

# THE BIG DEAL

Event: The Atlantic Film and Video Producers' Conference  
Case Study: John Walker THE BIG DEAL  
Place: University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown  
Time: 15 minutes before lunch

(applause and foot-stomping)

*Chairman:* Thank you very much. (more whistling and cheering) Our next guest speaker is from Toronto -  
(Boos and catcalls)

*Chairman:* - from Toronto, home of the Big Deal. He is a cinematographer, documentary filmmaker and brown-eyed handsome man. Ladies and gentlemen, John Walker.  
(smattering of applause)

*John Walker:* (clears throat) I know you're all anxious to get to lunch, but I'm here today to talk about how to produce a low-budget feature, as opposed to The Big Deal that is so prevalent in Toronto these days. Specifically, I will talk about my own experiences in the making of *A Winter Tan*, and how we got the project off the ground.  
(murmurings of suspicious minds)

*John Walker:* Have any of you seen *A Winter Tan*?

*Heckler:* Seen it? Man, I've lived it!

*John Walker:* Great! We do have something in common then. (coughs) The project was put together by a team of five people who all came out of the so-called 'industry'. We all had varying degrees of experience from 15 to 25 years in our fields. We set out to make a film that ran in the opposite direction of the industry, in terms of our approach and strategy.

Jackie Burroughs, whom I'm sure most of you know, was given a book called *Give Sorrow Words* by a friend of hers. It is based on the letters written by a woman who went to Mexico, essentially to write a novel in the tradition of Malcolm Lowry, and wrote some 2,000 letters in a period of two years. She ended up being murdered down there and her friend that she wrote the letters to edited and published a book of the letters. Jackie found a profound connection with the character and liked the writing - that was really the starting point of the project. It's really a project that grew from within, as opposed to "What's the market out there?", "How are we going to make money on this?" It was developed from the inside out.

We each had a craft that we brought to the film, Jackie as an actor, Louise Clark who was a producer and production manager, John Frizzell, a writer, Aerlyn Weissman, a sound recordist and myself as cinematographer. We had three Mexicans working with us on location a gaffer, an assistant cameraperson and a Mexican line producer. That was it.

We clearly decided that this was going to be a film by five people. There wasn't a hierarchy. There wasn't one vision in terms of a director. We shared in the shaping of the film, but we all came with our particular strengths and were not competing with each other's strengths. Although we all felt that this was "our" film.

The first step was to start the screenplay adaptation. Jackie takes the primary credit for that. It's interesting - it really took an actor to,

instinctively, start selecting and adapting and pulling the bits of text, she had an instinct of how to translate that written language through to dialogue. We all came together for the first selection, which was about 200 pages thick, and began discussing our approach to the film. We came together every couple of weeks and that took about a year of discussions.

We had all worked on big-budget films but we decided to make this one a low-budget film because we wanted to get it made. Too many of our friends have spent anywhere from three to seven years with their two or three-million-dollar budgets, and they are still trying to raise money for the film and getting depressed about not making the film. Our aim from the start was to work with something that was manageable, in terms of the amount of money, and what we could accomplish on a low budget, based on our experience. It's very easy to come up with a two-million-dollar budget. We could have done it with a snap of our fingers in an afternoon. The difficult thing is to know how to come up with a very small budget. What is the least amount of money we can have to actually get this thing made?

*Heckler:* In Toronto? How about 3.4 million not counting deferrals?

*John Walker:* Maybe some, but not us. In trying to raise the money, we immediately ruled out television because of the dialogue. It is fairly rough language for those of you that have seen it. We realized that most TV networks would never be able to show it. The first place we went to was the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council. The arts councils are always a ray of hope for filmmakers that want to do something that is against the stream and a little bit experimental. It's a very comforting process if you're successful with it because you are judged by your peers. There are five filmmakers that are judging your script. They are scrutinizing it based on their own experiences as filmmakers, not as deal makers. That is an important first step, to gain that confidence from your peers. We were fortunate to receive the requested amount from both councils and had close to a hundred thousand dollars at this point.

When we took the script to Telefilm one reader rejected the script so we didn't get anywhere there. We had a meeting with then director Peter Pearson, and he put his arm around Jackie and said to her, "When I was your age dear, I wanted to make a film like this too, but now we are making serious films" or something to that effect, and that was the end of the meeting. Jackie didn't remind him that she was older than he was but that's beside the point. Anyway, back to the drawing board, we've got a hundred thousand, what to do next?

Looking at the script again, we decided that the camera was going to play the character of Edith, the person that Jackie Burroughs' character was writing letters to. There would be a direct address to the camera which is a very

difficult thing to do. Like in *cinéma vérité*, the intervention of the camera changes the scene and plays a role, so we began working within that context. The budget that we finally came up with was \$150,000. and we thought we could do something with that.

We approached the Ontario Film Development Corporation with the script and they supported us through a special fund. It was called a Special Projects Fund – a very small amount of money set aside for projects that I guess they thought were risky but interesting. I'd just like to point out that three of the films that came out of that special fund were, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *Family Viewing* and *A Winter Tan*. We were supported by the OFDC, and I must say that if you read the script, it could easily be mistaken for a porno flick. The OFDC was able to meet with us so we could discuss the context and the treatment of the film. This was very important.

There is an obsession in our industry with the written text and not enough emphasis placed on the visual treatment. After all, the script is just a blueprint for an essentially visual medium. Just to fill in on that point, we found out why Telefilm initially rejected the film when the script reader turned up on vacation in Acapulco. We had an opportunity, after a few tequilas, to get out of him why the film was rejected. His response was, "We just weren't sure about the treatment of the film. It clearly could have been a pornographic film. Telefilm is a public agency and we're supposed to make..." (he mentioned the term, "family viewing" and he wasn't referring to the film). "But", he said, "don't give up on us. When the film is finished, though it is not our policy, maybe we can do something." It was strange meeting this person vacationing from Telefilm, but it made me realize just how important treatments are as opposed to the bare

bones of the written script.

So we shot the film in February. We were down in Mexico for six weeks. We shot for 23 days. We came back and started editing. We had a rough cut in June-July. With the rough cut, the Festival of Festivals was interested in the film and wanted to show it. It was clear that with our small editing staff, it would be impossible to finish the film by September. We could have still finished the film for \$150,000 if we continued with one editor on deferred salary for months and months, but we decided that the Festival of Festivals was a very important starting point for *A Winter Tan*. We convinced Telefilm to come into it and were able to hire a large crew of sound editors to get the film ready in time. The final budget was about \$300,000, with Telefilm's final involvement.

*Audience Member:* How did you go about finding distribution for it in Canada?

*John Walker:* That is a very important question because in order to access Telefilm or OFDC you have to have a Canadian distributor. We had Ron McClusky of Creative Exposure who gave us support right from the start, even at the early stages of the script. It is a tough script but he recognized that there was something there and

he supported us through thick and thin. I really admire him for taking that step. Creative Exposure distributes independent films through

the Festival theatres in Toronto and independent theatres across Canada. They pick up a lot of European films and were interested in distributing more Canadian film, so Ron went with us and, being an enlightened distributor with the Canadian rights, was able to pitch the project and make the right connections. He made a deal with Cineplex and the international deal went to Films Transit who took it to the Berlin Film Festival and sold it to 10 countries.

*Audience Member:* But you had great press.

*John Walker:* We were very lucky to have good press. Along with the great poster by Tim Forbes and a promotional campaign, we got positive reviews in Toronto and Vancouver. There is no guarantee that you will get good press but it is good free publicity and it helped the film tremendously. That, combined with the fact that Jackie Burroughs can get an interview with anyone, whether it's newspapers, radio or TV, because she is a well-known actor. A film that doesn't have a star, or a personality that is well-known, becomes more difficult to promote. Getting a film to a release print stage doesn't mean you have finished, it means that you are only halfway there. The next half of the filmmaking process is getting it seen. I cannot stress enough the importance of that. Too many independent filmmakers leave that side of things to fate and that's just not good enough.

*Audience Member:* In retrospect, since you decided to do this in a rather unorthodox way right down the line, although all of you came out

of rather orthodox industry circumstances, would you like to continue that way or do you think that was something special to this project?  
*John Walker:* That's a very good question. Yes, I would like to continue working this way. It has always been my strategy, as a filmmaker, to make films that are cost-effective. An understanding of that way of working is rooted in the documentary tradition which we have in this country, and which I value as very important roots. This film could not have been made the way it was without documentary experience. I think that we should build our industry from the ground up and I know I'm speaking in the opposite direction than the way trade forums work and market orientations and so on. I am a filmmaker. That's my orientation, so I'm really speaking from that point of view. But what I think is clear, recently, is that when you support filmmakers, when you support talent, you get films like *Mermaids*. It was not made to make money. They were surprised when they had success. They just set out to make a good film, and I think that's important. Yes I would like to continue working this way, in fact I've always worked this way in documentary, trying to maximize production values for the least amount of money. To work with the minimal amount of technology and the minimal amount of equipment.

*Heckler:* Could you be a little more vague?

*John Walker:* Well, if you just take off that Leopardskin Pillbox Hat, I'll try to oblige you. (shuffling noises) Let me point out a scene shot at the Que Brada cliffs that appears in the beginning of *A Winter Tan*. It is a very gorgeous scene





Photos by ANITA OLANICK.

documentary. But, my brother and I are lawyers who recently moved to England. They always looked at me when I was going on and on about the After watching British television and documentaries for two years they said we know what you were talking about they have seen more Canadian documentaries on Channel 4 and on the BBC than they do in Canada. And I think this is a great tragedy. Canadian documentaries are not being shown in this country.

*John Walker:* There is an obsession with drama now in Canada and it's hard to fund documentaries. This is what's happening in this country. We're cutting off the umbilical cord to what we do well. I think that's why *A Winter Tan* worked. There was a relationship there between documentary technique, cost-effectiveness, and yet it was also related to a dramatic form. And there's a stigma about drama. I mean I've seen some horrible dramas that are not very dramatic and I've seen a lot of documentaries that are very dramatic. I think we have a misperception about what drama is. Yes, we need drama, fiction-drama, but we also need non-fiction drama. I'm all for dramatic films, but let's not divide and say documentaries aren't dramatic and drama is because it's scripted and has actors.

*Audience Member:* Would you like to see changes in the key funding organizations that would make it simpler?

*John Walker:* Yes I would like to see the institutions change. I think we've got a situation in Canada where we have more support than any other country in the world, in terms of the amount of money, the diversity of support, and yet if you put it all together, there's something wrong with the system. I can't outline it here in 15 minutes before lunch, but I think the root of the problem is divisions. There are divisions between government agencies, divisions between documentary and drama and there are divisions in terms of a "so-called" industrial strategy.

I always feel that I'm looking at Canada east-west. I'm always looking out to Vancouver or to Newfoundland and half of my brain is in the U.S. and the other half is in the north, which is wide open. I think we need to develop strategies that are connected to the northern side of our psyche... to the needs of this country.

The recent strategy of Atlantis and Primedia, to open up developments with European partners is a good development. I think we need some co-production to open it up, although often Canadian material will suffer as a result of foreign partners. I think often our strategy is based on a Hollywood model, on the American model. *A Winter Tan* worked in opposition to this direction. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *Family Viewing* are all running in the opposite direction of that model and they are successfully doing that. I'm not against Hollywood, but I think Hollywood makes Hollywood films. Why do them here?

and it was shot at magic hour. There were three dialogue scenes, including some running scenes down the cliff steps and some Que Brava divers that were diving off the cliffs and they all had to be coordinated into one complex scene. It was shot, as I said, as the sun was going down and we had one hour to get the scene. With all the choreography and the divers diving off these 200-foot cliffs and the dialogue, we managed to wrap it up in three takes. Bang. Bang. Bang. The reason we could keep it down in three takes, and that was our general shooting strategy throughout the film, was because there was a relationship between the DOP and the production crew and there were no huge egos involved. I could say, for example, "Okay, you stand there because the sunlight is hitting the reflector is here. We can get the shot. If there was a director, he would be an ego there saying, "No,

over here because that's the way it has to be." Then you, arguing as a DOP, would say, "The light is very poor in that position." If the director insists, then it's "Get out the scaffolding, get out the brutes, run the cables over the cliffs." That scene would then have taken us literally a week to shoot, rather than the one hour that we did it in, and a lot of money would have been spent unnecessarily. We probably would have lost two gaffers over the cliffs as well.

*Heckler:* Now we're gettin' somewhere. *John Walker:* Well, thank you. Filmmaking should be fun and it's very depressing... I mean... raising money is the most depressing part of filmmaking. It's depressing to hear people say no. I think the more experience you get, you know who's going to say no so you don't approach them. I think we have the ability in Canada to make films that are very cost-effective because of our experience in documentary. We have a rich tradition. We're a

small country, we have to work with small budgets. The Hollywood approach to filmmaking was revolutionized when the eastern European DOPs came in with a documentary approach. I had lunch with Sven Nykvist when he was visiting and he's touted to be one of the greatest cinematographers in the world. What did he talk about? His documentary experience. He's directed documentaries. He's come from a low-budget background, with minimal lighting and small crews. Most of Bergman's early films were made this way. This strength is something that we're denying in this country. We want the big deal.

This is a particularly heartfelt topic, so you'll have to shut me up if I go on too long about the documentary tradition. My wife kids me about it, "Oh no, he's going to get on about the documentary again," because I attack anyone who visits our house, doctors, lawyers, anyone who visits, about the documentary tradition. And she says, "Oh-oh, documentary tradition, I better get a glass of whisky." She goes for the whisky now when she hears the word

So... there are divisions. There are divisions between the NFB and the CBC. There's an old rivalry going on since CBC got into television. Why they can't resolve it, I don't know. There are divisions between Telefilm and OFDC. One of them will support the project and other says oh... I don't like this or that in the script. I have friends in Montreal. They have scripts going back and forth between the Société Générale de Québec and Telefilm. Telefilm likes this character, but the Societe doesn't like the other character. The scripts go back and forth between these two agencies for three years and films are not getting made. Why? Because of divisions between those organizations. We are a small country, we've got to pull our divisions together, somehow make a link between these important organizations. And it's only when you link these things together that you create something that's successful.

*John Walker:* The Canada Council, for instance, is completely left out of policy discussions. Flora MacDonald announced the \$200 million injection of funds to the industry and no money to the Canada Council which was responsible for the heart, the seeds, the soul of the three films I mentioned. That's the support you need, you need that first dollar. You know, the first dollar that comes in is worth a million dollars because it gives you the emotional support to continue. And that money is coming from the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, in those three films that I've been talking about.

*Heckler:* And *Faustus Bidgood* and *Life Classes*!

*John Walker:* Of course, those films are perfect examples. I'm not saying that the fund can't supply that kind of seed money, or CBC. They all can, they all should. All I'm saying is that starting point—it's the hardest to get. The other irony is that the completion money is equally as hard to find. But the root of it is division. We could go on in an analysis as to why those divisions are there historically. You look at the CBC, NFB, it's a historical division that goes back to 1950. You have to analyze them all in their separate context. Because as I say, we pulled our film together with our own deferrals and money from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, the OFDC, and finally Telefilm. That's four institutions that were pulled together. You close down any one of them and there's trouble.

*Audience Member:* I've heard a lot of people say, "Telefilm said my film is not commercial. There is no market for this film." What do you make of that?

*John Walker:* I think that is a very difficult thing to judge. I mean who would have imagined that we could have sold *A Winter Tan* to Japan?

Theatrical distribution to Japan. I defy anybody in this room to predict that kind of eventuality.

*Audience Question:* How would you change your strategy if you were doing this at the beginning of your career?

*John Walker:* Well I think the important thing is to work within your means. I wouldn't have set out to make a feature film at the start of my career. I've always had this fear of the cinema.

I've always taken it very seriously. I guess it's a fear that comes from being a cinematographer. It's other people's money and you're making a big mess of other people's money if you screw up and you aren't going to continue in the industry. So you have to take it very seriously and be very clear that you can pull it off. I work very closely with my budgets to make sure we are not going to be over-budget. We didn't want to be over-budget with *A Winter Tan*, even though it was only a \$150,000. So it's just working within your means, and knowing that. Part of this whole hype that's going on now about the Canadian film industry, everyone thinks industry, they think Hollywood and they want to get into the bigtime. Well, start small and do something well. I would rather see a good 10-minute film with no dialogue, no music, then sit through 90-minutes of a 10-minute film.

The other strategy if you're from the entrepreneurial side, producer side, is that if you've got an idea that's really a good idea and it's hot, if people say "Yea, great idea" and you're new to producing but you're willing to slug it out, then my advice would be to go to talented people with experience. Don't try to direct it yourself. Go to a director that has experience, who is willing to commit to the project because it's a really good project, really interesting, it has a good heart to it. Find a director, that director will find a DOP that he or she has worked with who might commit and say okay let's take four weeks off in July and do it, it looks like fun. And you can get a commitment,

you can get a DOP that's just come off a 13-part series making lots of money but hated it and would love to do a really innovative project, and might do it for little money. Pull together a team, because if the film has a heart and it's got something that's going to touch people and it's a worthy project, you'll find people to work on it—and there are all kinds of ways that you can do that. But get people who have experience, if it's a feature film, if it's a big film. I think you need to get advice from people. It would be a crime if Telefilm threw two million dollars at *A Winter Tan*. If we had two million dollars, it would have been a waste. We didn't need it. It would have changed the film. We wouldn't have made as good a film, why spend the money? I think you can get advice from people with... maybe you're starting out with a 10-minute film, go to someone that's done a half-hour film. Take the ladder.

*John Walker:* Any more questions?

*Heckler:* Are you really from Toronto?

*John Walker:* Yes I am, but it's no big deal.

*Chairman:* If there are no more questions, we will adjourn for lunch. Thank you John... (burst of applause and hooting)... John Walker for speaking to us.

*John Walker:* Thank you.

*Heckler:* LET'S DO LUNCH!

(raucous cheers and applause)

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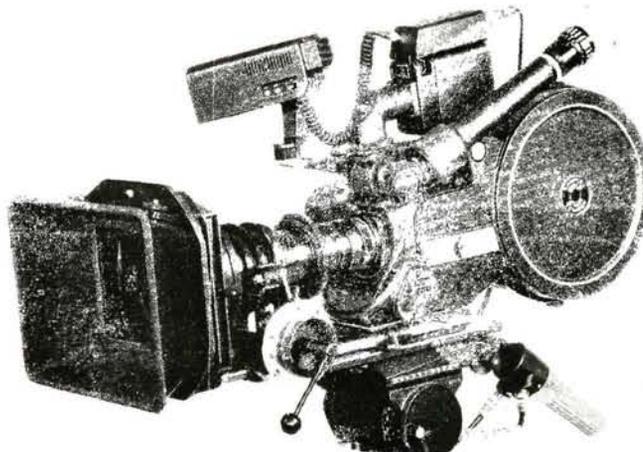
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