

## Mush and mumble in the mountains

by Linda Kupecek

Dubbing itself "the Pulitzer of television" and brandishing a healthy handful of rave reviews, the Banff Television Festival has come a long way since its early days at the Banff Centre. Now holding court in the medieval splendour of the Banff Springs Hotel, supported by backers like Global Television, Nabisco Brands, and increased loot from lottery funds, praised by international critics, the target of 385 entries from 21 countries, and the subject of a CBC television special aired June 10... the Festival is finally in the world arena of competition for excellence in television programming. Well done and bravo!

Then, why, instead of "the healthiest young brawler on the block" described in the press releases, does the Festival seem more like an aging debutante, still clinging to coy ways instead of welcoming the maturity of success?

There is much that is admirable in the Banff Festival: impressive guests and speakers in a spectacular setting, excellent programming from around the world... and an expressed concern for integrity in programming. But, seeing such great potential, one wants to whisper a few words of advice into this beauty's ear. (Or, even better, send over a crackerjack public relations person with a snappy wit and an iron hand.)

The litany of "we-are-so-poor-and-suffering" worked (barely) the first few years. But, the fifth time around, intoned in almost exactly the same words and cadence, with the same breathy pauses, and only the wardrobe and setting changed, the noble suffering routine begins to lose its charm.

The Banff Festival has a wonderful asset in executive director Carrie Hunter, a handsome woman with poise and

dignity. She has brought the Festival forward in giant steps; now, if only her speechwriters could do the same for her. She is beginning to sound more like the prow of the ship than its captain.

If Banff is developing something of a reputation as a "woman's festival" ... this is not in a positive, feminist sense. While Hunter and her staff ooh-and-aaah and lament their hard work (I heard one delegate unkindly dub this the "harassed housewife syndrome" - more tizziness than business), the panels are overloaded with men. In this colony, the women are the workers, the men are the king bees... or, at least, so this year's lineup would indicate. Of over 65 speakers and panelists, only nine were women.

The panels also had a distinctly American twang, peppered with the wit of the Brits. In fact, on a number of occasions, some Americans became so involved with debate that they forgot they were north of the border and referred to "this country" (and they didn't mean Canada).

The exchange of views between countries and producers was invigorating and promising. At one of the star seminars, "Trans-Atlantic Transplants", American panelists urged Canadians to pursue more co-productions.

However, Charles Larsen, of Almi Television Productions, recounted that when negotiating the sale of SCTV to the U.S., the Canadian producers were initially reluctant to include the McKenzie Brothers because the sodden siblings were "just Canadian content" ... "But they're funny", insisted a bewildered Larsen. Moral of the story, according to Larsen, is "Don't misjudge what the American audience will accept." Cloaked in humility, and fussing with indecision, Canadians seemed awash in our "decent but dull" international image.

And, unhappily, the day devoted to Canadian topics only confirmed that. One group of panelists muttered, mumbled and mouldered behind their microphones interminably, finally prompting one producer to explode with rage like a mini-volcano. When she marched to the front of the room to shake her fist at the panel and tell them off for their negative droning, most of the room was silently cheering her on. ("I thought she was going to slug them!" crowed one delighted delegate.)

Perhaps this illustrated two possible interpretations of the dynamics of mouldering/smouldering. The Americans and British seem to enjoy what they do. They get excited. They argue. They know their business and they love their business. But the genteel Canadians? Are we really like that dreary panel? Do we just wonder and wander and whine and wimp around?

Maybe not. The most vibrant moments came from three western producers... Wendy Wacko, Elvira Lount and Eda Lishman. Wacko not only sold *Challenge: the Canadian Rockies* to Turner

Broadcasting while in Banff, but also proposed an alternative film finance plan, which at least was an attempt to churn out something constructive. Lount, disgruntled with financing problems, charted the course of her Broadcast letter, and in an outrageous gesture, offered to sell it to the highest bidder. Lishman berated one panel on behalf of independent producers. "Why are we here? We haven't heard one positive thing from anyone on this panel."

Robert Fredericks, producer of *The Beachcombers* in Vancouver, earned a round of applause when he spoke eloquently of the needs of independents in the west. "If we really want Canadian content, we must use western creativity."

But these Canadian quotes were drops in the bucket of information available at Banff. The Festival offers a wealth of knowledge and expertise as close as the person at your elbow at the buffet. Seminars, addresses, press conferences, screenings, receptions, informal socializing, wild whoop-de-dooing, and general playtime in the Rockies offer a wide range of opportunities to wheel-and-deal, associate and negotiate.

Now if only the Festival could patch up its little problems: incredible disorganization in some areas (okay, many of the staff are volunteers, so one has to make allowances); faux pas after faux pas (Example: The opening night pre-

miere of *Draw*. Apparently, delegates had taken courtesy buses up the mountain to the theatre, only to discover they had to fork over a dollar in order to get back down the mountain at the end of the evening. "I can't believe it. That's so tacky!" groaned one bemused delegate); a lot of indiscriminate hugging and kissing and mushing over people when a simple handshake would do (I'm not against affection, just phoniness); a tendency to be hokey and cute (I was told that the Banff Follies, a sort of amateur night, caused a major exodus to the bar); and other such shenanigans that try the patience. Also, although the prow of this wobbly ship is unfailingly gracious, the crew tend to throw their manners overboard in the desperation of the week. (It's funny that Andra Sheffer and her gang at the Trade Forum don't have this problem. But, then, Sheffer, in addition to her impressive track record, has the p.r. skills of Maria Topalovich on hand.)

So. The Banff Television is terrific. "The best television festival in the world but no-one knows about it", laments Hunter. Personally, I think that's because there's still too much mush and mumble in the mountains. The Banff Fest has come of age. It can toss the kissy-huggy, fuss and buss, poor-little-me jazz into the closet... and simply be what it really is - a world-class festival.

### Quotable Quotes

**Robert Wussler** of Turner Broadcasting on co-productions: "Bring us an advantage... either tax shelter dollars or a unique creative characteristic or a way to spend a lot less money."

**Les Brown** of Channels Magazine on the population of Canada vs. the U.S.: "If CBS did a program in Canada and every single person watched it, it would fail."

**John Kennedy**, CBC Television Drama: "I would like to nominate Stan Thomas and CKND for sainthood for their courage in taking the bull by the horns, and undertaking something as potentially dangerous, but also potentially rewarding, as television drama."

Manitoba filmmaker **Allan Kroeker**: "Anything that's good in film is regional."

### And the winners are...

BANFF - Canadian television entries took three out of 14 Rockies awarded at this year's Banff Television Festival which concluded May 26. U.S. entries took four awards, while Australia, Hungary, Eire, and West Germany each took one, and U.K. entries two. The Best of the Festival grand prize with a \$5000 cash award went to the PBS production *The Ghost Writer* from the American Playhouse Series. Headed by Canadian film producer Claude Fournier, the international fest jury comprised Financial Times TV critic Chris Dunkley, Le Monde drama critic Michel Cournot and TV Guide's New York bureau chief Neil Hickey.

Award Category	Program Title	Production Company
Best Comedy	<i>Kick Up The Eighties</i>	BBC Scotland
Light Entertainment	<i>Romeo &amp; Juliette On Ice</i>	Indian Road Prods. Inc. (Toronto)
Fine Arts	<i>The Seven Deadly Sins</i>	Hungarian Television MTV
Children's	<i>Big Bird In China</i>	The Children's Television Workshop (New York)
Outdoors	<i>Never Stay In One Place</i>	Australian Broadcasting Corp.
Social & Political	<i>Gurkhas of Nepal</i>	Sepia Films (Toronto)
Continuing Series	<i>Rumpole and the Old Boy Net</i> (episode from the series <i>Rumpole of the Bailey</i> )	Thames Television Ltd. (London)
Drama Special	<i>In The Fall</i>	CKND-TV (Winnipeg) CanWest Broadcasting
Limited Series	<i>Kennedy</i>	Central Prods. in association with Alan Landsberg Prods. (U.S.)
Best Feature	<i>The Ghost Writer</i> (from the American Playhouse series)	WNET-13 in association with Showtime Entertainment
Special jury awards	<i>Post For Tiger</i>	Westdeutscher Rundfunk
	<i>Caught In A Free State Adam</i>	RTE (Eire) Alan Landsberg Prods. (U.S.)
Best of the Festival	<i>The Ghost Writer</i>	WNET-13 - Showtime Ent.