

Taking the bait

Despite the growth of the feature industry here, Tinsel Town still lures many talented Canadians south.

by Robert E. Miller

"American 167 'Heavy' descend to 3000 feet. Cleared for landing two niner left." You break through a shroud of hazel smog and there it is: the city of angels. L.A. actually enjoys quite a stunning geography, bordered on each side by mountains and hemmed in at either end by vast expanses of desert and ocean. As the sun sets behind L.A.X. you catch a slight hint of why they call it the "Golden West."

First stop? Hollywood and Vine in search of tinsel town. Result: hassled by a bag lady and hustled by several "professionals" of undetermined gender. The atmosphere is much closer to Dr. Caligari than Busby Berkeley. Sure, the studios dust off their glitter façade once each year around Academy Award time, but if it's stargazing you're interested in, then try the sophisticated boutiques of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Downtown L.A. struggles with urban decay while the magnificent gothic theatres lining Hollywood Boulevard attract a clientele that would do justice to a Fellini casting call. Even *Grauman's Chinese* has undergone a metamorphosis, emerging as - *Great Caesar's Ghost*! - a multiple! Alas, our cherished image of Hollywood in the thirties has become sadly tarnished over time.

Yet, there is still an undeniable vibrancy bubbling just beneath the surface. And, for a filmmaker, the energy positively crackles over you skin like Saint Elmo's fire. People are hustling. There is always a deal in the works, a script under option or a package about to receive financing. Even the names approach mythological dimensions; Universal, Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, MGM and the list goes on. It is, after all, the industry.

This is the dream, or perhaps illusion, that has drawn talented Canadians to Southern California for over 60 years. And, indeed, they have been welcomed with open arms. Hollywood has traditionally operated under the simple premise that "What's yours is mine and what's mine is mine." In the most pragmatic manner imaginable, major studios have used the lure of money, prestige and power to steal away master filmmakers from around the world. Hitchcock, Clair, Renoir, Lubitsch, Von Sternberg, Wilder - you'll have to complete the pantheon yourself. There is no fear of cultural dilution here, just a passion to learn from and exploit the talents of the best.

Hollywood's fascination has been

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● Arthur Hiller consults with Kate Jackson during a rehearsal for *Making Love*.

particularly strong for Canadians. Geographical proximity, cultural compatibility and, until recently, the lack of a viable indigenous feature film production industry have funnelled Canadians south of the border. Our greatest export commodity is not film but talent. Yet for each young artist who seeks his fortune in L.A. (or London or Paris for that matter) our industry loses a drop of its precious life blood. Why does the exodus to balmy Southern California continue unabated? What is it that Canadians are seeking in Los Angeles and what - if anything - would draw them back to their homeland?

To address these questions, it seemed only logical to poll the primary sources directly. So we interviewed six Canadians currently plying their craft in Hollywood. Some names will be familiar to you, others will be new. However, the stories are all representative of a common experience.

ARTHUR HILLER

Producer/director. Hiller began his career with CBC radio and television in Toronto. He moved to Hollywood in 1955 and established an excellent reputation directing dramas for shows such as *Matinée Theater*, *Climax*, and *Playhouse 90*. He subsequently moved into the field of feature films directing and/or producing numerous major motion pictures including *The Man in the Glass Booth*, *The Americanization of Emily*, *Man of La Mancha* and the highly successful *Love Story*. Hiller's latest, and as yet unreleased, feature is called *Making Love*.

around if it were possible. But when I landed it was a glorious day of blue skies and 82 degrees and all the anxieties seemed to just melt away.

Cinema Canada: Was the working environment you found in Hollywood more stimulating than the one you left in Toronto?

Arthur Hiller: No. Remember, Canada was the first to do ninety-minute dramas on television, so there was a tremendous sense of excitement. But Hollywood became more stimulating as time went on. I enjoyed the pressure of *Matinée Theater* because we were doing a show every day, so there were seven or eight directors working simultaneously. Also, there was a wonderful feeling of camaraderie that I really enjoyed. From there I went on to *Climax* and *Playhouse 90* which was the best television drama of that period.

Cinema Canada: What is your impression of the Canadian film industry viewed from the perspective of Hollywood?

Arthur Hiller: I've been up several times for festivals over the past 10 years and I could see there was an interest growing and the works were getting better. I saw films by Don Shebib, Claude Jutra and others and it was clear they could direct. Technically things were developing nicely so I thought there would be a strong feature film industry in about 10 years. This feeling was reinforced when the government decided to step in, because you do need help to get started. Things turned out a bit differently in that it became a highly commercialized venture. My own feeling is that the Canadian film industry has been hurt by the packagers and financiers who really didn't care much about making movies but would have been just as happy selling shows. By the same token, pictures are being made and everybody is learning, learning, learning! My own feeling is that Canada is now in a position to do major motion pictures of greater value than the films of the past.

Cinema Canada: What elements do you look for when evaluating the potential of a screenplay?

Arthur Hiller: It's hard to explain. Certainly your instincts have to be closely in tune with what the audience will accept. I go by an internal feeling that says, "This is something I would be interested in doing." Unfortunately you can't computerize what the audience is going to like. For instance, I felt *Man of La Mancha* was the epitome of my work until it came out and the critics and audience let me know the picture wasn't that acceptable to them.

Cinema Canada: Have you had occasion to work in Canada since you left?

Arthur Hiller: I did *Silver Streak* in Canada thanks to C.P.R. Everything to do with trains was shot either in Alberta or Toronto. It was fun because I still think of Canada as my home. I'm still a citizen and even our children - who were born in the U.S. - carry dual citizenship and feel Canadian.

I also get lots of scripts from Canadian producers, hopefully because they admire my work but also because I would fit nicely into a Canadian package. In a sense, they would be getting an "American" director who qualified as Canadian. There are a lot of Canadian scripts floating around down here. I remember having dinner one night with Ted Kotcheff and Dan Petrie and laughing because we were all, unknowingly, talking about the same film. Finally, we agreed to turn down the corner of page thirty-one whenever we got a Canadian script. Then, if we ever came across a screenplay with page thirty-one turned down we could call each other up and find out what the story was about.

As it happens, none of these projects ever materialized. I was interested in *Improper Channels* which I thought could be very amusing assuming some revisions were made in the screenplay. I spoke with the producer and indicated I was willing to work on the film. But the producer, for financing reasons, had to start shooting right away and wasn't interested in making any improvements. Still, I would really like to make a film in Canada. ○

AUBREY SOLOMON

Writer/producer. Solomon graduated from the University of Southern California's Division of Cinema with an M.A. in film history/criticism/aesthetics. He produced a full-length feature in Montreal and subsequently moved to L.A. in 1976. Since then, he has been a story editor on the Quincy series and has authored numerous dramatic scripts for television with his partner, Steve Greenberg. Presently he is the supervising producer for That's Hollywood, a syndicated program, backed by 20th Century-Fox.

Cinema Canada: What were some of the reasons that prompted your decision to leave Canada?

Aubrey Solomon: Well there was a very simple reason. There wasn't really enough work in Canada, at the time, that I could get actively involved in. The other reason was that Jack Haley Jr. called from L.A. and said, "I've got a job for you, why don't you come out here?" So we packed up and moved. It was as simple as that.

Cinema Canada: Did you manage to do any film work at all while you were in Canada?

Aubrey Solomon: Yes, after I got out of USC's film school in 1973, I went back to Montreal and put together a deal to make a French low-budget comedy. At that time, comedies were doing quite well at the box-office in the regional market. We got our investors, made the picture in the fall of '73 and released it in the fall of '74. It did moderately well initially and then dropped off like a shot within two weeks. So, our prospects for making any more pictures were washed out. The truth is that between the time we made the picture and released it the market had collapsed for local comedies

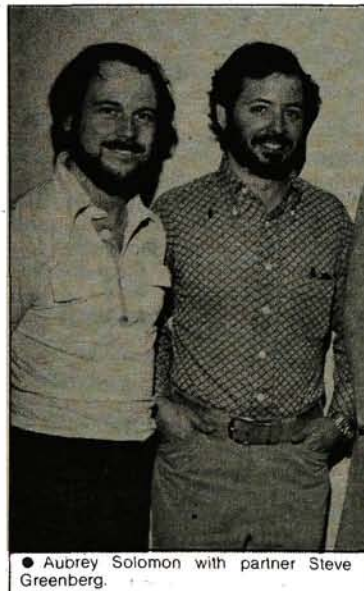
and we weren't the only picture to get burned.

The film was called *Les deux pieds dans la même bottine*. Pierre David was directly involved and had high hopes for it. He put together a distribution deal, got some money from Famous Players and was involved in the casting. We were planning to build from this film and expand into English pictures throughout Canada. Now this was a time when the tax situation was still in question. Nobody knew what kind of write-off they were going to get so it was a lot harder to attract investors than it is now. As a combination of the difficulty of raising money and the minimal release of our picture it was very hard to continue in Canada.

Montreal, at that time, was a closed market. You could go to Pierre David or George Destounis - who was really in Toronto - or perhaps to Gilles Carle. As a matter of fact, after the French picture I went into distribution and bought the rights to *Hester Street* and distributed it throughout Canada. As *Hester Street* was winding down in early 1976, Jack Haley Jr. phoned and offered me the job in L.A.

Cinema Canada: Would you consider returning to Canada to work?

Aubrey Solomon: Initially I had gone back to Montreal because I felt there was a potential for making pictures. As it turned out, the potential dried up very quickly and it wasn't until a few years later that Pierre David became more heavily involved in production. If I had stayed I might have



● Aubrey Solomon with partner Steve Greenberg.

been part of that, I don't know.

But in California, you're talking about an industry that's been in business for over 60 years and needs people in all areas. Television especially is like a bottomless pit. You have to keep on feeding it by bringing in a constant flow of new people. To answer your question though, I wouldn't consider returning to work in Canada. I've had offers to do scripts and generally, when I learn the producer is Canadian, I just tune it out. My experiences with Canadian producers have been all bad. The people I have dealt with - and perhaps it's because they were lower-echelon producers - have a very limited approach to picture making.

Cinema Canada: What are you presently involved with?

Aubrey Solomon: Right now I'm supervising producer on *That's Hollywood*. It's like a pet project for me since I am also a film historian and my particular studio - 20th Century-Fox - is funding the show. This is where I started as a researcher and now I'm supervising producer. I'm also completing a number of scripts and am involved in several development deals for television. All things considered, I'm really quite contented with my situation here in Hollywood. ○

GORDON FARR

Writer/producer/director. Farr came to Hollywood from Toronto in 1967. He wrote the Hollywood Palace for one and a half years as well as numerous variety specials - Tom Jones, Petula Clark, Glen Campbell, Tony Orlando - and situation comedies - Maude, The Jeffersons, The Dick Van Dyck Show and The Bob Newhart Show for years and then subsequently ABC's Loveboat for 3 years.

Cinema Canada: Drifting back 14 years, can you still remember the events which led to your decision to leave Canada and try your luck in Hollywood?

Gordon Farr: Well, I was writing some material for *Spring Thaw* (which was a big event in those days) with Barry Gordon - a friend I had gone to Ryerson with. We got 75 cents per blackout per performance and \$1.25 per sketch. It kept us in cigarettes and we got free tickets. So we would go to two or three performances a week and when our stuff would come on we would stand up and yell "Author! Author!" Somebody from CFTO saw some material we had written for *Spring Thaw* and hired us to write monologues for Rick Campbell who was doing a late night talk show... except that he had no sense of humor. It paid \$75 a week but we decided the show was no good so we would create our own program.

Barry and I phoned Spence Caldwell, who had just formed the CTV Network, and went in and pitched the show like crazy to a board room full of people. And they loved it. The show was called *Funny Business* and was a cinema vérité behind-the-scenes look at comedians. The show never got off the ground but I ended up as an assistant to Michael Hindsmith who was then head of programming for CTV. So I worked out of CFTO for four or five years and ended up producing and directing programs. Then someone decided to start a Directors Guild so I signed the petition like everybody else. John Basset, I understand, wasn't happy about it and summarily had the last two or three names on the list fired, so I found myself out of a job.

I was married, had no money and there weren't a lot of alternatives. The CBC wasn't hiring anybody at that time, especially if you were coming from CTV. There wasn't much of a future for me in Canada because the boundaries of what you could do were so narrow. What were you going to do if you wrote a film? There was no financing. There were no situation comedies on television - besides, who was going to let you produce? You had some guy sitting in an ivory tower on Jarvis Street who was going to do it because he was Mr. Showbusiness. We weren't bitter, but aware of the limitations.

Anyways, I said "The hell with it!" and came down to L.A. to look around.

Within a few days I had an agent, because Canadians were in vogue and were easy to sell in the variety area. I ended up writing a game show and earning \$250 a week which was considerably more than I was getting in Canada. From that came the *Hollywood Palace* which I wrote for a year and a half and then a lot of variety specials like Tom Jones, Petula Clark, Glen Campbell, Tony Orlando... I can't remember them all there were so many. A lot of it was through the "Canadian mafia" because



every variety show had Canadians on staff.

But variety was becoming a dinosaur so I started writing half-hours beginning with *Maude*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Dick Van Dyck Show* and *Bob Newhart*. I ended up producing Newhart for two years and wrote 15 episodes. When I left Newhart, *Loveboat* came along which I produced for three years.

I find people in the business here are open. They listen to you and are interested in what you have to say. In Canada, they're more interested in who your parents are or where you went to school - this was in 1967. In L.A. you can get a half-hour of anybody's time and pitch your idea no matter how dreadful it is. They understand that the next time the idea might be brilliant; next time you might have *All in the Family* or *Rocky*. Everyone is genuinely interested and that's why it's nice for creative people.

Cinema Canada: Does the talent exist in Canada to support a strong television and film industry?

Gordon Farr: Yes, there is a strong talent pool in Canada but not in the numbers that exist in the United States. Each year there is an influx of new talent on the writer, producer, and story editor level, not to mention actors. You take a show like *Laverne and Shirley* and there are eight or ten writers involved on various levels working under the producer and Gary Marshall. They're all learning and moving up. But there isn't that depth in Canada. Certainly the talent exists but they need the supervision of someone who has done it for a number of years. *The King of Kensington* is a terrific idea but it could never have gotten on the air down here. The actors were good but the writing was weak. Anybody can have an idea for a good story or joke but there is a whole lot of care and craftsmanship that goes into the script.

I'm still a Canadian citizen, but to go back - forget the weather which is a killer - is impossible. I make more in a week than I could make in a year up there. But I don't think a day goes by when something exciting doesn't happen in L.A. My God, I just sent a screenplay to my agent who told me Paul Newman passed on the script but someone else is interested. We're doing a three-hour picture for network television - that's exciting! There is always something happening and you don't have that feeling in Canada; it's not an exciting business. It's just a job, while people wait to get out because they know they're not going to get rich. If you go to somebody in the CBC or CTV and ask, "Is this it? Is this what you wanted to do when you grew up?" I don't think a lot of people would say yes. Still, I would love to make a feature film in Canada, and I have a number of screenplays - one of which is specifically designed for Canada - which are moving on. Who knows? O

KERRY FELTHAM

Producer/director. Feltham has written, produced and/or directed over 30 network television films in Canada, England, Germany and the U.S.A. In addition he has directed a prize-winning feature film and written half a dozen screenplays. Most recently he was associate producer on the television mini-series *Shogun*.

Cinema Canada: What were you involved with in terms of production when you were in Canada?

Kerry Feltham: I had a production company in Toronto for about 10 years, although I am a Vancouver boy, and we did a lot of commercials, industrials, documentaries and various things for CTV. We limped along and basically just survived. I spent two years of my life trying to get units sold in features that were very practical and probably would have made money. My blood is over Bay Street but they wouldn't go for it. I was perfectly happy to stay in Canada and make pictures but the answer was always "No!" My idea was to make films for about \$500,000 which could have a negative pick-up from a major distributor and probably have done alright, but nobody wanted to hear about it. Then, one winter, my daughter fell on a patch of ice and broke her tooth. I said, "This is it!" and four weeks later we were on a plane for California.

Cinema Canada: Do writers and producers in L.A. have a different attitude or approach to the business as opposed to their counterparts in Canada?

Kerry Feltham: Sure. I'm just an ordinary working fellow but there is nobody here in Hollywood, right up to studio heads, who wouldn't listen to an idea and say "I like it" or "I don't like it." Everybody's open to you and so many things are happening that there is a real sense of momentum.

There is a tendency to think about the market first: what people want to see. And then, having established what the audience wants, the goal is to do the very best job you can. It isn't the Sistine Chapel but people do a good craftsman-like job and they don't look down on what they are doing.

I don't feel my work reflects any particularly Canadian perspective. I'm working on a television movie now, for example, which is about the escape of Jews from Denmark during the Second

World War. It's a story of great heroism and suffering. In fact, my years in L.A. have helped me shed some tendencies I developed in Canada which would have been a drawback to writing a good script. Now I approach a script much more analytically: as entertainment first. You have to catch people's interest. Equally fundamental, you must be rational in that you have to take the premise and develop a story which flows and has plot and drive. That does not prevent you from having wonderful characters doing wonderful things.

Many Canadian films seem weak structurally. They start as good ideas but run out of steam after the first 30 pages of a 100-page script. This is a typical result of not having analyzed the structure of the story beforehand. That aspect of craftsmanship tends to be ignored in Canada. I remember a lot of stories in Canada which were full of internal angst and were about how I crossed the street. Nothing happened in these stories. There was a tremendous



● Kerry Feltham at Paramount.

amount of inner agony but no plot. They just weren't interesting.

Yet there are good Canadian stories available. I optioned one of Hugh McClelland's books which was set in the Maritimes but nobody in Canada was interested. Hugh Garner is one of the few Canadian authors whose stories are really strong... not literary or self-conscious. I also paid money to option one of his books but was unsuccessful getting it produced.

Cinema Canada: Is it worthwhile, then, for Canada to flirt with the possibility of maintaining a film industry of any significance.

Kerry Feltham: Maybe it's an artificially induced situation. Fundamentally I agree with Gerald Pratley who wants to see films reflect the Canadian character without saying Canada with a capitol C. Regional pictures if you want. *The Rowdyman* was a wonderful Maritime picture. Nobody outside of Canada ever wanted to see it but it's an excellent film and, if it takes subsidies, then perhaps that is the civilized thing to do. Still you compare *The Rowdyman* with an American regional film like *Breaking Away* and you discover *Breaking Away* is based on a much stronger story using characters that can be identified with much more easily. Peter Carter is a fine director and I cherish *The Rowdyman* but I wouldn't touch the film if I were a distributor because not enough people

would go to see it.

Cinema Canada: What would lure you back to Canada?

Kerry Feltham: A good project for sure. But I love California. This is where I was meant to be. I feel alive and real. One of the great things about being here is that if a deal doesn't work out this week there are eight others on the fire and one will come through next week. After the associate producer's assignment on *Shogun*, I did a pilot for television called *Chicago Story* and right now my agent is negotiating a deal with MTM to direct a segment of *Hill Street Blues*. Something is always happening. In Canada I only felt half alive. O

RENÉ BALGER

Writer/director. Balger graduated from Concordia University's department of Communication Studies in 1977. Subsequently he edited several Canadian documentaries, and directed a short film - *A Twist of Fate* - for Phantoscope Productions in Montreal. He came to Los Angeles in 1980 and has since been involved in three feature film projects.

Cinema Canada: Were you actively involved with film while you were living in Montreal?

René Balger: I was doing some production work while writing for *Cinema Canada* and also working for the Directors Guild. I still have a script under option to Stuart Harding at Cinépix but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Then I had the opportunity to work with a director - Monte Hellman - so I came to L.A., but I'm keeping all my options open. I'll go wherever there's work. But it seems that most Canadian producers come to L.A. looking for talent since this is where the agencies and the distributors are. I think it's a bit ridiculous to view the Canadian and American film industries as separate entities without any exchange between the two. In North America the marketplace is in Los Angeles. Anyways, it's been a good experience for me so far. I was hired to write a script for Mike Gruskoff (who produced *Young Frankenstein*, *Nosferatu* and *Quest for Fire*), and have also been commissioned by Martin Poll and Mike Wise for a feature film script.

Basically though, the approach to filmmaking in Montreal was very similar to what I found in Hollywood. The major difference is that there is an onslaught of projects here. You get calls every few days whereas, in Montreal, a new project might come up once a month. The pace is much slower because there's less money and opportunity. But, it still comes down to luck. There is talent and hard work, but you also have to have luck.

The most glaring weakness in the Canadian industry would have to be scripts and a lot of the responsibility has to lie with the producers. I would think 75 percent of Canadian producers have absolutely no experience in film. Many are former lawyers and accountants who make films only because they are able to put deals together.

My goal is to eventually establish myself to the point that I don't have to live either in Los Angeles or Montreal to get work. I would have no qualms about going back to Montreal if the project was worthwhile and the money adequate. In the end, it boils down to the fact that L.A. is the place to get work. The attitude towards Canadians working in

Hollywood - and you see this in *Cinema Canada* quite often - is very antagonistic. "Why did you turn your back on Canada?" I find this attitude unrealistic and it issues forth from a feeling of inferiority; perhaps even envy.

People come down here because this is a much bigger marketplace. They aren't running away from anything. This is where Francis Mankiewicz came to sell *Les bons débarras* and this is where they will sell *Les Plouffe*. They might sell it to Uruguay at the Montreal International Film Festival, but to make a profit they are going to have to sell the film to an American distributor. If everyone ends up in L.A. eventually, then why not be down here to begin with?

Cinema Canada: Is there adequate material and talent in Canada to support a feature film industry?

René Balger: There is a lot of good material and talent in Canada but the main problem is one of orientation. Should the industry model itself after the American fashion or perhaps the Australian or even the European approach? They're still searching for the answer.

What the Australians have been able to do is admirable in that they have distilled drama out of authentically Australian subjects. Perhaps it is due to some kind of psychological block, but Canadians seem to constantly undercut the dramatic elements in their stories. I'm thinking here of *Two Solitudes*, which I worked on and which was an absolute horror. We can't seem to take ourselves seriously because we're insecure. A little bank robbery in Toronto isn't exciting, but it's great in New York.

The Europeans, on the other hand, have had the courage to regulate distribution and return money from the box-office to the industry. In Canada we have never been willing to do this. A big help would be to place people in key positions who really understand film on a practical and aesthetic level. Right now the Secretary of State's office and the CFDC are filled with incompetents who don't have the background to make key decisions regarding financing or about how distribution should be regulated.

I also feel the tax shelter should be eliminated because then there will be a tremendous attrition of accountants and fly-by-nights. You need a sound financial base and all these wheeler-dealers have done their best to destroy that base. We really have to clean house because the industry can't continue to alienate financial institutions such as the Bank of Canada and the like by sticking them with \$50 million worth of unreleasable films.

Cinema Canada: So, where does one begin?

René Balger: The place to start, though, is with the screenplay. No one in Canada knows what a good script is. They don't know how to read them or write them. As Gore Vidal said, "In the beginning was the word." If you're going to initiate some kind of training program, the place to begin is with writing. Not just for writers but for producers so they will know what a good screenplay is supposed to look like. Studios like Paramount still have elaborate training schools for producers. Since we don't have large studios to bankroll such a program, I think it is the duty of government to step in. That is, if they are serious about finally developing an industry that is viable. ●