

Cheap Lies



photo: Kevin Hall

by Kathryn Allison

In the face of severe budget cutbacks, CBC Vancouver's drama department is finding new ways to finance its programs. A case in point is the 11-part anthology series *Lies from Lotus Land* which was shot in Vancouver over the past six months as a result of a new financing strategy: co-production with the private sector.

Lies from Lotus Land is an umbrella title for 11 programs which can be broken down into five groups, two of which were co-produced with Vancouver production companies. The first co-production is a half-hour pilot called *Blue's Folly*, which is a CBC/Beebop Pictures co-production with assistance from Telefilm Canada. The other was with Zorah Productions, in association with KCET in Los Angeles (a PBS affiliate), with assistance from Telefilm. The three half-hour comedy one-offs (*Moving Day*, *Driving School* and *Getting a Job*) will air next fall on PBS under the umbrella title, *Trying Times*.

There are two groups of films that were produced in-house. The first group is made up of three half-hour sitcoms that form a pilot called *Bailey's Law* (written by Phil Savath and director Michael Boucher). The second group includes three half-hour one-offs (*Market Forces* by Sherman Snukal, *The Accident* by Andrew Wreggitt and *Group Home* by David Petersen). The final element is a 90-minute, made-for-TV, social drama called *Shelley* which was independently produced by Christian Bruyère, a local producer.

This somewhat eclectic assortment of

programs is the result of CBC Vancouver's attempts to adjust to the new realities of being cash poor while meeting its mandate to produce regional drama. A year ago, when CBC executive producer Philip Keatley was asked to produce a 13-part local series he was happy to do it, and chose an anthology format. "It was a God-given chance to build up local directing, writing and acting talent." When Ron Devion, Director of Television, told him he had cash budgets for only nine (there were subsequent budget cuts, and the total number of episodes aired dropped to 11) Keatley's enthusiasm didn't fade: "I'm not going to stop doing drama just because they say I have no money." He went to the private sector, where he guessed that the CBC's name, crew budgets and facilities would attract private producers who had good projects and access to cash if they could find a reputable partner. He was absolutely right — soon, the CBC was partnered with two new local companies (Zorah Productions and Beebop Pictures Ltd.), and CBC 'old pros' were teamed up with an array of talented local newcomers and some bigtime U.S. talent. It was a learning experience for all.

The promos, which were produced by freelancer Yan Geoffroy, reflect the series' feisty West Coast flavour. Keatley (a natural comic actor himself) participated in one: "We thought we'd do a series to give people like Candice Bergen, Teri Garr and Catherine O'Hara a chance to advance their careers and work with actors like Jackson Davies, Blu Mankuma and Ryan Stiles — the really best professionals — and also get to tell a lot of lies." As a matter of fact, Bergen, whose name has drawn the

lion's share of media attention to the series, and director Sandy Wilson, had never done anything for television before, and the two of them cut their teeth on *Moving Day* with the support of old pros Jackson Davies and Bruno Gerussi.

Ed Richardson produced the *Trying Times* comedies through Zorah Productions, which is a relatively new company owned by Tegra Industries, the parent company of Alpha Cine film lab and Post Haste, a video post-production house, where all of the *Lies from Lotus Land* half hours were edited. He got involved in the project by chance when an L.A. contact (independent producer Jon Denny of Island Pictures) sent him a tape of a pilot for an anthology series that was produced in-house at PBS. Richardson was so impressed with the pilot, which starred Rosanna Arquette, that he picked up the option to produce the other three scripts that Denny had rounded up (penned by expatriate Canadians Bernard Slade, Wendy Wasserstein and Earl Pomerantz). With budgets of around \$300,000 per half hour, Richardson needed a strong partner's credibility for his pitch to Telefilm. He found Phil Keatley at the CBC, and soon Telefilm was in. Meanwhile, Denny was getting commitments to the project from the likes of Candice Bergen and Sandy Wilson, and a sale to KCET was made. Within two months of seeing the pilot tape, Zorah was in production. Richardson believes that the resulting half-hour comedies have launched Zorah as a company that is willing and able to produce world-class product.

As far as Sandy Wilson is concerned, it was a great learning experience. "The

thing that struck me about doing television is the lack of time. There's less time for thinking, for preparation, for shooting, for editing. And you don't have the luxury of letting it distill or find its own shape in editing. You cut it to a length and that's it. It was brutal, but I loved it." Wilson, a strong-willed independent producer as well as a director, had wondered if there would be problems over control of the project, but she was pleasantly surprised. "You would have assumed that the lines would be drawn across the border on this project. You know, that we'd have problems retaining creative control with the Americans there, or whatever. But that wasn't the case at all. They (Jon Denny and PBS producer Phylis Galler) take their work very seriously and care about it a lot, and they know what they're talking about. I learned a lot from them." She gives credit to the Canadian and U.S. producer for giving her room to work the way she likes, with ample rehearsal time with the actors. Jackson Davies, the old pro on set, commended her focus on the humans on set, "Most directors try to impress you with the mechanics of the business and spend all their time fiddling with cameras and lights. But Sandy concentrated on the script and the actors, which is the way I think it should be done. She's great to work with."

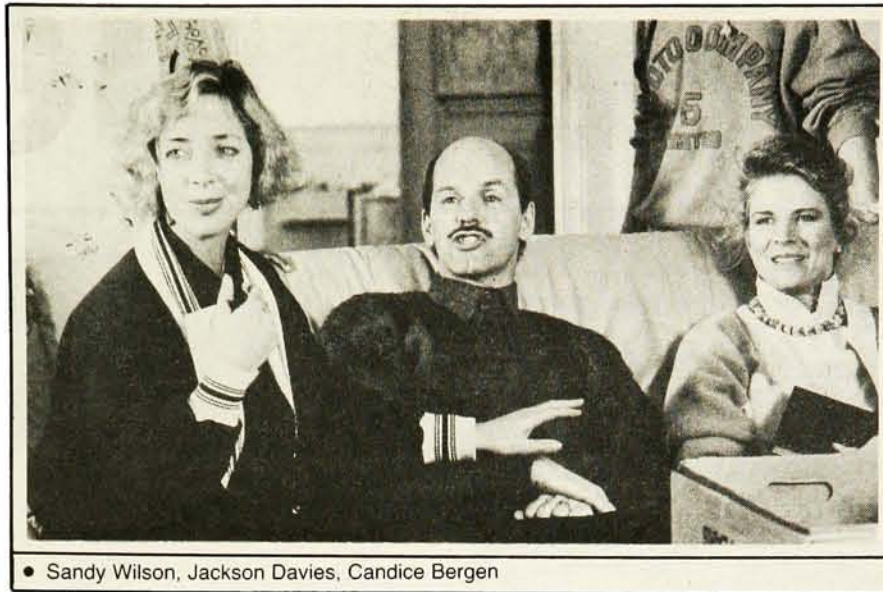
The other co-production, *Blue's Folly*, which producer Wade Ferley describes as 100% Canadian, may not have had an L.A. connection, but its budget was almost as healthy, coming in at approximately \$270,000. The money spent on production values shows. The look is sophisticated, with lots of

smokey nightclub and rain-slicked street scenes, and the soundtrack is a standout, with music by Duke Ellington and Vancouver's Hal Beckett and Lowe Wesley.

Ferley admits that the story itself, however, is not particularly Canadian. "It's a universal story, not just a Canadian story. It could appeal to any urban audience." He wants it to appeal to Americans as well as Canadians, because he must now find backing for the making of the series outside the budget-strapped CBC. He can't afford the luxury of appealing to a small, local audience.

This raises a problem for the partnerships between the CBC and the private sector. On the one hand, is CBC's mandate to reflect Canada to Canadians. On the other, is the private sector's insistence that to survive in a competitive industry the product must appeal to a world market. If the CBC can't put its money where its mouth is, it can hardly force its co-producers to be 110% Canadian. The crux of the disagreement is about what appeals to audiences: specifically regional stories with lots of local flavour, or universal stories that don't really take place anywhere in particular? Modest Canadian-style stories, or slick, fast-paced U.S.-style comedies?

Phil Savath, who wrote the *Bailey's Law* sitcoms, believes that there's a self-perception in Canada and particularly at the CBC, that we can't really do comedy: "There is a perception that if there's a lot of pace, rhythm and jokes, it's American comedy. You always have to be doing a social comedy or a human comedy or an issue comedy - not just a comedy." But Jackson Davies, who played Candice Bergen's husband in *Moving Day* and enjoys a successful career working on both American and Canadian productions, adamantly insists



• Sandy Wilson, Jackson Davies, Candice Bergen

that there is a large audience for programs that you wouldn't see on American television. "*The Beachcombers* sells all over the world, and it's just a little regional series. People want to see shows about other parts of the world - they want the flavour of particular people and places." Philip Keatley comments on the issue in broad terms. "Maybe television doesn't get the audience we want because we don't give them enough choice. I don't think we're stuck doing sitcoms because that's all the audience wants - I think we breed conformity. In Europe, the audience enjoys anthologies, plays and variety shows. We blame the audience, but maybe it's the TV makers, the TV raters and the TV advertisers who want ratings for shows that breed conformity rather than change."

On the production end, with budgets averaging \$165,000 per episode, the in-house 110% Canadian comedies become poor country cousins to the American-style co-productions. Phil Keatley described the efforts that were made to make ends meet. "We were trying to make a virtue of the cutbacks.

The stories had to be shot in Vancouver because we had no money to travel. They had to take place in the present because there's no money for period costumes, and they had to be shot with single Betacams on location because there was no money for film or for sets to shoot them in our studio." So the CBC's film crew put away the Arri and picked up a camera that was designed for electronic newsgathering, not drama. "We are all lovers of film, but we had to adjust to the new realities." The episodes were lit for film and shot at 30 frames rather than 24, but no one expected to be able to transform the look of the tapes into film quality. A bright spot came in the editing, which was done at Post Haste, whose facilities include a new montage editing suite which, according to CBC post-production producer David Dewar, put the editing of the modest tapes onto the leading edge of video technology.

The in-house mood was positive throughout, with the emphasis on human ingenuity overcoming money problems. Keatley, a lover of Shakespeare, said he took encouragement

from the opening of *Henry V*, where the chorus expresses similar budget frustrations with "O for a muse of fire - a kingdom for a stage." Keatley believed that if the Grand Old Bard could write stories that last for centuries without special effects, there was hope for his series. His personal priority was to get as many good local writers involved as possible. To do so, he took advantage of the screenwriters program at the New Play Centre. "They introduced me to a number of theatrical writers who were crossing over into television." One of these was Sherman Snukal, who has moved from writing hit plays (*Talking Dirty*) to writing for television (*Market Forces* for the *Lies* series).

Keatley is only worried that the anthology will be judged too harshly by the network. "I should be doing 30 shows, not the 6 or 7 that we can afford to do within the CBC here this year. With so few, you tend to put too much emphasis on each one - each one has to carry so much weight and be judged too heavily."

The final decision of whether or not *Lies from Lotus Land* will continue is up to the bosses. Keatley maintains a philosophical attitude about the future. "Producers and bureaucrats are always at odds about how inspired the creative product is, and the ratings people only like to measure what has become familiar to the audience. But my job is to invent new things that people haven't seen before. We're not quite in the same ballgame, but we have to work together. So I pretend I care about ratings and they pretend they care about programming."

The story ends on a bit of a down-beat. In the latest wave of CBC cuts this March, an episode from the second season of *Lies from Lotus Land* has been cut before production.

photo: George Gliszczynski

DramaLab

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The National Screen Institute-Canada (NSI), a creative centre for practising film makers, will begin its next **DramaLab** programme in the fall of 1987. The programme is designed specifically for professionals in film, television, and related fields who wish to further their skills as **Writers, Producers or Directors** in dramatic film making.

Hands-on, practical, and professional, the DramaLab programme is rigorous and in-depth. Participants go from the basic building blocks of motion picture drama, through a series of short, issue-oriented films for National Film Board distribution, to a series of regionally produced half-hour dramas for national broadcast.

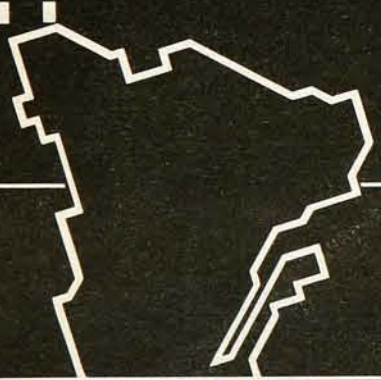
The next Phase I session will be held in Edmonton, Alberta during October/November 1987. Selection by a national jury is based on applicants' previous work in film or television drama, or in some cases on their work in a related field.

A \$1,200 tuition fee is charged for Phase I to help offset the costs of the intensive eight-week session. In all other phases participants are paid industry rates on a contractual basis. The NSI will cover transportation and lodging in Phases I and II.

The deadline for applications has been extended to **April 21st, 1987.**

For further information, please write or call:
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