

financial trends in theatrical production 1975

The budgets for features intended for theatrical release varied from \$60,000 to over a million last year. D. John Turner analyses the production and finds evidence of a growing commercial awareness among Canadian producers.

by D. John Turner

Production of theatrical features last year dropped some 20% compared to 1974: 28 films (against 34) representing a total investment of \$10.2 million (against \$12.75 million in 1974). However, partly as a result of the arbitrary choice of a calendar year as a time period, these figures can be misleading. There were cries of "crisis" in the industry early in the year, and justifiably so, with only ten films (total investment: \$2 million) made in the first eight months. Then in the last four months 18 films went into production including the four with category C budgets (see box) (representing a total investment of \$4.6 million) which were made in the last two months of the year.

The reasons for this drought and the period of intense activity which followed it are various. The Secretary of State Department expressed dissatisfaction with the results of the voluntary quota and with the performance of the two major theatre chains, Famous Players and Odeon, with regard to investment in Canadian films. So Famous stopped investing altogether pending a more specific pronouncement by the minister; Odeon could not stop investing having never started. When the minister made his new request* the chains immediately acquiesced, ever anxious to stave off the dreaded quota, and investment in features was resumed, at least by Famous.

On July 4, 1974, in a speech at Peterborough, during his election campaign, the Secretary of State, Hugh Faulkner, promised that the capital cost allowance for investment in Canadian films would be increased from 60% to 115%. The business community waited patiently for this promise to be fulfilled.

One year later Finance and National Revenue had it all

worked out and it became legal, albeit at 100% rather than the 115% promised. Once the businessmen knew where they stood, they hurried to invest before the end of the (tax) year.

Another problem was at the Canadian Film Development Corporation. The coffers ran dry and for a short but anxious period the continued existence of the Corporation seemed in doubt. Treasury Board wondered where the millions went (20 since 1968) and asked whether it was all worth it. But eventually (Nov 10) it was announced that another \$5 million to last until March of 1977 had been made available and the CFDC was able to participate in two more films before the end of the year, bringing its total investment in films in 1975 to \$3 million – an almost identical figure to that for 1974.

So, what about the films themselves? Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the year's production is that some of our most highly reputed filmmakers have been able to return to features, sometimes after very long periods doing television, commercials, or of simply being unemployed. **Partners** is Don Owen's first feature since **The Ernie Game** (1967). **Death Weekend** is Bill Fruet's first since **Wedding In White** (1972). **Second Wind** is Don Shebib's first since **Between Friends** (1972) and Marcel Carrière has made **Ti-mine, Bernie pis la gang...**, his first fiction feature since **O.K... Laliberté** (1972).

André Forcier has made the jump from the low budget category (**Bar Salon**) and has a much more substantial budget for his first feature in 35mm and color, **L'eau chaude l'eau**

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* \$1,700,000 to be invested annually in Canadian production; each theatre to show Canadian films for 4 weeks of the year.

frette, and Frank Vitale, who shot most of his **Montreal Main** as long ago as 1972, has also made his first 35mm feature, **Cindy**. It should however be pointed out that Vitale has managed with only \$25,000 cash, with everybody, cast and crew, deferring their salaries, and Forcier has yet to find a distributor, much less financing, for his film which is presently financed solely by the CFDC.

André Brassard and Michel Tremblay have followed **Il était une fois dans l'est** (1973) with **Le soleil se lève encore sur la rue Bélanger** and Gilles Carle, despite the poor performance of **Les corps célestes** (1973) managed to make **La tête de Normande St-Onge** which has now been released and has done very good business in Quebec.

Of the fourteen films in category A the CFDC has participated in nine (the Corporation may also get involved in **Cindy**) and all of these, with the exception of Lefebvre's **L'amour blessé**, are part of the Special Investment Program (60% of the budget of a first feature, the budget not to exceed \$135,000). This program has again permitted a number of new directors to make a first feature. Jean Lafleur and Peter Svatek made a children's film, **The Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck** which was released in French and in English versions on Christmas Day, and Tom Drake returned after five years in Hollywood to direct **The Keeper**. The producers so organised their budget as to permit the hiring of one international star, in the instance Christopher Lee, veteran of numerous Hammer horror epics, whose first film in Canada this is.

Two of the ten films in category B have been produced, in French, by the National Film Board: **Ti-mine** and Jean Beaudin's **J.A. Martin photographe**. The remaining eight, four English, four French, all have CFDC participation.

By the end of October total investment had only reached \$5.6 million, barely half the figure for 1974. Then along came the four category C leviathans to bring the year's total closer to that of 1974. However, it is perhaps a more useful exercise to examine the trend of which these four are a part rather than to juggle totals and percentages. The trend is an interesting one – especially so if it should continue – and would seem to indicate a recognition on the part of certain producers, in particular Harold Greenberg, Claude Héroux, and David Perlmutter, as well as John Kemeny and Harve Sherman, that you have to 'spend a buck to make a buck'. In other words, it costs at least a million to make a film with the star names and production values which the mass audience expects in return for the \$3.00 it is asked to pay at the box office. And when a film has this kind of appeal it can be sold in foreign markets and even the US. It is virtually impossible to recoup the investment in even the least expensive film solely in Canada, and even Quebec films can no longer make it in Quebec alone. So the trend here is toward budgets of a million and more – and to coproductions.

Coproductions offer a number of advantages, not least among them being the additional market of the coproducing country and the spreading of the risk. As a consequence investors are more easily attracted. Of course, the million dollar coproduction is not entirely new to Canada. Harold Greenberg coproduced (with US companies) **Echoes of a Summer** in Nova Scotia in 1974. Previous to this he and David Perlmutter coproduced **The Neptune Factor** with Twentieth Century-Fox. Now he has completed **Breaking Point**, again with Fox, and has announced five other projects with budgets ranging up to \$3 million for 1976. Use of an official coproduction agreement (these presently exist with France, Italy and the United Kingdom) confers additional benefits such as waiving of customs restrictions, full national status in both countries, with consequent eligibility for all primes, levys and aids to production available in the coproducing countries.

It is under the official agreement with France that Green-

1975 THEATRICAL FEATURE PRODUCTION

* CFDC PARTICIPATION

Category A:

Up to \$300,000

Average \$123,000

- Wilderness Trails (Gunter Henning)
- * The Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck (Jean Lafleur; Peter Svatek)
- * L'amour blessé (Jean-Pierre Lefebvre)
- The Melting Pot (Deke Miles)
- * The Clown Murders (Martyn Burke)
- * Brethren (Dennis Zahoruk)
- * A Sweeter Song (Allan Eastman)
- Cindy (Frank Vitale)
- * The Keeper (Tom Drake)
- Point Of No Return (Ed Hunt)
- * Chanson pour Julie (Jacques Vallée)
- * L'absence (Brigitte Sauriol)
- * Love At First Sight (Rex Bromfield)
- Le gars des vues (Jean-Pierre Lefebvre)

Category B:

\$300,000 to \$600,000

Average: \$402,000

- * La tête de Normande St-Onge (Gilles Carle)
- Ti-mine, Bernie pis la gang... (Marcel Carrière)
- * The Far Shore (Joyce Wieland)
- J.A. Martin photographe (Jean Beaudin)
- * Second Wind (Don Shebib)
- * Je suis loin de toi mignonne (Claude Fournier)
- * L'eau chaude l'eau frette (André Forcier)
- * Partners (Don Owen)
- * Death Weekend (Bill Fruet)
- * Le soleil se lève encore sur la rue Bélanger (André Brassard)

Category C:

Over \$600,000

Average: \$1,150,000

- * Find The Lady (John Trent)
- * Breaking Point (Bob Clark)
- The Little Girl Who Lives Down The Lane (Nicolas Gessner)
- Shoot (Harvey Hart)

Principal photography is complete on all the above films. Four are presently (February 18, 1976) in release: The Mystery of the Million Dollar Hockey Puck, L'amour blessé, The Melting Pot, La tête de Normande St-Onge. The remaining 24 are in various stages of post production and some of the titles could change.

berg has shot **The Little Girl Who Lives Down The Lane** with imported director Nicolas Gessner, David Perlmutter is co-producing John Trent's **Find The Lady**, a follow up to his earlier comedy **It Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time**, under the UK agreement and Harvey Hart's **Shoot**, his first feature here since **The Pyx**, shot in Montreal in 1972, would appear to have heavy US involvement. John Kemeny, after producing **The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz** for just under a million and subsequently selling it to Paramount for US distribution, produced **White Line Fever**, shot entirely in Arizona, for just under \$2 million as part of a multi-picture deal with Columbia. And for '76 Kemeny promises more. **Shadow of the Hawk** is set to go in Vancouver in March with Daryl Duke directing and CFDC participation, and **Big Iron** is set for July down South. The Héroux brothers, Claude and Denis, are heavily involved in co-productions, both in association with Greenberg and through their own company Cinévidéo. Claude acted as a producer on **Breaking Point** and Denis was associate producer on **Little Girl**. But Cinévidéo got into million dollar co-productions two years ago: In 1974 **Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris**, an official coproduction with France (80% Canadian), was shot in Nice and subsequently sold profitably to Ely Landau to complete the lineup for his American Film Theatre subscription series. After doing another medium budget film aimed at the Quebec market, **Pousse mais pousse égal**, which proved unprofitable, Cinévidéo began 1975 with **Born For Hell**, a near-million four-country (Canada-France-Germany-Italy) coproduction. Denis Héroux directed, shooting was done in Germany (with one week in Ireland) and Montrealers Carole Laure and Andrée Pelletier were part of an international cast. Miss

Laure, along with Jean Leclerc, subsequently joined another international cast for **Tony Saitta**, an Italian film shot in Montreal on a \$1.5 million budget. Though not really a co-production, Montreal's Les Productions Mutuelles provided production services against distribution rights, the negative was processed in Montreal (Bellevue Pathé), Cinévision's Montreal studio was used, and two thirds of the crew was Canadian.

The trend towards a more marketable product is also noticeable in the films with A and B category budgets, particularly on the English side, if the subjects chosen are anything to go by. **Love At First Sight** and **A Sweeter Song** are comedies, **The Clown Murders**, **Brethren** and **The Keeper** fall into the horror-thriller category, **Death Weekend** seems to combine the themes of **Straw Dogs** and **Deliverance**, and even André Forcier (on the French side) claims that he intends his new film to be seen as a comedy, albeit a black one.

In closing it should be mentioned that in addition to a number of TV movies intended to fill 'movie of the week' slots, American companies have completed three important features in Canada. In British Columbia Bert I. Gordon did his second adaptation of H.G. Wells' **The Food of the Gods** (the first was released in 1965 as **Village of the Giants**), Robert Altman made **Buffalo Bill and the Indians** in Alberta, with a budget of \$7 million, and John Champion shot **Mustang Country** in Banff.

In conclusion, it would seem that, despite a slow start, the year sees a new direction in feature films with production being established on a more substantial industrial base than ever before in Canada. □



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