

fallout from the boom

by john brooke

As the dust begins to settle from the feature film explosion, the role of the non-feature producer comes into sharper focus.

What, besides the action at the Courtyard Café, has the recent boom in feature production brought to the Toronto film industry? And what has it taken away?

Last summer Toronto was up to its ears in features. It was the height of the "boom." This summer there has been a substantial drop in production. It had to happen; reality would simply not allow a new feature industry — in a country where the financial resources are relatively limited — to continue producing films at such a volume.

But although the feature producers are lying low, and many of last summer's highly-paid actors and technicians are out doing some earnest hustling, there is a group within the Toronto film community for whom it is business as usual, despite the slump in feature production. These are the independent industrial producers whose small production or post-

production houses work the documentary, industrial and TV commercial markets. Hard-nosed businessmen all, they are members of the Canadian Film and Television Association, and together form the backbone of the film industry. **Cinema Canada** talked with five industrial producers about the effects of the feature boom on their business: Derek Baker (Editcom Ltd.), Robin Chetwynd (Chetwynd Films Ltd.), Don Haig (Film Arts Ltd.), Bruce Raymond (Bruce A. Raymond Co. Ltd.), and John Ross (J.T. Ross Associates). Years of daily film/business experience have given these men a unique vantage point from which to examine the feature's past and present impact, and predict its future. Their opinions on the topic ranged from the role of the film school to the responsibility of the new, "big bucks" feature producer.

To appreciate the industrial producer's perspective it is important to understand

his context. He is in business fifty-two weeks of the year; his responsibilities toward equipment, personnel and office space do not lapse after the wrap party. Tax deferral plans interest him — in fact a few of his associates are using them — but for the most part, he does business on a bid and contract basis. He has clients, not investors. As Robin Chetwynd explains, if he makes a mistake on his budget, "he has to eat it." There is nothing glamorous or romantic about making films. Try out the term "filmmaker" on him and see how he reacts: Derek Baker was emphatic: "I make a living in the Film Industry. I can produce, direct, edit and do everything that needs to be done... but I'm *not* a filmmaker. I'm in business."

Business being the prime concern, the

John Brooke is an independent filmmaker and free-lance writer in Toronto.

subject of prices and salaries was raised almost immediately. "The feature boom has made everyone inside and outside the industry more aware of film. In that sense it's a good thing. But it's also made a hell of a lot of people greedier..." stated Robin Chetwynd, having just come from negotiations with ACTRA. His colleagues agreed that in this respect, at present, the feature seems to have done more harm than good to the industry as a whole.

Said Don Haig, "There are a lot of first-time-out film assistants — editors, directors, all the way down the line — who've been thrown into the glamorous situation of a feature, making very high wages. Nobody has any objection to high wages in themselves, but it's an unreal situation." According to Bruce Raymond, "Hollywood prices among the creative people — directors, editors, writers — have become commonplace."

Why? Because at the source, there is a different financial approach. John Ross explained that, "Because of the investor plans, they (the feature producers) are much less concerned at the cashbox than the industrial producer. They've been letting salaries inflate much faster than they should have. This will hurt the industrial producer in his fixed contracts." Of course. Each man had numerous stories to tell about the problems involved in trying to hire a cameraman at \$125 a day for an industrial shoot, when he's just come from working for four or five times that much on a feature.

Raymond pointed out that, "It's very difficult for somebody who has worked on three or four features, and been really over-paid, to take these credits to Hollywood, because he'd be way down on the line... It's very difficult for him to step back in to our world." Don Haig thinks that the feature boom has caused many film people to miss, or cut short, a time of apprenticeship that is crucial. "It's caused a bankruptcy in creativity and talent."

For someone who has been in the industry for thirty years, the word apprenticeship carries a lot of weight when considering talents, skills, and experience in general. Should there perhaps be some kind of apprenticeship program for feature producers, as well as for those they hire?

Essentially, these industrial producers were ambivalent in their attitude towards their counterparts producing feature films. Coupled with their concern about the unreal values the feature is creating, was also a great deal of admiration for what the feature producers have achieved. "What you have now is an entrepreneurial class within the industry; they have been faster off the mark than the rest

of us," said Raymond, who also admitted that "Most of us were afraid of features. We have all kinds of friends who went broke."

Such comments indicate that the feature has the power to entice, or at least interest, even the industrial producer. Don Haig has participated in such small-budget features as **125 Rooms of Comfort** and **Summer's Children**. Hopefully, he will do more. Bruce Raymond hinted that he is homing in on a feature project. And Chetwynd's company is working on a deal that will have him functioning as line producer on a series of feature-length documentaries. The mere existence of the feature is creating new possibilities.

"But," advises Chetwynd, "you have to remember what you do best. The danger is that if too many people in the industrial and documentary side of the business begin to go for the feature, perspectives will become cluttered and confused and the whole industry will suffer."

In some quarters, due to the questionable credibility of certain feature producers, a new variation on the feature theme is in the wind. And it is beginning to receive attention. As the industrial producer continues to hold his ground as a competent producer of quality film, we may soon find the ones who raise the millions and put together the feature packages bringing their projects to him to be produced. Chetwynd predicted that, "Within the next three to five years you'll see more producers involved in feature film projects and/or television movie production..." Bruce Raymond elaborated that, "Many of the packagers are going to withdraw from the production process and leave the producing to us... The new Secretary of State's rules that are likely to come forward — which will limit the role of the executive producers so that the line producer has more authority — will help this to come about."

For those who have felt generally disappointed by Canadian features, such a transition would seem logical, and could create new enthusiasm in all sectors. (Another boom!) Potentially, it could also give the film community a more coherent structure.

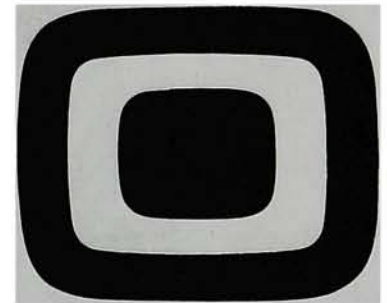
For the moment, however, feature production still is, basically, another world to the industrial producer. Features may have stepped up volumes at the labs and post-production houses, but the bread and butter jobs have virtually remained consistent. Consequently, the slump this summer will hardly be felt. In fact, with regard to crews, some of the regular freelancers who were lost to the features are turning up again — at the old prices.

John Ross said that the effects of the feature boom have no real base for com-

parison to his situation because: "The feature film hasn't yet taken root as a 52-week business. There's no revenue base; and it's too early to say what effects it's had because it's still a phenomenon."

His colleagues were quick to point out that Canadians are generally too hard on themselves, and that much of the recent criticism of the feature industry is premature. It will take time before Canadians can properly judge where the feature stands, both nationally and internationally. In the meantime, flexibility is the name of the game.

For the industrial producer, the main effect of the feature film, so far, has been the escalated price of producing a film. Otherwise, his profile is still as low as he wants to keep it, and business goes on as before. In Bruce Raymond's words, "The independent producer who is not doing features is in exactly the same market as he was ten years ago." Derek Baker summed it up simply: "Basically we don't need features." Which is not to say that the industrial producer has closed his eyes. To the contrary. In his view, due to his proven skills and established credibility, he need not jump on the feature band wagon to survive. In time, he may even find the band wagon coming to him. Who knows...



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