

# credit where credit is due

by stanley colbert

**Last year money spoke louder than words. This year film industry analysts are making themselves heard. For Stanley Colbert, the message is clear: good films depend upon good producers who can pull more than just purse strings.**

The wine was flowing and the platters of steaming meats were being stabbed at from all directions when an enthusiastic crewperson sidled up to me and nudged me in the ribs. The occasion was the wrap party for **Bells**, a feature film we had just completed with the ease and efficiency of a skilled surgical team dissecting a well-prepared patient. "You're the producer, eh?"

I acknowledged that I was.

"Well," she said, with another rib nudge, "you keep the money comin', and we'll keep makin' the pictures."

If I didn't need her for my next picture I would have kicked her in the slats. On the other hand, if I was impelled to physical violence against all the people who think of producers strictly as moneyraisers, I'd probably be spending the rest of my days in jail.

And yet, as the industry is poised to jump to the next plateau of development — having failed to make a significant mark on the first plateau — there may still be hope for the Producer, that rare beast who is entitled to that credit with a capital P.

As mergers, public stock issues that include shares in the company as well as the pictures, financing and distribution oriented groups and boutiques all become the hallmark of the new plateau to which our industry appears headed, the gap between entrepreneurs and producers is widening. Pretty soon, it may actually be possible to tell the moneyraisers from the filmmakers, the business people from the creative people.

A preliminary shaking out of the industry this year has already revealed a number of people who are neither moneyraisers nor filmmakers, past publicity and stock issues notwithstanding. All that now remains is to make clear that finding money is one unique skill; being a creative producer is another. Current thinking to the contrary, simply being able to raise the funds for production

doesn't make one a producer. It also, alas, doesn't make one creative.

There are closets full of unspooled film that attest to this and, as we know, there are films in release that prove this beyond a reasonable doubt. Yet money and moneyraisers keep insisting on "final creative control" and keep getting it.

Now, I'm not disrespectful of the people who invest in films, or the people who assemble these investors, or even the people who assemble the people who assemble the investors. Clearly, the entrepreneurs have done a grand job of rooting out a couple of hundred million dollars over the past two years or so for motion picture production. That's a record that should make any country intent on developing an industry proud and happy.

So how come we're unsuccessful, in our perception of ourselves as well as the way we are perceived by others? The answer, I'm afraid, is that money not only doesn't buy happiness, it doesn't buy instant creative film skills either.

Stories are ill-conceived; writers are rarely steered and supported (or, conversely, they are over-abused by committees); directors are treated like temporary demigods and heaped with limousines and champagne (or, conversely, they are ignored unless they bear the Good Housekeeping seal of approval from someone else who hired them first); Hollywood agents and lawyers are presumed to be impeccable in their counsel while local agents and lawyers "don't seem to understand the problem." And so it goes.

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The mounting number of pictures that can't be cut, that can't be sold or that can't find an audience makes it easier than ever to suggest that our entrepreneurs, who are content to call themselves entrepreneurs, are successful: it's the entrepreneurs who call themselves producers who are killing us.

Hopefully, this new movement to a formalized business structure of certain companies in the industry is a move that could be in the right direction, if the people involved in these companies recognize that what they do best is finance and arrange for distribution of films. But they must also come to recognize that between those two functions is the making of the picture, and that function, in its entirety, belongs to a Producer.

That function and that credit is something legitimate producers in our industry should fight to define and retain. And talent should somehow band together to insist that creative control over their efforts as writers, directors and performers be vested in the hands of producers whose skills — not just their ability to assemble money — entitle them to such control.

While all of this may not be easy to attain, it is far more feasible than skeptics may believe. The new empires-in-the-making will be only as successful as the projects they are able to attract. And the skilled producer who knows how to find material and develop it, how to establish a collaborative relationship with a director, how to make and read a budget, how to work in tandem with key personnel in moving a film forward, within its schedule and its budget, may well prove to be the key to success or

failure of these new structures in our industry. Recognizing that, the skilled producer may well be able to retain control over the destiny of a film until the answer print. At that point, line producers — who are no more than that — can return to being production managers, and those with more to offer can become their own masters.

The results of such a move might be remarkable, and a salvation for an industry which is still, for the most part, putting forth indifferent films to an indifferent marketplace.

First of all, a skilled producer is neither in awe of high-priced foreign screenwriters nor ineffective in working with a willing and skilled group of Canadian writers. The same producer can work confidently with some of the more promising young Canadian directors, instead of being limited to the same handful of so-called "name" directors who play musical chairs with Canadian productions with somewhat undistinguished results, not only in their work but in the marketplace as well. And they can confidently work with and build attractive and talented Canadian performers.

The recent Trade Forum at the Toronto Festival of Festivals made clear that interest in independent production is greater than ever. And the interest centered in low-budget production is not just because it appears easier to find a little money instead of a lot. Rather, it's because it's easier to control one's own low-budget production as opposed to someone else's high-budget production. The thrust, clearly, is towards control of one's own production. The opportunity, clearly, may be closer and more attainable than you think. ■



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