

Spring in July

Now that the failure of C Channel and First Choice's Canadian program freeze have burst the short-lived bubble of pay-television, a certain, more familiar (and more Canadian) sense of proportion returns. In the aftermath, it is instructive to see that Canadian programming will be saved, when the dust settles, by those very traditions that have given Canadian broadcasting its distinctive coloring throughout its history.

The rapid rise and decline of Canadian pay-TV, over-inflated from the beginning of the CRTC hearings with rash and unrealizable promises, echoes in compressed form the earlier experience of the unlamented film boom. In both cases, the lesson to be derived is that the pure-market vision of Canadian production (in either film or television) is a phantom, but a phantom in whose shadow lurked very real Americans. As by now enough films and made-for-U.S.-TV programs have clearly demonstrated, Canadians in that 'pure' market can never be more than imitation Americans, no matter how much they might wish to be recognized as honorary Americans. Always reluctantly, Canadians find themselves thrown back upon their own identity - yet once that shock of realization has taken place, they do manage to get on with it in an appropriately Canadian manner. If producers in this country today feel a renewed and genuine commitment to original and distinctively Canadian programming, it is because there has been a collective reawakening to the fact that to be Canadian means something more than being a derivative Yankee.

It means that the role of the Canadian state and its involvement in the broadcasting system will continue to be fundamental and decisive. That does not mean that the role of the state need be centralizing. In recent years two extremes have been tried and rejected: just as there will be no totally free market loosely regulated by the licensing authority, neither will there be an ever-expanding CBC monopolizing talent, resources and budgets. Instead, through federal government funding, administered by a federal cultural agency, indigenous private production will feed the established television networks with genuinely Canadian programming. It's a very Canadian solution. The wonder is that it took so long to think of it.

But, as one says in Quebec, "il fallait y penser." And so it is extremely heartening to see palpable evidence of a shift right across the board, away from the integrationist logic that some say has been the hallmark of the Liberal custodianship of our national government, and towards a genuine opening to truly Canadian possibilities.

Francis Fox once said that, in Canada, renewal occurs on all fronts at once, from the Constitution to culture. It is becoming increasingly clear that he meant those words: namely, that the political will for renewal is there, as André Lamy only days ago attested when he reaffirmed the minister's intention to dislodge the Americans from Canada's airwaves during prime-time.

From production (the broadcast program development fund) to distribution (the Task Force report) to exhibition (the Combines investigation of the Majors), there is not one front of Canadian program production which hasn't in recent weeks experienced an upheaval in the status quo, resulting in the promise at least that the Canadian cultural rules are being changed, redressed in favor of the Canadian side of the equation.

In Quebec - as always symbolically leading Canada's cultural battles - the passing of Bill 109, while not of earth-shattering economic consequence, has major, national, psychological repercussions - and will practically make some difference to that nearly extinct breed, the independent Canadian film distributor.

Finally, the appointment of Peter Pearson, a noted Canadian nationalist, to head the broadcast development fund, is yet further evidence that underscores a serious intent to stem the flow of Canada's cultural hemorrhage.

None of these measures, singly, are of themselves enough, because it is always much harder to win back what never should have been given away in the first place, and because an aberrant situation has for too long been allowed to pass as the acceptable norm. But, when taken together, they form a whole that is all the more noticeable in that it is so rare.

It is a beginning, and in this wintry land, signs of cultural spring can only be welcomed, even if it is already summer.

Sixteen lost years

Once upon a time in the long ago 1950's, says Martin Knelman, ("Dramatic Turn of Events", Toronto Life, April 1983), it is believed that there was a golden age in CBC Television Drama. But when in 1958 producer Sydney Newman went to England, the lights went out and, by the time John Hirsch took over in 1974, the "golden age had long gone and so had the audience."

Amazingly, Mr. Knelman edits out 16 years as if they had never happened. Those missing years, curiously, may have been the most crucial ones for CBC TV Drama since its beginning.

By 1958, audiences for studio drama, no matter how golden, had virtually disappeared. The U.S. flagships - *Studio One*, *Philco Playhouse*, *U.S. Steel* - all had gone in favour of filmed series from Hollywood. CBC's *G.M. Presents* was faring no better.

Recognizing this, some of us in CBC TV Drama at the time, on a miserable budget, and officially 'not in the film business', invented a modest 'mini-series' - *The Serial*, which for the first time, got Canadian TV drama out of the studio. With an eight-episode dramatized version of Thomas Raddall's Nova Scotian novel "The Wings of Night", Canadian audiences saw Canadian stories shot on Canadian locations, and they loved it. The response was overwhelming. Literally thousands of letters came in praising it. People across the country and from the border American states told us they had changed family bedtimes and bridge nights to fit broadcast times. Hard-rock miners wrote to say that the off-work shift relayed the continuing story to the guys underground who missed an episode.

They wanted more. We gave them *Strangers in Ste. Angèle*, Costain's *Son of a Hundred Kings* and *The Chord of Steel*, *Train of Murder*, *The Reluctant Agent*, Joe Schull's *Convoy* and Morley Callaghan's *More Joy in Heaven*.

Of necessity *The Serial* was a maverick shoestring operation - black-and-white location film rolled into a live studio performance. It kind of bucked the system and the entrenched studio practices. But the audience loved it, and on the strength of it we got the CBC's blessing to go into a full-scale film series. Still on a shoestring budget, we invented *Wojeck*, and *Quentin Durgens M.P.* and *Hatch's Mill* - 30 one-hour episodes the first year, 30 the second year (1966-67).

"*Empire's* sensational ratings," says Martin Knelman, "was about two million viewers." In 1966, *Wojeck* got 2,900,000 viewers, an index of 80, outrating *Bonanza*, and when sold to the BBC rose to the top of the top ten in Britain.

It was so successful in fact, that the CBC wasn't quite sure what to do with it. Seen in Hollywood, the stars, the writer, producer and directors were all offered jobs. Agents came to Toronto to see what all the fuss was about. Sensing a new and exciting development in Canada, the artists did not wish to leave. But CBC drama funding was on a year-to-year basis, so that no matter how successful *Wojeck* was, the producer could not guarantee on-going employment to these eager and talented people. In consequence, John Vernon, Sharon Acker, Michael Sarrazin (*They Shoot Horses*, etc.) Peter Donat, Michael Learned (*The Waltons*), directors Paul Almond, George McCowan, writer Phil Hensch and others, packed their bags for greener pastures, and *Wojeck* folded.

Quentin Durgens M.P. was equally popular. It brought John Trent into film production (*Bushbabies*, *Homer*, among others) and made Gordy Pinsent a star, giving him also a ticket to Hollywood.

Associated British Television (Thames) sent people over to look at *Hatch's Mill* shooting. They thought it had the international potential of *Bonanza*, and offered to co-produce and co-finance it, but the then CBC brass, perhaps a bit dazed by success, decided 'we were not ready.' So that folded after one season, and with it another exodus of trained talent, as ready as ever it would be.

On the positive side, the CBC now had three good film drama production teams, which were capable of scripting, shooting and editing world-class movies, within the professional demands of time and budget. The CBC was in the film business.

We tried again. This time writer Sandy Stern's *Corwin* series. Same deal. It was a success. But CBC funding still could not offer future guarantees to the artists. So, one episode of *Corwin* - "Raisins and Almonds" - became director Darryl Duke's ticket to Hollywood where he promptly won an Emmy. Another episode *Denny*, (a two-part feature for TV release), sent Margot Kidder and director Peter Carter into orbit. Sandy Stern was recognized in L.A. as a 'hot' writer, and without a firm future in Canada, off he went to become a successful Hollywood writer/producer. All of the above, of course, were freelance artists, without tenure. Without, indeed, any guarantee of income beyond their next show.

The story goes on. A series - *Canadian Short Stories* - Callaghan, Richler, Laurence, Garner, Mitchell - we did them all - giving directors like Paul Lynch and Allan King some finger exercises. Al Waxman got a shot at directing. Anthology series with new writers Barry Pearson and Les Rose, Tony Sheer and Lyl Brown. Grahame Woods - the gifted *Wojeck* cameraman - wrote the brilliant, searing scripts that will René Bonnière's direction gave us Jackie Burroughs' award-winning performances in *12 1/2 cents* and *Vicky*.

John Hirsch once told me 'Perhaps each of us has to rediscover the wheel...'

Some of us were already quite familiar with the wheel. In those 16 years that Martin Knelman left on the cutting-room floor, it was demonstrated time and again that the Canadian film community - the actors, the writers, directors, cameramen, the editors, the composers - inside the CBC and out of it, given the opportunity to work and develop on a sustained basis, can be of world stature.

But there is the ever-present problem - of 'critical mass.' That is, there must be a predictable and continuing volume of work available to sustain this community, and the long-term financing to support it. Below that critical level of opportunity and funding, artists upon whose creative talents we depend, cannot survive, no matter what bureaucratic structure it is in place.

Martin Knelman wonders if *Empire* was a fluke. He wonders about the future of actor Kenneth Welsh, writer Douglas Bowie, and producer Mark Blandford. The answer is that without serious attention to that 'critical mass', good shows like *Empire* will continue to be one-shot affairs and tickets to Hollywood for the creative talent.

Ron Weyman ●

Ron Weyman is a director-producer living in Toronto.