

# I'm not sure

## But who the hell invests in Canada anyway?

an interview by Connie Tadros

**W**e know all the problems that exist and sometimes I feel helpless because I don't have any answers. I know that it has a great deal to do with confidence in oneself and that, as long as we lack the confidence, then probably we won't put forward an image that is attractive.

Let's face it. When I was young, those were very exciting, heady days. Can you imagine turning loose on the CBC this motley group of people with all different backgrounds, and so ambitious, with big egos, and committed? And a whole new medium of communication. Television was so exciting. Dave Garraway was in Chicago. The center of television was Chicago, it wasn't New York in those days.

We used to bring people up to give us lectures, people like CBS president Dr. Frank Stanton, and technical people, because, remember, you had to train a whole group of technicians. These guys had never seen a camera before, let alone taken it apart, or learned how to run it.

And then, of course, it was all live television so it was just the funniest... I mean it was panic city all the time — a state of panic which resulted in people taking chances, being very creative, out of necessity, making do. We never did have a lot of money.

We used to rehearse in a church off the campus of the university (of Toronto) where they had cancerous chickens in the cellar and the smell of chickenshit permeated this old church and that's where we rehearsed. We were very *avant-garde*, I think, in the field of satire, comedy, even music. Even musical variety and comedy was, at that moment, a little bit superior to our dramatic presentations. We used to think, anyway. It was also the most creative because we wrote everything ourselves.

Why did we all leave? It was a natural kind of progression. There was, if I may say so, a kind of surplus of talent. There was also a lack, I think, of appreciation and when artists, writers, directors, actors don't feel appreciated and aren't stroked, aren't considered important, and the technicians take over, then they feel unwanted.

You see, there was a tremendous, mass-sense of inferiority that permeated the press in this country. The press in this country is very conservative, and it fed this inferiority complex. It was pretty

tough for a Canadian show to get a good review or to get any attention. Even then, everyone was watching Buffalo and the Canadian press never really supported Canadian television anyway. That frustrates directors and writers and actors, and so they say, 'Why don't I go where I'm appreciated?' because, exactly the opposite attitudes were prevalent in American television. In other words, *they* wanted the writers, *they* wanted the directors, the actors. They wanted the creative people. They were very supportive of the creative people. They knew that their programming lived or died on the strength of the creators.

The programming group at CBS, NBC and ABC were far more interested in programs than commercials. And, you had this incredible audience you played to. You didn't realize how important you were until after people started to tell, "Did you know what your audience was last night? Did you know how many millions of people saw your program?" To communicate to millions of people and to have them respond is a very exciting thing. To communicate to a smaller population and have them tell you that you're not very good is a frustrating situation.

You see, Americans want a slice of success. They *love* success. If you're successful, in any field whatsoever, including sports, architecture, any of the arts, music, anything. If you're successful, Americans want a slice of you. They want a piece of you. They admire you, make you into a star. They love success. Whereas in Canada, if you're successful as a writer, a musician, as an artist, people are very suspicious of you. There's no reason, it's a kind of meanness of spirit. I guess it comes from a Calvinistic background. Maybe it comes from the fact that we are very large and have a very small population, and therefore we feel that. We feel a little intimidated by this enormous country next door with this huge population. Maybe it's just a feeling of being smaller.

When I came back in 1978, after being gone for 19 years, there was a whole generation of young people who were much more confident and were beginning to say: hey, wait a minute, we do have talented people in this country and some talented artists at an international level. At the political level, John Roberts had become Secretary of State in 1976 and I got to know him; I met him in London

when I was living in England. He said, "You know, there's inequities in the film business." And I said, "There sure as hell are. The Americans own the distribution, they own the theatres. Now Canadians, for some reason, love movies. They have never lost the moviegoing habit, whereas in America and other parts of the world, they have. So, therefore, we are the biggest customers for American movies that exist in the world. Now, outside of a few dollars left with the popcorn-counter and the odd projectionist and a few ushers, where's all this money going? It's going back to the United States, back to Hollywood. Don't you think you should lean on these people a little bit? Do you think it's fair? Do you think it's morally right? Don't you think you should have a slice of the pie?"

I invited him down to Malibu, to my house, and I said, "You come down and I'll introduce you to the heads of the studios. I'll get them all there in one room." It was a terrific thing. You had the head of Universal, Ted Ashley was there, the head from Warner Bros. We had Columbia, we had Fox, we had United Artists. We had them all there, or most of them. We kept it very light, and then after lunch I gave a little preamble and said, "But perhaps the Honorable Minister would like to say a few things about film in Canada since all of you men have a stake in the Canadian audience," and so he made a little speech. He hadn't got three minutes into his speech before one of them said, "Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute. You're now making *us* responsible for your problems?" Of course, the Americans are tough to deal with. They play hardball. You don't want to play hardball, then get out of the game, as far as I'm concerned. You want to make a deal, then you've got to be tough. So, at the end of the luncheon, I think everybody realized that they had been had, that they had been invited to this luncheon and, all of a sudden they were being attacked, they were being lectured. They didn't like that too much and, of course, they laid those problems in the lap of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) which is headed by Mr. Jack Valenti. And the Motion Picture Association is supported, financially, by all the major distributors. So, the next step was to get to Valenti. But it was important that we got to the heads of the studios to make them aware of the direction in which we felt the

problems were. And, since that time, there's been fairly constant pressure. I don't know how much it's helped.

Then I got Francis Fox and Valenti together at my farm for dinner. Which was very interesting. Fox came with some assistants. Valenti was alone. He can handle himself. He's well-prepared. He had a speech ready to be delivered the next day to the Toronto Film Festival and he handed a copy to Francis Fox. "Here's my speech." He's used to dealing with various governments. That's what he does for a living. We don't have anyone like that. The Motion Picture Association has offices all over the world: New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Rome. They're very organized. We don't have anything like that, 'cause we're not a filmmaking country. We don't depend upon billions of dollars coming in for our films because we haven't made that thrust into the marketplace on an international scale to warrant this kind of operation.

Anyway, these discussions are very complicated because you can only go so far with threats in any particular industry as far as trade goes. You can make all the threats in the world, but the moment you make a threat to another government (especially a government as large as the United States government) in the field of, let's say, film distribution or exhibition, they can also come back and make a threat in another area: lumber, automobiles, agriculture. It's a two-way street. Valenti can mobilize the Senate and Congress. Why is his office in Washington? I would say the MPAA is one of the largest, most successful lobbies in Washington today.

What you must understand is that there is constant lobbying of the American Congress by special-interest groups. And MPAA would be one, but a very influential one. Therefore, if they felt that they were getting a rough deal they would push to have, perhaps, quotas established in other areas which would be detrimental to Canada. If we put an excise tax on the distribution of American films in Canada, they'll probably put an excise tax on an industry which is, at the moment, doing a tremendous amount of business in the United States without a great deal of tax on it. Those are the realities of life.

But, you see, pressing Valenti is like pressing someone who is constantly protective of the American industry. I prefer dealing on a one-to-one basis with the

heads of the studios themselves. We got Columbia to commit to three pictures in Canada. Now, *Agnes of God* will, I guess, be one of them. Maybe that's the way to do it. Convince them that we can, that the production organization can supply them with three films that people will really come to see and that it's not going to cost them as much money. And work with the studios from that standpoint. I don't think you can really have a successful Canadian distribution system or organization in Canada distributing Canadian films.

You see, I've cooled a little bit since the days when I thought quotas and levies could give Canadian filmmakers a hold on an industry. When the Canadian government provided a 100% tax write-off for investment in Canadian motion pictures, I said, "Well, that's the way to do it. They're doing it internally. They're using taxpayers' money. Well, we can afford that much, I guess, especially since we're the heaviest-taxed people in the world practically. That's terrific." I'm all for write-offs if that provides incentives for local investment. I mean, God, our major banks have most of their holdings outside of the country. Who the hell invests in Canada anyway? Canadians don't seem to. So I thought that was terrific. What happened?

The carpetbaggers came in by the plane-load. All of a sudden it was Hollywood North. And all the people who couldn't get a deal on a script in the United States from any studio came rushing up here. And everybody thought it was terrific. Why? Because they've never produced motion pictures before, I guess. A lot of them. I don't know. But it was disastrous because there's a lot of terrible films made. And, because there were all these awful films made, and so many of them, and so much money spent, and so much money put in the pockets of certain producers - I mean, there were a lot of limos running around.

Somebody forgot, along the line, that you have to develop writers, that films should have something, some passion, some ideas, that you've got to make good films; even if you make a film about a tiny little subject, it's got to have some passion to it. It's not just something which can be created on Bay Street. What I'm saying is that somewhere along the line we got the money, we had a great opportunity there, and we blew it.

Because films are international and I don't really believe that just because a film is made in a particular part of the world that's any passport to success. I mean, when I came back to live here in 1978, then I realized that it was incumbent upon me to do what I can. And that's why *Iceman* was made in Canada. But it was also the right place for that film to be made. And so we brought what, \$9 million? Not bad. So we brought \$9 million American dollars into Canada, and we hired all Canadians, outside of two or three stars and an Australian director. During the experience with *Iceman*, and during the experience with *Agnes*, I saw that there was no problem in our capabilities to make really first-class, first-rate feature-films. There's no problem. Now we need the confidence to build confidence in the international film community. And we have to nurture and build upon this groundwork that's all there. In other words, the infrastructure has now been created.

I don't think that, as a filmmaker, the government should be too involved. I have a feeling that creative, independent artists maybe should... Part of making a film is being aggressive enough, is being a good enough salesman to go out and get those investors. And I think we can get the investors. I think we can get American



• Jack Valenti, the American industry's man who talks to governments

studios, I think we can get... You see, money has no personality to me. I don't care where the money comes from. I don't care whether it's German tax-shelter money or whether it's studio money. And what is it? What is studio money? Studio money is nothing but American banks, floating loans to the studios on which they pay an enormous interest and charge to the filmmakers. And charge it to his budget. Why don't Canadian banks finance films? It's because there aren't enough successful films for them to get excited about making money. And making money is what banks do, for a living, everyday. Therefore, until we start to make films which make a lot of money, once films do make money, then you will find that banks will loan you money. And I don't see a lot of that happening, and I think that that is the answer rather than all of us running around, crying the blues and expecting Marcel Masse to create a miracle in which all of a sudden, wonderful Canadian pictures will be made. I'm afraid we'll fall into the same trap as we fell into before. I think the answer is to get more American films made up here as Canadian films. In other words, financed by American studios. Why not bring the money back in?

*Agnes* is financed by Columbia but that doesn't matter to me. It's a Canadian film. The world will know it's a Canadian film because it was shot in Montreal and Quebec and everybody, even Jane Fonda, says "about" with a Canadian accent. And there's French spoken in the film, and there's the odd flag, but that's not important. The important thing is that the story works. The world will realize where the film is shot. The world will realize that it reflects Canadian attitudes and behaviour but it could be shot anywhere. It could be shot in Massachusetts, it could be shot in a convent in England, in a convent anywhere. But I specifically wanted it to be shot in Quebec because I just thought Quebec was the right place for this story to take place. At no time did Valenti or anyone say to me, "This is an American film and it should be shot in America." No time, because, you see, I don't think Americans really care. I don't think anyone in

the film industry really cares. I think what they really care about is whether anybody comes to see it.

Of course, now we have a tremendous opportunity with our exchange-rate. This is why we're attracting so much American production up here, because we can say, hey, we also offer you 30% on the exchange, which means that you're going to get more for your money by making a film right now in Canada than you are if you make the film in the United States.

I think we can be very aggressive. I think our film commissions of every province should be down there, pounding on the doors in Hollywood, just the same as the state film commissions. My God, the governor of Arkansas gave us a 5% rebate on every dollar we spent in Arkansas to get us to come to Arkansas to make *Soldier's Story*. Do we have that kind of aggressive policy? Is the premier of this province willing to make deals? Are we willing to really get out there and attract filmmaking to this country, because when we do, remember we employ all Canadians because they don't want to bring a lot of people. Who knows? Maybe there'll be a Canadian director, maybe Philip Borsos is hot. You never know. So more activity; I'm all for activity, action. The more action going on, the more people are going to learn and become involved and, who knows, maybe a Canadian bank, conservative as they are, will take a chance.

We can't keep crying the blues that the Americans are making all this money. I don't like Canadians in the film industry when they continually whine and complain that they don't have the same opportunities as other countries. I think it's all a matter of confidence, and if someone is really confident in what they want to do, what they want to say, they can somehow manage to do it. I think personally, Philip Borsos would be interesting to talk to from that standpoint, because he is one of the new generation of Canadian filmmakers who has been accepted in the States because of what he did in Canada. If I was the distribution, or if I was a bank I'd put my money in someone like that because I think the talent is there. The problem is to

get the Canadian private sector involved, because, until you get them involved, there won't be an industry.

And if I could probably raise the money from the banks, I haven't done so because I'm not interested in raising money. Takes too much time. I take it from a distributor because I can get it quick and I don't have to go down to Bay Street and deal with all those people. But I think some of these young people will do it. They're good talkers. They can convince somebody to give them money.

I'm trying to do it the best way I can right now by lecturing at Ryerson, and by lecturing when I'm asked to, and trying to fit it in, by meeting with young people and looking at films, talking about film and trying to give some guidance. And, you know, I bring in a filmmaker every year to Toronto University for a week, and that's been going for three years. And then we've got scholarships in film at various places, and what I'd secretly, deep down, like to do, is I'd like to see in Canada, on a very small scale, something similar to the AFI, the American Film Institute. Its purpose was to preserve American films, one of its purposes. The other purpose was to train filmmakers. It's an interchange. A constant interchange of ideas. And I think it just stimulates. If it stimulates just one person, if one person out of AFI goes to make internationally successful films, it would be enough. I guess we've got to make sure that all those young, independent filmmakers who are out there like Bruce McDonald and his friends, that someone pays attention to them. That someone encourages them. Because I'll tell you something, encouragement means more to me than money.

We must always understand that there's no equation between money and art. You don't need a lot of money to make a successful film. That's another thing no one seemed to understand. It wasn't money, it wasn't *only* money that we needed. It was creativity and desire and passion and commitment. All of those things. And, I think now, we've found that out.