

Double trouble

Caught between North American resistance to dubbed films, and French law, the Quebec dubbing industry is feeling the pinch.

by Judee Ganten

It is rare that Anglophone audiences get to see a film dubbed in English, mainly because of the limited demand in this country for foreign films. Unlike most other cultures, our cinematographic diet is consumed largely in our mother tongue. And, if we are curious enough to see a foreign production, it is usually an artistic film with subtitles.

Despite this lack of exposure, we have all sorts of preconceptions about dubbing. We screw up our noses at the prospect of watching dubbed films. We think they seem unprofessional; we're distracted by the lip movements that don't correspond exactly to the dialogue. We find the actors' voices unrealistic. But this is a privileged perspective, rooted in our North American xenophobia, and one which may no longer be affordable.

In cultures where foreign-language films are daily fare, they are not so quick to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The adapted version of a film is considered a small price to pay to see a good production. In Quebec, dubbing has been a part of the filmgoers' experience for 30 years. Last year, over 50% of the feature films shown in the province were dubbed and only 7% were subtitled.

"The English market is spoiled," says André Fleury, president of Sonolab, the largest of Quebec's dubbing houses. "They are simply not used to films with lip-sync, so they reject them as second rate."

Despite the objections of Anglophone audiences to dubbing, Fleury predicts our tastes will change. "With increased programming requirements from pay-TV and more openness on the part of U.S. distributors to the international market, dubbing is slowly penetrating English culture."

Currently, however, despite the predicted boom, the \$2 million-a-year Quebec dubbing industry is experiencing lay-offs and empty studios. In this report, *Cinema Canada* examines dubbing, how it's done and the issues facing a troubled industry.

The job of a dubbing studio is like that of a repairman. Both must doctor someone else's material. People in the business concede that, at best, a dubbed version is an approximation of the original, not a duplication.

Dubbing a film really means dealing with constraints. Translation must be done culturally as well as linguistically. Unfamiliar references, plays on words, sense of humour and accompanying gestures all present problems. Casting must be done according to the ability to

imitate rather than interpret. And these problems are compounded by the limitations of synchronized lip movements. Additional difficulties are presented by musicals or characters speaking slang.

Some films cannot be dubbed. For example, *The Life of Brian*. There is the obvious problem of the humour being untranslatable outside a select milieu, coupled with the fact that each actor plays several different roles using various accents. How would that work in Japanese?

Action films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* are the easiest to dub because of the sparse dialogue and limited characterization. Dramas, on the other hand, present more of a problem. Especially if they are top quality. The finesse of a fine screenplay and the subtlety of a superb performance are difficult to do justice to in translation.

It would seem, then, that with so many obstacles, most films would suffer drastically through dubbing. But this is not necessarily so. Dubbers have solved some of their problems through standardization. Take casting, for example. Big film stars like Marcello Mastroianni and Marlon Brando are always dubbed by the same actors. So there is an Italian Brando, a French one, a Czech one and so on. Initiated audiences have become so accustomed to the translation that someone who has only heard 'Brando' speak Italian finds his real voice bizarre and uncharacteristic.

The problem of lip-syncing is solved through technical means. The process, which is the basis of dubbing work, originated in post-war France to cope with the inundation of U.S. films. In the early days of dubbing, lip-sync was a hit-and-miss proposition. Actors simply entered the studio armed with a translated script and, while listening to the original version through headphones, recorded the first take. Hélène Lauzon, director of dubbing at Sonolab, recalls that "every French émigré living in Montreal was improvising as an actor" because of the strong precedent for mid-Atlantic or Parisian accents. Today, actors' unions offer special courses in over-dubbing and specialized technicians insure that the script is already synchronized before actors even step into the studio.

The synchronized script is prepared in a series of slow, painstaking processes. First, a technician, called a 'detector,' records and codes every lip movement of each character in the original version onto a clear band of film. This is done on a modified editing machine where the coded band runs in sync with the picture. Particular attention is paid to labials (sounds which require closure of the lips such as p, b, m, f, v, w, and vowels in which the lips are rounded such as o). A translator then follows, adapting a translated text to the coded band so that the labials, sentence length and meaning correspond to the

original. The adapted version is recopied by a calligrapher, to allow the actors to read it easily. In effect, then, the entire text of the film is recopied three times by three different people.

In the recording studio, the original picture plus the legible synchronized band are flashed on a large screen. The actors recite the translated dialogue as it moves across the screen on cues from a director. Several takes later, the new version is recorded. An editor then checks the recorded version, adjusting any errors in synchronization. Later, after incidental sound effects have been reproduced, the whole package is mixed and sent off to the lab for printing.

The total average cost for a feature film can range anywhere from \$25,000 to \$50,000, depending on the complexities of individual films. Subtitling costs about half the price. The process is the same whether a Japanese animation is being dubbed into English or a Bulgarian documentary into French.

Though most countries have established independent dubbing industries, Paris is still the dubbing capital of the world. In Canada, the industry is localized in Quebec. Since the early fifties, the province's several studios have been processing features and TV series as well as advertisements, training films and shorts. But business is shrinking.

Despite the fact that the Quebecois watch seven dubbed hours of prime time television per week (plus additional hours of reruns and late-night movies) and dubbed versions of half of the films seen in theatres, studios are facing the prospect of closing their doors. The problem is that most features and TV shows are dubbed in France and imported into Quebec. The province's industry is up in arms, fighting for a bigger share of the market.

Though imported French dubbing is not new to Quebec, the added pressures of a slumping economy and the trend of networks to produce more of their own shows compounds the problem. Pierre Dequoy is president of L'Association Québécoise des Industries Techniques du Cinéma et de la Télévision (AQITCT), which is an association of dubbing and service houses. He is concerned about the limited possibilities for growth of the industry. "We're not gaining any business; and when you don't gain you automatically lose..."

Dequoy feels the solution to the problems facing the members of his association lies in current efforts to wrestle away from France the work they see as rightly theirs. But this solution is not a simple one. At the core of the dispute is a French law protecting its industry. It states that all foreign language films and most television shows shown in France must be dubbed or subtitled in France. While this does not directly affect Quebec, it does make the decision clear for distributors who pay the dubbing costs. Since the choice to dub in

Quebec would automatically eliminate the more substantial French market and restrict distribution to North American French-speaking audiences, distributors invariably choose to dub in France, then import the dubbed version into Quebec where there are no such restrictions.

Dequoy does not expect distributors to voluntarily pay the cost of two dubbings nor to ignore the much larger French market in favour of Quebec. What he and his members are after is protective legislation.

"In Mexico, it's not possible to import more than a negative. Here, we accept the final version with only a token tariff per foot. Mexicans re-dub Spanish imports into their own colloquialized Spanish and in Quebec we calmly accept Parisian idioms as if they were our own."

Though Dequoy admits that Quebec represents a much smaller market than Mexico, he feels certain that if he gets the restrictive legislation he's looking for, it would not be self-defeating. "I don't think any major distributor could say, 'Let's forget about Quebec.' This market is quite important to them. They all have offices here."

At present, AQITCT is appealing to the Federal government for increases in import tariffs as a way of discouraging what they refer to as "dumping." As previous negotiations with France, held at the highest level, have so far proved fruitless, the Quebec government has reacted to AQITCT's proposal with a 'let's-forget-about-it-for-now' attitude, according to Dequoy.

Adding salt to the wound is the recent decision to have *Les bons débarras* dubbed into English in France, for screening on American cable networks. The winner of the 1980 Genie Award for Best Canadian Film will also be re-treated (with subtitles or dubbing) for French network viewing. The original version was produced in québécois French. Ron Weinberg, spokesman for the U.S. distributor and world sales agent, International Film Exchange in New York, defends the decision by saying "it was the safest one we could make. We went to the studio in Paris which has the most experience; the one with the longest list of credits in doing the biggest titles."

Quebec dubbers are incensed by the inference that they might not do as good a job as Paris if given the opportunity. In the case of *Les bons débarras* it was no less expensive to have the work done in Paris. This example only serves to reinforce dubbers' demands for protective legislation.

Despite a disinterested Quebec government, Pierre Dequoy and AQITCT still plan to continue their appeal. Since feature films fall under provincial jurisdiction, it might be their only hope for change. As Dequoy says, "They protect shoe and clothing manufacturers. Why not dubbing? We're not asking for any grants or subsidies, just a chance to recoup a market which is our own." ●