

Boom town

Production log jam in B. C.

BY MARK O'NEILL

British Columbia's on-again, off-again film industry has wrapped a record-breaking year. While visiting American production was down somewhat (final figures had not been released as of our deadline) because of the writers' strike, indigenous filmmaking has never been so strong. As of the end of B. C. Film's first year of operation as a provincial funding agency, 11 features were in various stages of development. As one delighted filmmaker noted at the year-end 'Wrap 88' party, "You could have counted the local films made over the past two or three years on your hands; this year you'd need to borrow some fingers!"

The strike underlined the nature of foreign, particularly American, work opportunities. They're tied to market forces beyond B. C.'s control and can vanish overnight as has happened before. If nothing else, the labour dispute reminded the province of the need to build a backup local industry.

The films now shooting or in post-production are a varied lot. They range from Sandy Wilson's *California Dreaming* (working title), an early sixties sequel to *My American Cousin*, to the Beacon Group's *Cold Front*, a U.S.-Canada thriller starring Martin Sheen. On the low-budget end (\$1.5 million) is *Matinee*, directed and co-written by Richard Martin, editor of *Maximilian Glick*:

"One day (Kim Steer and I) were walking down Granville Street and saw a poster for a teen horror film. 'You see', I said, 'that's what you have to do to make a film.' Then we thought 'let's do it' and went home and spent about four days on the premise. It's murder taking place at an actual horror film festival. From there we wrote the script.

"You know, if this had been a \$300,000 slasher it would have been up and running a year and a half ago. But a funny thing happened, I began to get interested in the premise and the characters. The element of horror has gone down, the body count never really gets as high as some movies. We're mixing up what is real and what is fantasy."

B.C. Film makes it possible

Along the way, the *Matinee* gang followed the example of Joel and Ethan Coen, the American writer/director team who made *Blood Simple*. With Executive Producer Richard Davis in place, they made the first six minutes of the film and shopped it around to arrange financing. David says the emergence of B. C. Film made this deal, and the other 10, possible.

"It's done two things. It's provided financial support which is always important. But it's also done something that's hard to quantify; it's given a psychological impact to the industry



Martin Sheen, DOP Thomas Burstyn and director Allan Goldstein on the set of *Cold Front*

here. It's easy to believe in what you're doing if there's a local, a government commitment.

"We've also had extraordinary support from the craftspeople," says Davis, pointing out that about \$300,000 of the budget has been deferred. "ACTRA, the guilds and the unions; their people are working for less than they normally would. It's a measure of the level of caring and I think it's a useful model for the future.

"I don't think we can make really expensive films here unless we can put names in it and then you hover between making a deal and making a film. Quebec could well be the model for B.C.; they've done a group of films in the \$1 to \$5.2 million range that have worked."

Gillian Barber is making her feature debut in *Matinee*. She plays Marilyn, the projectionist in the theatre where the Horror Festival, and the murders, takes place. She's pleased to be investing her meal penalties in the project.

"Career-wise, you never know what's going to happen to these films when they come out. Possibilities for this kind of thing are endless. That's why deferrals are ultimately well worth it, it's our way of investing in the industry without having to be out of pocket."

Unions want standardization

Mind you, the proliferation of low-budget films has sent the labour community into a bit of a tailspin. They've always been willing to make deals with local producers but never had to deal with so many at once. Since B.C. producers are still something of a rare species, they know one another and can easily compare notes. IATSE boss George Chapman says it's time for some standardization especially as he's adding at least one full crew to the roster each year; he estimated about 4,000 British Columbians are now making a living in front or behind the cameras.

"We're planning on sitting down with the producers for an analysis and to come up with a better way of doing things in 1989. Up until this year our maximum (for considering deferrals) was two million dollars. This year we were approached by projects up to four million dollars and we did two in the \$750,000 bracket. Our members are investing about five million dollars this year. We're desperate to make them all succeed."

B.C. Film is also anxious, having put \$4.5 million into the system over its first 12 months. President and Chief Executive Officer Wayne Sterloff says, although the emphasis is on regional stories told by regional storytellers, the key to successful returns is international audiences.

"We are encouraging joint ventures with international partners. We encourage our filmmakers to work with London, Paris or Hollywood on an equal basis, we don't expect B.C. to always have final control.

"There's a huge amount of money to be made if you can produce a film of interest to the world



Vancouver actress Gillian Barber plays projectionist Marilyn Williams in *Matinee*

market and, after all, international partners aren't interested in the nature of the story but in profit. We're seeing a great interest from Pacific Rim countries but also from other corners of the world."

International thrust

Cold Front is a prime example of international thrust. It's a \$3 million production (plus star salaries) that actually takes place in Vancouver. Martin Sheen (the star) plays an American drug enforcement agent sent here to work with the RCMP. As well as a love interest (Beverly D'Angelo as Sheen's ex-wife), the plot involves Canada's role as an easy access route in and out of the United States. Sean Allan, co-writer and

producer, says, "The image we had was of a picture postcard of Vancouver with something rude written on the back."

A large portion of *Cold Front's* financing was raised by The Beacon Group, the Vancouver-based private funding company. Allan echoes Wayne Sterloff's conviction about successful filmmaking.

"An indigenous industry is one that's internationally viable. Our distributors wanted an American name so we made a few changes and got Sheen. But all the Canadians are being played by Canadians.

"What we need for a film industry in B.C. are entrepreneurs like in Australia. We're now raising \$30 million (for a second film investment

fund) and are finding Canadian investors starting to come forward. But, on the whole, Canadians are conservative."

Cold Front is being directed by Allan Goldstein, hot off the success of *Max Glick*. He's worked in many countries and says he's developed the ability to work at the pace different audiences expect. In this case, "I prefer to think of it as a North American pace.

"I would say the biggest thing Canada brings to filmmaking is our main protagonists.

Canadians are less macho and aggressive which I suppose is representative of us as a country, we tend to be less forthright. In *Cold Front* we have Sheen as an aggressive American and Michael Ontkean (*Bye Bye Blues*) who's just as strong - but different.

"I'm a Canadian and an internationalist. Borders shouldn't define art. I think of excellence and I bring in people from all over the world. My DOP is from Quebec, my key grip from Australia, the stuntman is French. Or Jan Rubes, I always use him in my movies. In *Max Glick* he was a kindly old man, in this he's a villain."

Production makes you better

Other films that were shooting in December (a meteorological advantage unique to the West Coast) included Harry Cole's \$2.1 million *Lighthouse*, Danny Virtue's *Dude* and *Ricochet* (scheduled to shoot this month), written by Phil Savath. In fact, Savath is probably the busiest film writer in Vancouver at the moment; as well as contributing to three features he's also actively involved in television. He's pleased with the pace of production but has one caveat to offer.

"The only downside that I can see is if we end up expecting these films to be the best ever made. Production is what makes you better, you can write a million scripts but, until you see it on the screen, you don't know if you were right. Too many times we give people just one chance, you've got to have continuity to have improvement. It's great that we can say 'there's a film, there's another one, there's a good TV show.' From that you get excellence."

For that you need more than one boom year. Consensus seems to be that six to 10 features are required annually just to be relatively protected from an American exodus. Wayne Sterloff says private sector financing must increase, a wish shared by George Chapman.

"If we had a wish list, the next step would be for B.C. Film to get inter-provincial agreements. Like in Quebec where they have a 166 per cent capital cost allowance. It would be a wonderful return for the private investor."

And for the technicians, writers and actors who've been driving cab between gigs on imported Movies-of-the-Week. B.C. is quite pleased with itself going into 1989 but well aware that a boom decade is needed before the bust years can be forgotten. ●

PHOTO: DAVID COOPER