7th annual Banff Television Festival

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

by John Timmins

Organizers of the 7th Annual Banff Television Festival were uneasy at the beginning of the week (May 21 to 31) -- and with reason. But it wasn't because the Bow River, winding through the backyard of the Banff Park Lodge, was threatening to overflow its banks. Rather, their concern was whether this year's festival had outgrown its usefulness as an effective "working festival."

Like the Bow River, the number of delegates had also risen dramatically -- to over 400. No fewer than 300 television programs were screened by a pre-selection committee and 173 programs representing 22 nations kept the jury busy for the greater part of two weeks of 15-hour days.

Yet by week's end, the river had found its level slightly above normal. And Festival Director, Jerry Ezekiel, was at last able to relax; declare the festival a success, and begin to reflect on what could be improved for next year. Chief among his concerns is the uniform complaint by all seven jury members of a near intolerable workload. The difficulty, as he sees it, is balancing the festival's reputation for thoroughness with the festival's growing popularity around the world.

"We are in a way victims of our own success," says Ezekiel. "The jury has too many programs and not enough time." The options are a larger jury, more time or both. The first option, he says, is difficult to secure in terms of who is available, the second option will cost. The festival might also consider being more selective in its initial screening process but this could raise the question of credibility and a preselection committee exceeding its mandate.

Both Ezekiel and Carrie Hunter, Executive Director of the Banff Television Foundation, insist that the $900,000 festival must remain, in Hunter's words "small" and "honest," where programs in competition are judged solely on their own merits.

"Whatever we do with the jury system we must maintain its integrity," says Hunter, "this is not the Prix Italia." Another concern, albeit perennial, also has to do with the jury. The suggestion is that the number of competitive categories should be increased from the current 10 to more finely defined categories. These might include (pre-and post-pubescent) children's programs and cost effectiveness, the latter category being suggested in a panel discussion by jurist Gyorgy Balo to which fellow jurist Jerry Kuehl replied that there is no true accounting method to find out, in terms of dollar-value, what a show costs.

As in the past, several programs which the jury found fit with difficulty in their assigned categories were awarded. These were: Anne of Green Gables (Canada), The Story of a Country Road (Bulgaria), My Mother Married Wilbur Stump (USA), Zina (England).

If one theme or persistent topic of discussion surfaced on all three levels of the festival (the conference, the competition, the marketplace) it was "co-production," says Ezekiel.

A question of co-production was very much in the air this year. You had the public television thread (special tributes) and the marriage of public and private broadcasting. Speaking as a business executive in the festival's marketplace, Louis-George Tetreault of Montreal's Productions SDA Limitée described the prevalence of the co-production theme this way: "The key word this year is co-production. It is not 'can I sell you my product?' It is, rather, 'let's do a production.'"

As a result of a meeting at the festival with Télécine (France), Tétéraut is looking at an unsigned deal to create two four-hour mini-series. A story treatment from Television España, hailed as an outstanding competitor this year, is expected on Tétéraut's desk in early August.

International cooperation, inter-agency cooperation, the relationship between independent producers and television networks, the theme of co-production surfaced again in comments by Arthur Weinthal, CTV Network vice-president, who said that the cost of producing has rendered the co-production a "marriage of necessity." Gene Lawrence, English programming director of TVO said he would like to reduce staff and pump 50 per cent of all new funds received into the private sector.

The theme also surfaced in the daily seminars. In one instance, a discussion on the topic led to near-fighting words. It was during a panel discussion chaired by Norman Horowitz of New York when Bruce Rider of Disney Channel, co-producers of Danger Bay and The Edison Twins, spoke about the introduction of a children's pay TV in Canada. Noting that the introduction of the Family Channel, in which Disney would be a major partner, would result in more Canadian productions, he insisted that these programs would have to assure production values targeted at a U.S. audience.

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David Simon, of the newly consti-
tuted Fox Television Network added in-
suit to injury when he said that Fox, a contender for status as the fourth U.S. network, might have difficulty purchasing Canadian programs not as familiar to a majority of U.S. audiences. He said that to break into the market, Canadians have to deal with what he called the “most chauvinistic broadcast-
ing country in the world.”

On the following day, John McGreedy, the Toronto-based producer of the Peter Ustinov’s Russia series, took a moment from a panel discussion, to explain how the industry has appropriately entitled itself to propaganda and Media Responsibility, to re-

Biggins said that Fox, a production company in the West German network, would be foolish for anyone to adopt the “unappreciated” public service of the Canadian war correspondent-turned-filmmaker, whose films have been coopted by the better networks and too few from East bloc producers have been returned to the festival since 1982 when he joined the jury. He says the festival should maintain the high quality of its competition and develop the prestige of the Rockie’ award.

His criticism this year is that there were too many U.S. entries in competition and too few from East bloc countries.

On the domestic scene, Demers has observed the growing sophistication of Western Canadian industry executives as Canadian filmmaking traditions have begun to take hold.

Hunter argues: “The Eastenders have traditioned themselves better here after the festival but the Westerners are getting to a point where they have developed the knack of putting deals together.”

Regardless of past-traditions and Canadian producers made a strong showing in international competition with three winning programs in the 10 finalist categories. The Best of Festival (Grand Prize) went two ways this year: to The Final Offer, winner of the social and political documentary category, produced by the National Film Board and the CBC and to Music Hall, winner of the Limited Series competition, pro-
duced by Téléc for FR3 and Canal Plus. The Nature of Things: Ducks in Danger at the Bear and the Ape in Rockie in the Outdoors and Wildlife documentary section. Diane Dufresne: Follement Votre, produced by Société Radio-Canada, is this year’s win-
er in the Performance Special category.

Awards night was the black tie affair of the festival held at the Banff Springs Hotel to introduce the 15-hour epic Helmut from West Germany.

“Helmut was much too tough for the other networks,” says Lawrence.

“Although the Awards Night was the social event of the week, two formal evenings were given over to tributes to West Germany’s Westdeut-

cher Rundfunk (WDR) for outstanding achievement in television and radio and to the CBC for 50 years of public broadcasting.

Both evenings provided a suitable stage for chief executives and politi-
cians. Representing WDR was Dr. Gunter Fleischer, Westdeutcher Rundfunk’s director, who introduced 17 minutes of highlights from award-winning programs by such film notables as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, (Berlin Alexanderplatz); Wim Wenders, (Paris, Texas); Edgar Reitz, (Heimat); Wolfgang Petersen (Das Boot).

CBC president Pierre Juneau who took the honours during the CBC Radio-Canada tribute followed by an historical perspective on public broadcasting achievements by Minister of Communications Marcel Massie. The group did not have a day before the week was out. A press conference was called to introduce a working group to study the non-theatrical sector of the film and video industry. The National Film Board president François Macerola will co-chair the group with Merit Jen-

sen from West End Productions in Win-
nipeg. Other group members are Carl Green from Canadian Filmmakers Distribution West (Vancouver), Les Mod-

o of Motion Pictures (Toronto), Aimé de Danis of Les Productions du Verseau (Montreal) and Bernie Hart of the Nova Scotia Board of Broadcasters.

The group will study ways to increase the size of the education market for Cana-
dian productions where there has been traditional dominance by mostly Amer-
ican films.