A glimpse of hope

George Chapman, IATSE 891, and the future of B.C. film production

by Eric Green

Cinema is the only new art form generated in this century. And the film industry struggles with artistic dreams of heroism and anti-heroism that films heighten and intensify, when their poetics are right on. Thanks to the democratic traditions of the 100 years since Ibsen made it clear ordinary folk could be tragic, film writers have poked their imaginations into the contemporary world's obscure, dark corners looking for real tragedy or real comedy.

With the emergence of mass society and the information age, we have developed the corresponding institutions to work for us: joint-stock corporations whose stockholders are mass investors; churches representing large groups; educational institutions to teach en masse, and layers of agencies representing every group imaginable, from veterans of world wars to batik artists and potters.

Among those institutions, unions have written themselves a major role in the history of this century, representing the mass workers who once operated the machines of the Industrial Era, and now increasingly work in knowledge-based service jobs that didn't exist even 30 or 50 years ago.

A scan of the response of the industry to unions reveals the same spectrum of attitudes, from pandering to low taste to attempts to enlighten, that is characteristic of the industry generally. As a form of big business providing 'personnel' for services like a labour-broker, unions themselves no longer show the world the dramatic face associated with head-busting on the waterfronts of 50 years ago. Like any changing industry, unionism too has its hidden achievers, who understand how the system works, have a carefully developed sense of objectives and goals that can be realistically achieved in limited time-frames, but who also quietly try to knock sense into the system through their dedication to 'a better way.'

If all this sounds somewhat theatrical - it's because it is. But George Chapman, the business representative for Local 891 of IATSE, representing motion-picture studio production technicians, resists being defined that way. Every decision made by the union, he says, is made by the membership who vote on everything. Still, there are thousands of 'business reps' for unions across Canada's business world. Bad ones, barely competent ones and a handful of great ones. Like it or not, Chapman has the makings of one of the great ones.

The IATSE business office in the Palisades Hotel (West Tower) in Vancouver has become the focal point of the film industry in the west. If you want to know what's happening here, start there. Room 506. You don't have to knock.

George Chapman's briefcase - highly organized - is open. Evident are a Super Natural British Columbia promo badge with the film director's chair predominant. There are temporary Media Club (a hangout for television, radio and other media people in Vancouver) membership cards. A visitor's pass to the 20th Century-Fox lots says he has recently been in L.A. on business. There are contracts: a record number have been signed in B.C. this year worth record amounts (see below and also Cinema Canada No. 123). All around the briefcase of the ubiquitous Chapman, on a tidy desk in a cubbyhole in the living-room of the apartment that parades as an office, are trade magazines, industry guides and so on. It has been a very busy year so far. It continues to be a very busy year.

Besides record general unemployment, B.C. has had another record year: record-clear days and sunshine for months, and now some record rainfall. Chapman has been on a set of A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend, an American productions starring Bob Hope. "The film was going to be shot in Palm Springs. But we talked to Fox. Even with the rain, we convinced them it could be done here," Chapman says.

George Chapman: born in Victoria, raised in Montreal, came west in 1965, at 21. His first connection with the film industry was a job driving truck on The Trap, starring Rita Tushingham and Oliver Reed. "It was just a job. I was hooked." His father was Air Force. Chapman had no 'logical' background leading to the film industry.

"The Panorama Studios were built in the early '60s, and there was that business of B.C. being touted as a Hollywood North. There were great proclamations about B.C. 'getting in at the ground floor,'" he recalls.

Chapman went into lighting, joined IATSE. The industry did not appear. Lesson one: doubt the rhetoric. Chapman went into the lighting de-
sign business on a commission basis as a manufacturer's representative. He learned a second very important lesson: how to be a salesman. When your job depends on it, you learn. His job today still depends on it.


But the film industry in Canada wasn't alive. "There were about 30 people in the local, all fighting for each job. We'd go a year or more without work."

As Chapman's business changed -- it was more profitable, he explains, to move closer to the film industry (meat packing, fish processing) and stainless steel fittings for yachts -- he became aware of the structural and strategic flaws in Canada's film industry. It simply wasn't living up to its potential. The provincial and federal governments appeared to have no ability to see it 'steadily and see it whole' and act accordingly.

The big rhetoric of the 1960s about a great leap forward for Canada's film industry was occurring at the same time as organized labour in Canada was experiencing stronger growth and more viable support than it ever had. New Democrats -- formally affiliated with unions, receiving direct funding from them -- were in office in three provinces for the first time and stronger in another.

But the rhetoric wasn't producing work. IA TSE, along with most unions, began to look at the film industry as an industry, to see how it actually works, not how it ought or even should work. IA TSE is a fragmented, (decentralized) group of locals, some larger, some smaller. In B.C. five locals (891, the motion picture studio technicians; 601, international photographers, western district; 348, projectionists, 118, the stage crew local; 872, front of house people at theatres) are involved. Across the country there are fraternal relations, but local by local there is competition for work.

George Chapman was asked to act as business manager for three months while 891 looked for a full-time business manager. This is no sinecure for who ever does the job. Each year the contract must be voted on.

It was clearly a position where someone who both understood the 'weird' film business and had the skills of an entrepreneur might have a chance to do something positive. Chapman still unabashedly talks like an entrepreneur: "We're selling services."

"I had supplemented my income by working in the film business for a number of years. I felt I owed the local a great deal," says Chapman.

A goal was set for the three-month contract period as 891's business manager spent generating a five-year plan. Custom metal fabricating business was unionized, and he understood how the system works from all sides of the picture.
The real movie we all want to see, Chapman explains, is the one that comes after *The Making of an Industry*. Let’s call that *Making Canadian Feature Films and Television Shows*, because, as Chapman says, we need Canadian financing, Canadian producers, Canadian stories, Canadian films.

George tells the story of a major industry convention he recently attended in San Francisco, where television show producers and distributors were trying to sell their wares to the networks. Smack in the Moscone centre a yacht manufacturer had set up a big yacht. Why there? Why not in a boat show? The manufacturer said the show had already resulted in three sales of yachts. “I’m the only game here. In a boat show I’d be one among many.”

“When people ask me why a union representative is at these special events, that’s the story I’ll tell them,” Chapman explains.

But as more and more competing jurisdictions learn to play the game of promotion, the law of diminishing returns comes into play. Sooner or later, Chapman took the story onto the set of *A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend*. We watch Bob Hope for a fleeting second. The rain has been pouring down for weeks.

IATSE members on the set talk a little about Chapman, who has agreed to participate in a commercial for the B.C. government that describes the industry’s successes in recent years. He is delighted; it helps him sell the industry to the government.

Because another major issue looms in B.C. with the death of Panorama Studios, there will be no major studio facility, no home base for the industry. The movie the B.C. Film Industry Association is trying to have made today is *The Dominion Bridge Story*.

A crown corporation the B.C. Development Corporation has been charged with assessing the future of the film production industry. Their report, soon to be made public, will determine whether the government helps develop an international class production facility. The big numbers from the industry in 1985 may help tip the scales in favour of the project. Research has clearly demonstrated the project’s feasibility, says Chapman, who is a vice-president of BCFA.

So here’s one final scene for George’s movie.

**Location:** Brock House Restaurant, a mock tudor fantasy structure that doubles as a community hall for Vancouver oldsters.

**Time:** Evening. Early dinner hour.

George Chapman, the main man, enters with U.S. veteran producer Bob Stabler. *A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend* is being shot nearby in the ritzy Royal Vancouver Yacht Club. Also along is a cinema magazine writer. Chapman has called Allan Simmons, the director of Wendy Wacko’s film *Striker’s Mountain* and invited him. He comes later. Tables are not ready, kitchen is not ready. In a somewhat raﬃsh holding bar the three men are served drinks and talk about Stabler’s experience in Canada. Chapman knows the scene well, and makes use of it. Chapman and Stabler discuss mutual business briefly.

Byplay between Chapman and restaurant staff person, an attractive young woman of Asian descent. Where’s Bob Hope? she asks. And the conversation turns around a promise of free dinner if he would get Bob Hope into the restaurant. Alas, the old folks didn’t want their even tenor on a wet, cold afternoon made uneven. Not even for a glimpse of Hope. Chapman is connecting people to people. Simmons arrives before dinner is served. The restaurant fills up with non-film folk. Conversation ranges through the technical (Simmons leading) to the political, from personalities to issues.

There are no hidden agendas. Chapman is connecting people to people. Stabler makes films. Simmons wants to direct more features. Chapman wants work for IATSE members. You get the picture?

The film industry in western Canada is going through a period of intense transformation. As welcome as American-generated production is, no one today made it clear certain cultural industries will be “on the table” in trade negotiations with the U.S., an overriding issue now faces Canadian producers. Will film, as a cultural industry, be one of the areas in which government intervention would disappear on both sides and talent would be permitted to move freely between countries?

If so, what would this do to the film industry in Canada? As long as there is a currency differential, it is likely productions would come north, but if part of the deal which is struck includes parity or near parity in currencies, that advantage could disappear and, with it, the current bubble of activity.

A lot of work remains to be done within Canada to get free trade between east and west. There are prominent people within the industry who have stated publicly that they don’t believe the west can ever be a significant production centre without American capital.

George Chapman and other key figures in the industry in B.C. now believe it is likely the provincial government will announce support for a production studio and office complex on the Dominion Bridge site. If so, it will be one more major element in the stabilization plan.

Chapman’s “five-year-plan” was his own and, with a positive decision about a major facility, the prospects for sustaining activity will be improved greatly. “Research has shown that B.C. could average about $70 million in annual production over the next decade,” says Chapman.

Here’s hoping.

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