

Development, diversification and the dollar

Wayne Sterloff, Patricia Gruben and Harry Cole

BY MARK O'NEILL

Of the points made in Robin Brunet's article, the one that stands out is the fact that fully 95% of the money spent on film and TV production in B.C. last year was American. It's difficult to imagine any industry that could be comfortable while so dependent on one source of income. The British Columbia industry is not comfortable. Nearly every company involved in production clings to corporate and commercial projects as a reliable, safe foundation. There's a lot of talk about creating a homegrown industry that makes film and television programs about B.C. but it's hard to resist the lure of easy American dollars.

Over the years any number of B.C. filmmakers have invested their time, talent and energy in creating a body of indigenous work. But, until last year, they were doing so without benefit of help from the provincial government. The creation of B.C. Film was well received but, unfortunately, hampered by the fiscal confusion at Telefilm Canada.

Cinema Canada invited three industry leaders to meet with West Coast Editor Mark O'Neill to discuss some of these issues. Wayne Sterloff of B.C. Film phoned in from Los Angeles where he was busy putting deals together at the American Film Market. Patricia Gruben of the Praxis Film Development Workshop and Harry Cole, new president of the B.C. Motion Picture Association (formerly the BCFLA), joined O'Neill in a studio at CBC Vancouver. Portions of the discussion were broadcast on the regional CBC Radio program *Artbeat*:

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Cinema Canada: Let's begin with that figure of 95%. Isn't it unwise to put all our eggs into the American basket?

Harry Cole: The U.S. market requires a lot of films being made. The basic problem has been to get the quality of crews and production facilities up to a level where we can meet those needs. We have increased our output every year and have increased the quality of crews and now we're in a position where we can start branching off and doing our own productions. I don't think it's a case of putting all your eggs in one basket; I think it's a case of bringing the level of expertise up to where we can compete in world markets. It's a training mechanism and is founded by American productions at this point which is a very fortunate situation. The Canadian dollar makes it very beneficial for the Americans to come up here.

Cinema Canada: That's part of the precariousness of the situation. Should the Canadian dollar continue to rise we could lose that edge and all the training could suddenly disappear.

Harry Cole: That's true, but I think we're in a fortunate situation now. We do have those crews and we're starting off now with the creation of the B.C. Film Fund which is allowing producers here to package projects and package them properly. We require the ability to be able to make those films and half of that is the technical aspect. Now we have to develop the producer's end of things, and the stories, and the scripts. Once we get those to a competent level, then B.C. will indeed be a major force in production.

Cinema Canada: Patricia Gruben, you're concerned with writing and, a great deal, with indigenous film. How do you feel about the 95% American figure?

Patricia Gruben: I agree with Harry and a lot of other people who say that having the Americans here helped bring the crews up to a technical standard that perhaps didn't exist before. Harry was telling me that he thinks that B.C.-based productions are more credible now because the Americans, who may be interested in participating in the financing, know where British Columbia is and that these crews exist. But I think the other side of it has been that these fabulous crews are so busy and so well paid on the American productions that an indigenous, low-budget independent feature, which needs people to work for less than scale, can't find people who have the experience and the training.

Harry Cole: That is the case in some areas but my experience on low-budget pictures is that there isn't much of a problem getting Canadians to work. The ones that are making the heavy dollars still want to support the Canadian industry and I think it's a matter of searching out and finding the right crew members who are willing to work for the amount of money in the budget.

Cinema Canada: Wayne Sterloff, as head of B.C. Film you are concerned with what is now just five per cent of the industry. What's your view of the American domination?

Wayne Sterloff: Our objectives are to expand the B.C. industry, to diversify it. Our goal is that of sharing ownership of these projects so that

Canadian directors are being hired to do episodes of American series. We are seeing great trust being put into our line producers. Writing is still a problem. I don't think our writers are being invited to participate, simply because the writing is usually done in an office in L.A.

B.C. producers can begin to own part of the pictures, thereby allowing them to have some financial and creative control. In other words, to have input at the development stage when you're conceptualizing the film. We want the British Columbians to have input that's creative, not just technical.

Patricia Gruben: I think that's one area where there's probably been less of the training that people are talking about from the Americans – certainly, I think, in the areas of screenwriting, directing and post-production, although to some degree that's changing. Those things are usually done by Americans who are brought in or who don't even come up.

Wayne Sterloff: That is beginning to change. As the volume of work increases in B.C., we are seeing a change in that attitude. Canadian directors are being hired to do episodes of American series. We are seeing great trust being

Canadian films can be marketed. You don't have to put Canada in big bold letters across the screen, but if it is a Canadian story and it is done properly, there is a market out there.



My kind of town – Peter Smith, Martina Schliessler, Michael Marks.

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Cinema Canada: I want to go back to a word Wayne used a moment ago, diversification. I know the B.C. Motion Picture Association is planning to send a delegation to the Pacific Rim later this spring. Is that part of diversifying? Is it a good idea to look across the Pacific?

Harry Cole: In the Pacific Rim countries there is an untapped market, as far as production and investors. We'd like to take our package, which is British Columbia and what can be done here, both on a production and co-venturing basis, and take it to those countries and see if we can't diversify. There are good production companies in Japan, Hong Kong and even Taiwan who are willing to come here and work.

Cinema Canada: How does that work for you, Patricia, in terms of creating a body of B.C. film writing?

Patricia Gruben: Potentially, I think it's a really fascinating area to move into. Not only because of the financing but in terms of subject matter. Especially because we're a country, and particularly a province, of immigrants. I don't think that whole area of interest has been explored very much at all. I've begun to talk to a

couple of East Indian friends here in Vancouver about writing a story about Indian immigrants. I can see unlimited possibilities there.

Cinema Canada: Wayne, of the applications that have come into B.C. Film, are there a significant number that might work across the Pacific?

Wayne Sterloff: In some respects. The Pacific Rim represents a very good investment community. We should be able to find the raw dollars it takes to make movies there. There's very little revenue to make, however, selling into that market. But the point that Patricia brought up is perhaps the most important to us: The notion that, through co-production treaties like the one recently signed between Canada and New Zealand, we might find the Maoris of New Zealand working with, say, the Coast Salish of B.C. I see some very, very exciting possibilities in terms of stories.

Harry Cole: Speaking of the New Zealand treaty, there's one pending now with Australia. There are lots of opportunities there.

Cinema Canada: There's another market I want to talk about. It seems to me that the B.C. industry doesn't pay a lot of attention to the rest of Canada. There isn't a lot of co-production between Ontario and B.C., or Quebec and B.C. Should B.C. be looking at co-productions with other provinces?

Wayne Sterloff: Oh, very much so. We're

putting a lot of energy into that. In fact down here in Los Angeles, the American Film Market is an opportunity for British Columbia producers to get together with those from other provinces. I would have to say that, so far in this market, about 50 per cent of the (Canadian) activity is East-West rather than North-South. Between Vancouver and Toronto or Montreal as opposed to Vancouver and L.A. The major production companies all attend this market and, as a consequence, these conversations are being generated.

Patricia Gruben: I'm glad to hear that because it's been my experience quite often that writers, especially the new ones, want to have their scripts read in Hollywood. When we say, "Don't you think it's a lot easier to get a script on a Canadian subject produced in Canada? Why don't you go to a production company in Toronto?" Quite often there's the attitude that nothing happens here, it's too slow. The North-South axis seems a lot more viable to them.

Wayne Sterloff: That's an unfortunate misconception. It is easier to make a movie if you're joint-venturing with a producer in Montreal or Toronto than to dig up a venture in L.A. We should be co-producing in Canada and that's basically what B.C. Film has been doing recently; trying to put joint-ventures together in Canada. I think it is easier to make low-budget

movies in Canada, take them into international markets and have them buy the product or get to know you and trust you via these projects that have been developed within Canada, (than try and develop a project with Americans).

Harry Cole: We're at a level of expertise where, when we take a properly packaged project to Toronto, we're getting a good reception. And we can open doors now in Los Angeles because B.C. has the reputation of being able to supply the end product. This is what the story is about here. We have to develop the other areas; writers, producers, packaging, all to complement the skilled technicians. Yes, it's easier to produce a Canadian story in Canada because we want to see our own culture presented on the screen. But we also have to do the commercial projects, the ones that are accepted worldwide and are out there to be marketed and to earn Vancouver producers and technicians alike the credits they deserve.

Cinema Canada: There's a feeling that there are really two film industries. The commercial industry which makes corporate videos, films of TV sitcoms. On the other side are the indigenous, independent filmmakers who want to make stories about ourselves. Will we ever get to the point where our own scripts will also be commercially viable, where they will make profits?

Patricia Gruben: When people ask me questions

like that, I always think about American independent films because, too often, we compare Canadian films to Hollywood and there's no valid point of comparison. But I think if you look at the growth of American independent film over the last six or eight years, then you see that the films that have emerged were shot on very low budgets under difficult circumstances. I think there is the potential to make money if you keep expenses low and manage to really put a lot of quality into the film so that it will do well at festivals and attract the interest of the press and other people whose attention can't necessarily be bought by big ad campaigns.

I think everyone wants to have as big an audience as possible. The question is, do you sacrifice everything to that principle, in which case you often fail as well and end up with a film you don't like and which never gets shown anyway. Or do you make the best film you possibly can? That's the principle which, I think, is important to remember in the midst of all the other kinds of factors at work. I don't see why they always have to be considered opposing forces. People make the assumption that a good film won't make money.

Harry Cole: The operative word is quality. If you have a good script and you have people who are willing to put a little extra effort into it, we have the expertise. Canadian films can be marketed. You don't have to put Canada in big bold letters across the screen, but if it is a Canadian story and it is done properly, there is a market out there.

Wayne Sterloff: It depends to a very great degree on the script itself. Until the B.C. writers develop scripts that people in other cities and other countries can relate to and enjoy, you're not going to get the big box-office hit. I think that's why it's important that Praxis continue its work. Our internship program is also important. We're hoping that some of British Columbia's best storytellers who are working in other media - novelists, poets and stage play writers - would join in and start adapting their work, or creating new work, for screenplays so that our movies and TV shows will be entertaining and enjoyable to human beings no matter where they live.

Patricia Gruben: I think that process has already started. Over the year or more that Praxis has existed we've seen a huge rise in the quality of the work that is being submitted to us. And the numbers of scripts. We get our funding from the

provincial government but we solicit applications from across the country. This spring, having had 62 applications from all over Canada, six of the seven projects we're working with are from Vancouver. They're really outstanding work. We're finding that producers are calling us looking for material. People are coming out with their scripts and sending them off to Superchannel or production companies locally and in Toronto. There are at least three or four projects that seem to be on the verge of getting made.

Wayne Sterloff: The British Columbia indigenous industry is evolving. It is improving and getting better. It's an exciting time.

Harry Cole: The industry is continuing to grow. The whole process is a learning curve and I think we're on the upswing. The future is going to hold some very exciting times for the indigenous producers and that includes the writers. It's a matter of taking advantage of the present situation and making it work for us.

Cinema Canada: *What is the most important single thing that the B.C. industry has to do next?*

Wayne Sterloff: There are a couple of initiatives that have to be undertaken. If we go back to the

nub of the problem, it's the script. The effort that Praxis is putting into this process needs to be doubled or tripled. We need to get more people involved. We need to concentrate and develop more properties. We need proper development of the business plan. We have to develop the entrepreneurs. We need a market sales force, a sales force literally.

Harry Cole: Developing the packaging of projects and writing abilities. Generally complementing what exists here now. With the support of the B.C. government, which is now on stream, I think this is going to happen.

Cinema Canada: *Writing gets two votes Patricia, probably a third from you?*

Patricia Gruben: You were talking briefly earlier about the two film production groups. For me the most important thing is to see those two groups move a bit closer together, so that the people who come out of film school and are dying to direct feature films can work with the proficient crews we have. And, on the other hand, for the crews and producers who are developing the industry to be able to come over and join forces with the creative talent to make films that we can be proud of.

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