
DESIRE FOR DOMESTIC INDUSTRY EVIDENT AT MPPIA STRATEGY SESSION

by M.A. Demers

As follow up to last week's coverage of the MPPIA forum held in November, I attended the strategy session on December 5 to see what, if any, support for the domestic industry would be found. What followed was a pleasant surprise for me and, I hope, a wake-up call for MPPIA.

After November's meeting, MPPIA created a message board on their website asking for feedback on eight topics which would form the spine of December's gathering. The topics were:

- Federal and Provincial Government Issues (PST and Tax Credits)
- Labour Issues

- The Rising Canadian Dollar
- Managing Locations
- Building the Indigenous Industry
- Marketing BC to LA and the World
- Getting Communities on Our Side
- Other Initiatives

This feedback was then assembled into a paper for the strategy meeting along with a list of actions taken so far on each issue. It was interesting to note that only the indigenous industry and the rising dollar (a relatively new challenge) did not have current action items listed. This is not to say that there has not been any lobby for our domestic product by anyone, only that MPPIA either doesn't know about it or doesn't care. What makes this more distressing is that MPPIA allegedly has a committee dedicated to expanding the indigenous film industry, and members from MPPIA and the Canadian Film and Television Producers Association (CFTPA) sit on each other's boards. So why has this alleged support and inter-association communication not produced any initiatives for the domestic industry that we know of? Where at November's forum, asked one message board contributor, was the discussion of the importance of domestic production?

The structure of the strategy session was to debate, in groups of 7 to 8 people, those topics listed and create one actionable proposal per group which would then be voted upon by everyone attending to be either green-lighted, sent for further study, or rejected. The 150 or so participants were allowed to choose which topic they wanted to work on, with no minimum participants per issue. I took my place in front of the sign marked "Indigenous Industry" and thought we'd be lucky to get a table's worth, and was surprised—as were the event's organisers—when 30 people crowded around. That roughly 20% considered this topic to be paramount was a testament to the hunger in Vancouver for a sustainable domestic industry and a call to MPPIA and others to begin taking it seriously.

Our table tackled federal funding. BC contributes approximately 15% of the federal tax revenues yet we receive on average only about 2% of federal film and television funding. The lion's share has always been divvied up between Ontario and Quebec. The reasons for this are twofold: 1) Quebec has a popular cinema that is well supported so there's been a return on investment; and 2) there was a belief in Ottawa that if a strong domestic infrastructure was created in Central Canada for English cinema, we would see the same results as Quebec. Consequently, the bulk of the support went to large, centrally based companies such as Alliance Atlantis with the assumption that the selection of projects and distribution of funds would be fair, open, and accountable. That, as we all know too painfully well, hasn't happened.

The proposal, then, is to demand legislative changes that would see the regions receive a percentage of the federal funding proportionate to their contribution to federal revenues. That would mean a more than 700% increase in funding to BC. It's safe to say we can expect considerable opposition to our plan from Toronto and Montréal, but why should we care? As director Charles Wilkinson of the DGC, who is spearheading this proposal, put it to the forum, "When Telefilm and the federal culture folks say having a western production envelope is not a very good idea, our answer is 'How much worse can it work?' So it's really simple: we want our share."

The federal funding fiasco is one area, however, where BC has no one to blame but themselves. Fat off of American service work, enough of us (to make a difference) simply never cared who got domestic funding. That this has been allowed to go on for as long as it has should make us question not just the myopia of the service sector but the divisions that render the whole of our industry ineffective when tackling Ottawa. There has been a tendency in BC to divide our community between domestic versus service, drama versus documentary, film versus television, which has left us easily conquered. We need to crawl out from our respective corners and start speaking with one voice. (I began writing about this issue back in 1997 with my WIFVV article "Independents and Service Industry Share Common Cause"; it dismays

me that I am writing of it still.)

The second group devoted to domestic issues proposed that MPPIA include strong support for BC Film as a prominent element in their lobbying of the provincial government over the PST. This is to avoid what table facilitator Gary Marcuse called a "teeter-totter" effect whereby Finance says yes to PST exemption only to claw it back by axing the last of BC Film, whose budget has already been reduced by a staggering 80% at a time the industry is hurting desperately (which says a great deal about Gordon Campbell and Victoria).

Table two also wanted to see MPPIA's committee on domestic production expanded, to which this writer would add just revealing itself would have been useful to begin with (few at the meeting knew the committee existed). This committee would work on such initiatives as convincing local theatres and broadcasters to exhibit trailers of upcoming locally produced films; the cost to the theatres and broadcasters is minimal and the strategy has already proved beneficial with *The Delicate Art of Parking*. It was also added that we need to secure renewed commitment from Canadian broadcasters for regional development funds which are always in danger of disappearing.

Neal Clarence of Ellis Foster facilitated the table devoted to private investment, in particular investment in the distribution and marketing of Canadian product, which has dwindled down to almost nothing. (Clarence's presence at the table and the revelation that he, alongside producer Colleen Nystedt and solicitor Arthur Evernsal, has been blazing the trail on reform of BC's Venture Capital Corporation to make room for more film financing, came as a welcome surprise.) The resolution put forward was that "MPPIA should create an advisory board, consisting of representatives from both the film industry and the financial community, whose mandate will be to develop a viable structure for raising marketing and distribution dollars for the indigenous film sector."

The fourth table devoted to home grown product wanted to see the creation of a marketing resource to enable producers to determine the international marketability of projects; this would include market assessment, project definition, and export support. The group also added the development of a lexicon of film language; the idea is to share knowledge across professional lines in the industry so we all understand and appreciate each other's roles. Michael Francis of BC Film has agreed to tackle this project; I suggest he contact Women in Film and Video - Vancouver and take a look at their *Producer's Workbook* which addresses the latter part of the proposal.

All the proposed initiatives were passed by a resounding majority, and I left the meeting feeling a lot more optimistic about the future of our domestic industry than I did after November's forum. I discovered there is a great deal of desire and support for an indigenous industry in BC; we just have to harness it by increased communication and inter-association cooperation. In this respect I hope MPPIA came away from the strategy session with their eyes opened as wide as mine. Kudos to MPPIA for producing both events—now work with us!