

Canada's film industry

Finding the balance between art and commerce

Canada's film industry has known both boom and bust. But one constant has always prevailed: how to find the right mix that will lead to the production of worthwhile films.

In the fickle world of popular cinema, a comment often heard from film producers is: 'To make good films, you need the right mix of art and commerce.' Evidence from the 1987 Cannes film festival seems to indicate that Canadian film makers have managed to find that elusive mix. For the second year running, Canadian films premiered in the festival received both critical and popular acclaim.

Last year, it was Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* that opened the Directors' Fortnight and walked away with the International Film Critics' Prize; this year, it was Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un Zoo, la nuit*, which opened the Directors' Fortnight and also stole the show. The audience literally stood and cheered. While in another category, Patricia Rozema's low budget feature *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* won this year's Prix de la Jeunesse.



Patricia Rozema's delightful first feature *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*

Photo: Cinéma Québec

In Canada, producers, directors and crews working in the film industry *also* stood and cheered, because it confirmed that Canada has succeeded in establishing a viable film industry that produces good films. Both Lauzon and Rozema will have their films featured in this year's London Film Festival in November.

Quintessentially Canadian issues

Since the earliest days of filmmaking in Canada, which can be traced to the turn of the century, Canadian filmmakers have had to face up to those quintessentially Canadian issues: a small domestic market and close proximity to (and in the case of the film industry, domination by) the American market. How to respond to these realities has been the subject of argument and discussion for many years — but the keystone of that response is undoubtedly the federal government's National Broadcasting Policy, which came into effect in April 1983.

Under this policy, the federal government places itself squarely behind the film industry as a major source of investment capital for both film and television production. A total of £57 million was

available in 1986 for films needing investment that could not be obtained from the private sector. Also, an agency called Telefilm Canada has been mandated to invest in film and television production that supports the Canadian industry, and to fund related work in the areas of dubbing, sub-titling, script development and film promotion.

As an independent Crown corporation, Telefilm is able to invest in projects on a co-financing basis with private or public sector producers, so long as those producers can present evidence of pre-sales to Canadian-owned television broadcasters or film distributors. Decisions at Telefilm regarding investments are made on a project-by-project basis in a committee headed by the agency's executive director, Peter Pearson, formerly a filmmaker himself.

Provincial schemes also operating

In addition to Telefilm Canada, there are programmes in Quebec, Ontario, Alberta and Manitoba that work on roughly the same principle as the federal scheme. By approaching both levels of government, a filmmaker can therefore obtain a sizeable portion of his or her financing before having to approach private investors.

Of particular note is the Quebec scheme which was the first established and so far has had the greatest impact in the area of feature film production. Unlike Telefilm Canada, which allocates a significant portion of its budget to made-for-TV production, the Quebec programme focuses its resources on modestly budgeted feature films indigenous to Quebec.

Under the aegis of an agency called the Société Générale du Cinéma du Québec (SGC), it will consider proposals for investment at every stage of production — from the first moments of scripting through to distribution, promotion and exhibition — and will allow itself to become committed to up to 60 per cent of a film's total financing (compared with Telefilm's upper limit of 49 per cent).

By limiting itself to a maximum investment of £0.25 million per film, the agency has managed to spin out its £5.5 million annual budget, so that from 1983 to 1986, it managed to invest in 32 feature films.

NFB a major player

One other government agency associated with full-length feature film production is the National Film Board. It has regularly produced drama films for some years now, although since the late 1960s, this part of its work has been overshadowed by its documentary and animated filmmaking.

Nevertheless, the NFB is an important player in the industry, working on full-length feature films in partnership with both private and/or public sector corporations. With its strong technical and administrative services, and an annual budget of £32 million, the NFB is an attractive partner for small independent companies needing assistance in the areas of script development, editing and dubbing.

As a co-producer, it played a key role in the development of what are now the best-known films of recent Quebec cinema, including *Le Déclin*, *Un Zoo*, *Pouvoir Intime* and *Anne Trister*.