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MPPIA IGNORING VOICE OF DOMESTIC INDUSTRY NEW

by M.A. Demers

On November 22nd, the Motion Picture Production Industry Association (MPPIA) held an open forum at Bridge Studios to address the challenges facing B.C.'s film and television industry. The forum was facilitated by David Gouthro, President of Consulting Edge, whom MPPIA has hired to lead us through these dark days. But if MPPIA and Gouthro are anything to go by, I fear the light at the end of our tunnel is going to be a train.

In his snazzy PowerPoint presentation, Gouthro likened the film industry to a spider's web, supporting as it does a wide range of spin-off business activities. And in the middle of this web? "L.A. Producers and Others." Yes, you read that right, "others." The entire Canadian indigenous film industry was lumped together into one amorphous, insignificant insect left, perhaps, to rot at the fringes of the web, the lifeblood already sucked out.

Lest anyone had missed the gist of his earlier metaphor, on the presentation page entitled "What our Customers are Saying," all the logos representing said customers were American companies. Canadian giants like Alliance Atlantis or Serendipity Films were noticeably absent from the club. Even the CBC failed the grade. They had a news team at the forum, however, and I hope reporter Belle Puri didn't miss the irony.

It got worse. In his presentation, Neal Clarence of Ellis Foster focussed solely on the effect our rising dollar, PST woes, lost tax breaks, and lacklustre private investment are having on service productions: territories such as Eastern Europe and Asia are luring away our American customers. "Our ability to compete on a cost basis," said Clarence, "has all but disappeared."

Yet Clarence made no mention whatsoever of the flip side to this, the positive effect our currency is having on Canadian productions. The lower cost of imported expendables—from gasoline to film stock to textiles to fresh tropical fruit for a picky star—means our costs go down and we get more on the screen for our money. That, and Robert Lantos can now hire Annette Bening for 15% less.

Furthermore, that blasted PST, and our provincial government's refusal to exempt film and television from sales tax as the other provinces and the federal government do, has as negative an effect on domestic production as it does on imported projects. So too do high location and labour costs. Yet it was left to one lone voice—producer Mary-Anne Waterhouse—to point this out.

Waterhouse, who is now finally realising her dream of "putting together a Canadian film with a sizeable budget, developed here," may have to take her \$10 million film to the prairies because of B.C.'s high costs. B.C. Film, under its Feature Film Fund, has stepped in to help bridge the 10% gap between B.C. and Saskatchewan, and while the funds are not huge they do make a difference. "It underscores the importance," said Waterhouse, "of a small amount of money





underscores the importance, said Waterhouse, of a small amount of money shifting the tide and keeping a production here." But while Waterhouse's project still qualifies for previous tax dollars, future ones won't, since the program has been axed.



Victims of our own success, and focussed on American money, both our government and the service industry seems to have forgotten not just the importance of the domestic industry, but its very existence. We have forgotten that the service and domestic industries support each other: the former, as our largest employer, builds our talent and infrastructure while the latter allows us to express our own voices, develop our own ideas, and place our stars centre stage. As Waterhouse put it, "Whether you work in service or you don't, it's important that a domestic industry exists alongside."



Waterhouse's pleas on behalf of the Canadian industry were essentially lost, however, in the deluge that followed by fellow service veterans Rose Lam, Brent O'Connor, and Warren Carr. The quartet had been asked to speak on behalf of B.C. producers and, in keeping with the evening's theme, O'Connor, Carr and Lam made much of our languishing service industry. As did the BC Film Commission's Susan Crome and David Hardwick, UBCP Treasurer Rob Morton, Entertainment Partners Canada Executive VP Cheryl Nex, and locations manager Anne Goobie. It's worth noting that prominent architects of local Canadian product such as Chris Haddock (*Da Vinci's Inquest*) and Gigi Boyd (*Cold Squad*) were not invited to speak; their perspective on the industry, and their thoughts on possible solutions, were therefore not heard.



Ever intent on keeping the conversation on (one) track, MPPIA's follow-up report ignored Waterhouse's comments altogether. The four producers, it is written, "presented feedback from their own experiences and gave anecdotal evidence of concerned customers in LA saying inconsistent production quotes, high costs and expensive locations are keeping them away from B.C."



"Each producer," the report continues, "outlined a number of steps they are taking as well as suggestions as to how to market B.C. to LA and the rest of the world as a cost-effective and high-standard filming destination for the future." Not only are Waterhouse's concerns suspiciously missing from the report, our domestic industry is only mentioned once in the 18-page document: we're lobbying for an increase in the provincial tax credit cap on labour for indigenous production from 48% to the federal rate of 60%. One can only hope Canada at least makes it into "the rest of the world" in somebody's mind over at MPPIA.



MPPIA has now sent out an email informing everyone of the provincial government's request for expenditure suggestions and asking us all to lobby on behalf of the industry. But here again, MPPIA's narrow focus reveals itself. Their top three "Examples of priority areas for the BC Film Industry are: 1) PST exemption - classification as a Manufacturing Industry (as with the Federal Government and other Provinces); 2) Harmonization of Tax Credits - with the Federal Government, competitive with other provinces; [and] 3) Creation of a Venture Capital Corporation (VCC) allocation specific to the film industry to encourage private sector investment and economic development." It was left to staff at Women in Film and Video-Vancouver to add a fourth priority—"Dedication to sustain and grow the domestic sector of the industry through continued and increased support of such organizations as BC Arts Council and British Columbia Film"—before passing it on to their members.



Crawford Hawkins, Vice Chair of MPPIA, in his opening address, reminisced how B.C.'s film and television industry really got started "in the seventies and early eighties primarily with the CBC with shows like *Beachcombers* and *Danger Bay*. If you wanted to mount a production here, you had to get people to take their holiday from the CBC." Shows like *Neon Rider*, *Bordertown*, *Mom PI*, and *Airwolf* soon followed. Now we have *Da Vinci's Inquest*, *Cold Squad*, *The Shopping Bags*, and the new *Godiva's*. Vancouver's Brightlight Pictures has just signed on to executive produce six new MOWs for CHUM Television and Victoria-based station, The New VI. If MPPIA is serious about looking for ways to make B.C. less dependent on American business, it only has to look in its backyard to see one solution worth pursuing.

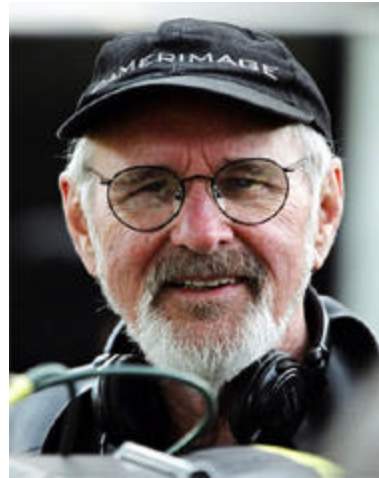


No one is suggesting we can survive solely on our domestic product. Canada is

too small a market and our entertainment product too intrinsically entwined with our southern neighbours to harbour such delusions, an expression echoed at the forum. "I'm not for a minute suggesting we can replace a \$1.2 billion industry with a domestic industry," said Waterhouse, "but we can replace a part of it and we can have something to fall back on that is our own. I believe it's extremely important that we don't forget that."

MPPIA, perhaps more so than any other film and television industry organization here in B.C., is in a position to actualise benefit to us all. With its membership of high-powered producers, American studios, international financiers, and distributors it can offer access to the corridors of power usually denied our domestic players. If MPPIA wants to continue to herald itself as "The Voice and Vision of B.C.'s Motion Picture Industry" it has to address its entrenched myopia. It has to offer producers of domestic product a seat at the table. Who knows, they may surprise MPPIA with their ideas.

JEWISON HAS A WAY WITH WORDS NEW



Norman Jewison sure knows how to tell a good story.

And it's a good thing, too, because the majority of his 90 minute talk at the Stanley Theatre November 21 was nothing but stories, delivered with the same warmth, wit and precise timing of his best films. Jewison was riveting and inspiring throughout, candid but impeccably professional. Interviewee Vicki Gabereau was also terrific; her informed questions kept the momentum going. It helped that Jewison was mostly retelling stories he had written about at length in his new autobiography, *This Terrible Business Has Been Good To Me*, which Gabereau quoted from numerous times. Still, even if I had read the stories of his life, I wouldn't have missed the opportunity to hear this masterful storyteller tell many of them again. In fact, after listening to this, I planned to buy the book to read these stories again, along with many others.

Jewison began the talk with personal stories related to his Jewish heritage, and his father's disapproval of him. Then came his first great tale of show biz: producing the 1981 Oscars. President Reagan had just been shot, delaying the show one day. Miraculously, Jewison lost only one guest by switching days, and received a bonus gift from the US government when they told him Reagan could open the show from his hospital bed (Jewison: "Doesn't he have tubes?" Government: "We'll take 'em out!").

Next came the gossip about Hollywood legends such as Steve McQueen ("shrewd, but not educated", "Steve wanted a father figure (as a director)...I told him I would be his older brother with a college education") and Sam Peckinpah (whom he took over from on *The Cincinnati Kid* because he was fired for shooting "a nude scene for two days that wasn't in the script").

On the subject of directing Jewison remarked that the hardest part of the job is