

Two writers in search of Canada's vanishing cultural identity

The sorrow and pity of being Canadian

by Gerald Pratley

Canadians are used to being called Americans, particularly by foreigners, and so we seldom turn a hair when visitors tell us there is no visible difference between English-speaking Canada and the USA. We are inured to hearing that Canada, always lumped in with the U.S., has no identity, at home or abroad.

The 1985 Genie Awards, so incisively described and analysed by Michael Dorland in the May issue of *Cinema Canada*, were the ultimate expression of our loud and juvenile desire to prove how true this is. How well we have succeeded in imitating and prostrating ourselves before our "great neighbour," right down to Mickey Mouse without the members of the Academy of Canadian Cinema (!) feeling the slightest twinge of shame or conscience, is exceptionally well stated by Dorland.

But we would perhaps show understanding and feel some sympathy for the Academy when its activities are set against the background of current affairs in Canada. Should we expect the Academy to behave any differently when we read, hear and see what is going on these days in the soap-opera circles of our art, politics and entertainment?

It is not surprising to hear once again discussions about "free trade" with the U.S.; that we are again being called the 51st state, or that we have in Ottawa a prime minister whose love of Ronald Reagan and all things American has already led to his being dubbed "Reagan's vice-president in charge of Canada."

It has even been said that the sight of the Stars and Stripes flying over us, along with our historical provincial flags, might give us a deeper sense of our British heritage. After all, the Maple Leaf has no historical relevance, while the 13 stripes on the American flag at least represent the original colonies.

Yet secure inside us is the knowledge that we are indeed different from our relatives south of the border, that we think, feel and behave differently in a number of ways, that we are less "showy" (even if we do these days, under exhortations from government, plaster everything with the Maple Leaf) and that we take our existence as Canadians quite seriously, living with the dispiriting fact that, because we are 25 million compared to their 250 million, it is only to be expected that, no matter what we do, the Americans will do it bigger and sometimes better.

In the meantime, as experienced observers of those things that betray us as Canadians, we accept with resigned humour and despair the constant stream of statements in the media and elsewhere — together with the peculiar actions of politicians and businessmen — we all know could never emanate from the U.S. These could only be Canadian:

- The reporter on the CBC news, with that forced upbeat brightness, telling us about Marcel Masse's "task force" on broadcasting, and ending by saying that from this enquiry we would learn "how Canadian Canada's television should be." *Should be?* Really? In the minds of individuals such as this reporter, there ought not to be any doubts whatsoever (and certainly there is no need for such a commission). It is inconceivable that such an enquiry would take place in the U.S. They know how American their TV should be:

the three networks accept no foreign programs.

- The organiser of the recent Dramalab (sic) in Edmonton quoted in *Variety* as saying "Our intention is to figure out how to make an identifiable Canadian film industry." Really? This is a matter that requires "figuring" out?

- The reporters in a Toronto newspaper who disliked the ACTRA Awards and complained loudly that this is a CBC show which excludes CTV and CFMT. They never tell their readers what programming has been aired on CTV with our writers and actors that would qualify to win any award. The answer is, of course, that CTV, CFMT, CHCH and others, do almost nothing for Canadian programming. In fact, it is well-known that the unofficial world at CTV is 'nothing Canadian, nothing British, everything American.'

And while the ACTRA Awards are a splendid tribute to Canadian talent that make the Genies look cheap, who is it that makes them possible? Texaco, hardly a Canadian company, but performing splendidly in the absence, shall we say, of Petro-Canada.

We were also told in the Toronto *Star* that CTV spent \$24 million buying American TV programs. No one said a word about the amount CTV *doesn't* spend on Canadian drama. "We do news and sports" they say, and that is enough contribution to being Canadian on our airways.

- In what other city in the world but Toronto, would passengers step into a subway car to be confronted with advertisements for a local television station in which all the programs listed were American?

- What other country but Canada would give an expensive testimonial dinner to a

film producer who had unleashed upon the world three despicable Canadian movies which are all-American in concept, location and work?

- Outside the U.S., in what other country but ours would newspapers run a regular series of columns on etiquette taken from an American news service and in which the writer talks of what to do when meeting royalty from an *American* point of view, but presented as though it applied to us?

- In what cities outside the U.S., other than in Canada, will you find newspaper boxes on the street loudly advertising *USA Today*. A city's cosmopolitan awareness is to be found in newsagents' shops which matter-of-factly sell newspapers and magazines from around the world — and of which we have too few.

- In what country but ours would you find a leading newspaper running film reviews from an American wire service and which, as one would expect, reflect an American and not a Canadian point-of-view; what newspapers abroad would run articles about "our movie stars" which are all American; what other transport system other than Ontario's GO would get its tickets printed in the USA; and where else but in Canada would a city's radio stations buy its weather reports from an American company; in what other city outside the U.S. other than Toronto would visitors arriving at the airport find the exchange counters run by the Bank of America; and in what country would an Expo be created, as in Vancouver, built and run by Americans? Can we do *nothing* by ourselves?

The examples are almost endless: it's a game anyone can play; the results, however, are not exhilarating.

Only in Canada, you say. Small things, you say; but small things repeated over and over throughout the years become accepted facts of life and bleed from us our sense of being Canadian. And they say there is no difference between us and the Yanks? Just try reversing all these situations and see if they could ever happen south of the border if all the incidents mentioned involved Canadian manufacture or participation.

It is a paradox that in being different from the Americans in allowing or wanting these things to happen to us, we are doing just what others say we are: becoming more and more American. Does it matter? Can we still assure ourselves we are "quietly Canadian" in spite of the Genies, in spite of being willingly subjugated by the tide of things American, in spite of our continuing and shameful production of imitation-American feature-films?

Perhaps we should take some satisfaction from the realisation that we are now that part of the United States which managed to become American without a war of independence and still recognises the Crown! As the McKenzie Brothers used to say, "This is the life, eh?"