

Boom! (1)

The actor's point of view

by Paul Kelman

From the actor's point of view, the "boom" years from 1978 to 1981 offered the first real opportunity of professional work in film. Nearly a quarter of a billion dollars was spent making dozens of Canadian feature films. The actor who did land roles gained major film experience which was previously inaccessible to him.

He had a crack at playing more visible parts in both support and lead categories and, consequently, gained media and audience recognition. He had the opportunity of working with seasoned international professionals, thereby allowing him to gauge his talents by internationally competitive standards. There was money to be made - sometimes double, triple or even quadruple what he had been accustomed to making. This resulted in the actor acquiring a more acute business sense. He became familiar with negotiations, contracts, promotion and distribution. He began to differentiate between filmmakers with vision and those who were inspired by short-term thinking. He saw the real possibility of a formidable motion picture industry in his own country, and he wanted it.

When, in 1981, the boom went bust, the actor saw that most of the films which were made during this period had not received distribution and those that did rarely made competitive major-league money. This came as no surprise. From the start, the majority of scripts was deficient in dialogue and character development. Further, the primary function of the screenplay - to tell a good story, and to tell it originally - was neglected, there being too much emphasis on formula writing and obvious imitation of previously successful genre films. Often it was left to the actor to make the script fly. He invested so much time in trying to make it work that he was robbed of the necessary concentration needed to do his job: act. If the movie is good, the actor can be good, not the other way around.

Television producer Moses Znaimer, who acted in *Atlantic City* and *Misdeal*, explains: "You look at the incredible torrent of failed movies and you can't point to the acting as the central point of failure. The production was frequently bad, the financing was atrocious, the marketing was silly, but the acting was almost uniformly good."

Paul Kelman has acted in many films and on the stage, and had the lead role in Dal Productions' film *My Bloody Valentine*.



● R.H. Thompson, one of the most versatile and competent actors



● Nick Mancuso, back from Hollywood to buy his *Ticket to Heaven*

● Saul Rubinek, the only memorable character in *Agency*



Movie-making is a commercial industry, but the fundamental impetus to make a film must be creative. The two do not contradict one another. On the contrary, as the Americans have known for over half a century, the dynamics of feature film production is a synthesis of art and business.

One cannot make a film just because the money is available through the federal capital cost allowance, or by way of development and interim financing through the Canadian Film Development Corporation. In the boom years, these measures simply opened the door to the American Majors who were willing to listen and co-produce on their own terms. One makes a film because there is something to say, an idea to be communicated, a story to be told or, more specifically, "shown". Then one goes out and finds the money. The short-term thinking producers, anxious to cash in on opportunity, went to the Americans out of insecurity and became intoxicated with stars and dollar signs.

We're not talking here of a lack of nationalism or patriotism, but of Canadian talent, available and capable, being forced to take a back seat. When a producer looked to Hollywood to legitimize his Canadian production, he ended up being told what to do. 'He who pays the piper calls the tune.'

These decisions affected the actor in that the roles which became available were mostly in support of American stars. Often second-rate "TV Guide" name-actors ended up playing roles that could easily have been played by Canadian actors. But Canadian actors, it was feared, couldn't guarantee, at minimum, an American television sale.

Consequently, producers went after actors who did it for the money, not because they were irresistibly right for the role. This was also obvious in the choice of scripts the actor had to work with - scripts bought from American writers because they were American and not necessarily because the producer had a creative desire to produce that specific script. All this led to inflated costs and salaries.

Meatballs was one of the first movies to demonstrate that investment in Canadian films was viable. Grossing over seventy million dollars worldwide on an original production cost of about a million, it precipitated the production of many imitations. Actor Keith Knight of *Meatballs* fame and eight other Canadian features explains. "People who didn't know all that much about making films saw a buck to be made and jumped

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right in. A lot of trash resulted – a lot of trash which I took part in. I only wish more filmmakers had cared enough to make sure they knew what making a film was really about. It's no good in the end turning to an actor to make the turkey fly. You had to be able to write on your feet because the scripts were often no more than second drafts. However, all the films I acted in, even the bad ones, provided me with invaluable learning experience."

Faced with this situation, most actors did not get stuck in a posture of dissatisfaction. Instead, like Knight, they worked hard at what they were offered, learning their craft as they went along, and developing an ever-increasing critical sense of the business of filmmaking and film-acting. They also knew it was inevitable that some smaller budget films couldn't afford to play the tax shelter game, and that some weren't even set up for that purpose. These films presented the actor with a real chance of winning the lead and other major roles, even if it did mean working for far less remuneration than their American counterparts were making in other Canadian features.

Among the Canadian actors who won starring roles were: Michael Ironside in *Scanners*, Winston Reckert in *Heartaches*, Nicholas Campbell in *The Amateur*, Robert Joy in *Atlantic City*, Paul Kelman in *My Bloody Valentine*, Nick Mancuso, Saul Rubinek and R.H. Thompson in *Ticket to Heaven*, and Gabriel Arcand in *Les Plouffe*. It is significant that these films did get distribution and earned commercial and/or critical success – the magic combination that gives credibility to the word "industry".

Those producers who exercised vision in the choice of subject matter and film-packaging found most of their actors in their own talent pool. There was no question here of the so-called expatriot actor. Talent and producers alike see filmmaking as an international medium. A Canadian film actor is as much an actor if he's working in the U.S. or Khartoum. An international mix of actors has always existed for creative

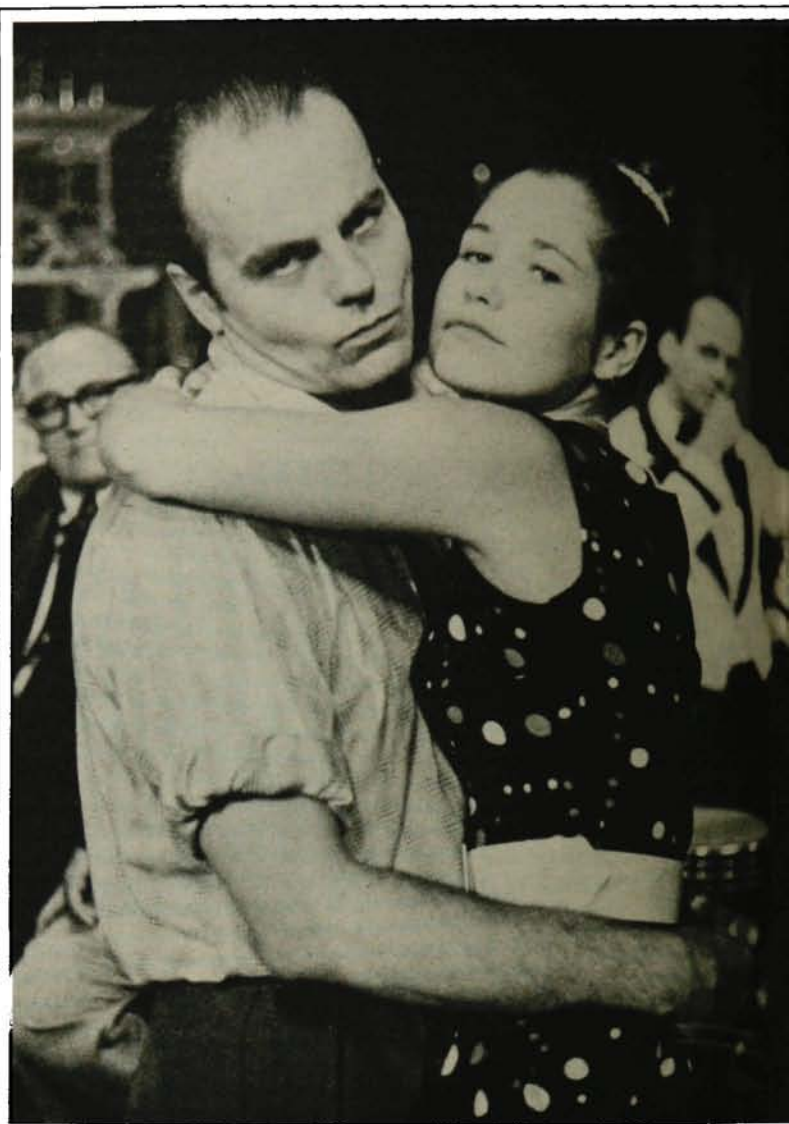
and economic reasons. For filmmakers like Gilles Carle (*Les Plouffes*), Ralph Thomas (*Ticket to Heaven*), Zale Dalen (*Hounds of Notre Dame*), Don Shebib (*Heartaches*) and newcomer Clay Borris (*Alligator Shoes*), vision payed off for them, their producers and their talent.

Saul Rubinek, this year's Genie Award winner for Best Supporting Actor, has worked in the U.S. and Canada on films like *Agency*, *High Point*, *Deathship*, *Ticket to Heaven*, *By Design* and in the American film *Soup for One* in which he had the starring role. Says Rubinek: "Suddenly the Canadian actor had the possibility of making \$100,000 a year. I'm not talking about those few actors who have their own business, but the normal work-a-day actor. He had a chance of making money, of buying a home – the way people in other businesses do."

But the actor's dream of having a big money-making movie career remained that – just a dream, an illusion. In a commercial industry like film, either you make it or you don't.

Although business expectations, career expectations and artistic expectations blossomed, fulfillment and international exposure was denied the Canadian actor. Either his films never saw the light of day, were immediately sold to TV, or came out and disappeared quickly. In Canada he gained local industry recognition, but Hollywood wasn't offering anything because the higher profile roles were being played (badly) by primarily American second-rate actors at exorbitant salaries. All this for, at least, the guarantee of a TV sale so that the producer could pass his prospectus around to potential investors.

Rubinek continues. "The films did not make money. People started to go bankrupt and invest elsewhere. This wasn't the subsidized theatre or television (CBC) the actor was used to. The actor had to face up to reality as he would in any big city where he's involved in any commercial enterprise. You have to balance good work with financial suc-



● Michael Ironside, hamming it up with Suzanne's best friend

● Gabriel Arcand, straightening out things with Suzanne



cess. Just because you were working on one film didn't mean you were going to keep working – not unless there was a continuity of film production. If artistic fulfillment meant playing leads in movies, you were a fool, a dreamer. It's called 'Leaditis': a disease that occurs in every country with a film industry. You have to learn to settle for less. You can be ambitious and go up for things. But you have to also learn to practise your craft and get fulfillment out of that.

"I know that if I just go after fame and money and do things I don't want to do in order to do things I want to do (eventually), I'll die inside creatively. And I won't know what it is I'm supposed to do. Who do you know, that after tasting power, says they've had enough? Nobody... I can't lose sight of whatever it is that makes me able to give something as a man to other people through my work.

"You have to be smart if you're an actor. If you're... hoping that the world is going to give you a living just because you're talented, you're crazy. Chaplin and Keaton were geniuses. Keaton died broke. Why? He wasn't a good businessman... He didn't protect his work.

"The good thing that came out of all this was that people got a taste of what could be. Some people did good work even in bad films. Some learned from foreign stars (sometimes what not to do). A great deal was learned from foreign directors too. We learned something about the industry and now there are more people than ever who want to act, write, produce and direct in film.

"The bad part is that the way was blocked by bad work, badly done. It was thoughtless, short-term thinking... but it was just a phase. We're a young nation and we're ready."

These years transformed the actor into a realist. He realized that in order to have an enduring industry, it had to be built on a solid foundation. Economic reality must merge with artistic sensibility. If the medium is to mature, then it's time the business community take stock and become more responsive to talent.

Ian MacDougall, deputy director of the CFDC, senses a move in that direction: "There certainly has been a great attrition in the ranks of the producer group. The people who were in it for the short haul have gone back to investing in rapeseed futures. The cost of the films made under the tax shelter tended to inflate in value. In August, 1979, the cost of a feature film here was just under four million. Today it's around a million. A lot of it was the fat of the tax shelter, and a lot of it was strictly inflation. I think it's much better to go with a good story and a solid cast, and take your chances with less money.

"One of the differences today, as opposed to those low budget films that were done ten years ago... is we now have a talent pool of top professional quality.

"I think there are more people around who'll work for minimum and a share in the profit because they want to work. After all, you're not an actor if you're not

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working. But it seems to me that the producers haven't gone in yet and said openly and honestly that, yes, there has to be one producer and one boss, but that they are willing to open their books and show you that you are getting an honest reading. They could, say 'We want you to act for less than your normal rates, with the potential of making money down the line, and really share in the risk and the reward.'

"Instead it's usually (spoken like a pirate) 'Ahar! We get the low rates and we'll hide all the extras...' If producers were more open, they'd get more co-operation and be able to put things together. There are a lot of younger producers from the milieu who are probably interested in working that way."

Nick Mancuso, Canada's 1982 Best Actor, offers his insight: "We have advantages here. For one, a quarter of the world market speaks the same language, English. We have two film industries in two countries (U.S. and Canada). We have resources on two levels: economic and cultural. As Canadians we have exposure to the British and American systems of acting. We're in an extremely competitive arena... and the hostile environment of competition is what makes it happen."

"We have the experience now, we know the score. A few years ago people didn't have a clue... The talent is here, the money is still here. The next logical step is for people to get together at some level and make their own films: a private film industry."

"Subsidy was good just to keep the patient alive, but you don't want to be just alive. You want to be able to jump around and breathe, and think, and do the whole thing. Well, we don't have producers. Fine, then someone has got to say 'Hey, I can make a buck off of these guys (the talent)'. When you're in the States, everyone opens the door and smiles. Why? The reason is you are their bread and butter. The stakes are higher, and they're willing to take the risk."

Risk is a common variable in an actor's work. He takes emotional and psychological risks in developing a character and exhibiting it. Often he risks his life or his health in a difficult shoot. He risks his trust, integrity and faith in almost every project he takes on. It's the nature of the profession, a hazard which takes enormous will and sensitivity to sustain. It's his choice to be vulnerable, and he doesn't make it lightly.

Obviously, more risks have to be taken by those who make things happen: distributors, investors, producers, casting agents, and all the middle men from brokers to finders. The kind of risks that will make a "high volume, low cost" competitive industry. Big money makers aren't the be-all and end-all, but they are a possibility too. As actor Nick Campbell put it, "I don't care how bad the economy is, if you've got a good product, people will jump at it. The 'boom' indicated that there are a lot of people who are willing to play this game. There's a lot of opportunity here and there's a whole re-alignment going on. You've got to let the work speak for itself."

Letting the work speak for itself is perhaps the ultimate risk that needs to be taken - the reasonable and creative risk of making Canadian films which say something about who we are or where we come from. Again, Moses Znaimer adds "If the final funding has to come from outside the country be-

cause the gross budget is so large that you can't hope to recoup in your own marketplace, then you ought not to be surprised that those exterior markets come along and tell you what story to make and who should be in it. And, paradoxically, those are the two central things in a movie which I think are the most important, and in the boom years, were almost never Canadian. The two things which the audience most easily relates to: the story and the people in it."

Znaimer believes that on a one-and-a-half to two million dollar project, in which everyone involved works at more reasonable rates, an actor could conceivably make 30 to 50 thousand dollars twice a year, rather than getting one or two hundred thousand every four years. "If the industry pulled off a few dozen of these films annually for TV and theatres, you could get for the first time a fundamental change in the economics of the film industry. You could see anywhere from four to six hundred thousand dollars in domestic television before looking at the rest of the world. That changes something from rank speculation to a reasonable business proposition" says Znaimer.

In the boom years, when Canadian actors were cast in the leading roles, it was in the lower budget features and they often took short money, from nine to twenty thousand. They took it partly from inexperience and partly as a hedge against the future. Michael Ironside, with 25 films to his credit, (among them *Scanners* and the recently-released *Visiting Hours*), shares his experience. "I did *Scanners* for nine and change. I'm not embarrassed by that. It was a good part. I made my money back on the next film. Just because producers think 'short' and 'soft' costs, doesn't mean the actor has to. I made 18 films before *Scanners*, two of them in leads. Now *Scanners* and *Visiting Hours* are making money and they only have one thing in common. They have me in them. There's no backtracking, my career is going to go on. I'm thinking very much long term."

"You get typed in structured productions, 'til you break type. In lower budgets, they aren't buying on the hoof, they're buying favours. You take shorter money for freedom. Once they wanted leads, they had to groom us for more than supports. They had to give us a shot. So they bring in Ironside, Kelman, Reckert or Campbell, whoever..."

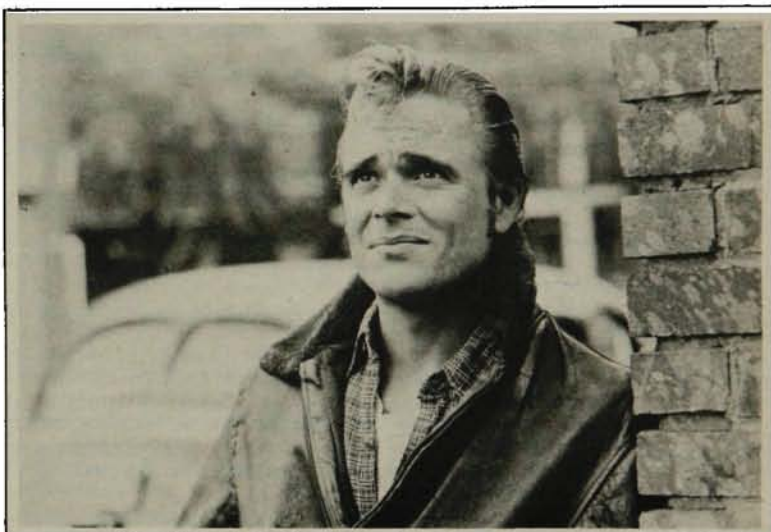
"You have to trust your actor. He can help tell your story; the director has to have enough strength for creative argument, and you grow. You break type. Really if you can't pay, don't play. That's what it's about, on all sides."

Real talent in this country demands artistic and financial parity in its contribution to the making of films. It's important at this moment in the industry's development that producers and filmmakers realize this as a necessity. The Canadian film actor is not the inexperienced and naive talent of five years ago. The transformation he underwent in the boom era has made him movie-wise. He knows what he's worth and what he has to offer. The "boom", in a sense, groomed him for today's industry. His criticism of the lack of insight and foresight during the boom years is not a chastisement but a reaffirmation of the need for responsible and creative expertise in film production.

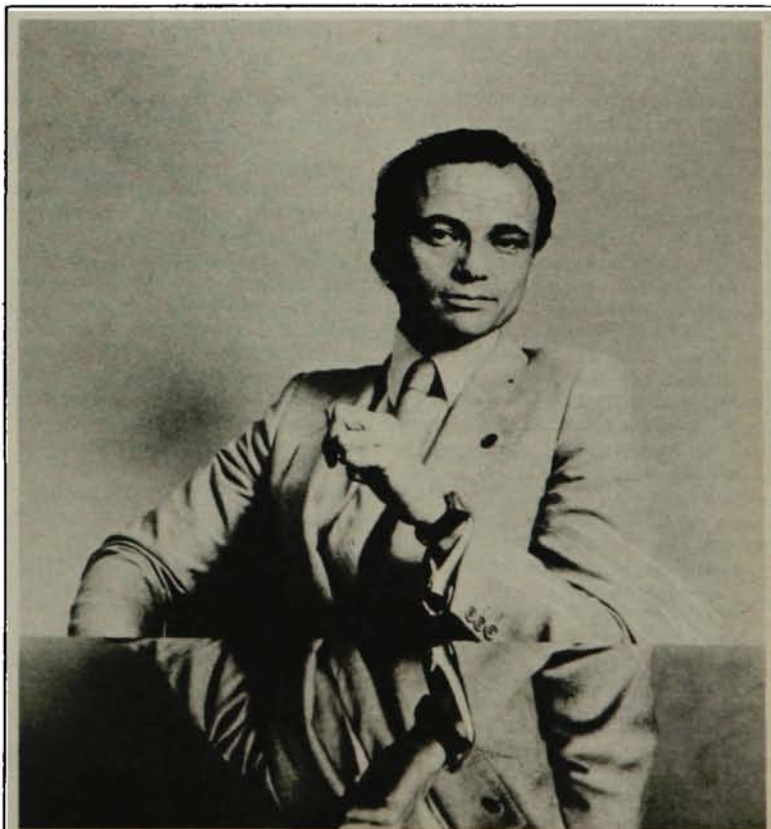
The actor today is thinking long-term. And as Ironside says, "There is no backtracking."



● Paul Kelman whose *My Bloody Valentine* tops video sales in the States



● Winston Reckert as he was in *Suzanne*



● Moses Znaimer, also a young actor after three feature roles