

FRONTS WEST

by Kathryn Allison

The latest expedition of Telefilm mandarins took place in late November when chairman of the Board Jean Sirois (along with cohorts Peter Pearson, Linda Beath and Neil Court) came to Vancouver to meet the western barbarians. Sirois and Beath held a luncheon press meeting during which the unique problems of the West Coast producers were rehashed. The lack of a provincial government film fund, coupled with the lack of broadcasters with a) money and b) clout combine to disenfranchise B.C. producers of funding and development opportunities.

Sirois and Beath adamantly rejected the suggestions that Telefilm allocate more money to B.C. (the favourite figures being used to embarrass Telefilm these days are: B.C. contributed 16% of the total amount of the broadcast fund and has only received 2% back). Beath insisted that they had been "erring on the side of generosity in regional decisions" and repeatedly stated that there just aren't many proposals coming in from B.C. She pointed out that Sandy Wilson,

the darling of Canadian cinema, and certainly the most attractive director in terms of revenue potential, hasn't even submitted a proposal for her next project. Sirois asked where all the producers in B.C. are, "Don't you have any Anne Wheelers here?" It was pointed out that many B.C. producers move to Toronto or Los Angeles because of lack of growth opportunities here.

Another subject of concern was the apparent lack of lobbying power for local producers in B.C. Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec's lobby groups have succeeded in getting their provincial governments to set up film funds, and co-production agreements between several of those provinces are being forged. But in B.C., the lobbying for the independent production industry was agreed to be fragmentary and just plain weak. Most producers from B.C. who want to get anywhere simply pack up and leave, justifying Peter Pearson's tongue-in-cheek description of the B.C. industry as essentially "below the neck". Yet it was pointed out that there is a strong lobby group

for the support industry that has blossomed from the large amount of U.S. runaway production in the province. There's plenty of lobbying for a studio centre, and the Dominion Bridge building is getting \$5 million worth of renovations to that end. There's plenty of lobbying against the tax on U.S. performers. There's plenty of concentrated effort going into keeping these Americans coming in and employing B.C.'s technicians. But not a lot of effective lobbying for local production.

In a public meeting the same day, Peter Pearson responded to Ron Devion's suggestion that both Telefilm and CBC give decision-making powers to this region, by pointing out that Wayne Sterloff already did have decision-making power at Telefilm's Vancouver office, and that perhaps Pierre Juneau should be invited to Vancouver next. (While Sterloff does make the decisions in the West, he can be overturned by specialists back East who often quibble over budgets of financing structures. Fiscal responsibility is felt in the West to be a catch-all phrase that enables the Eastern mandarins to stonewall Western decisions over creative differences.)

Pearson had already protected himself from the challenge of dual decentralization by starting the evening saying that Telefilm is a "reactive, not an active" organization. He repeatedly stated that Telefilm cannot function as a studio, and that therefore the onus for determining the quality of projects must be determined by the market. His attitude was his usual one - that Telefilm wants to fund B.C. projects, and have been very generous in the past, but it's up to producers to lobby whoever it takes to get all of the other support structures in place, as other provinces have done.

Katharine Neilsen, a scriptwriter who also sat on the panel, provided relief from the all-too-familiar rhetoric from both sides with exasperated one-liners. Reacting to the favourite buzzword of the day: Market driven! What is that? I'm sorry but I don't think the thing is being driven by anyone." On having to rewrite scripts: "I don't mind being told to rewrite by somebody who understands dramatic action and structure, but there are story editors out there who shouldn't be allowed to make vowel sounds."

But she wasn't there just to entertain - she brought up the thorny problem of the plight of writers who receive abysmally poor payment in options, and virtually nothing while they develop scripts. There were no easy answers. Peg Campbell repeatedly asked for more Tele-

film funding for script development and for more recognition of low-budget features (less than half a million dollars) as safer bets for recoupment. Neither was forthcoming.

By the end of the evening, the Telefilm contingent had held firm in refusing to define their organization's role as being obliged to compensate for the weaknesses of other players in B.C. But Sirois ended the discussions on a conciliatory note, and promised that they would try to do better in the future. It was rumoured afterwards that he intends to continue talks about the CBC's centralist bias when he goes back East.

Genie screenings will be held in Vancouver in early January. A selection of videos to Video Culture's program were shown in November. Several Western Canadian entries were shown, though Karen Firus submitted her award-winning *Fashion 99* video too late that day for the evening screening. But there was a second chance - she threw a purple fashion bash on December 3 for the screening of the video at Robson Square Centre. Chris Bruyere had his screening of *Shelley*, his new feature about a teenager who is molested by her stepfather, also at Robson Square, as did Ivan Horsky and

his one hour documentary about child prodigies directed by Robert Chesterman, *Which Way to Carnegie Hall*.

Another headache for Hollywood North - the Hollywood unions have agreed to lower their rates, in an effort to keep U.S. productions at home. It is an indication that the golden days of B.C. as a favourite location for U.S. shoots may be coming to a close, or at least a slump. And just when we were getting Directors Guild of Canada directors on series (*Airwolf*), and holding onto complete post-production (Jumpstart is using Gastown and Pinewood for all their posting).

Congratulations to the people who made *Vancouver, City by Choice*, a Rogers Cable TV-Vancouver production which recently won the Grand Prize (\$10,000) in the City Assets Film Competition sponsored by the U.S. pay-TV channel, The Arts & Entertainment Network. Robert Carver directed, Ron Fisher wrote the script and Julie Markus did narration.



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