

# A unique voice

## *The Banff Television Festival*

AN INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CARRIE HUNTER

**T**his year the Banff Television Festival celebrates its 10th anniversary. Over the past 10 years, under the guidance of executive director Carrie Hunter and festival director Jerry Ezekiel, Banff has blossomed into a unique international meeting place for seasoned television professionals and fledgling talents. Deals are discussed here, but so are ideas. Last year, a debate on television news between Soviet commentator Vladimir Pozner and John Ranelagh of Danish Television Producers sparked a profound and lively discussion on the role of news in modern society. The mix doesn't stop there. Ideas are complemented by the world's finest television programmes and a Rocky Mountain setting that retains its magic year after year.

Cinema Canada talked to Carrie Hunter to find out what makes Banff stand out in a calendar crowded with festivals and markets.



**Cinema Canada:** *What was the original impetus for the festival?*

**Carrie Hunter:** There was a motion picture conference in Banff in 1976 which was held at the Banff Centre – it was a Canadian conference. A group of Canadians were sitting around over some brew and one of them suggested, “Wouldn't this be a great place for a film festival?” There was a representative there from the film festivals bureau of Canada who threw up his hands and said, “This country does not need another film festival.” They said, “How about a television festival?” That's really where the idea was born. It took until 1979 for it to actually happen. There was a lot of discussion about it until then. I was hired in November of 1978 to do the festival in August of 1979.

**Cinema Canada:** *Who hired you?*

**Carrie Hunter:** Fil Fraser was the president of the Banff Foundation at that time. The president of the Banff Centre had suggested to Fil that I would be a good person for the job. They called me and offered me the job, and I didn't want it. Nobody really knew what it was. They said, “Come and talk to us.” So we talked about it. I still didn't want it. Life was quite nice the way it was. We talked some more. I said, “Just tell me what it is you want it to be?” And Fraser said, “Well, I don't know. It's basically whatever you want it to be. You can do what you want. You can have a free hand.” He said it would be a part-time job. I thought it would still give me time to do other things. That's the last time I ever did another thing. It was a double-time job since day one. The rest of my life disappeared.

**Cinema Canada:** *What did you want it to be?*

**Carrie Hunter:** I didn't know at the beginning. Jerry Ezekiel at that point was working for Alberta Culture. He and Fil Fraser and I sat down and talked about it. Basically, we said, “If we were going to go to a festival what would we want it to be?” And we decided we would want

to meet some of the key people in the industry; and we would want to look at good programmes. That was the thrust of the thing at that time. Put together a conference and put together an international competition. Interestingly enough we didn't realize that a market followed a festival. Even if it's not a formal market, and Banff has never been a formal market, people come to do business. Even the first year, a month before the festival, Leslie Halliwell called me from the U.K. and said that he was coming to Banff to buy programmes. I said that we were not a market. We went through this whole long telephone conversation. Finally, in exasperation he said, "My dear woman, where there is a festival there is a market. I'm coming to Banff to buy programmes, you may use my name in your advertising." That was it. Leslie Halliwell was coming to buy programmes. He was the god of the buyers. I was just distraught that somebody was coming all this distance thinking he was coming to a market. Well, he did come to a festival and he did buy programmes. More than that, Banff evolved into what we call a marketplace of ideas. It is now the foremost co-production marketplace in North America.

**Cinema Canada:** *I noticed looking through the files that the first year was very successful. You attracted well over the initial number of participants you imagined would come. What do you think attracted people to a completely unknown festival?*

**Carrie Hunter:** I think it was serendipity. There were a lot of things that happened that were good fortune. Jerry and I often kid about this. We say we were so lucky, and Jerry says, "Yes, but the harder we work, the luckier we get." There were a lot of things that happened. First of all, we decided that one of the sessions would be about the documentary. And we thought wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get Marcel Ophuls here? And I had been to the Berlin Festival that year. My background was journalism so I hung out with the journalists. I made friends with international journalists. They were all interested in what Banff was going to be. Only I didn't know what it was going to be. This was early February. One friend in particular from *L'Express* in Paris, Francois Forestier, wanted to be kept informed about what was happening. When we talked about Ophuls, I thought I'm going to call Francois and see if he had a number for Ophuls. He said, "No, Ophuls is a recluse. You'll never be able to get through to him." I said, "Do you know where he lives?" He did. I said, "Would you please go over and knock on his door and ask if he'll come to Banff." He did, and Ophuls said yes. As soon as we had captured a major name we sent out press releases to the trades. We immediately got a lot of space from *Variety* because of Ophuls. And when people saw the story in *Variety*, they started to call. At the end of the festival that year... I hadn't seen anything. I was down in the dungeon. There

was a cave underneath the Banff Centre which was our headquarters. I was down there all week slaying dragons. I didn't see anything. On the last day I surfaced and a group of international people took me for lunch and they said, "This festival is really important. You have to be sure it really survives." I thought they were crazy. I hadn't seen anything. I didn't know that something successful was happening.

**Cinema Canada:** *What was happening that wasn't happening at other festivals?*

**Carrie Hunter:** There was an intimacy about Banff. It's the only way I can describe it. It still exists despite the fact that we've grown very much larger. Everybody got to know everyone else. Everyone could sit around that week when they weren't watching programs or attending the symposium and talk with each other. They could talk about deals; they could discuss philosophy; they could talk about anything they wanted to. But they made lifelong friends. It's absolutely extraordinary that many of those people at the first festival are very close friends. This still happens here. I think it happens because the festival isn't the size of most markets; it happens in one place. Everybody gets an invitation to everything. There aren't parties that only a few people can attend. There's the opportunity all week long to be rubbing shoulders with people and to seek out who it is you want to meet. Then I think the atmosphere has something to do with it. The mountains are bigger than all of us. The egos disappear with the three-piece suits. It's very easy to get to know some of the big people in the business. It's not intimidating. A lot of people from Toronto say they come to Banff to meet people from Toronto. Because they can't get into their offices in Toronto.

**Cinema Canada:** *It seems Banff is a place people keep coming back to.*

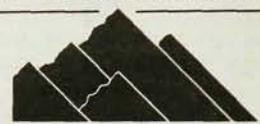
**Carrie Hunter:** A lot of people have a really warm spot for the festival in their heart. Les Brown, the publisher of *Television Business International* says he has to come to Banff each year, that it's like going to church; it's good for the soul. It's a place he can step back and really look at what's happening to the industry. Norman Horowitz from MGM-UA comes back year after year after year. Now Norman doesn't do a lot of business at Banff. He just loves it. This year Norman asked what he could do at Banff. I told him we had our programme set up. He said, "You have to let me do something. Can I come and bring six of my top people and do something about international distribution?"

**Cinema Canada:** *Looking at the seminars, even from year one, the concerns are co-productions; how do we get out into the global marketplace? Have you seen any shifts in the kinds of things that people in the industry are concerned about?*

**Carrie Hunter:** Canadians are much more

## Banff Highlights: The first 10 years

### BANFF TELEVISION FESTIVAL



**1979:** The first Banff festival is launched August 23. Budgeted at \$213,000, it runs a deficit of \$220,000 because of its immediate and unexpected popularity. Over 200 participants arrive from Europe, North America, Japan and Mexico. Issues on the table include using the tax shelter. Producers are reminded that "tax shelters are a means to an end, to launch the Canadian film industry as a global competitive force."

**1981:** The second annual Banff festival runs from September 20 to 30. Italian novelist Alberto Moravia heads a critics panel alongside James Wolcott of *The Village Voice* and Phillippe Meyer of *L'Express*. Panels explore the responsibility of TV reporting and the meaning of pay television.

**1982:** An American distribution consultant is booed at the third Banff festival (August 15-21) as he tells Banff participants that the "U.S. is the money mecca for the world for international producers but only if they are willing to give American audiences what they want. They expect their television programs to have lots of action and they don't want to have to work at understanding heavy foreign accents." Canadian producers are eager to learn about the co-production marketplace and emerging opportunities in world markets.

**1983:** *Variety* headlines the fourth Banff fest (August 14-20) as "Spotlight on Canadian Co-production Strategy". Everyone wants to know what the new Broadcast Fund means. Gregory Peck attends the fest and picks up a lifetime achievement award.

**1984:** The festival moves to a spring opening, May 20-26. Les Brown, editor of *Channels* says "Banff is the best of the festivals because of its purity." Of ongoing concern is the changing Canadian broadcast environment and the impact of new technology on television.

**1985:** Federal communications minister Marcel Masse opens the 6th annual Banff

festival (June 2-8). Gerald Caplan, newly appointed co-chair of the broadcasting task force, begins his investigations of Canadian television at Banff. Canadian educational broadcasters initiate workshops for the professional development of emerging producers, writers and filmmakers.

**1986:** Masse is back to deliver the keynote address at the 7th Banff fest (May 25-31). CBC is feted on its 50th anniversary. While public broadcasters discuss their importance, Americans spread the *realpolitik* of commercial television. David Simon, vice-president of programming for Fox Television, tells Banff audiences that "part of the problem is that Canadians come to us with programs that don't have a universal look or an appeal to audiences in the U.S." He points to CTV sit-com *Check It Out* starring Don Adams as an example of the universal. For Gerry Golod the truth is "you've got a problem with your pool of talent in Canada."

**1987:** The 8th Banff fest (June 7-13) opens with a salute to the BBC. At the top of the symposium agenda is new technology and the changing world of television. Organizers ask if "the emerging world of satellite communications heralds the 'internationalization' of television or the 'Americanization' of television or 'Canadianization' of the rest of the world." For one observer it was "like discussing the nature of God" and left the audience "overwhelmed and unable to cope".

**1988:** Jeremy Isaacs, founding chief executive officer of Channel 4 in the U.K., is honoured at the 9th Banff fest (June 5-11) with an outstanding achievement award. Jeremy Kinsman, standing in for Communications Minister Flora MacDonald, delivers the keynote address and hints at imminent tabling of new Canadian broadcast legislation. The highlight of the seminars is a fierce debate on truth in television news between John Ranelagh of TV-2 Denmark and Vladimir Pozner of Gostelradio, U.S.S.R.

sophisticated now about film and television and about production than they were 10 years ago. They know a lot more. They have a lot more experience. They're not so interested in how do you do it; how do you put the deals together; how do you get it to market; etc. They're interested in meeting people who are very, very successful and picking their brains to find out how to go the next step in terms of major, major markets. I think we've gone from a festival where most of the Canadians who attended were emerging talents to a festival where those who are here are doing very well and wanting to break into the international market and having the wherewithal to do it.

**Cinema Canada:** *What about programming? Have you seen a shift in the kind of programming that you see at Banff?*

**Carrie Hunter:** A great deal. I don't think any of us could have forecast how it changed through the years. This year we could probably program three other festivals with what didn't make it into competition. The standard is unbelievable. However, the programming itself has changed significantly. Social issues are addressed that were never addressed before. When this festival

began, you would not see television programmes about incest, or child abuse, or wife abuse, or battered women, or homosexuality. Those subjects were absolutely taboo on television 10 years ago. Now television does its greatest service with the kinds of drama put together on these subjects which help a lot of people who are in a lot of pain to realize they are not alone. There's a great consciousness-raising that's happening on television.

**Cinema Canada:** *One of the themes at MIP this year was that with the commercialization of European television, programming would have to become American in form to succeed. Is that something that's evident at Banff too?*

**Carrie Hunter:** It's very popular to sit around and bash the Americans. It's understandable because they produce more television than anywhere in the world. An incredible amount of material. When you look at the massive amounts they produce they do a good job. If you go to Britain and look at television at night, you watch three channels of snooker for a few hours. The great British drama doesn't exist in quantity. So when you look at the amount of work the Americans do that's good, they have to

be commended. In terms of people's fears, in Canada we have a fear because the border is so close and because the signals spill over. In Europe it's a whole different thing. Because of 1992, when it becomes a single economic unit, there are serious concerns. They're talking about producing in one language. If that language is English, naturally the competition is going to be with the Americans. That issue is going to be addressed here at Banff. And the other issue that's going to be addressed is what's happening with the French right now. They're talking about not recognizing co-productions with Canada. That would be devastating for a lot of our producers here.

**Cinema Canada:** *You're coming up to your 10th festival. Do you have a favourite year among the past nine?*

**Carrie Hunter:** My favourite year is the one just past. It gets better every year.

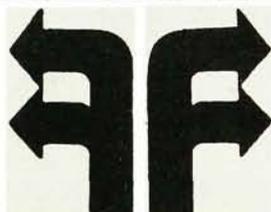
**Cinema Canada:** *What's the most difficult thing about running the festival?*

**Carrie Hunter:** In the beginning it was too hard to do because we never had any money. That was the really difficult thing. We always tried to

do a festival that looked like a million dollars on \$250,000. And we managed to pull it off most of the time by doing unique things. One year we had a reception for Gregory Peck. We didn't have any money. We got a local restaurateur to loan us a birch bark canoe which he filled with strawberries. We put pots of melted chocolate at the end. Wherever I went the following year people said, "Yours was the festival with the canoe." We had to be very creative with our money. Now the challenge is complexity. As we grow, the festival becomes more and more complex. There were probably about 20 people speaking at the first festival. This year there will be 103.

**Cinema Canada:** *Is there a lot of pressure to make it something else, more of a market?*

**Carrie Hunter:** Yes, we get that every year. We're not a market. It was never our intention to be one, and it isn't our intention to be one. They say, "Well, why not? It works at MIP and it works at Natpe." And we say, "No, the market works; the rest of it doesn't." What we have that is so special doesn't exist in those other places. What we have to examine is do we preserve what is unique? ●



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