

Features

The Canadian film industry

Just a shot in the dark?

Salem Alaton

A couple of weeks ago the Canadian Film Development Corporation delivered its annual report to the press in a spacious suite at the Four Season Hotel. It made a Merrill-Lynch board meeting look like a fraternity party.

A tight-lipped, aloof Michel Vennat, present C.F.D.C. chairman, read verbatim from a news release sheet which was a kind of accountant's ledger expanded with promotional rhetoric. The heading above the report was "Canadian Films Securing Wider Distribution as 1980 Production Continues at High Level." The specifics:

● of 87 Canadian films or co-productions produced in 78-79, 67 have secured Canadian distribution; 35 of them have American

distribution and 36 have had sales internationally

● in 1980, 51 films with total budgets of \$170 million have been produced or are in production presently

● currently, some 20 Canadian films are being screened in over 100 cinemas nationally

● the C.F.D.C. has, to date, invested \$6 million in 27 Canadian film projects. The corporation is participating in "over half" of the 1980 production.

So, why is this crown corporation, that has been created to develop Canadian films, looking and sounding like a terse contingent of investment officers?

There are possibly two or three reasons, but only one of them counts: money. There is no other creative activity in existence

which matches filmmaking's blood relationship to capital. Money is the oxygen of any film project; five minutes without it and a production will turn blue and perish.

The cost of materials for a sorry, confused little idea called *Heaven's Gate* would exceed the combined cost for every great novel and painting this century has produced.

Hardly more than 10 years ago, a production on the scale of *2001: A Space Odyssey* would cost \$8-10 million; today, that is hardly more than the average bill, variously estimated between \$5-8, for a "small Hollywood picture".

The scale is not quite so inflated in Canada, but there is no question that money—great gobs of money—are intrinsic to filmmaking here, as well.

Hence, we have a tax-shelter which cuts by half any possible losses an investor may sustain, and a crown corporation called the C.F.D.C. which, among other things, oils the industry machinery by supporting a project first, and leading the way for other investments to follow.

Not everyone is happy with this arrangement. The C.F.D.C.'s figures showing increasing film production in this country are presumably accurate, but under hot debate is the question as to in which way these films are 'Canadian'.

American stars seem to fill leading roles and the Hollywood format is generally the guiding structure for these films (the cinema of Quebec is an important exception, but then, the accomplished French-Canadian

film contribution is a separate entity in all other senses as well). Many creative people at the periphery of the industry are so cranky about it as to prefer that no films be made rather than what they perceive as made-in-Canada Hollywood movies subsidized by our government.

One important reason that they are wrong is that while a film costs millions of dollars, it employs many dozens of people. Elliot Gould and Susannah York may fill the leading roles, but lighting, sound and photography technicians, make-up and costume artists, directors and

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Low budget learning

Ingrid Matson

For Canadian filmmaker Tibor Takacs, the low-budget film is the training ground for the Canadian film industry. "I believe in a low-budget attitude. You don't need to spend five million dollars telling a love story. To control that kind of money and put it in the right place takes a lot of expertise," says Takacs. Takacs has demonstrated some expertise himself with a new Canadian made for TV film, entitled *The Tomorrow Man*.

In this speculative fiction film, Takacs deals with social and philosophical issues of the future. He portrays a frightening scene of "future history" that takes place somewhere in North America. We are told the world is on the brink of Atomic war and political offenders are being imprisoned without trial by the New Regime.

It is not a realistic film says Takacs, but rather an allegorical story of political apathy.

The story focuses on Tom Weston, played by Stephen Markle, who has been arrested for the political crime of subversive collaboration.

Weston, prisoner 984, used to be a stereotypical North American businessman. A statistical analyst for General Research, he was married, had two cars and a salary of \$85,000.

He seemed happy and successful, that is until he was arrested. Then his life became a nightmare of torture, interrogation and mind deprogramming. While the tension of the film is occasionally relieved by flashbacks of Weston's happier memories, the overall effect is that of a nightmare

interspersed with dreamlike images.

The Tomorrow Man is essentially an experimental movie says Takacs. He finds "on a low-budget film it is easier, and better, to tell your story in a more experimental form using flashbacks and a lot of tricks."

The Canadian movie was produced so cheaply mainly because Takacs is a relatively new director. He has five or six years experience in theatre and filmmaking and is banking on *The Tomorrow Man* as his most major project to date.

His early experience includes starting a theatre company with his partner, writer Stephen Zoller, and producing a play and film called *The Metal Messiah*. The two of them now run a company by the name of MegaMediaProductions.

As of last week *The Tomorrow Man* had been nominated for a film award but has not yet been sold in Canada or the United States. With a budget of \$150,000 the movie took one and a half years of preparation and was filmed on an eighteen day shooting schedule.

Most of the production took place in studios using built sets, and all the actors employed were Canadian.

According to Takacs it was easy to get Canadian actors but it may have been more profitable to also use some Americans.

"You can say that you need American actors because you can identify with them, but if you're lucky you can find good Canadian actors; there's always new faces

that are being exploited on television," said Takacs.

He explains that the more name actors a film has, the easier it is to sell. "You need name actors if you are looking for presale," he said.

Regarding sale of *The Tomorrow Man* Takacs says, "It has its limitations as far as selling it to the States because there are no American actors and the theme is controversial."

"A lot of networks are very hedgy about what they put on. And if a film is only shown on a Canadian network you don't make your money back," said Takacs.

To discuss the financial and legal aspects of filmmaking Takacs meets regularly with members of CAMPP, the Canadian Association of Motion Picture Producers.

Through his experience Takacs has formulated a view of the problems in the industry. "I think that there's sort of an amateurism in the industry, it smells of small time. Even when they're talking big bucks, they haven't really been involved in any giant or money making films. They don't really have that kind of experience so I don't really think they have the capability to make any real artistic judgements which a producer often has to make."

Investors are gaining more and more control over the artistic end of filmmaking says Takacs. "A couple of years ago it was the director who was in control, now it's the producer, and now it's even shifting more to the brokerage houses and the security commission."



Tom Weston (Stephen Markle) ponders his fate as an 8 foot goon steals the limelight in *The Tomorrow Man*, one of many low budget beauties being born in Canada's burgeoning film boom.

"The projects have to be geared to the man in the street...the investor whose film expertise is almost negligible. The people who

invest, such as dentists and doctors, are not real moviegoers. You have to gear the packages towards these kinds of people," said Takacs.

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