A Cinema Canada interview with Norman Horowitz

The mirage of cultural sovereignty

Living in the U.S.
electronic shadow

by Connie Tadros

D uring the Banff Television Festival last June, Norman Horowitz participated in a panel entitled "Wacky Wacko Goes to Market: Can She Make It Internationally?" Wacky presented a projected television series as a test case and people in the room — the CBC, the NFB, representatives from the U.S. and abroad — responded to it with offers and counter-offers as Wacky tried to put a production deal together. The panel then commented on the project and on the deal which resulted. In this context, Cinema Canada spoke with Horowitz about the dealings of Canadian producers in the American market. Now president of The Norman Horowitz Company, Horowitz had been with Columbia Pictures Television for 25 years and at CBS for three. In the latter job, he was Director of International Sales. He founded Polygram Television before starting his current company. Horowitz holds syndication rights to a number of successful U.S. series, among them Soap, Barney Miller, Charlie's Angels and Hart to Hart.

Cinema Canada: There is a very interesting quality when Americans speak to Canadian panels. Canadians are so hopeful, young, enthusiastic, and the Americans sound like such cynics about us ever being able to do business except in the most exceptional circumstances.

Norman Horowitz: I think that what most people don't understand including most Americans is what the American market actually is. There is essentially in America a desire for money and power that affects everything that happens. There is money, power and ego at stake in American television. And I think that while I've certainly experienced a considerable Canadian ego, moderate amounts of money and moderate amounts of power, the situation doesn't exist nearly to the same extent that the system exists in the United States.

I just met my friend, Murray Chercover, someone I've been doing business with and I've known as a friend for 23, 24, 25 years. He's been head of CTV ever since I've known him. There hasn't been a head of an American broadcasting organization for more than 12 minutes because they come and go. Mail is addressed to American executives to "occupant" because no one is there for any appreciable amount of time, so they must absorb that amount of money, and that amount of ego satisfaction while they are there. It's like the brass ring. They have it, they know they are going to lose it and they have to grab as much as possible and try to exercise as much power as they can. They must try and take as much power as possible with them after they leave the network or after they leave the job of studio head.

We don't have an attitude of protecting our culture in the United States, so that's not an issue. We don't have government involvement in American television other then the minimal involvement of the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) which is not at any level of the same texture as the CRTC. It's just totally different. My observation is that the American FCC understands television probably as well as the CRTC does. I mean, I haven't been to a hearing in 15 years. When I used to listen in on the regulatory process, either in American or Canada, the regulators didn't even understand the business that they were regulating. If saying this makes me more enemies here in Canada, it's a similar situation in the United States.

But again, the American business is motivated by power, money and ego. And there are production companies that have huge overheads. The overhead at Paramount is huge, at MGM, Universal, MTM. All of the studios have huge overheads. Even independent companies, Viacom or Telepictures or Lion or Embassy, have huge overheads for salaried producers, writers, casting, production assistants. The actual physical plan involves tens of millions of dollars for each of these companies. The networks have huge amounts of money, again, at stake. Suffice it to say that they are in a life-and-death struggle in order to attract an audience, and that attracting that audience allows these particular people, who work at these particular companies for huge amounts of money, to retain their incumbency. "Retaining the incumbency" is the number-one item in the American broadcasting organization, in American productions. Who wants to lose a $500,000-a-year job? How many network presidents are here? How many heads of studios are there? So that that really leads to such basic issues... Again, the exercise of power comes from that amount of money, and from that ability to order programming, co-produce programming, hire your friends and, if you want to go deeper into politics, it lets you exercise your own personal opinion. Any way, there is such a multiplicity of things going on as to be absolutely overwhelming.

What we don't have is we don't have any government financing institution there to encourage American production. "We'll give you 12%, 19, 42..." and I believe that — and this is an ugly American speaking — that in the long run it harms the process rather than assists the process.

Cinema Canada: The government incentive?

Norman Horowitz: Yes, the government incentive... People get upset when I say this but the government ultimately interferes with the process. If you let the "entrepreneurialness" of free competing commercial interest, evil as it may be, and let the marketplace, you know, come into play... If what you want is co-production, if what you want is American involvement, well then, you are going to have to risk American domination. You have to risk it. You actually have to risk it. The expectations that you can put together stuff that you want "Canadian", reflective of your culture, reflective of the Canadian idiom and that you can get people to invest in that programming, is almost a contradiction. Now I'd get lynched if I said that, but, I mean, that's the reaction. As a sovereign nation, you are absolutely entitled to do what you want in programming. But you can't have it both ways, and it's unlikely that you are going to have it both ways.

Cinema Canada: Talk to me about
that I never hear any discussions about the actual quality of programming when Americans talk about why their programs get to the networks...

Norman Horowitz: That's why! Strike the word, strike the word "quality" – very subjective – strike the word quality. America is not interested in quality television, whatever that is... Now, quality television to an American is not what the critics and the people who comment on television in The Globe and Mail will talk about. If the US networks paid attention to that – and they do pay a certain amount – then they'd be losing their eggs... We did it with Hill Street Blues here at NBC, and we were proud of it...

Cinema Canada: But is it not true that, in fact, there are a lot of people with sets turned off? Do American executives agree that what they might produce could cause these people to tune back in?

Norman Horowitz: Can I tell you something about the difficulty of this interview? It's like discussing religion between a Jew and a Gentile, a Jew and a Catholic, or somebody who is from some other planet! We don't come from a common base of understanding. See, you come from Ozz with a question like that. You really do.

Cinema Canada: To the question of whether television executives think about that?

Norman Horowitz: No, because that is a do-you-still-beat-your-wife kind of question. What is flawed is not my ability to answer; it's the question that's flawed. Now I just made another error. Let me tell you why the question is flawed...

We got our first television set when I was 14 years old in 1946 right after the Second World War and I remember it was a RCA family affair. It was about five inches square and the technician putting an antenna on the roof, connecting the wires, plugging it in and putting it on. And there was the test pattern, and I sat there and watched it... The only thing I was looking at was the test pattern because I could not conceive that a picture was being sent from one place, even though it was a test pattern, an early test pattern, not even as interesting as colour bars today, just a black and white head of an Indian, with circles and lines. And I sat there and watched it. I'm not saying that the American public is not interested in quality television because it would not attract the kind of numbers that they feel they need. The reason is, and this is very unfortunate, that our system has generated the "it's got-to-be-better" syndrome...

The trouble is that the network spends tens of millions of dollars in the program development process. I don't know what the hell the figure is, huge amounts of money. They have programming staffs. The larger the staff, the more the power, the larger the expenditures, the more the power, the more they can hire their friends...

Cinema Canada: But what you are actually saying is that if the American system is so unregulated by the government, by the public, then why are people who are controlling it so beautifully regulating it?

Norman Horowitz: They are so heavily regulated by the public, that people who own material and have personal vested interest and the shareholders of the company they work for. That enters into it, but you see what happens? You are going this way, and you are in this place, and in this place and the reality is in another time and in another place so that your questions, have to do – you understand what I'm saying? – with your frame of reference. There are no really unique answers because that's the way it is...

Cinema Canada: That is in the Canadian frame of reference it's difficult to talk about American TV.

Norman Horowitz: Yes, from your frame of reference, absolutely. When you are talking about people watching television. Absolutely. Your frame of reference is going to be what's of interest to people who listen to Jewel in the Crown. You are absolutely right. But it's in the wrong frame of reference as far as America is concerned.

Cinema Canada: Well, my frame of reference is that of being very bored by American TV, and we have more TV than you have.

Norman Horowitz: I'm married, two kids.

Cinema Canada: Have you ever been bored with your husband? Don't answer that. But boredom is not just... People want to look at boredom and say, you are right, I spoke to 50 of my friends and they are bored with their television... People know that that is not necessarily what matters. There are other considerations... So that when you bring that up, you understand what I'm talking about? You are speaking a different language, because you know, that is not in your framework, everything you said is reasonable, but in the real framework I'm speaking about, what you say is...

Cinema Canada: Why does the American framework become the real framework?

Norman Horowitz: Because it's the framework of America, not of your mind. I'm not saying that the American framework should be transported...
of that show. Right here, I'm going to invest my own money and we'll take it to that same guy. The same guy is going to look at it and say: I've seen all 50 episodes and they are incredible, they know how to develop the really expensive projects for a price that I can buy it at a right price... What is that going to do for me and my career? I'm looking to buy something from Norman Lear because he's going to hire me. If my conviction isn't strong enough, he's going to get killed because his management - the CBI, the NBC or ABC - will say: hey, wait a minute! What the hell are you guys doing playing $50 million worth of golf with him? These people out there all over the world who are willing to develop programs! You got this marvelous program from half of what you paid for this other network. I think therefore you are, and that you want to pay $50 million next year for development... Their ego goes down. Their earning ability goes down. Their relationships go down. So what you're talking about is a constant dynamic flow of things and reasons, and you want to quantify it and talk about what's happened downstairs at the panel! Chauvinism.

I want to get back to what you think it has to do with. That's right... I just had a small discussion with one of your Canadian network executives whom I've been arguing with for years. It has to do with what market they are going to do with. It has to do with circumstance.

If you have a company, Maple Leaf Productions, financed at $30 million capitalization. It takes five talented Canadians, people who are talented in comedy, in drama, in children's program. You have a certain amount of rent space and a glitzy office. They hire a very high-level p.r. company, they work with some of the existing Canadian writers and directors based in Hollywood. Now, this is typical in Hollywood. It's a lengthy process of getting to know the network people, lunches, dinners, parties, establishing relationships and knowing we have all this money. Now, when the show is successful because Edmonton is far from L.A. or New York, the seats of network power, but in that process, there would be a possibility of things happening, based on the fact that they are playing the same way the game is being played.

**Norman Lear: But Wendy Wacko is not about to do that**

But Wendy Wacko is not about to do that. "I could not say to you, and I could not say, so when Wendy Wacko says there's been ‘interest’, I would tell you something. If I call every distribution company that I know about, I could call the state of Hawaii, I could call a company that was going to invest money in Wendy Wacko's film - and I admire her. She's terrific, but it's a very tough thing. Years ago, before things got different, the Canadian production that could have worked and still could with the right ingredients, was taped programming with lesser aspirations. Nobody is looking to Canada for a $2.5 million feature and, you know what? Nobody is looking to America either. If it's going to be a series and if somebody went out and made a picture for $2.5 million, you know what American network could buy it? None. You know what interest it would have in syndication? None. It would have in home video unless it had certain ingredients, and certain promotional aspects? None. It's not its ‘Canadianism’. It’s got no connections, it's nothing to connect to.

I’m a distributor. I've been an executive. The most expensive deal I ever made... I did a deal on the telephone with Aaron Spelling when I was at ABC. We wanted to produce a pilot for ABC called: Hart to Hart, and I said to him, what about it? He said it's the Thin Man. I = fine, wait a minute! What the hell are you doing playing $5 million worth of golf with him? This kid's going to hire me. They throw him out! He has no power, he has no leverage, no idea about the market. I’m going to go fade out and fade in. The only way I would like to answer and I choose to happen to go into the fact that this kid's history comedy that takes place in the Banff Springs Hotel - the history of it, the mountain of the mountains, the tradition, the mountainous - all very tough thing. Years ago, when you were under 40, 50, 60 years. You'll have the mountains and stuff that we can do in the skiing. The manager is a skier and he's got a mistress who lives in the mountains, but tells his wife he's skiing. Now the network executive who's listening to this is 32-year old, he hopes that after he gets thrown downstairs downstairs that Norman Lear is going to hire him. Now, that's not in your reality. Your reality doesn't talk about Norman Lear hiring that network executive, that does not happen. Norman Lear is not one of those people who have been here for 40, 50, 60 years. You'll have the mountains and stuff that we can do in the skiing, the manager is a skier and he's got a mistress who lives in the mountains, but tells his wife he's skiing. Now, the network executive who's listening to this is 32-year old, he hopes that after he gets thrown downstairs downstairs that Norman Lear is going to hire him. Now, that's not in your reality. Your reality doesn't talk about Norman Lear hiring that network executive, that does not happen. Norman Lear is not one of those people who have been here for 40, 50, 60 years. You'll have the mountains and stuff that we can do in the skiing, the manager is a skier and he's got a mistress who lives in the mountains, but tells his wife he's skiing. Now, the network executive who's listening to this is 32-year old, he hopes that after he gets thrown downstairs downstairs that Norman Lear is going to hire him. Now, that's not in your reality. Your reality doesn't talk about Norman Lear hiring that network executive, that does not happen. It is a fantasy. It is not about reality. It is not about what you want to do. It is not about what you want to do... et cetera... They throw him out! He has no power, he has no leverage, no idea about the market. I’m going to go fade out and fade in.