



Alberta Film & TV

Portrait of an industry

by Natalie Maclean

As early as the 1940's, Walt Disney Productions recognized what Alberta had to offer the film industry: the great outdoors in every camouflage Mother Nature had devised. So the crews trekked west from Calgary, travelling past 80 kilometers of prairie to the foothills of the Canadian Rockies and the Rafter Six Ranch. Disney's wilderness series was only the beginning.

Stan Cowley is the present owner of the 60-guest capacity, two-storey ranch-house which has housed Marilyn Monroe, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. Cowley's family is part of Alberta's history and, as a legacy to that history, he has a profound appreciation for the country around him and the process of free enterprise. In this respect Cowley typifies the Albertan character; in many others respects he is unique - an honorary Indian chief, bit-part actor and location scout. His ranch is equipped with all the comforts of home away from home as well as horses, buggies, stage coaches, western and Indian gear, not to mention camera-wise relatives and ranch hands. Close-by are raging rivers, placid streams, wooded terrain and mountain bluffs.

Great scenery, yes but what's this province got that would make it more attractive than Yugoslavia to an international producer or encourage home-grown involvement in the industry? Part of the answer lies just a few kilometers up the road from Rafter Six in Canmore, Alberta.

The necessary components

Canmore (population 4,000), nestled between the Three Sisters Mountain and the Spray Lakes, is the home of the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation. Established in 1981 under the auspices of the Alberta Government Department of Economic Development, the AMPDC office opened in October, 1982.

The corporation resulted from a task force report recommendation which had been completed by the department of Economic Development in '76. Primarily as a result of that report and in conjunction with the Alberta govern-

ment's policy of diversifying the economic base of the province, the motion picture industry has been blessed with advantages unavailable elsewhere in the country.

AMPDC's major role is to provide development financing for motion picture production. The bank has resources of \$3 million and provides loans for up to 60% of total pre-production needs to a maximum of \$200,000. Secondary objectives to be developed over time include marketing and production financing assistance.

Content must be deemed Canadian and the motion picture should be of significant benefit to Alberta, i.e. 50% of personnel should be Albertan, 50% of below-the-line production costs are to be spent on Alberta residents or services and Alberta locations are important. Producers should be residents of the province for at least one year although this can be waived depending on other factors. Loan applications are judged on commercial viability, permanent financing sources and marketing strategy.

Repayment is required prior to principal photography.

Canmore looks like a typical western, country town. But it's a town where speculation has always been a second industry because it sits just outside both the Kananaskis Provincial Park and the Banff National Park, prime year-round resort locations. The industry no doubt will peak now that the 1988 Olympics are a reality. So it seemed apt enough to place the AMPDC office in this speculative atmosphere in the heart of the Canadian Rockies. The AMPDC is housed in one of the newest buildings on 8th Street (otherwise known as Main Street) and its offices are tastefully decorated in a western folk art motif which sanely does not try to compete with the panoramic views in the windows.

Lorne MacPherson is the Corporation's president. For 15 years prior to his appointment he practised entertainment law and ran a production company. Over lunch in one of Canmore's new cafes he discussed the components needed to make film a viable industry in

the province.

Five essentials made up the package: entrepreneurial spirit, technical and crafts people, the creative element, services and, of course, money. With a dramatic history of entrepreneurial success intrinsic to the fibre of Alberta, MacPherson feels the AMPDC will give local producers the impetus to put together the sophisticated business packages required for high-budget feature films. The technical and crafts components are already in place as is the creative element. MacPherson stresses that some of Canada's best writers are home-grown. (I later learn that he is on the board of the Edmonton-based Television and Film Institute. Run by Jaron Summers as a non-profit organization and supported in part by the Alberta Government and Allarco Broadcasting, TFI offers screenwriting seminars and film and video production workshops.)

Film industry services are available to fill present needs and these would naturally expand as the business did. As for money, 50% of the national total invested under the provisions of the CCA in the past five years was put up by Albertans! "Of course," continues MacPherson, "it's not the gravy train it was a couple of years ago, but there's still a lot of money in this province."

He goes on to provide some of the details of the Corporation's workings. The loans are at prime, AMPDC takes to equity share in the venture, and the content and residency clauses are flexible. As of April 1983, 13 loans had been approved and seven advances made.¹ An advisory group of five local producers (Eda Lishman, Doug Hutton, Arvi Liimatainen, Nick Bakytka, and Ron Brown) comments on budgets and technical aspects of the applications. Approvals are given by AMPDC's board which includes Orville Kope of CHAT Television, Lucille Wagner of Alberta Theatre Projects, Aristedes Gazetes of the University of Lethbridge, Ken Chapman of the Edmonton law firm Chapman, Finley and Gawne, and Tom Peacock of the University of Alberta.

Developing entrepreneurs

Wayne Long and Ed McMullan of the Faculty of Management, University of

● Official portrait: the crew of *The Wild Pony*, a national premiere.



Photo: George Webber

Natalie Maclean is a Calgary freelance writer.

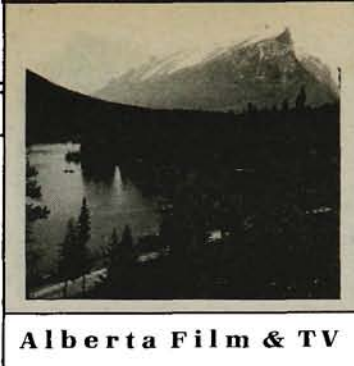
Calgary, are co-authors of "Towards Professionalizing Entrepreneurship." "Entrepreneurship", they state, "involves three things: 1) uncertainty and risk; 2) business knowledge and 3) creativity and innovation."

Long and McMullan appreciate the complexities facing the entrepreneur in 1983:

"We live in a world that is becoming increasingly more technologically sophisticated and internationally more interdependent. These changes are im-

Alberta has to offer.

Externally produced features such as *Superman* which caused as much excitement as the Stampede last summer proved beneficial to the local industry in a number of ways. Local technical and crafts personnel (both IATSE members and freelancers) got another major credit to bolster resumé's while the publicity created enhanced the year-round work of the Alberta Motion Picture Industry Association (AMPIA). In a recent promotion Charles Porlier, freelance



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save *Thunder Road* from financial difficulties.

Nick Bakyta, president of AMPIA and owner of Tinsel Media, echoes a gloomy present for Alberta producers. Economic factors have forced most producers to concentrate on bread-and-butter work. Tinsel itself seems to have weathered the storm and plans to start the National Film Board co-production *River of Bones* in August. A second co-production titled *Blood, Sweat and Cheers* will be undertaken with the CTV affiliate CFRN Television of Edmonton. It will be a pilot for a sports-oriented TV series. An AMPDC loan provided the start-up cash.

So things have been tough for the industry, but there's good news. The Conference Board of Canada predicts that the Alberta recovery would be underway in 1983 to the tune of a 4.7% increase in production (for the province as a whole), a sharp turnaround from 1982's decline of 3.6%.

Success stories

The industry's creative activity is evident through events such as the annual AMPIA awards competition which had over 70 entries in '82. The mosaic of factors that have fostered and maintained this level of activity despite the poor economy indicates that there is a firm foundation of indigenous producers. And it is growing...

Bob Barclay has re-settled in Calgary, his hometown and his first venture was to produce a million-dollar feature on the Lizzie Borden murders financed by CFCN Television.² Highlights of Barclay's career include the first colour film for the CBC, the Telephone Pavilion extravaganza at Expo '67 and Disney's *Magic Carpet Tour Around the World*. With the Lizzie Borden film in the can he has plans for a big budget feature analogous to *The Wizard of Oz* using state-of-the-art effects.

Barclay met director Silvio Narizzano in the late '40s in Ottawa where they were both involved in repertory theatre.



Special effects turn Calgary TV's Gil Tucker into a 90-year-old.

Photos: N. Maclean

posing greater demands upon individuals and organizations wishing to turn an idea into a successful business venture." There is recognition as well that technical business expertise is only part of the package and "should be subordinated within a framework of creative expression."

In Australia, new venture formation workshops have become a nation-wide phenomenon and the U.S. has national innovation centres such as the high-technology centre at the University of Utah. Canadian universities offer a variety of new venture-type courses, but the proposal put forth by Long and McMullan to teach entrepreneurship at the post-graduate level is indicative of the value Albertans place on entrepreneurship and the framework established to nurture it.

The shining star in Alberta's entrepreneurial arena is producer Eda Lishman. Her first major production, *The Wild Pony*, premiered nationally on First Choice this spring. The pre-sale to the pay-TV station was a coup she fully appreciates from her perspective as a female western-based producer. Described by a colleague as "a first-class filmmaker who is artistically honest, perceptive and intuitive," Lishman is setting standards for local producers by creating low-cost (\$800,000 for *The Wild Pony*), high-quality films that have a waiting market.

Two other productions are in the planning stages: *The Unseelie*, a horror picture to be directed by Randy Cheveldave later this year, and a feature Lishman describes as "a glamorous picture" written by and starring Marilyn Lightstone, the star of *Wild Pony*.

Lishman emphasizes her commitment to the province and the industry. She knows she has the talent to develop people in the trade and to exploit - in the best possible sense - the potential

special effects make-up artist, 'aged' Gil Tucker, host of "1040 Tonight", CFAC Television, before a live audience in the make-up department of Calgary's downtown Eaton's. While AMPIA's focus is strictly Albertan, the impact of high profile features for both its members and the average person in the street can't be denied.

Present gloom, future recovery

Technical crews in the province have kept their hopes up but overall 1981-1982 hasn't been a financially successful year. Barry Merrill, business agent for production with the Calgary local of IATSE, stated that the production work which usually makes up 50 to 60% of the members' annual employment, has for the past two years been only 20%.

Equipment suppliers agree that 1982 brought down times but vary in their present appraisals. The Calgary branch of the William F. White Company, whose head office is in Toronto, has experienced continuous growth since its opening just a few years ago but a spokesman said that competition is much keener these days. M.T.M. Equipment (owned by Melvin T. Merrills, president of IATSE) the largest locally-owned supply house, has found business slow through '82 and into the first quarter of '83.

The recessionary effects experienced by the rest of the country hit Alberta late, making the recovery time lag as well. *Thunder Road Studio* which is equipped with a film lab and sound recording facilities was caught in the down-turn and has gone into receivership. David Bromwich of Ernst & Whinney Inc. is now acting as the receiver/manager. The intention of the receiver is to continue to run the company until alternative financial arrangements can be made and to actively pursue expansion possibilities. Bromwich noted that as of February there had been an upswing in business but that it had come too late to

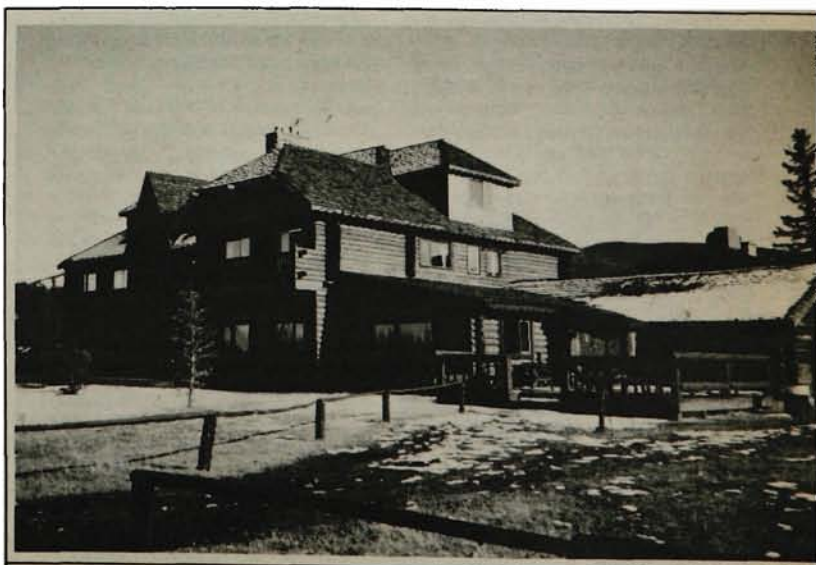
In recent years they had decided to do a film together and the Lizzie Borden film was the result. Barclay found CFCN's commitment to the project "extraordinary" and Narizzano described the venture as "... one of the easiest shoots I ever had." High praise for the talented crew who were relatively inexperienced in undertaking of this magnitude.

Barclay also managed to locate an ideal studio for the film whose single largest budget item was sets. ATCO, the Calgary-based international shelter corporation, uses former airplane hangers as a construction facility. With the economic slump, many of ATCO's tradesmen were left with time on their hands, making the deal Barclay offered a made-to-measure one. The crew moved into a hanger on the ATCO grounds which came with 24-hour security, on-site medical support and experienced woodworkers who built and decorated the lavish sets.

For Barclay, the province offers almost everything: talented writers, cooperative professional personnel, great locales and, at the ATCO site, a perfect studio. The hang-up is effective distribution. Having worked first hand with Buena Vista, Disney's worldwide distribution arm, Barclay appreciates the complexities of distribution. CFCN will first air the Lizzie Borden film through the CTV system; after that the sales department will look towards international distribution, especially in Britain where Narizzano's work has a very large audience.

A new process using 16mm negative film which is transferred to video allowed the editing to be completed ten days after the shooting ended. Narizzano supervised the work and then returned to Spain to begin shooting John Wain's *High Shoulders* for the BBC. As part of his investment in coming to Alberta, Narizzano says he "hopes to develop a continuing source of future work."

No doubt Maxine Samuels has similar thoughts. Known most widely for her CBC television series *The Forest Rangers* and *Adventures in Rainbow Country*, Samuels also has a major feature film to her credit, *The Pyx* and recently completed an 'Adventures in History' series for the NFB. Alberta has been home for almost two years now where she has joined forces with Les Kimber to begin Four Nine Productions. Their first project is the story of John Ware adapted from the work by Alberta historian Grant McEwan. Ware, dubbed by the Indians a



The Rafter Six Ranch: Marilyn Monroe and Robert Redford called it home

"black whiteman", was a runaway slave who escaped to Canada and became a successful cattle rancher, contributing a great deal to the province's development. The details of his life are fascinating but the substance of his story comes from the type of man he was.

Samuels has negotiated a pre-sale to First Choice, but because of the scope of the effort (approximately \$3-3.5 million) she is also looking south of the border to Home Box Office.



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Her repeated work with outdoor stories is no accident. She is an avid rider who

Independent thinking

by Anna Gronau

Technologically Native, the first workshop production of the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers, had its premiere on June 10. And while that in itself was something to celebrate (for the members and Board of Directors of this co-op) the event had wider significance. It was concrete evidence of the success of new directions and philosophies affirmed and developed by the Society over the past year (In May, 1982 the current Board - Marcella Bienvenue, Douglas Berquist, Andy Jaremko, Leila Sujir and Wendy Hill-Tout - were elected as a slate at a time when the organization was suffering from a lack of identity and purpose.)

To be sure, much had been accomplished since the initial meeting in 1977 established the Calgary Film Group, incorporated later under its present name. A permanent location with office, production areas and an excellent screening-room had been set up, and a number of productions had been completed. But cohesion had become difficult to maintain. The original members were all technically proficient filmmakers, many of them already working in media-related organizations. When sincerely interested but less experienced people began to join, it became much more difficult for the co-op to serve all members equally. On top of that was a problem Marcella Bienvenue, the Society's current co-ordinator, attributes to the very broad interpretation that can be given to the word "independent" when applied to filmmaking. "We had to keep telling people this is not a place for hobbyists" she recalls. On the other end of the scale, filmmakers who were "independent" in the sense of having no affiliation to large institutions or organizations, but whose work was indisputably commercial in intent were also using co-op facilities.

C.S.I.F. members were also beginning to realize that the group's dispa-

rate functions were making their public image unclear. And in Alberta, where arts funding seems to be at a very formative stage, groups lobbying for public money have to present themselves in a forceful, clear and visible manner. According to Bienvenue, provincial funding bodies, unlike the Canada and Ontario Arts Councils, tend to regard film only in terms of an industry. Independent and experimental film are new and not well understood in the province. "It's hard to be taken seriously," she claims. "Our values are seen to be out of step." A strong case for non-industrial film had to be made, and new approaches that would help to drive home the point had to be discovered.

Leila Sujir, who has been on the Board of Directors of the C.S.I.F. since it began, also sits on the Board of the Independent Film Alliance du Cinéma Indépendant, a national federation of film co-ops. Some of the Federation's first conferences provided an opportunity to meet other like-minded filmmakers and to see how the co-ops had successfully (or otherwise) dealt with problems. Another model was the Association of National Non-profit Artist-run Centres. Both Sujir, a writer, and Bienvenue, a performance artist, had previously worked for Artons, an artist-run organization now operating in Toronto. They felt that strategies borrowed from the artist-run centre could be successfully transferred to this filmmaker-run enterprise.

In discussion of the C.S.I.F.'s policies of the last 12 months with co-op members, the term "arts context" seems to come up again and again, along with apologies for the inadequacy of the phrase which, like "independent", could easily become a catch-all. But the difference lies in the assiduous program of implementation that has been initiated and followed through. The co-op has gone back to its original mandate of providing a means for the production of films of social and cultural import, "in an indigenous context." Hobbyists are out. So are commercial films - regardless of how independent they may be. Marcella Bienvenue is quick to explain this position. "Most independents would view their films as being creative or culturally orientated, and

chooses her home address on the basis of its proximity to both the office and the stables. Her goals as a producer sound simplistic: to produce the thing well, and make sure it's viewed. She backs the statement up with an air of conviction and toughness that tells you she'll succeed.

Developing writers

The quality and quantity of local material available to producers is due in part to the long-standing writer's program run by Alberta Culture. Grants are awarded annually to novice, advanced and senior authors to a maximum of \$15,000. For 1982-83, \$120,000 was distributed to 40 writers. Culture's support is typified in the Sharon Riis story. In 1974 she received a \$500 grant to revise the novel, "The True Story of Ida Johnson." Three years after its publication in 1976 she got another grant to turn the novel into a script. The result is the movie *Latitude 55* which was produced by Fil Fraser of Edmonton and directed by John Juliani.

David Scorgie, assistant director, Film and Literary Arts, Alberta Culture, lists what's happening now and what his office hopes to achieve. Writing workshops on various literary topics and at different levels of expertise are held throughout the province. A prime example is the two-day script writing symposium to be held in early summer at the University of Lethbridge. Support also goes to the Television Film Institute and to a program in the schools which fosters film literacy. (Not surprisingly, Stats Canada pegs Albertans with the highest level of movie attendance per capita in the country.)

Another integral part of the program is the "Alberta Authors Bulletin" which is distributed to any writer in the province free of charge six times a year. It discusses markets, workshops, trends and opportunities and provides an invaluable link for the province's literati.

What Scorgie hopes to add as early as the spring of '84, pending approval, is a Film Arts Program. It would have roughly the same structure as the writer's pro-

gram, except that its recipients would be film and video artists who hadn't as yet established a track record. This would be an entry program to develop production and direction talent.

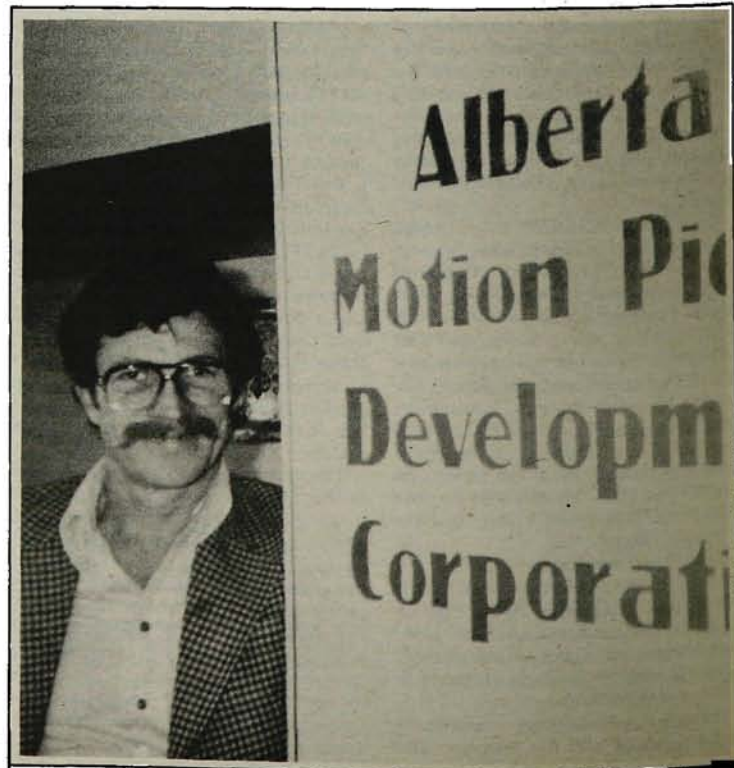
Special events

The services essential to the industry come in all forms. For international and local producers, the Banff Television Festival is an ideal opportunity to make contacts and do business in a relaxed atmosphere. Carrie Hunter, the Festival's executive director, worked closely with AMPIA this year to ensure that attention was given to areas of concern to Canadian producers, as well as focussing on issues that make the Festival appealing world-wide. Scheduled for August 14-20 it includes sessions on marketing, international co-productions, ratings and how they affect what we see. Special guests are American series writer Stephen Cannell, Pat Ferns of Primedia and Harold Greenberg of Astral Bellevue Pathé, Inc. Other notables who will be attending are: Murray Chercover, president, CTV; Bill Armstrong, executive vice-president, CBC; Colin Watson, president of Rogers Cable Systems Inc.; Don MacPherson, president, First Choice; Mark Fowler of the American FCC; and John Miessel, chairman of the CRTC.

The Alberta Government is one of the Festival's many sponsors and will contribute \$200,000 to this year's event.

For the province that housed the Commonwealth Games, runs the greatest outdoor show in the world, is home to Superman and has a lion's share of year-round tourism, providing support services to any size movie venture is second nature. For out of province producers. Calgary has a Film Industry Development office run by David Crowe. Crowe's job is to cut through red tape and smooth the way for those unfamiliar with the Calgary scene. It also means advertising the city internationally as a production site and generally promoting available services and locales.

Crowe keeps in close contact with Bill Marsden, Director of Film Industry



Headed by Lorne MacPherson, the AMPDC shows consistent growth



● Producer Maxine Samuels: making the future happen

Development with the provincial Department of Economic Development. One aspect of Marsden's job is to provide the same service Crowe does, except on a provincial basis. Other duties include liaison at trade fairs, development of new markets, scouting for opportunities and determining what could be most beneficial for industry development. In the past six months Marsden has appointed consultants in England and Los Angeles to be marketing resources for local producers.

For Marsden the future of the Alberta film industry looks rosy.³ The local producer is being given expertise and accessible start-up cash while 'outsiders' are actively sought and sold on a land that has no sales tax, a favourable rate of exchange, and available personnel cognizant of their needs.

Money finally

Money is the remaining element. Producers have been looking to national pay-TV for that resource and First Choice was first in laying big money on the line. Superchannel's approach has been perhaps more cautious. Ed Richardson, director of creative development, indicated that as of mid-April the company had paid out just under \$1 million in production and development fees. About three hundred proposals had been received and each one rejected had been given a detailed evaluation. Some of those accepted were two major entertainment programs, a 90-minute dramatic series, sports specials other than hockey and three children's programs at varying stages of development.

Limited resources may also become available from the government through Vencap Equities Alberta Ltd. Vencap is just being set up by the government and estimates of its investment budget range from \$500,000-\$5 millions. Money will be invested in areas other than conventional oil and gas, real estate and banking. While policy hasn't been finalized, a diversified risk portfolio might include film investment.

There are also the men and women in the street. While Canadians are notorious for banking their dollars rather than investing them, Alberta was the exception before the recession hit. Hot investment tips were bandied about on the ski slopes, over bridge hands and at the local watering hole. That atmosphere is dead today. Many of those hot tips led to financial disasters such as the multi-million dollar Reed affair. However, what is now available to the legitimate producer is an investment-wise population. Cautious yet, but not unwilling to take a well-explored risk.⁴

Conclusion

The big picture of the Alberta film industry shows it's made up of many small components and no one element, film or producer will be responsible for its success. The combination rather than any one particular item may enable Alberta to develop an industry that is more than various large fish in a small pond somewhere west of Toronto. People from all walks of life in the province want a film industry to happen. For its part, the government has provided incentives in line with its free enterprise policy. Large-budget international features have given technical and crafts personnel opportunities to demonstrate their skills. And certain producers like Lishman and Barclay have shown it can be done.

Bill Marsden can't find anyone to give him odds... the future does look rosy. ●

Notes

1. With a total of 21 projects approved by end-June (16 to Alberta productions and five to out-of-Alberta producers), AMPDC is showing consistent growth. Eleven features have received or been approved for funding for a total of \$700,000; four TV series for \$116,000; three TV pilots for \$70,000; and three video projects had pre-production budgets approved to \$204,000. Total approved for pre-production budgets: \$1.2 million. AMPDC has received applications for 64 projects to date. In '83 two features and one TV pilot will go into production.

2. A legal case in connection with the film's title and authorship was recently settled out of court. As a result the film's original title will be changed.



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though no decision has been reached as of this writing

often they are," she states, "but in many cases the creativity is associated with trends and/or giving the public what it wants. And in most cases the bottom line is making money." The bottom line for C.S.I.F. productions now is exploration. And members who do commercial work are encouraged to keep it entirely separate from their work at the co-op.

A concerted effort is being made by members to educate themselves and their community in "what is possible and what is contemporary," in Leila Sujir's words. An exhibition series this winter featured personal visits by several filmmakers from The Funnel in Toronto. A quarterly tabloid-format film journal that will explore media arts with particular emphasis on criticism as a part of the art process is also in the works. Plans for the future include an artist-in-residence program that would bring out-of-town filmmakers to the co-op to produce new works, an expanded exhibition schedule, and a curated Super 8 series featuring work by C.S.I.F. members and other local artists. Liaisons, both formal and informal have been set up with other Calgary artist-run groups - both to encourage the exchanges of ideas, services and audiences, and to lobby for more adequate arts funding on a local and provincial level.

But perhaps the most important step has been the emphasis on "workshop productions." The new Board instituted a tiered membership policy which provided a "flow-through" apprenticeship structure. More accomplished members can receive considerable support from the co-op for a project in the form of funds and labour. Less skilled members can learn the art and craft of filmmaking through the hands-on experience of crewing on these productions. Earlier introductory technical workshops had been well-attended but had not resulted in the making of films. The new

3. While no statistics are kept on levels of U.S. investment in Alberta film production, industry sources reveal that foreign production in the last three years is "up and increasing", as one source put it.

4. While public issues in film are not being pushed by brokers these days due primarily to the economic climate, the poor payback record and the 50% CCA, there has been an increase in private placement in films. One industry source knew of six probable private placements in film for '83. The difficulty with keeping track of private film placements in Alberta is that these investments are not specifically identified as films.

system, however, launches newer members into the middle of the creative process. Members may also pursue projects apart from the "workshop production" scheme provided they stay within the co-op's mandate and agree to give the organization privileged access to the finished work. But the priority is always the workshop productions, which, obviously, kill two birds with one stone. In fact, they epitomize the "economy of scale" typical of the new thinking at C.S.I.F. - big budgets aren't possible, yet a lot of activity happens due to the effort and energy of people working very carefully with the money and resources that they have.

Technologically Native - the first workshop production to be completed - is a 16mm film, 13 minutes in length, that was made for about \$4000. Leila Sujir and Douglas Berquist, collaborators on the film, call it a "narrative document." As in some of the works of Michael Snow and of Jean-Luc Godard, the intellectual territory is language. "The figures in the film become tangled in language and attempt to discover how they and we structure our world," explains Sujir. *Technologically Native* is definitely not a film by or for hobbyists. Instead, it is a mature and sophisticated example of independence - an independence of thinking.

The second C.S.I.F. workshop production, *Desire*, by Wendy Hill-Tout is now in post-production. And the first edition of the film journal will be out shortly. It looks like Alberta's funding agencies aren't the only ones who will be getting the C.S.I.F. message loud and clear. Marcella Bienvenue summed up this message rather well when she said "C.S.I.F. is a place where ideas may develop free of the constraints imposed by an industry. We are interested in getting the work out, getting it seen, and being part of an ongoing process which will contribute to Alberta's coming of age, culturally."

● Technological natives: Marcella Bienvenue and Douglas Berquist



Photo: Berquist/Sujir