

Cultivating film

Saskatchewan plants the seeds for a local crop

BY CHERYL JACKSON

“We’ve become leaner, meaner and wiser.” Don List is emphatic. “Eight to 10 years ago, people didn’t take filmmakers seriously here. Now they know we mean business.”

List is one of the founders and the past-president of the Saskatchewan Motion Picture Industry Association (SMPIA). He knows what it was like in this province a decade ago. He was here, trying to make films. Most of the time he had to travel to other provinces and countries to work. Now he doesn’t have to. There’s enough here to keep him busy.

After years of slowly creeping forward, Saskatchewan’s film industry has taken a giant leap. There’s a lot of work here now, thanks to government initiatives and the rise of many talented people. The boom is convincing filmmakers to stay in the province, and some, who had left when projects were few, are coming back.

Last year was a very good one for Saskatchewan filmmakers. Sunspirit Productions, one of the province’s busiest houses, shot 80,000 feet of

Cheryl Jackson works for CBC-TV in Regina.

film in 1988. That’s up from an average of 45,000 feet a year for the last five years. Sunspirit’s children’s TV series, *Puttnam’s Prairie Emporium*, has been bought by CTV and is being aired across the country on Sunday evenings. There’s even talk of an international sale.

Kevin Dewalt’s Regina Motion Picture and Sound has had 300 per cent growth in the last year and is number one on Saskatchewan Business’s list of the province’s top 25 fastest-growing companies.

Prairie Media Associates, a consortium of production houses, has made enough money to buy \$20,000 worth of computer equipment.

Most of the day-to-day business has been, and continues to be, in industrial and commercial film and video. That’s no surprise – that’s where the money is, and Kevin Dewalt knows that. “Companies are just starting to realize the potential of video and they’re using it more and more.”

One of those companies is the Royal Bank. Dewalt produces a monthly video report for the bank, something that used to go out on paper. IPSCO (Interprovincial Steel Company), one of the city’s biggest companies, has just put out a tender for a quarterly video report. “These are



The Great Electrical Revolution team: writer Ken Mitchell, producer Barbara Stewart, co-producer Kevin Dewalt, director Larry Bauman and production manager Shar Carrick. (Inset) Film development project training coordinator Ron Braun

the contracts that help a production company expand," says Dewalt. "They're the bread and butter. Now we can afford to look at the dramatic side of it."

That's the stage Saskatchewan film is at - it's ready to look at features. And the people of the province seem ready to help it do that. The government, the NFB, and private broadcasters and producers are now getting involved in developing and funding the industry.

An industry task force report released in 1987 had six objectives and has already met four of them - a motion picture development fund, a directory of people and resources, a training and professional development mechanism, and an awareness campaign has just started work on the fifth objective - a review of government tendering policies. The sixth, an equity fund, has yet to be developed.

Development fund - who runs it; who gets it?

The development fund was to be supplied and operated by SMPIA, but the provincial government has offered to take on the responsibility. Some people in the industry don't like that. They'd rather see the fund completely separated from government. But others are happy SMPIA won't have to take on the financial burden. If the association ran the fund, it would fall under the Bank Act and would be liable for any losses.

The fund should be announced and running early this year. The commitment is \$2.1 million over the next three years to help with the development, marketing and production of Saskatchewan film. Single projects will be eligible for up to \$50,000. Outstanding loans won't exceed \$100,000 for any company. Almost any kind of film will be eligible, but the producer must prove that it will sell. Commercial viability is crucial to getting the money.

Just who gets that money will be decided by a panel made up of SMPIA members, industry professionals and government representatives.

The second part of this project is the film development office, which will get \$150,000 a year to operate. It will help filmmakers get money, develop their skills and market their films.

All of this means things look pretty good for at least the next three years. After that, no one seems to know who will take on the job. Culture Minister Colin Maxwell has said he hopes to see the film industry "up and running on its own."

Saskatchewan Film Development Project

The National Film Board has taken over the task force's training and development objective in a big way with its Saskatchewan Film Development Project. Seven half-hour dramas will be made over the next three years. The purpose - to train, develop and employ the province's



It's lonely at the top: Sask. crew shooting a rock video on location

filmmakers. The project has \$1.2 million to work with, \$600,000 from the province, and \$600,000 from the NFB. It's hoping to get at least as much from Telefilm as well, taking the total to more than \$2 million.

The NFB is using the money for workshops in all areas of film production, from producing to accounting. So far, about 70 people have participated in 12 workshops. The crew of the first drama, shot in February (*The Great Electrical Revolution*, written by Ken Mitchell) came from those workshops. Nine participants have been sent to work on other productions in Canada, and are expected to share their experiences when they return.

Project coordinator Ron Braun says the objective of the workshops is to get people experience they couldn't get otherwise. "The best training is to do the job, and this better prepares them to get those jobs."

The project looks good and for the most part seems to be working, but some filmmakers are skeptical about the mechanics. Who gets to participate in the workshops? Who gets to work on the dramas? There's a vague uneasiness about the whole thing. Braun knows that. "We've had some complaints, but all in all, it's been well-received."

Already, seven people who took part in the three-day producers' survival workshop have formed a producers group. They're working on a proposal to Baton Broadcasting. Baton has a million dollars to spend on regional drama within the next two years.

The Baton deal is the fulfillment of a promise made to the CRTC when Baton bought out three Saskatchewan TV stations. The money has to be spent on regional drama. "We'd like to do several dramas, perhaps even a series, but we don't know yet. It all depends on the scripts we get," says Reed Brown of CFQC in Saskatoon.

Brown has put out a call to independent producers for ideas and treatments. He has \$50,000 to develop scripts and hopes production will get underway soon. "We could have a fabulous industry here," says Brown. "There's great talent here. All they're lacking is the experience you get working." The Baton promise is to hire as many locals as possible.

There's also a CBC initiative. It's called *Family Pictures* and is supposed to give regional producers a chance to make dramas for national TV. Twenty-seven scripts were submitted to the Saskatchewan office. Only one was approved, but apparently that number is in proportion to numbers across the country. The half-hour will be written, produced and directed in Saskatchewan.

The Gamracy connection

A new company in Saskatoon has burst onto the scene and is promising a lot of work for crews here. It's called Cinegam, headed up by Veronica Gamracy. Gamracy is the president of SMPIA, and a stockbroker. And she knows how to get money. Together with Glenn Ludlow of Calgary, she's producing a series of TV features.

Gamracy started small, with plans to shoot one 90-minute feature called *The Cold War*, but she's been able to raise so much money from private investors, she's decided to shoot a series. "Investors have been very keen, so we've decided to go for the big one."

Gamracy is looking at international markets for her films, and hopes that offering a package of shows will make the deal more attractive.

All films will be produced in Western Canada. She has linked up with producers in other provinces because she wants to gain some of their expertise. It also allows her to tap into other provincial film funds.

Gamracy says shooting won't start until the

NFB drama is in post-production. "My biggest problem is getting people to work on the films," she says. "The keys will probably be brought in but I want to use local crews, so I have to wait until they're finished working on the NFB." The shortage of people sounds like bad news, but in the end, it can help the industry grow. It means there's work, and where there's work, there's growth.

Student winners

Much of the province's talent is coming from the University of Regina's film program. Rick Ash graduated last May. Just a few months later, he won the top drama prize at the Canadian Student Film Festival, held in conjunction with the Montreal International Film Festival. *All in Passing* was chosen over 36 other entries. The 24-minute film was made on a budget of only \$4,800. When Ash returned to Regina, he was contacted by the Paris Telefilm office. It wants him to enter the film in Tour France, an international student festival.

Last year, *Hearthline*, a 17-minute drama by film students Will Dixon and Angelos Hatzitolios, won second prize in the student category at the Canadian Society of Cinematographers Annual Awards in Toronto.

These young filmmakers are now a vital part of the film community and they're working on all kinds of films - independent dramas, commercials, and industrials. In a fledgling industry, there's no time for animosity over which kind of filmmaking is more worthwhile.

"Saskatchewan is this country's best-kept secret." Richard Kerr, experimental filmmaker and U. of R. instructor, is talking about the extraordinary light and locations that brought him to the province. He may be right, but if Saskatchewan filmmakers have their way, it won't be a secret for much longer. ●