

THE PRODUCER

"...That very rare breed indeed—the only people on the planet who can blow smoke up their own ass..."

—ROBIN WILLIAMS,
1988 ACADEMY AWARDS

Or there's Fred Allen's definition of an associate producer – "the only guy in Hollywood who will associate with a producer". Producer jokes are like mother-in-law jokes; as good as the joke and the teller and as risible and recognizable a stereotype as you can find. The Producer we all love to hate is not only a philistine, but loud and flashy to boot. He wouldn't recognize a good script if he saw one, and if he got hold of one by mistake, by the time he'd finished with it, you'd probably want to take your name off the picture. His crass commercialism and fawning insincerity with the money men is sickening, and his sensitivities are so deeply buried even his current girlfriend can't find them. As far as he is concerned, art is a Christian name.

Like any good stereotype, the producer character is drawn from the extreme edge of the range of people who actually do produce for a living. The joke wouldn't work if we couldn't recognize the butt. The first time I actually met a walking example was during the shooting of *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing*. The production had rented tiny, dingy offices from a producer down the hall in a building on Adelaide. His claim to fame was making quick, cheap (never mind the quality, feel the width) movies funded by

doctors and dentists. The point of his movies was making money – and he took pride in his clearheadedness (and in the fact that they *did* make money). Bruce McDonald, who had the office next door, immortalized this character two years ago in the pages of *Cinema Canada* as "Mac the Finger". It fits.

But for stereotype jokes to make you laugh, you have to know that the joke doesn't apply to you. This applies to mothers-in-law as much as it does to producers (even though it's well known that neither category has a sense of humour).

Now I can take a joke. After all, I like to think of myself as being a pretty decent type, you know, intelligent and amusing, supportive, good at my job, a nice girl from a good home. Both my friends like me (well, my mother says my tables manners have slipped, but that doesn't count).

So it came as a bit of a shock to me to find myself on a panel a few weeks ago where the other panel members clearly didn't know about my self-image at all. Not only did my wit and charm fail to impress them, they automatically included me in that extreme fringe I've described as the stereotypical producer. And it doubly hurt because I valued their opinions – they were all independent filmmakers I have

incredible respect for and wanted passionately to talk to and connect with. Instead of which I found myself blurting justifications not only for my own existence but for that of all producers – which, to say the least, I'm patently not qualified to do, nor do I want to. And because the comments made and the attitudes reflected were not at all directed at me personally (these people didn't know me from Adam), the single most horrifying question during my mental postmortem was the thought that the producer stereotype *AS FACT* has more currency with Canadian filmmakers than I want to believe.

I'm not writing this article to redress my incoherent performance at the time, nor to boost my ego by having the last (and thought-out) word. I want to discuss the question before the panel that afternoon – structure a model for filmmaking in Canada, a model unique to ourselves and our environment. And maybe I can lay some ghosts to rest at the same time.

We have all taken enormous pride in the films being made in Canada over the last few years. Many of these films have been the result of a writer/director doggedly and methodically learning to negotiate his or her way through the maze of federal and provincial funding agencies and the daunting complexities of film distribution in Canada. The films have been

financed, organized, sold, distributed and their performance monitored by the writer/director himself – without benefit of a separate producer. So no wonder these filmmakers completely resent and reject the stereotypical producer's image of the stereotypical writer/director (still with me?) – brilliant and talented, but incapable of organizing his or her way out of a brown paper bag. And since filmmakers have demonstrated that they are capable of producing, why work with a producer?

If I could offer you a script editor; a counsellor; a scheduler; a budgeter; a problem-solver; an ally to fight your battles for you over readers' reports and funding issues; a pitchman who will represent your film honestly and with integrity; a dealmaker to get the best distributor and pre-sales; a second opinion in casting sessions; someone to deal with the hassles of corporate organization, bookkeeping, lawyers and number crunching; an executive to supervise the production manager, crew and all the other production complexities; a manager to cope with paperwork and the flood of information required by investors, production guarantors, unions and distributors; someone to talk to about your insecurities or your frantic 2 a.m. ideas for the film; a fund of favours, contacts and tricks that will stretch your budget; an

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administrator to take care of chasing, investing and disbursing income and residuals for years to come; a dispatcher to take care of the hassles of duplicating stills, video copies, dupe sound negs and all the other miscellany of post-completion work; someone to file the corporate tax returns for the film company in the year 2000; most of all, someone who cares as much as you do about the film and its presentation – would you be interested?

Presumably, yes you would. After all, if you don't have to do all of this yourself, the interval between your films is going to be that much shorter. The only hitch to this marvelous partner would be the strings attached. And that, traditionally, has meant taking the script you have nurtured for years and handing over creative control and potential financial reward to someone else.

Which brings me back to our Canadian model. There is a very definite place for the producer who options an idea, hires writer(s), chooses the cast and hires the director – after all, not every director is an *auteur* or necessarily even wants to be. And for mega-budget films of international

complexity, this is probably the only way the projects get off the ground. But there is no law of natural causes that says this kind of system forms a rule which has to be slavishly adhered to – and for the motivated artist of low budget independent Canadian films, it would be sheer lunacy to do so.

Several films have been made recently with a different kind of relationship altogether between producer and writer/director. The films were not designer films, but rather intelligent, alternative, so-called “art house” films – *A Winter Tan*, *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing*, *Top Of His Head*. The producer/director relationships varied a great deal from film to film, but the basic principle was that of co-operation, co-ownership, co-responsibility and co-control.

This didn't mean that the films were made by committee – which is probably a recipe for disaster and no fun for any of the participants. It meant that the producer and writer/director (and actress, cinematographer and sound recordist in the case of *A Winter Tan*) entered into genuine legal arrangements to share financial and legal control of the projects. It meant that each part of the team specialized in what they did best, but shared responsibility and arrived at a consensus on all major decisions – creative or financial. (Realistically these two elements are

so intertwined that a seamless film cannot be made without harmony between cost and content).

And the only reason that these relationships worked was that the parties involved had mutual respect for each other's talents, shared each other's priorities and concerns, and that ultimately issues were resolved in the favour of the project itself rather than the ego of any of the principals.

Given the uncertainty of the filmmaking climate in Canada, we need to form alliances in order to develop a healthy, durable independent filmmaking community in Canada. The implications of Free Trade and the distribution and broadcast policy changes are difficult to quantify, but the new reality their existence heralds is looming closer and closer. We need to become less dependent on public financing institutions like Telefilm and the provincial agencies. I think we would be foolish indeed to bank our futures on something subject to political expediency – look at the Capital Cost Allowance and our much-diluted Distribution Bill. Traditional alliances – international, inter and intraprovincial – need to be explored and strengthened, but we also need to form alliances between ourselves – producers, writers, directors and the host of other indispensable

contributors to filmmaking. And specialists specialize. As our funding and distributing landscape grows more complex, we need to have people who make it their business to learn about these rapidly changing variables.

Does this all sound a little too idealistic for words? Too good (or naive) to be true? Well granted, it's not a perfect world, and if all this is a definition of a perfect producer, it's true you might have to compromise on some of the points. Then again, not all filmmakers are perfect either... and, of course arguments arise and tempers flare, filmmaking not being exactly a stress-free occupation. Some people will always contribute more than others. But depending on what each party brings to the relationship, it can be not only a workable model but a highly satisfying partnership.

The model works for me – and for the filmmakers I've worked with. And I certainly don't claim to be all the things I've listed. I'm certainly not perfect, but neither are the people I work with. You all do the best you can and mostly end up being more than the sum of your respective parts.

The only thing that keeps me awake at nights is that “Mac the Finger” offered me a job – what worries me is that he must have thought he recognized the stereotype...