



Blood, horror and boobs

by Michael Douglas

On television in Los Angeles that second week of March you could watch the neighborhood houses flying down the street. Downtown, a tornado nearly went unnoticed among the widespread damages from the wildest winter storms in 20 years.

Landslides closed the highway, hundreds of families up and down the California coast were left homeless as torrential rains swept over the sandbars and washed beach-front into the Pacific.

The rain pounded on the windshield of my rented Chev as it surged through a great pond that spread across the busy highway. On the car radio, a news flash blended with the commercials—a young policeman had shot and killed a five-year-old boy presuming he was armed, and the Queen had moved her tour north to Reagan's ranch.

Turning off the Hollywood freeway onto Vine Street, I aimed for the searchlights over the Hollywood Palace. Though the legendary theatre has become a fashion-plate disco for disinterested teenagers, tonight for a few hours it would host the opening party for the third annual American Film Market.

After drinks and hors d'oeuvres, the buses appeared at nine to take the buyers back to the hotel. Big day tomorrow.

The foreign buyers had arrived to purchase the rights to distribute hundreds of English-language movies in theatres, on television or through home video, in any one of the 60 countries they represented.

Here is one slightly adulterated sales story:

After working for years distributing films for a Hollywood major, "Max" was on the MIFED to Cannes road when he met a writer-director with a script. It was a variant on the wolf-man story in an isolated fishing village. Max put up \$45,000 as his half of the production and they shot it in English on a Greek island in 35 mm. The various distributors would provide subtitles. The film presented lots of blood and guts. It didn't have

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sufficient quality to play theatrically in North America, perhaps some drive-ins, but it sold as high action in other markets.

For the video rights in England, \$30,000. Video and theatrical in France, \$24,000. U.S. and Canada television, \$140,000 minimum guarantee plus 25% on the overage.

Philippines, \$15,000. Singapore-Malaysia, \$6,000. India, \$12,000. Iceland, \$2,000. Belgium-Luxemburg, \$1,500. Holland, \$2,000. Spain, \$22,000. Ecuador-Columbia, \$2,500.

Produced in 1980, the picture is still selling. Max retired for a year on the singles-bar circuit and then returned to the distribution game he originally enjoyed. Production had too many hassles, he said.

The American Film Market is a must. Launching the sales pattern there will get the production off to an equal or better start with the rest of the new year's output and set up sales activity for MIFED and Cannes. The AFM provides a very business-like environment. Six floors of hotel suites are turned into office reception areas with adjoining screening/deals room. The suites are generally lined with a variety of colorful posters for pictures the agent represents. One agent might represent one movie or five or 200.

Admittance to these floors is tightly restricted. Only buyers and invited guests are permitted. Sales agents screen trailers, excerpts and completed films on 3/4" cassettes. The screenings are complemented by information sheets with 8-1/2 x 11 inch color posters with cast, crew and synopsis on the reverse side.

For ten days the buyers and sellers take a bus for half a mile to the sprawling Beverley Centre to the 14-screen Cineplex. Every two hours from 9 to 5, screenings begin on all fourteen screens, over 300 films for sale. The screenings prompt hope and despair.

The veteran distributor stands by the door to the empty theatre with his promotional material. No one enters. The buyers, chattering in their varied languages, pass by and enter the next group of screening rooms. The distributor shakes his head. His movie begins, "They can just smell it—a good film or a dog," he says to no one in particular. The hall is empty again.

After the screenings, the hotel elevators, hallways, bars and rooms buzz with business. What would the minimum guarantee be? Would the first payment be the only payment? Could the buyer do as well in all media as claimed? What would the currency be worth in six months or two years? What other films were they bidding on? What would the majors have as competition?

The AFM is primarily for the little guys, the independents. There are some exceptions: Orion, Embassy, PSO, Jensen-Farley, Cannon...

You never know what kind of ancillaries your movie might open up for you. Arista was at the market, promoting their new video games, based on the popular movies *Halloween* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. In the former, the baby-sitter must keep the madman from killing the babies and in 'T.C.M.' you battle to keep your family from being cut in half, complete with electronic blood. From 9 a.m. till 5:30 every day, two young idiots sit and demonstrate these games. The titles available can be depressing; 'Blood-Sucking Freaks', 'Blood Tide', 'Funeral Home', 'Mausoleum', 'Screwballs' and 'Joystick'. These titles represent three of the more popular elements available—blood, horror and boobs or the mix.

There are also big classy movies promoted here, like *The Far Pavilions* and *Gorky Park*. But what seems most striking is the passion for gore; as when one buyer turns to another and says "great shot" after a flying finger hits the floor in a trailer.

One of the most original trailers or promotional films came from Rob Reiner, pictured busily editing his new rock 'n roll movie *Spinal Tap*. The film isn't ready. So his 'promo' incredibly takes us to Denmark for a 10-minute documentary on making cheese.

There are dozens of Canadian movies available here. One of the busiest and perhaps best distributors handling Canadian pictures is Manson International who are representing *Spring Fever*, *Utilities*, *The Funny Farm*, *Siege* and Garth Drabinsky's new American film *Losing It*. (Paul Donovan's *Siege*, a taut thriller set in Halifax during a police strike did well at Manila and would do well here.) *The Columbia Connection*, a Canadian film produced on

the west coast, would do well for its gutsy director-producer Len Kowalewich. At AFM, Sandy Howard, an experienced producer, had been impressed by the look of the film related to its budget and wanted to get into a deal with Len for a new movie.

At the north end of the sixth-floor hallway, a proud cardboard Mountie stands guard at the doorway to the CFDC suite. Inside, Anne Brown, Karen Lawrence and Lorraine B. Good acted as liaison people, screening films without sales agents to prospective buyers and helping to connect them with the Canadian producers. Jack Darcus of Vancouver came with his film *Deserters*, fresh from a deal with First Choice. He was looking forward to initiating foreign sales. One of the most quixotic figures was Montreal director Rafal Zielinsky. He pleasantly hustled his proposed TV series while chatting up the two films he directed, *Babe* and *Screwballs*.

One of the most gung-ho buyers to exit the CFDC suite was Bob Curtis of AIP Video. He had purchased *Scoring*, *Slipstream* and *This Time Forever*, *Coming Out Alive* from the CBC. It would do well for them on American cable, he smiled. (The star of *Coming Out Alive* was Helen Shaver, co-star of Ron Cohen's *Harry Tracy*).

At the Cat and Fiddle Pub on Laurel Canyon Boulevard, Helen Shaver sat in the chair vacated moments before by Beverly D'Angelo, and ordered a beer for her handsome friend and waited, as performers must do so much of their lives. Earlier that day, the waiting and working had paid off for another Canadian actress living in L.A. Lisa Langlois had shot her first scene as the female lead in a Paramount comedy entitled *Under Pressure*.

Outside the pub, a Marilyn Munroe look-alike steps out of her car and pulls her tee-shirt down. It reads Hollywood Reporter. A young man follows her down the hill as Neil Diamond drives by in his Rolls, singing to himself.

Later that night, on a shuttlebus chugging up a Hollywood hill, the bus comes to a stop and a red-headed woman with turquoise eyes steps on board and a man follows, probably a nice guy but he's hard to remember. The woman is actress Tanya Roberts (*Beastmaster* and "Charlie's Angels"). The man, her hus-

band, is a writer. The blond, playboy leader of our mini-bus tour to the hillside party is a hustling producer with a script he wants Tanya to read. "She is worth a million now", her husband smiles. "Ah, a husband-manager, I've dealt with you before." The young producer turns to Tanya. "Have you read the script? I know you just got it yesterday." Tanya: "No, not yet, I have a couple of other projects I have to read first." The producer: "Well, there's not a whole lot of money, as you know, but this is a movie for you; it's got definite Academy Award potential." Tanya: "Well, I will read it."

On the hillside in the roomy, pink villa, everyone chats to each other for 15 or 20 seconds. In the wet and crowded kitchen, a creative director (script reader) asks the young guy opposite to guess how old she is. He smiles, he can't guess. "80", she laughs out loud. He shrugs, "Well I'd still take a run at you." She smirks back, "That's the point, isn't it?" Their 20 seconds are up. As Robert Culp dashes through for a glass of wine, he appears larger than on screen, but no less intense.

After the party breaks up, an odd group of new friends appear to pour down the hillside to Sunset Boulevard. They have a chance to read their invitations. A producer has met an actress at the market and 48 hours later, they are engaged and he is passing out printed invitations at the party to departing guests. Apparently his engagement will commemorate both this odd couple and the date on which the first film produced in Hollywood was begun.

The five friends reach Sunset Blvd. and load into my car. Our guide would be Jonathan Barnett, a freelance writer. Sitting in the front seat is Stefan, the Swedish video-buyer who offers me \$10,000 for video in Sweden of anything I produce based on the way I drive. In the back seat with Jonathan is Linda, a writer from New York and Allen, a suave movie-buyer from Florida. Fortunately they have decided to sober up the driver and find something to eat at the only all-night deli in Hollywood. On the way, Allen muses over his recent deal to buy *Superman III* for \$35 million from the Salkinds. He and his consortium would sell the rights to a major distributor and go into profit at the \$79 million dollar mark. Later in the week he would buy three more movies. Right now he couldn't understand how four men had ended up with one woman after a Hollywood party. Linda smiled politely. She knew why. She just wished he'd stop talking about it.

Daytime. Many of the buyers were gone. In the bar a few deals and a lot of bullshitting about the business was in progress.

Two new buddies around the piano had discovered their exhausting common knowledge of movie trivia.

"Who were all the Tarzans?"

They both know and rhyme them off.

"Who were the Magnificent Seven?"

"If I tell you, Brad Dexter, will you give me the rest?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. I got a great Brad Dexter story for you...", Steve Sloane continues. Steve distributes karate films. He owned a couple of boxers for a while but you can't talk to them so he's looking for an off-Broadway play to produce. "Just ego", he shrugs.

"Are you going to the party?" the other trivia expert asks.

Patrick White acts and recently directed *Slapstick*, the latest Jerry Lewis picture (there's a rumour that Lewis' heart



attack occurred during a screening. Patrick would wait to see how *Slapstick* went and do some days as the gardener on *Dynasty*.

Later that night in Culver City, just down the road from MGM, Bruce Laird Studios hosted the AFM's windup party. Visitors enter through a 747 mockup past the celebrity look-a-like into the two giant sound stages made over into international restaurant areas; at the far end a huge dance floor and orchestra.

These were once the Selznick Studios, and this was the home of Scarlett O'Hara. Those magnificent sunsets over Tara were shot from the roof with fences mounted to mask the offending skyline in the days before smog drained the colour out. Since *Gone With the Wind*, the dreams have changed.

Over 2,000 guests mill about the restaurants and bars, many in tuxedos. There are not ten black people in sight.

When this fact is mentioned, an L.A. producer laughs and resumes his half-hearted interest in the ass-kissers that flank him.

"Can I get you some more dessert?", one asks, concerned.

Suddenly, I was tired of all the people who looked you in the eye and lied to you; these comfortable people who don't give a shit.

Steve Sloane grabs my arm and takes me for a walk.

"Listen, preacher," he starts, "don't



worry about the sharks. Sharks have to eat. They're hungry. You show them how they can eat and they can be your sharks."

Next day the veteran gypsies in the show-bizz caravan rolled up their advertising and moved on. They'd renew acquaintances in Italy or France later

this spring at or Cannes or MIFED. After screening so many films, meeting lots of people, the good ones shine through clearly, and so do the scripts. Me, I'd return to a desk in Edmonton to work on a script I hoped would back-bone a film to be sold, yeah, at the next market.