

B.C. movie union rivalry heats up

VANCOUVER – Before April last year, life was simple for the movie producer working in B. C. The producer either signed the standard agreements with a combination of IATSE, Teamsters, Directors Guild of Canada (DGC) and Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), shot non-union, or went elsewhere.

But life during boom time is never simple. New unions in town, and local agreements signed in conflict with national standard contracts, have changed the rules. Technicians' unions NABET 800 and the Association of Canadian Film and Craftspeople came to town last year to get a piece of the expanding B. C. movie action. This move resulted in the established unions circling their wagons. Both ACFC and NABET have been frustrated in attempts to create a competitive moviemaking atmosphere similar to Toronto's, where they take the majority of the work.

While IATSE had, prior to this year, concentrated on building up the American import movie business, ACFC promised to focus on local indigenous productions. NABET wanted to carve out a market in the lower-budget movies IATSE wouldn't touch. The two rival unions held recruitment drives, signing up disillusioned IA permittees, and nearly everyone else with some level of experience. IATSE reacted by signing on those qualified for membership in IATSE before they could join the other two unions.

Local producers have enjoyed an organized series of concession contracts, offered by the established movie unions, known as "local production incentive agreements." Up to one-third deferrals have been offered to local producers for the last eight years. The other advantage for local producers in working with the established unions is using their collective deferral as cash at B. C. Film and Telefilm; using that deferral as equity private investment, you can, in theory, finance a movie with no money down.

While NABET and ACFC can outbid IATSE, getting the other unions to go along with them has been a major stumbling block. That is, until talks broke down between IATSE and E-Motion Films over their feature *Terminal City Ricochet* (see On-Location this issue). "They (NABET) bought their first picture," says IATSE business agent George Chapman, "the picture qualified as a local production entitled to our standard one third deferral. NABET gave them a two-thirds deferral."

"Not quite," corrects Kevin Brown, business agent for NABET 800, who says the two-thirds was based on a 16-hour day. "We only worked 12-hour days, meaning it worked out to around

a 35 per cent deferral. But they (E-Motion Films) didn't have it in their budget to cover the one-third of 16-hour days."

When NABET got the shoot, IATSE took the new rival union to the B. C. Federation of Labour to try and get NABET thrown out for unfair labour practices, or thrown off the show entirely. "They were told that they should recognize that NABET has jurisdiction and to begin a dialogue with us," says Brown.

NABET's presence at a meeting held in early May with IATSE, the DGC and Teamsters, means official recognition by the established unions of their rival union brothers. But ACFC, being an association, not a union, was not invited. Even NABET wants them kept out.

Having started out in Vancouver within weeks of NABET 800, ACFC has been a revolving door of presidents and business agents (Brown was their first business agent before being fired by ACFC, then hired by NABET). With no work, and unlike NABET, no major parent union next door to help out, ACFC has had little to offer its 220 members besides picnics and meetings, seminars and workshops. "The bottom line is we are here for the long haul," says Brenda Collins who points out that for the first two years of ACFC's 10-year existence, they didn't land a contract. Now that they are established in Toronto, they want to make ACFC a national organization.

Unlike NABET and IATSE, ACFC has its' own drivers' division, putting them in direct conflict with the interests of the 250-strong Teamsters local 155. Rumors about threats of mufferless motorcycles disrupting ACFC shoots have yet to be realized but, so far at least, no producer has been willing to take the risk of being the first to hire ACFC in Vancouver.

Meanwhile the Teamsters, "movie local," recently held its election, turfing out old business agent Bob Dennet and his executive, in favor of Fred Hunchuk and a new executive. As to whether the new administration will be more willing to work with ACFC, "Who knows what the future will hold? We have a very close relationship with IATSE and we certainly wouldn't want to disrupt that," says Hunchuk. That's also the official line from the DGC and ACTRA.

The Directors Guild of Canada is currently engaged in a jurisdictional dispute over a Toronto-based art director and member of the DGC, who worked on *Terminal City Ricochet* under NABET.

ACTRA is still involved in a "constitutional crisis" started when local writer Rick Drew, working on Paramount's big-budget TV series *MacGyver*, signed a Writers Guild of America contract with Paramount. The ACTRA Vancouver office, under then business agent Peter Dent, signed the agreement to allow more writers to work on the American series.

Paramount had a problem with ACTRA because, under the ACTRA agreement, which

was based on the model of low-budget Canadian features, the high-budget American series ended up paying the Canadian writers almost twice as much as the American ones. The other problem is the issue of copyright which, for serial TV with its regular characters and standard plot lines, may not be as important as in feature films.

ACTRA national wants the writers to keep copyright; when Toronto found out about the agreement in September, the Alliance tried to pull the contract back, but Paramount refused. After initially agreeing to disagree, the national and local ACTRA Writers guilds are still no closer to coming up with some form of ACTRA agreement that would allow Canadian writers to work on American shows.

Meanwhile Paramount has gone from having only one Canadian writer on *MacGyver* to three and, according to Drew, next year all four writers may be Canadian. With *MacGyver* being renewed for another season of shooting at the Bridge Studios in Burnaby, and enjoying its highest ratings ever, Drew says the Americans want to hire more Canadian writers. Unfortunately, few Canadian writers are experienced in episodic action adventures.

The problem of experience, and the standard ACTRA Writers Guild contract, is also keeping Canadian writers out of Cannell Films of Canada, the largest producer of episodic TV in the country. All Cannells' shows are written out of Los Angeles. With Cannell building a multi-million dollar studio in North Vancouver, frustrated Vancouver Writers' Guild members are hoping that some of those writing contracts will come north of the border. Meanwhile, they continue to fight with the East.

Ian Hunter •

YORKTON – The 25th Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival will offer a new workshop for students, June 2 and June 3, at the Yorkton Regional Highschool.

This production workshop is called *Video 89* and is co-hosted by the Saskatchewan Drama Association.

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