

The Canadian Difference

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It often seems that the two major founding cultures within Canada — one French, the other British — have little in common. They represent different sensibilities, they play to audiences of very different kinds, and they speak different languages. But when Canada is seen in a global context, the problems and possibilities of these two cultures — the “Two Solitudes,” as they’re often called, after the 1945 novel by Hugh MacLennan — look remarkably similar.

A leading Montreal journalist, Lysiane Gagnon, recently pointed out that two contradictory impulses dominate French-Canadian culture: “the persistent desire to conquer lands beyond Quebec’s borders” and “the fear of assimilation,” which produces a

defensive, inward-turning mood. If that is true of Quebec artists, it is also true of artists in the nine other (mainly English-speaking) provinces. They, too, yearn to make themselves heard around the globe, and yet simultaneously worry about protecting their society from the almost overwhelming force of American mass communications.

And these two cultures have something else in common: while the fear of outside influence has not abated, and probably will not do so for a long time, the urge to speak to the world has been steadily increasing in recent years. More important, both cultures have produced artists and substantial artistic organizations whose appeal reaches far beyond the borders of Canada.

International Cultural Figures

Canada has produced international cultural figures for generations, but with a few notable exceptions (such as the great pianist Glenn Gould) they have found it necessary to leave Canada in order to achieve eminence. In the process, particularly if they are English-speaking Canadians moving to the United States, the world may never know or care that they are Canadians — sometimes, in fact, they turn into great mythic figures of American culture. Mary Pickford, “America’s sweetheart” in silent movies, was from Toronto; so was Raymond Massey, who for a generation embodied Abraham Lincoln for Broadway and Hollywood.

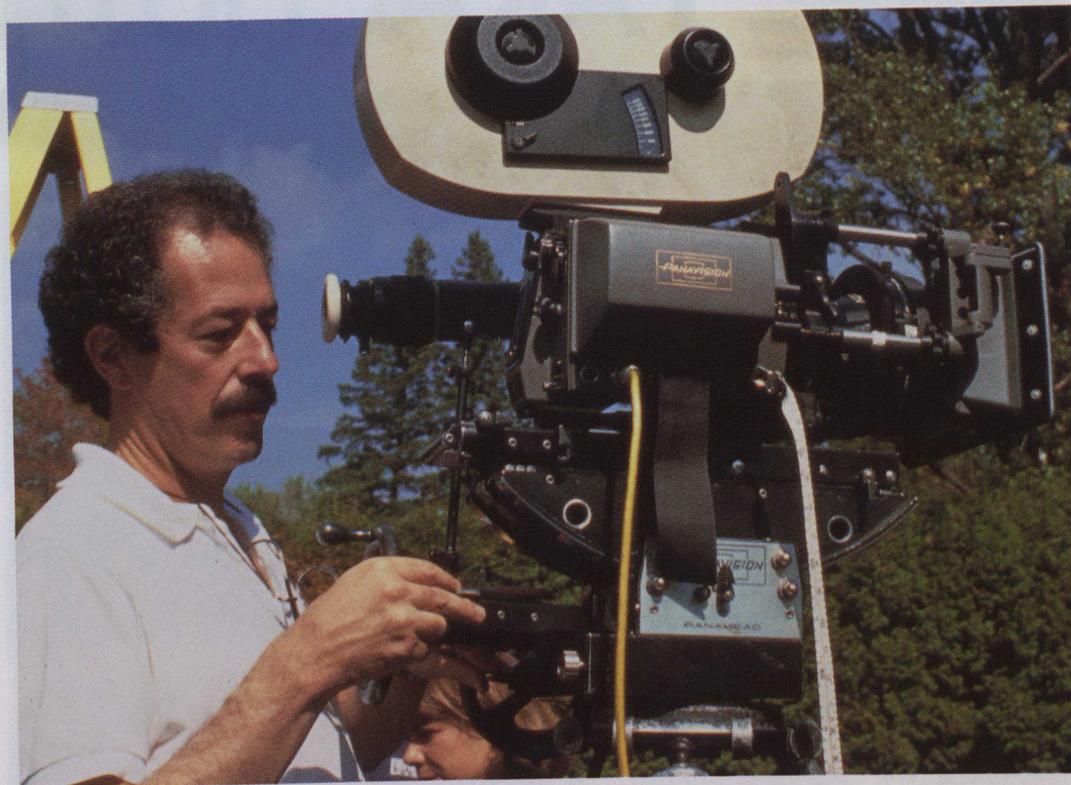
Frequently, American pop myths are the product of Canadian imaginations — both Superman and Rambo were created by Canadians. In the 1960s, when Pa Cartwright rode the range in “Bonanza” as the ultimate American father-figure on TV, he was played by an Ottawa actor, Lorne Greene. Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*, in the “Star Trek” TV programs and movies, is given human shape by William Shatner, who graduated from the Shakespeare festival at Stratford, Ontario.

More recently, performers such as Michael J. Fox, the SCTV troupe and others have followed the same path. French-Canadian actors and singers who move to France are more likely to remain identifiably Québécois, but Jean-Paul Riopelle, a great Canadian painter who lives part of each year in Paris, is frequently identified as a Frenchman, to the occasional annoyance of Canadians.

Government Support for the Arts

There is no way of stopping this process of emigration, and no reason to do so: some Canadians, like some Koreans or Norwegians or Australians, will always find it natural to pursue their careers elsewhere.

Quebec film director Denys Arcand reinforced Canada’s international film-making reputation with *Le Déclin de l’empire américain* and *Jésus de Montréal*.



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