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# Independents and Service Industry Share Common Cause



I write this out of a sense of exasperation at what I feel are artificial divisions being perpetuated in our community that weaken us and create barriers where none should exist. What I'm alluding to is the alleged differences between the service industry and the indigenous, or "independent," community.

Time and again I hear the service industry denigrated for failing to contribute to indigenous culture, and comments like "we have nothing in common with them" are snively proffered during meetings of some independents. I find this distressing. The cross-overs between our communities—or, rather, between the different elements of our larger community—are far more common than "nothing." Many independent films have been made with the assistance of technicians experienced in the service industry and paid the union wages that allow them to defer payment or work as volunteers on lower-budget independents. Lorne Davidson, a locations manager on *Poltergeist*, has worked for free on a number of independents and recently for scale on Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, a film Davidson says he could not have afforded to accept if it weren't for the bread and butter he earns on shows like *Poltergeist*. Davidson also applauds the service industry for providing him with the experience he brings to smaller projects: "The majority of what I've learned I've learned off the big-budgets, which I've then applied to smaller budgets."

The hit independent film *Kissed* also benefited from a similar arrangement. Associate Producer Jessica Fraser tells me that all key positions were experienced union people who worked for "rent." It was partly due to this support that director Lynne Stopkewich was able to turn down strings-attached money and make the film she had in her heart.

And this support works both ways. Rose Lam, who produced *Double Happiness* and has been working steadily as a Producer/PM on American shows, spoke to me of the joy of finally working to a budget which allows her to pay decent wages to her crew. "It's great to ask someone to work for me for a proper wage, instead of it always being 'I have a \$1.50. Can we do it for that?'"

Experience and cash are key words of the service industry, and this applies to the suppliers and post houses as well. With their businesses supported primarily by the service industry, suppliers often lend equipment for free (or next to it) to independent producers, and post houses cut deals. I've personally benefited from this generosity courtesy of Lorne Lapham, who lent equipment to me for the production of a demo reel for my documentary. The aforementioned *Kissed* owes much to Keystone Entertainment who handed over everything from trucks to office space to a great deal on the sound cut. And when production manager Mary Anne McCarthy was asked to work on John Nichol's short film, *The Highway House*, funded by the Kickstart program with its \$10 000 budget ceiling, McCarthy says they "were only able to produce *Highway House* for

such a small amount of money because I was able to draw on favours from suppliers that I worked with in the TV movie industry."

*Highway House* was also supported by Pacific Motion Pictures, a company known mostly for their service work. PMP allowed *HH* to insure their production on the back of PMP's own policy, shaving a hefty \$1500 off *HH*'s insurance bill. And McCarthy has drawn on her long-time relationship with PMP to work such favours for others as well, including Stopkewich. Lynne cut her short *Soul Tone Poem* on PMP's Lightworks *au gratis*, then borrowed their other editing suite to cut the show reel that launched *Kissed* at the Toronto Film Festival. Favours like this allow emerging filmmakers to get their films made, seen, and maybe, like *Kissed*, to skyrocket them into celebrity status.

Money and connections made while working with the American studios can also facilitate development and production of indigenous films. New City Productions owner Colleen Nystedt, quoted in a *Vancouver Magazine* article, referred to the service industry as "financing her development habit"; while PMP co-owner and Emmy-nominee Tom Rowe will direct the PMP-developed *Jackrabbit Parole* early next year. And the aforementioned Rose Lam cites not only the extra income these shows provide for development, but the access to decision makers afforded to few independent producers. Says Lam, "What people don't realise is that you can have a hit film one year, but within a year the door is closed again. Working for a studio like Disney means I have access on a regular basis, so they know who I am and what I'm capable of when I next come calling."

Such access is not just useful for producers and directors, but writers as well. Recently while working on Trilogy's *Creature* I had the opportunity to "pitch" my feature script to the show's producers—one now has it in hand, and another has offered to show it to contacts in L.A. Such access reduces the isolation and frustration most writers/filmmakers experience, and provides further opportunity for a valuable critique of your work.

This relationship between the union and non-union shows works the other way as well. Technicians new to the industry often cut their teeth and fill up their resumé's on smaller productions, using the experience and credits gained to land jobs in the higher-paying service sector. Independent productions also usually afford creatives more room to play than they're allowed on the American shows where, between network regulations, adherence to formula, and skittish executives, imagination is often left out of the equation. Costume designer Margaret Loveniuk, who also worked on *Creature*, loves doing independents for the room to experiment and expand her horizons. Says Loveniuk, "Sometimes you lose your creative edge, and the independents give it back."

Which, really, is what being a community is all about.

Michelle Demers