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# MIP-TV

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## programming the world

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It may be a rude awakening for many production people when they first discover that films made must also be sold. But Susan Gabori, who went to MIP-TV wearing a sellers blue badge, quickly learned the ropes and joined in the television-film market which grossed \$30 million.

by susan gabori

I personally had never heard of MIP-TV till this year, even though I have been involved in the making of film and television programs on a number of levels. I am very familiar with the agony of choosing the right angle. I have sat through excruciating decisions at the fine cut stage, trying to hone down the seconds to fit the slots. But I have seldom concerned myself with what happens to the film after the first good answer print. I am usually too busy going on to the next project. Therefore, when a friend, Max Engel, of Media Lab TV, a Canadian distribution company, asked me to help him out at MIP, I was presented with a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of the other side of this business, the side that most of us "creative" people view as crass commercialism.

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*Susan Gabori is a filmmaker and writer now living in Toronto. She has studied film in London, England and has worked at the National Film Board as a free-lance cameraperson. She is presently writing a science-fiction book.*



Photo: John Williamson

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A sampling of the daily press from the MIP-TV market



MIP-TV takes place in Cannes two weeks before the International Film Festival. The difference in name quickly reveals the real difference between the two events. MIP-TV, *Marché International des Programmes de Télévision*, is a market place, not a festival. It is the biggest and most important international event for the buying and selling of TV programs. Its purpose is purely monetary: at the end of its seven day run it was proudly announced that over \$30 million worth of business had been conducted. Its snowballing success over the past fifteen years is indicative of a global sprouting of TV antennas.

From April 20-26 the Palais, with its sprawling five floors, was crammed with the booths of 230 TV organizations and 600 independent companies, tons of promotional material and nervous sweat. In the hope of arresting the attention of all passers-by, some of the companies had a video monitor boasting their best product in front of their booth. You could see belly dancers, trapeze acts, magic shows, Marie Osmond and many more just by walking down the corridor. Others lured in the buyers with offers of free "goodies" — umbrellas, beach bags, note pads, pens, cups, stuffed bunnies, alka seltzer, etc. After a buyer had stocked up on a pen for himself and ten for his children, he could hardly leave without viewing at least a few minutes of a show.

Media Lab TV was part of the Ontario Distributors Group which included eight other independent companies. We all shared a large reception area and four screening rooms. Most of my time was spent inside one of these screening rooms: an 8x8 plywood box lined with black felt and containing a video cassette machine, masses of promotional material and sample cassettes. On the first day, as I was trying to make a cozy nest out of our black space, I received my instructions: watch out for red badges. Color coded badges identified the purpose of each person's presence. The red badges were the buyers. I had a blue one, marking me as a seller. In the beginning I was rather shy about approaching these important red badges. After the second day I only saw red. As soon as someone neared our booth my eyes were rivetted to their lapel. I knew the name, company and country of origin before I even saw the face. England, Italy, France, Australia and other major countries gave me a rush. Countries like Yugoslavia and Hungary left me cold. I was told they did not pay enough and took forever to make a decision.

I quickly learned to spot a good buyer. He would come in and state exactly the kind of program he was looking for. I slipped on the best cassette of the requested series and started it where it had been left off from the previous time. He would not want to waste time by going back to the beginning. A minute here, then fast forward, and a minute there. That was enough for him to determine whether he wanted the whole series or not. Most of the buyers prefer to buy a series of 13, 26, etc., rather than specials or one shot deals. This is particularly true for the South American countries that do not produce much of their own but rely on imports to fill up their air time. It is easier to program in a block ahead of time than to try to place a special here and a special there. Buying in bulk means less work for the distributor, buyer and programmer.

By the third day I was so tuned into who was a serious buyer and who was not that I began to suspect anyone who wanted to see more than five minutes of a show. No serious buyer his time to look at the whole show. (One time I actually heard Max sell a show solely on a verbal description.) One afternoon a Yugoslav with a red badge came in and asked to see "Aston-

ishing Odyssey," a sound and light show with Michel Legrand conducting the orchestra. He sat down, stretched out his legs comfortably and wanted me to start the tape at the beginning. My suspicions were aroused. Two minutes into the show he asked me to close the door because there was too much noise outside; he didn't seem to notice the heat inside. I suggested going fast forward to give him a better idea of the show later on. Without looking at me he put up his hand in protest and settled deeper into his chair. I became edgy and stepped outside to see what was going on. A German buyer was waiting in the hall. I returned to the Yugoslav who was thoroughly enjoying himself. I once more asked him if he wanted me to go fast forward, after all, he wouldn't want to waste his time seeing the whole show. He said, no, of course not, but continued to watch and motioned me to keep quiet. I finally asked him if he was interested in buying it. He apologized and explained that the decision was not up to him. He had to present the show before a committee back home. I gave him a brochure and the company card, and as I was about to ask him for his he abruptly got up, shook my hand and left. I was stunned.

Besides the buyers who are representing TV stations, there are also agents who come and view the shows. The agents are middlemen between the distributor and the TV stations of the countries he is representing. Often it is easier for a distributor to deal through an agent than to try to make the contact himself. It takes time to understand the culture and customs of the country one is dealing with. For instance, Viscotel International, a London based company, sells to Nigeria as a representative for a number of companies around the world. It has taken them years to establish their contacts and to understand the mentality of the people living there. One of their stories involves the sale of "Black Beauty" to a Nigerian station. After receiving the film, the station head angrily called up to complain that he had been delivered the wrong product. Victor Ramagge checked his files and said, no, that couldn't be. He was asked to go over to the station. Upon arrival he was led into the screening room by the station head who pointed to the projected image and indignantly declared, "Look, this is a show about a horse. I expected to see a movie about a black woman."

A good distributor must know what the different requirements are of the different countries. More specifically, he has to know which stations are looking for which shows. You cannot sell Saudi Arabia a show which has scantily dressed show girls. This year France might be looking for animal shows whereas in the past three years they haven't even bothered to read your promotional material on anything dealing with animals. Or, this year a station in England has decided to buy a series of music shows, though up to now they have always produced their own. It often takes years for a distributor to build up contracts in order to be able to obtain this sort of information, in order to be plugged into the TV grapevine.

For a producer to try to sell his own product at a place like MIP must be one of the most painful experiences, particularly for a producer of documentary shows. Media Lab TV was distributing the Canadian-made science magazine show **What Will They Think of Next?**. Some of the buyers didn't want the whole series. They only wanted some of the shows, but they didn't want everything in each show. They wanted the right to re-edit them to suit their needs. Sure, no problem. The important thing is to make the sale.

ML-TV picked up the rights to a series of 110 Japanese



underwater documentary shows called **The Mysteries of the Indigo Depths**. To start with, I could not believe anyone would mass produce a documentary series. Each show had already been edited with a voice-over English narration. After procuring the rights, Max wondered who on earth would want to watch 110 half-hours of fish, no matter how interesting it might be. He decided to take all the shows, give them to a Canadian-based company and have them re-edited using the best footage, to make 39 half-hours. The original director was now totally out of the picture. I was shocked to realize how little the director's work was considered.

My second awakening came while having lunch with the person who had put up the money for the production of the shows and who was now handing them over to Max. I had been screening his demo reel to interested buyers that morning and I enthusiastically began to describe the sequence which attracted the most attention: a slow, unsuspecting octopus being vehemently attacked and strangled by a strange looking fish. As I was talking I realized that behind his polite nodding there was a blank look. I went on to describe another scene, more enthusiastically, only to be met by the same polite blank look. I stopped in mid-sentence and asked him if he had seen any of the shows. He burst out laughing and shook his head.

You quickly get a feel for what most of the buyers are looking for: commercial products, that's where the money is. They're not interested in "esoteric rubbish," they cater to a middle of the road taste, and the middle of the road taste exists in all countries. I was told that a Belgium company had been coming to MIP for the past three years, trying to sell a film it had produced. It is called **Heureux comme un bébé dans l'eau**. It is a 48 minute film about the natural birth of a baby, inspired by the theories of Dr. Leboyer. I caught a few seconds

of it as it was being screened next door. I saw a wrinkled, bloody baby emerging from the vagina. It was gently placed in a tub of water. Then I had to dash off to my own booth and stick on a cassette of **Et Ca Tourne**, a disco show made by Télé Métropole. Victor Ramagge had already sat down with three Nigerians. I expertly zipped fast forward to the Village People strutting their stuff before the camera, a few seconds of that and then fast forward again to the dance contest. I felt their excitement in the small sweaty cube, I saw them tapping their feet to the rhythm of the music. I told them how this disco show was different from all the other disco shows because you can really see the people dance, the camera doesn't flit from one obscure close-up to an equally obscure long shot. The kids can watch the show and learn the steps in their own bedroom, living room or wherever the TV had its place of honor in the house. They can practice along with the show and then go out that night and DO IT. They are only half-listening, they are too absorbed in the dancing. The show is sold, they want all 26 half-hours and I think glibly to myself, how can an under-exposed, wrinkled baby compete with such dynamic material, with such energy.

This business is about money, money, money. Phrases like cultural exchange do not have a high premium on the premises of the Palais. As a matter of fact, cultural *unity*, the frame of reference being set by the American shows, is more in line with the needs of this event.

After all the excitement had died down, an uneasy question surfaced in my mind: in this shrinking world of satellites and cross-bred entertainment, who wields the power over the world's leisure time? Who is the Big Decision Maker: the buyer, the seller, or the public? How much influence can a director or producer hope to have? □

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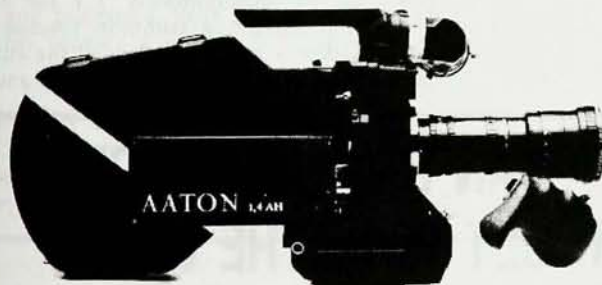
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