

# drawing a bead on sherman

Ken Dancyger met with Harve Sherman early last year and noted some of his thoughts on the production of *Shoot* and on the feature industry in Canada in general.

by Kenneth Dancyger

In December, Harve Sherman, a young Toronto-born producer, saw the release of his latest film – the \$1.5 million *Shoot*. As for many in the Canadian film industry, the road to *Shoot* has been long and bumpy. You don't become a producer by being born with a cigar in your mouth.

Harve Sherman has been an assistant film editor, a unit manager on the CFTO news, and then a production manager-producer on the John Bassett-Agincourt Productions films from *Face-Off* to *Follow the North Star*, an ABC-TV Movie of the Week. He produced, for Universal, the Canadian segments of four Movies of the Week from *She Cried Murder* to *The Execution of Private Slovik*. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment was his involvement, through the production company Vision IV, in *Black Christmas*, one of Canada's most successful feature films.

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Naturally a producer's interests differ from a director's. But not as much as one would think. We are still a young industry and as such the romantic view of film prevails. Beyond the loving close-up lies a complex operation dealing with preplanning, scheduling, coordination of the creative and practical elements that enter into making a film. It's as simple an equation as: if people don't have food to eat, they can't create. If crew and actors don't appear at the appropriate location, at the appropriate time, no close-up. Coordination, planning, facilitating the creative process, these are the responsibilities of the producer. An indispensable man; too often a forgotten man. (The same might be said for the screenwriter, but I'll save him for another article.)

Harve Sherman was very lucid about the Canadian film industry, its potential (which he feels is great) and its problems (which he feels are not small). I might add that he discussed these problems much as he would production problems on a film: Identify them, anticipate them, and then provide solutions. He feels many of the problems are born of inexperience. Solution: regularity of produc-

tion. Presently there are 10 feature films produced in one year, and five in another. If we could achieve a regular production schedule, say 10 to 20 reasonably budgeted films a year (\$1 million budget per film, say), our talent could gain the experience required of all professionals. Efficiency of production would be a side benefit, as crews would work together more frequently. A spinoff of the larger budgets involved in these films would be additional preproduction time. Too often Canadian filmmakers get the final go-ahead for production a week before the film is scheduled to begin shooting. The logistics of an expensive undertaking like a feature film require pinpoint planning. Without it, the film begins under a handicap. Preproduction costs money, but adequate script development, location selection, costuming, crew hiring and cast selection can't be residual to a film production budget – they are essential, and they cost money.

Now we get into the grey areas of Canadian feature film life. Some people may not realize it, but films are a business, a proven business where many people make a lot of money. Harve Sherman is not in the business



From left to right, Harve Sherman, producer, Zale Magder, DOP, and Harvey Hart, director, during the production of *Shoot*

for charity, or for a tax write-off. In order to make money on a film in Canada, one needs access to international markets, specifically a sale in the U.S. The reason is simple enough. To recoup his investment, a Canadian producer's film has to generate 3 to 5 times the initial investment; with only Canadian distribution, most films will not recoup. Interestingly, in the U.S., a film can recoup its investment by earning 2½ to 3 times its investment. The discrepancy lies primarily in the weak position of the Canadian producer. He has not yet produced a *Jaws* and, as a result, the strength and money in Canada lies with the distributors and exhibitors.

Back to the need for a foreign sale. The requirement dictates, to someone like Harve Sherman, the type of films to be made. He wants to produce stories that could take place anywhere, but affect all audiences, quickly and emotionally. That means a *Black Christmas*, or a *Shoot*. Later, when Canadian producers have proved Canadian films are a viable and desirable business venture, then the types of films produced can be of a broader range. Now, it's shoot for the gut, and only sometimes for the head.

The next grey area is the role of the government. We didn't discuss

quotas, or even the CFDC (*Shoot* was made without CFDC participation). What we talked about was interestingly non-monetary government aid. He told me the case of New York City. At New York City Hall, there is a single civil servant whose sole task is to deal with motion picture producers. If you need to do location work, police coverage, an ambulance, street signs changed, this person will give you fast and efficient service. The reason has little to do with New York's efforts to drum up tourist business via films made in New York (see *Taxi Driver*, made in New York, and understand the failure of such a policy). Film production companies spent \$50 million in New York last year. Filmmaking is good for the economy - fewer actors on unemployment, more taxi fares, and more business for hotels and restaurants.

Harve Sherman recommends such a "one-stop system" for Toronto, or Montreal, or Vancouver. Without it the producer faces horrific problems for his production. Such problems galore arose in the making of *Shoot*. Shuttled from functionary to functionary, Harve Sherman could not get police protection on a particular sequence because the scenes were to be shot through three counties, each

with its own police, its own bureaucracy, and its own way of deciding these matters. Since the film involved guns, trucks and an armory, he required federal government cooperation as well. I won't dwell on the horror stories but only mention that *Shoot* was almost never completed because of problems of this order. A "one-stop system" not only would acknowledge government's partnership in a film economy, but also lend an air of legitimacy to civil servant dealings with films. Presently filmmakers are viewed with almost as much suspicion as used car salesmen.

The problems of Canadian feature film production merge with the question of their future. The solution of the problems would smooth the path to the future. Harve Sherman is very optimistic about the future for our industry. He speaks effusively of the talent in Canada. He has the highest compliments for writers like Roy Moore (*Black Christmas*), cameramen like Zale Magden (*Shoot*) and directors like Bob Clark (*Black Christmas*). He only laments that these gifted people don't get more work after their significant successes. He mentions that many Canadians who have made it internationally want to do more work in Canada. Harvey Hart has come back continually for *The Pyx, Fortune and Men's Eyes*, and now *Shoot*. Ted Kotcheff returned for *Duddy Kravitz* and may return again in the near future. Norman Jewison has expressed an interest in returning. And the list goes on.

We have the beginnings of financial packaging corporations here in Toronto. Feature Financing, Video Program Services, numerous lawyers who package deals - these are important groups who willingly enter into feature films financing on a larger scale than has previously been known here in Canada. The possibilities for production of TV movies lie in the future. An abundance of good popular fiction, the raw material of commercial film, is coming out from writers like Lance Hill, John Buell, Norman Hartley.

All possibilities are here, and Harve Sherman would like to be part of them. After having worked with companies like David Susskind's Talent Associates and with Universal, and having developed a major film package with an American studio to be shot in Canada, Sherman joined Ashling Multimedia last year. Always involved, Sherman is hopeful that the continuum of Canadian film will grow and take its rightful place in the international medium. □