middle of the night from production managers who realized, at the last minute, that a certain shot already in progress required a prop or a special effect. Ultimately, inadequate safety measures and communication problems endangered both Proparms personnel and crew members.

In *City on Fire* for example, an assistant director who wanted to "consult" with Elsener while the latter was completing the wiring for a gas explosion, fell over a trip wire. Had the wire been connected to the power supply, a lethal explosion would have resulted. In general, said Elsener, the mass confusion which prevails on most sets, and the know-it-all attitude of everyone from the production assistant right up to the producer, impeded him from doing his work quickly and safely.

On another occasion Cinepix hired Elsener to help on an arms-related special effect but then failed to include him in pre-production meetings. Currently, the production manager learned that a municipal SWAT team would supervise the effect for nothing. Proparms was dismissed. Yet on the eve of the shoot, Elsener was awoken at 2 a.m. by a phone call from Cinepix. The SWAT team, although qualified to handle

the arms, did not fully understand the visual problems inherent in the effect - would Elsener please bail them out?

The production of *Oh Heavenly Dog* required three separate pre-production meetings before a shooting schedule was finally agreed upon. Yet after all that planning, a last-minute phone call from a production assistant informed Elsener that work would begin the next day.

Elsener offered David Cronenberg's *Scanners* and Gilles Carle's *Les Plouffes* as examples of well-managed shoots. In these films, careful pre-production set the stage for an on-set atmosphere of cooperation rather than conflict. If films such as these were the rule rather than the exception, Proparms would have been more inclined to put up with late-night phone calls, last-minute diversions and the reality of perpetually late payment.

Much of the energy which Rust and Elsener could have used to survive the hardships of the industry was soon wasted in an ongoing red-tape battle with provincial and federal governments, following the toughening of federal gun control laws (Bill C-83) in 1978. The resulting debate was the straw that finally broke the camel's back.

At first the new laws, which required the extensive licensing of any user of an automatic weapon (machine gun, etc.), did not alarm Proparms; until it learned that the laws did not distinguish between a live weapon and a de-activated prop weapon for theatrical use.

Rust immediately informed federal officials that the law could seriously reduce filmmaking activity unless some legal allowance was made for the safe de-activated prop weapon. (See box.)

Finally, unable to obtain a ruling on

"If there was a great deal more honesty and less bullshit in the Canadian film industry, and a greater degree of respect for quality craftsmanship, we could rise out of the shadow of the American industry and face a confident future."

Lesley Rust 1979

"The Canadian film industry is dominated by so many charlatans and crooks, it deserves whatever it gets."

Lesley Rust 1981

Who is Rust and why has her guarded optimism been replaced by bitterness and contempt?

Lesley Rust was a partner with Josef Elsener in the now disbanded theatrical and movie prop special effects company Proparms. The company specialized in weapons - time bombs, custom-made swords, bayonets, machine guns, etc.

Proparms began supplying effects and props to Canadian films in 1975; six years and 36 features later, tired of an eternal chase for unpaid accounts, weary of a quixotic red-tape battle with the governments of Ontario, Quebec and Canada, and fed-up with the disrespect of the majority of Canadian crews towards them and their equipment, they are leaving the film industry.

So what? you may ask. The issue here is that Proparms, a quality company which met a demand in the Canadian entertainment industry (ask almost any production house that's made a film since 1978), was plowed under by inconsistent, if not incomprehensible government regulations, and the callousness of an industry which apparently does not reward quality suppliers with quality treatment. The details of this case study not only illustrate problem areas in Canadian production, but also the government's inability to deal effectively with industry-related problems in its domain.

Josef Elsener, part-owner and chief design engineer of Proparms, is recognized as one of Canada's leading ballistics experts. He received his training in a small weapons manufacturing shop where he designed his own guns before becoming a prop arm supplier for theatrical productions in 1963. Elsener used his talents to construct the ideal prop weapons - authentic arms which looked and behaved like the real thing when fired, but which could not be loaded with live ammunition of any sort.

Before renting out these converted weapons, Elsener had them approved by the ballistics division of the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP). When film companies approached the QPP in 1975, inquiring about prop weapons, the QPP referred them to Proparms. Soon, film-related work became the mainstay of its business. And soon also, film-related headaches occupied front row center of Rust's business mind.

In an industry which may boom for four months, and lie dormant for the next eight, budgeting to maintain a year-round overhead becomes a tricky task.

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Lesley Rust and Joseph Elsener.

the constitution of a converted weapon suitable for theatrical use, Elsener ceased his gun conversion work to concentrate more heavily on the special effects aspects of his job (lightning, rain, explosions, etc.). Meanwhile, Rust continued to press the federal government for a blanket ruling on converted weapons. By day she was a collection agency, by night a political lobbyist.

After fighting government bureaucracy, working odd hours under conditions which were not always creatively satisfying if not downright dangerous, Lesley Rust and Josef Elsener decided to find a new line. They will be selling their inventory of special effects machines and converted weapons and entering the international defence market, primarily outside the country. It is the industry's loss. ●

## Laws under fire — but best shot fails

Among other things, Bill C-83 stipulated that anyone wishing to use an automatic firearm had to first obtain a FAC (Firearms Acquisition Certificate). Yet the new federal law did not adequately define "firearm". Interpretation of the new law was in the hands of provincial courts. In Quebec, the QPP was familiar with Elsener and his converted guns. It did not consider the props to be firearms and allowed operations to continue as before.

In 1979 when the production of *Starmania* inquired into the legal technicalities of taking six Proparms converted automatic weapons into Ontario, it was told that the guns were legally considered "firearms" because they still had moving parts. As firearms, their operators would require FAC papers.

Elsener had been trying to get a ruling from the federal government as to the exact definition of a converted gun for stage and film use

since 1978, but had never received any reply. He had even worked (free-of-charge) at the request of the federal Working Group on Gun Controls, to complete a working paper which defined a safe de-activated firearm, and outlined film/theatre needs for weapon-related props. Still, in 1981, a letter from the Honourable Bob Kaplan to Lesley Rust revealed that there was no agreement between the provinces as to what constituted a de-activated "prop" weapon. "... The issue in the view of Ontario officials is the level of de-activation required so that a part of a fully automatic weapon is no longer a part." For Proparms, this means that it was futile for Elsener to convert weapons unless he could dream up a way of making "parts which were not parts." Productions wishing to use guns would have to comply with provincial interpretations of federal law. In Ontario, this means that a production may only use fully auto-

matic weapons if the owner of the weapons is in possession of a bona fide collector's permit and is present on set whenever the guns are in use, and if the weapons fire blanks only.

This interpretation results in higher costs for the producer and a lower degree of safety for the cast and crew because there is no guarantee that the "bona fide" collector knows anything about the safe maintenance of his weapons under the continuous firing of blank cartridges.

According to Elsener, his company lost about \$15,000 in props contracts because Ontario prohibited the fully automatic guns he had legally converted in Quebec. Furthermore, he cites an example of one producer in Ontario who has resorted to renting active (i.e. live ammunition) weapons from a mercenary who evidently prefers filmmaking to combat in South Africa.

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