

David Novek Living and loving the business

"I started reading *Variety*, I don't know why, when I was about 13 years old," remembers David Novek.

One of the country's top publicists, Novek recently decided to sell off his Montreal-based company, and accept an executive post (Vice-President of Corporate Communications) at Astral Bellevue Pathe. One afternoon last month, he sat behind a desk in ABP's headquarters, reminiscing about a long career and talking about his favorite subject – the Canadian film industry.

The kid who loved *Variety* eventually grew up into a daily reporter covering the city hall beat, a radio news editor, a p. r. supervisor for Bell Canada, and the publisher of *The Canadian Jewish*

Chronicle Review. Then at the end of the '60s, Novek began a long stint as the NFB's Director of Public Relations – a job that made him a ubiquitous presence in Montreal's film scene.

He left the Film Board in 1980, and shortly thereafter started up David Novek Associates, which handles corporate p. r., unit publicity, and various other tasks for high-profile entertainment industry clients. Among the people on DNA's books: Denis Héroux, Robert Lantos, René Malo, Rock Demers, and Harold Greenberg – his new boss at Astral. Among the pictures Novek – at the NFB and with his firm – has launched and promoted: *Mon Oncle Antoine*, *J. A. Martin-Photographe*, *Le Déclin de l'empire Américain*, *Porky's*, *Quest for Fire*, and Demers' family films.

When not working long hours for his clients, for example in his highly visible role as communications chief of Montreal's World Film Festival, Novek, the p. r. man, has doubled as a lobbyist for the Canadian film industry, steering it around the twists and turns of inner circles in Cannes and Los Angeles. And at this new juncture in his career, he feels particularly proud of his activities "promoting and helping Canadian production and distribution" and "the confidence" government (film) agencies and ministers "have in my work" (See sidebar).

On a personal level, Novek looks back nostalgically on his numerous encounters with movie people in Canada, and "around the world." The year he worked L. A., trying to net an Oscar for *Le Déclin*, "I took my daughter to the cocktail party for the best foreign film nominees, and she said, 'Dad, you seem as if you've been living down here all your life.'"

But Novek is, of course, a Montrealer, and a prime example of the kind of English-speaking Montrealer who fits effortlessly into the city's French milieu. Novek's fond memories of L. A. nights mingle with recollections of evenings in his own city. He recalls, for example, "convincing both Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque to attend the opening of *Maria Chapdelaine*" although the political arch-enemies rarely showed up at the same social events. "At the cocktail party," laughs Novek, "they started joking with each other," and even posed for photographs in which the publicist sometimes appears – a solicitous, diplomatic presence.

CAN-FILM THEN AND NOW

When Novek first started promoting Canadian movies abroad, he had to draw on more than his

knack for diplomacy. He went for the hard sell, because apart from NFB product, "nobody knew what Canadian films were all about."

Novek and people like Jean Lefebvre (now at Telefilm) started "working the market at Cannes," developing – before the Australians – a "national approach to promoting the cinema." Because Canadian feature films were such an unknown quantity, "to get press into a screening, we used to walk along the streets, and virtually drag" journalists and critics into theatres.

Since those long afternoons of hustling Can-flicks outside the Grand Palais, "an evolution" in the industry has, of course, taken place. "I don't think," says Novek, "you have to apologize for being Canadian anymore." As for the tricky game of selling our motion pictures to international buyers, "we have become more professional, and it's much easier." Today's knowledgeable sales agents and sophisticated marketing techniques did not even exist in an era when nobody seemed to have heard about press kits and stills.

Sales are up; prices are better; foreign buyers and critics no longer lope away from the word "Canadian." However, despite our moviemakers' slow immersion into the glittering waters of showbiz, Novek feels strongly that "Canadian and Quebec films still have a problem.

"It's the box office that greases the wheel. And we're not known – although there are always exceptions – as a country that makes box-office films. We make *success d'estimes* like *Jesus* and *Mermaids*. But over the last five years, can you recall any big box-office hits – except for *Déclin*?" Even Denys Arcand's breakthrough picture, a hit in "certain countries," was "not what we call boffo."

In New York's *Village Voice* (October 17), a critic reviewing the current two-month retrospective of Can-pics at MOMA makes a familiar point: "(Canada's) enduring problem has been the all-important area of feature-length fiction. (The) country still struggles to make movies as proficiently as America without being slavishly derivative."

David Novek ticks off items in an equally familiar diagnosis. "The documentary tradition... the reputation that a lot of our films are cheerless, hopeless downers... (the fact) that we have not been perceived to develop any real stars who stayed. I can't say that anybody in France, or in the States, says, 'I want to see the next Rémy Girard film. Or the next Sheila McCarthy.'" As for directors, the only one –





M. Novek in his office, in front of the wall of honour (No, he doesn't work out of a deli)

according to the p.r. man – who is both perceived as a Canadian, and whose films are anticipated abroad, is Denys Arcand.

And then there's that elusive phantom of Canadian Cinema – the domestic audience. "Last year, the leading English-language film at the box office was *Dead Ringers*, and it did maybe \$1.4 million. That tells you something." Even the Québécois, who support their pictures, are not exactly indifferent to American product.

Heading for the bottom-line, Novek speculates, "Maybe it's budget. Who makes movies these days in the western world for \$800,000 or \$2.4 million? Generally speaking, I have concerns about the future of the film production industry. Just when we're developing all the other expertise, like marketing, and the distribution money is there – I worry whether there's going to be enough real theatrical production coming down the road." His pessimism notwithstanding, Novek does

continue to believe in the viability of the Canadian feature – if filmmakers "find international subjects." But these days, he believes even more in production designed for the tube.

"Particularly here in Quebec, we've been more successful in keeping the industry working at the television end of it – the *Lance et Comptes*, the *Night Heats*. You can control your costs, and your investors are sure of their return even though they may not make as much money as with a feature that takes off. Maybe television is a better medium for us."

WORDS OF ADVICE

Despite the frustrating problems of film promotion – the virtual impossibility of selling a Québécois picture in English Canada, the scarcity of national entertainment media – Novek "recommends the field to anybody; it's very rewarding. But you've got to love movies. For the long hours you put into it, you don't

make as much as doing p.r. for General Motors."

He emphasizes that "writing is still the basis of our business," and that a publicist must be a diplomat. For example, what do you say to a director and his stars when journalists cancel interviews after seeing their so-so film, or their "identifiable turkey?"

"You're dealing with people's egos, and some of them want you to draw them a picture. No director ever made a bad film; it was a bad release." On the other hand, "if the film works, it's because the director made a masterpiece."

In the final analysis, Novek sees film promotion as a profession like any other. "A lawyer handles a case and does the best he can for his client. Obviously, it's going to be a lot easier to sell *Jésus de Montréal* than some other films. But that's part of the game. You've got to try and find ways. Unless there's something patently wrong, every film deserves a chance."

– Maurie Alioff

SCORING THE FILM BOARD'S OSCAR

As a lobbyist for this country's film industry, David Novek set up meetings between Canadian cabinet ministers and American studio heads. He organized a Quebec film festival in L.A. He developed promotional campaigns for Cannes.

But of all his lobbying, the "work that I did on the NFB's 50th anniversary was the most satisfying." What work? Novek was instrumental in getting the NFB last year's special Academy Award.

Over a period of about a year and a half, he orchestrated a campaign that began with planting the special-Oscar-for-the-NFB idea in the minds of the people who would eventually vote for it: the Academy's 36-member board of governors.

But how do you succeed in the face of stiff competition, and when you know that the Academy "does not give honorary awards to production entities on their birthday" (including Paramount Pictures)? First you "find an angle." (The NFB got its special Oscar, says the citation, for innovation and "excellence in every area of filmmaking.")

Then you talk to the governors you've met over the years, and you ask other people to speak to their contacts. As the months tick by, you keep track of the dates when the board meets; you prepare "the right documentation." And you make sure the NFB is "in the spotlight" when the vote is imminent; you invite board members to a cocktail party.

Of course, Novek emphasizes, the campaign ultimately worked because he was selling a "good product." And for a man who believes the NFB "is, despite the problems it's going through, important to Canada," helping the Film Board get an Oscar was one way to "make its relevance known to the people."

– M.A.

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