A claim to a place in the sun

by Eric Green

British Columbia's motion picture industry is now heading towards a bumper $100-million-plus production year.

Spokespeople for the industry, however, are emphasizing that this is not another case of peaking before the inevitable trough. But there is unanimous agreement that if this trend is sustained, and reinforced by more Canadian production, the foundation for a genuine industry will have been well-laid.

Producers and directors, most of whom are from the U.S. industry, cite the already well-known factors which attract them here: location, technical talent and a growing creative talent pool.

There is no question that the present disparity in value between Canadian and American dollars - giving U.S. producers a 40% advantage off the top - plays a vital role in where the 'transportable' motion picture industry works.

'Ve're here because the industry is worldwide and transportable. They won't be here when the financial advantage isn't there,' said one industry person.

A certain urgent note in the voice comes from historic experience with the 'peaks' and 'troughs' of the notoriously cyclic industry.

The seasons of highest activity have traditionally been spring and summer, and the production of local commercials tend to happen in the same period, reinforcing the swings in the extreme.

Many of the central players in industry in B.C. are so busy they hardly have time to look at the critical issue of industry foundations. But they know that western Canadians must become deal-makers.

If B.C.'s production industry has struggled to become 'Hollywood North', it has remained largely a provider of services, equipment and talent exporting.

Until deals are put together here, supported by Canada's financial industry and producers, the third most populous province will be subject to the same vicious boom-and-bust that characterizes resource industries.

Brent Clackson, location consultant for the Film Promotion Office (which in B.C. is the ministry responsible for film industry support) says the resources of the industry in B.C. are so strained that productions have actually been turned away.

Virtually every prominent location has witnessed the incongruity of a production director who boasts that a film is 'locally grown' as a means of redefining the national imbalance somewhat.

'The fact is that we sent away $75 million in production between July 1 and the end of September because of our inability to service producers,' says George Chapman, business agent for IATSE, and one of the creators of the B.C. Film Industry Association.

Chapman was part of a group that held a May 1985 breakfast meeting with producers in Los Angeles. Forty U.S. producers attended, and from that group alone 12 projects were confirmed.

'In early July, I sent them all letters thanking them, and telling them we were booked solid. Even with that we had to turn away that much production. Had we not sent the letters, the interest would have been even higher.'

Under totally ideal circumstances, 1985 could have seen revenue of $20 million in production, and possibly more.

Chapman calls the results 'overwhelming' and described the B.C.-Los Angeles axis as informal and relaxed, arising from attitudes, identical time zones and closeness. The closeness to L.A. has, in turn, produced greater pan-Canadian largesse. 'We started referring productions to Alberta, and the other Prairie provinces, and finally to Quebec,' Chapman says.

Chapman explains that some of the good results from promotional activity come from a five-year plan to develop the quality of services and expand equipment availability.

Another major factor has been a policy in which creative and technical services have been "purposely undervalued." For a TV feature this can result, over a 19-day shooting schedule, in savings from $100,000 to $500,000, and crew costs can be up to $100 per hour. Added to that, fringe benefits are lower.

'This was done to encourage the emergence of a year-round

The world of business pays billions of dollars in North America every year for explicit forms of advice about how to make money in business development and promotion.

One of the glaring problems with Canada's hot-and-cold film business is that the history has been deal-making and professional promotion, including marketing in general and specific marketing programs for each film.

In the resource of manufacturing sectors of business, anyone who planned a business without working up a marketing plan would be considered crazy. And yet for decades our filmmakers have done that, and our governments have been inept at professional promotion of the industry in general.

Traditional mindsets (inferiority complex, bureaucratic amateurism, and management-union ideology) have managed to keep the industry from operating as a seamless cycle of people operating from the creative to the box office ends. We paid a price in Canada.

In recent years, however, the desperation associated with the failure of resource-sector industries to deliver more jobs has finally made the managers of the system aware that promotion is a critical element of the process.

B.C.'s Film Promotion Office in recent years, in particular, the direction of Diane Neufeld, has been demonstrating what the results of a cooperative attitude can do. And, for their part, industry insiders have given the lie to an argument that labor by its very nature is inflexible. 'So persuasive is the myth that B.C.'s new policies are better known in the United States film industry than it is in Canada.'

The fact that B.C. is having a record year in production is a reflection that the new attitudes are paying off. Everyone is winning.

Brent Karl Clackson, of B.C. Film Promotion Office (Ministry of Tourism), says the buoyancy in film production hides the fact that "everyone wins" when promotion is systematic and professional. And when one region in Canada wins, others are sure to come along.

B.C. is able to direct producers eastward, is clear the province is going to contribute to Canada's entire production industry.

It is in these areas of structural industry support that government is most effective.
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film industry," says Chapman.

The views of the unions and others involved in the industry, who generated a business game plan for B.C. a number of years ago, has been that "activity breeds activity." The industry has recognized that it needs to be able to plan its future as any other industry does.

Chapman agrees with others who believe the activity and growth in basic creative and technical talent pools will create a situation in which many people in the western Canadian industry will achieve credit levels internationally, as well as an international experience base that will result in Canadian deals.

"People are loathe to make long-term investments until all the elements of the equation are in place," he says.

"We're growing even in the depths of regional depression, and commerce, Chapman says. But the industry still hasn't achieved the recognition it deserves from governments who view film-arts industries as 'bakey'.

The industry's associations and unions are trying to establish momentum and critical mass in the industry, to ensure that when the Canadian dollar is at par or higher than the U.S. dollar, the industry "competes on the basis of merit."

Chapman says a study under-
The sirens of cinema
by Rona Gilberston

In the 1980s, the British Columbia film industry underwent a significant transformation. With the federal government's support, the province became a hub for film production, attracting both domestic and international projects. This period was marked by the rise of independent filmmaking and the growth of the industry's infrastructure.

The 1960s saw the establishment of the British Columbia Film Industry Association (BCFIA), which played a crucial role in the industry's development. The association worked to create a nurturing environment for filmmakers and to provide them with the necessary resources to succeed.

In 1978, when Alberta wooed some notable productions to its territory, British Columbia remained competitive, retaining its hold on film industry professionals. The province's film industry was seen as a reliable and efficient production center, attracting filmmakers with its skilled workforce and supportive government policies.

By the late 1980s, the industry had matured further, with a robust presence of local and international filmmakers. The BCFIA continued to play a pivotal role in the industry's growth, ensuring that British Columbia remained a competitive player in the global film market.
The figures are exhaustive and fascinating. In 1984, airfares amounted to $450,000, car rentals for one company alone totalled $150,000, helicopter usage came to $750,000, construction materials to $150,000, and polaroid film, from one drugstore phone, to $6,000. To cite a favored example last spring, Rocky IV required exuberant documentors for the Stallone vs Soviet stand-off. That sent production-assistants rushing out daily for hundreds of dollars worth of flashes for cameras. Tourists may have noticed a paucity of flashes, but retail stores relinquished their wares willingly.

Even with the equality of the Canadian dollar to the American, many believe that film work here would not slacken. The scenery and expertise of crews is, most consider, above par. Still, savings of between $200,000-$300,000 on a television movie, coupled with the mere two-and-a-half-hour flight from the mecca of moviedom, offers an exceptional lure. Between 1979 and 1983, there was a 10% increase in production within the province. By 1984, both domestic and foreign production in this territory amounted to an impressive $46,125,000 dollars.

According to IATSE business agent George Chapman, there are more people on the roster than ever before, but no compromises are being made with entrance requirements, though demand is extreme: “A producer must know he will receive consistent competence, or this long-nurtured industry has no chance of fully reaching its potential.”

For Chapman, this is an especially salient issue. Now an industry mainstay, he began his film years in lighting, doing the necessary theatre work to survive the ubiquitous lean periods. When ‘lean’ became too tangible, he left the industry, opting for architectural and interior design.

The point to be made is that though he found his way back into the industry, such is not always the way with many—an example of what can happen when you don’t protect this people and the industry—you lose your regional resources. Working from his survivor’s instinct, Chapman and the Film Promotion Office are seeking ways to promote, diversify, and survive the seasonal crisis inherent in a mono-industry.

The technicians’ local numbers 160 members, with 50 camerapersons, and, together with the Director’s Guild of 105, seven levels of positions. A staggering of crews has been necessary to accommodate the incoming work during the summer months. According to Chapman, “It’s a matter of consistency of advice, testing the market, keeping figures, working in the same method of operation and providing due warning to would-be producers.” Such creative juggling brings work back. In the last few summers, Vancouver has seen a run of back-to-back projects. A flow of people have kept the momentum of pre-production, production, and wrap-up, before moving on to the next set of pictures. Sad, though, that such things are seasonal and short-lived.

As consequence the prevailing attitude is one of accommod-ation. In comparison to Los Angeles, where 20,000 people work within a 30-mile radius are represented by one union local, there is no complacency about employment in Vancouver. Canadians are more apt to work at scale than their American counterpart and often the fringe benefits add only 18%, as opposed to 33% to 42% in the U.S. All this goes down as fair argument for finding reasons to make it happen in the north.

To date, according to the federal government’s Communications department report on the industry, there are no set requirements in awarding minimums, as in the U.S. As one L.A.-based producer put it, “the same picture would have taken 70 persons in L.A., whereas 45 had managed, through the liberties of no minimum crewing in B.C.”

Since the inauguration of the Film Promotion Office, the city has had two mayors whose support has lent marked and marketable muscles to an industry which historically has not had that many. Jane McDonald, communications assistant to Mayor Harcourt, attends to problematic production issues, working closely with Tourism. McDonald says that though budgets are necessarily large with visiting projects, the city itself realizes little direct monies, other raise small amounts in permits and the like. However, with the city budgets of past years, any infusion of real dollars into city economies is welcomed.

For some time Vancouver representatives have gathered where the provincial contingency from the Canadian contingent from the Canadian film promotion offices had become an architectural essential party of the business as its mercurial functioning against the usual odd. The federal government, which to some extent monitors, the existence of the film industry, states that in B.C., “somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 people work as freelancers, dependent on the arrival of foreign work.” If in such terms, the idea of “a stable industry” becomes matter of perspective, 80-90% of Vancouver crews depend upon a seasonal visitation of outsiders.

In the past high seasons of the summer, there have been no fewer than five projects shooting simultaneously in B.C. and the panic over studio space is mounting.

Within the city itself, three studios exist, each with their own lures and limitations. Vancouver Studios, though willing to lodge any production, is small and principally operates as a focus for commercials. Panorama Studios, long-time host to production, is seeking to re-zone and divest itself of its occupation. As recently as 10 years ago, the studio held a steadfast position, but it has since become an architectural anomaly as high-priced housing engulfs it.

Built in 1962, the 37,000-foot complex has seen the filming of The Changeling, Star 89, Golden Seal, Packing It In, The Iceman Cometh, Clan Of The Cave Bear, and Expo’s recent 30-minute industrial fantasy, Rainbow Wars. Currently, The Hitchhiker, a 13-part series for HBO, is shooting until fall. Studio director John Powell estimates that since 1982, approximately $50 million worth of production budgets have worked through the building. The age of the studio is best exemplified by the still-received phone calls from prize winners of Let’s Make A Deal.

Owners of the studio feel that the film industry has its own esoteric workings and should therefore be left to them. That, and the encroachment of the city, has convinced the Panorama Estates to sell the shrivelling 2.8 hectare site.
to developers. Though small by today's standards, the studio is one of the largest in the great radius north of L.A. With a price tag of $1.9 million, Powell feels the studio itself comes free.

Certainly B.C.'s film community has never been more focused, but the unease left from the infamous tax-shelters has not helped in unearthing investors. At governmental levels, the policy of tight restraint makes financial assistance seem unlikely to many.

The financial trepidation in both private and public sectors produces no small amount of consternation in film promoters.

So a battle now rages over the Burnaby property known as Dominion Bridge, which last year provided space to Sellick's Runaway and at present to Lorimar Production's The Boy Who Could Fly, the summer's long-running feature shoot.

As a studio, Dominion Bridge is ideal because of its colossal size and unerasable environment. Its sheer size allows for great detonations and enhancement to occur without mishap. As a bona fide studio, it would house equipment, a film lab and perhaps a restaurant. The hope is to eventually capture lost post-production work by installing facilities in the building. Currently, 33% of production budgets are lost as producers head back from whence they came to complete their projects.

The Dominion Bridge project would demand a start-up time of three to five years and at initial cost of almost $15 million. Given the yearly increase in action, with an average daily rental of $1300 while shooting and $850 per holding day, there is optimism that this is a safe investment.

The wealthiest rival to Dominion Bridge is the shopping-mall proposed by Alberta developers Triple Five of West Edmonton Mall fame. In a recent report commissioned to juxtapose the two alternatives, the British Columbia Institute of Technology looked at the dollar-to-acre projection over the next 10 years.

Results clearly show the B.C. film industry as something of consequence. The shopping-mall proposal, while investing an initial $300 million, would see a yearly rendering of $20 million for fifteen acres. The repercussions to the retail-trade of the lower mainland have their own tale of woe, but the economic focus would be considerable.

However, the studio proposal would utilize fifteen acres of land with a yearly return of $50 million per acre. The prognosis is that a studio could manage well on seven acres of land, therefore bringing in $100 million per acre and optioning half the pricey land for other use.

For George Chapman, if studios are "white elephants anyway," they do present a point of bargainability when trying to woo producers one's way. A studio of premium size and quality would act as a doorway to the rest of the province, opening northern B.C., the Yukon, and the interior to big productions that have made rare visits in years past.

The film community argues that a television movie, on average, brings in over one million dollars every nineteen days. A feature can be expected to spend an average of three to eight million for the duration - all dollars with direct investment that would otherwise not be captured by the province. And so - caught with a choice between a shopping-mall and a firmer film industry - an impasse endures until decisions are made by government and private investors examining the issue.

A studio could remedy the seasonal slowdown, but increasingly the commercial sector is permeating the regional market. Traditionally
west coast operations have been different, leaning more heavily on longer productions, but palpitations in this creative traffic are being felt. Prior to Christmas, the sister IA lSE local in Toronto was crewing at least 14 commercials a day, while the Vancouver union might not do 14 in a year.

Immigration has always been a factor for transgressors of borders – and no less so for short-time movie marketers. Recently the Japanese, like the German co-producers of A Never Ending Story, found out that the Canadian government can be less rigid and more solicitous. Two years ago at the San Jose film commission gathering, the Japanese advertising agency Dentsu pleaded with the American contingent to lobby on their behalf for less stringent entry regulations. Of the $30 million they wished to bring into the U.S., they were only being allowed six.

The Vancouver union and Film Promotion Office representatives rapidly alerted them as to the northern potential. Though the U.S. didn’t alter their restrictions and Canada didn’t get all the remaining $24 million, Dentsu is now shooting big-budget commercials for Toyota and Mazda in B.C. and Alberta.

The resulting cultural interface introduced its own unintended education. The Japanese serendipitously encountered oddities such as ‘grips’ and now find them as indispensable as does any crew. This meshing of international film cultures may have its high moment next year when EXPO ’86 brings the world to Vancouver. The film community, far from the pessimism one might expect, feels it will simply move operations further from the core of the city. Meanwhile, it’ll be shooting as usual as the principle hotelliers have already reserved rooms for their summer film customers. Like the L.A. Olympics before it, EXPO ’86 could simply make Vancouver a more ordered place to live and work, as fear stimulates action and coordination.

In the meantime, production continues to increase. Presently on the West Coast, either shooting or confirmed, are Showscan, Hitchhiker, The Story Of Linn Yan, Captive Hearts, April Fools Day, The Boy Who Could Fly, Stir Crazy, Abducted and Running Man. Here, in the land of make-believe, it is a time for applause to promoters and the industrious fellowship of film crews.