

A glimpse of hope

**George Chapman,
IATSE 891,
and the future of B.C.
film production**

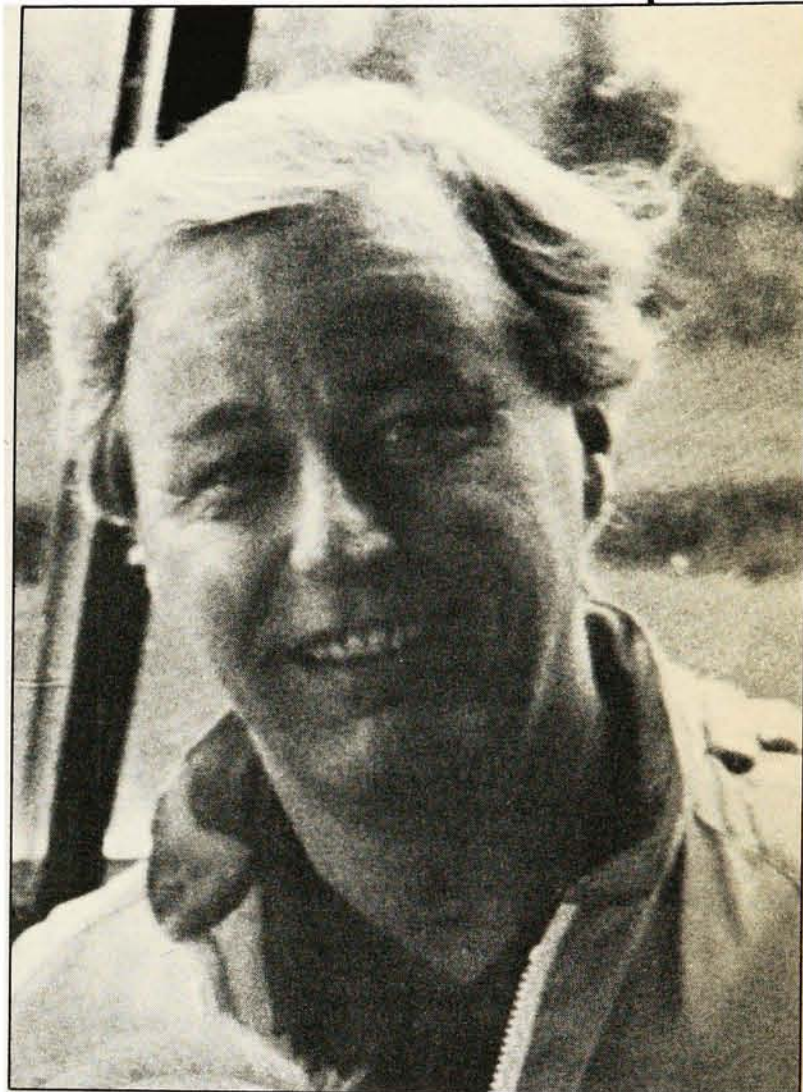


photo: L. Christopher Helcermanas-Bengo

by Eric Green

Cinema is the only new art form generated in this century. And the film industry struggles with artistic dreams of heroism and anti-heroism that films heighten and intensify, when their poetics are right on. Thanks to the democratic traditions of the 100 years since Ibsen made it clear ordinary folk also could be tragic, film writers have poked their imaginations into the contemporary world's obscure, dark corners looking for real tragedy or real comedy.

With the emergence of mass society and the information age, we have developed the corresponding institutions to work for us: joint-stock corporations whose stockholders are mass investors; churches representing large groups; educational institutions to teach *en masse*, and layers of agencies representing every group imaginable, from veterans of world wars to batik artists and potters.

Among those institutions, unions

have written themselves a major role in the history of this century, representing the mass workers who once operated the machines of the Industrial Era, and now increasingly work in knowledge-based service jobs that didn't exist even 30 or 50 years ago.

A scan of the response of the industry to unions reveals the same spectrum of attitudes, from pandering to low taste to attempts to enlighten, that is characteristic of the industry generally. As a form of big business providing 'personnel' for services like a labour-broker, unions themselves no longer show to the world the dramatic face associated with head-busting on the waterfronts of 50 years ago. Like any changing industry, unionism too has its hidden achievers, who understand how the system works, have a carefully developed sense of objectives and goals that can be realistically achieved in limited timeframes, but who also quietly try to knock sense into the system through their dedication to 'a better way.'

If all this sounds somewhat theatrical — it's because it is. But George Chapman, the business representative for Local 891 of IATSE, representing motion-picture studio production technicians, resists being defined that way. Every decision made by the union, he says, is made by the membership who

vote on everything. Still, there are thousands of 'business reps' for unions across Canada's business world. Bad ones, barely competent ones and a handful of great ones. Like it or not, Chapman has the makings of one of the great ones.

The IATSE business office in the Palisades Hotel (West Tower) in Vancouver has become the focal point of the film industry in the west. If you want to know what's happening here, start there. Room 506. You don't have to knock.

George Chapman's briefcase — highly organized — is open. Evident are a Super Natural British Columbia promo badge with the film director's chair predominant. There are temporary Media Club (a hangout for television, radio and other media people in Vancouver) membership cards. A visitor's pass to the 20th Century-Fox lots says he has recently been in L.A. on business. There are contracts: a record number have been signed in B.C. this year worth record amounts (see below and also *Cinema Canada* No. 123). All around the briefcase of the ubiquitous Chapman, on a tidy desk in a cubbyhole in the living-room of the apartment that parades as

an office, are trade magazines, industry guides and so on. It has been a very busy year so far. It continues to be a very busy year.

Besides record general unemployment, B.C. has had another record year: record-clear days and sunshine for months, and now some record rainfall. Chapman has been on a set of *A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend*, an American production starring Bob Hope. "The film was going to be shot in Palm Springs. But we talked to Fox. Even with the rain, we convinced them it could be done here," Chapman says.

George Chapman: born in Victoria, raised in Montreal, came west in 1963, at 21. His first connection with the film industry was a job driving truck on *The Trap*, starring Rita Tushingham and Oliver Reed. "It was just a job. I was hooked." His father was Air Force. Chapman had no 'logical' background leading to the film industry.

"The Panorama Studios were built in the early '60s, and there was that business of B.C. being touted as a *Hollywood North*. There were great proclamations about B.C. 'getting in at the ground floor'," he recalls.

Chapman went into lighting, joined IATSE. The industry did not appear. *Lesson one*: doubt the rhetoric.

Chapman went into the lighting de-

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sign business on a commission basis as a manufacturer's representative. He learned a second very important lesson: how to be a salesman. When your job depends on it, you learn. His job today still depends on it.

He called on architects, designers, and helped install lighting in hotels, nightclubs and offices. In-between projects, he worked on films. He bought a metal fabricating business, and began designing and manufacturing lighting equipment. He kept active in the film industry, working on *Groundstar Conspiracy* (1972), *Journey Into Fear* (1974), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Hey, I'm Alive* (1975), and others.

But the film industry in Canada wasn't alive. "There were about 30 people in the local, all fighting for each job. We'd go a year or more without work."

As Chapman's business changed - it was more profitable, he explains, to make conveyors for the food industry (meat packing, fish processing) and stainless steel fittings for yachts - he became aware of the structural and strategic flaws in Canada's film industry. It simply wasn't living up to its potential. The provincial and federal governments appeared to have no ability to see it 'steady and see it whole' and act accordingly.

The high rhetoric of the 1960s about a great leap forward for Canada's film industry was occurring at the same time as organized labour in Canada was experiencing stronger growth and more vocal support politically than it ever had. New Democrats - formally affiliated with unions, receiving direct funding from them - were in office in three provinces for the first and only time in Canadian history.

But the rhetoric wasn't producing work. IATSE, along with most unions, began to look at the film industry as an industry, to see how it *actually* works, not how it *might* or *even* should work.

IATSE is a fragmented, (decentralized) group of locals, some larger, some smaller. In B.C. five locals (891, the motion picture studio technicians; 667, international photographers, western district; 348, projectionists; 118, the stage crew local; B72, front of house people at theatres) are involved. Across the country there are fraternal relations, but local by local there is competition for work.

George Chapman was asked to act as business manager for three months while 891 looked for a full-time business rep. This is no sinecure for whoever does the job. Each year the contract must be voted on.

It was clearly a position where someone who both understood the 'weirdo' film business and had the skills of an entrepreneur might have a chance to do something positive. Chapman still unabashedly talks like an entrepreneur: "We're selling services."

"I had supplemented my income by working in the film business for a number of years. I felt I owed the local a great deal," says Chapman.

A goal was set for the three-month contract period as 891's business manager spent generating a five-year plan. Custom metal fabricating business was unionized, and he understood how the system works from all sides of the picture.

"The center of it was to create work, as opposed to being among the highest rated, hourly-paid, unemployed technicians in the world," he states.

"I took that experience from the employer's side of the union experience - and my own as an IATSE member - and asked what would tip the scale in favour of production in B.C."

That steady, pragmatic assessment is typical of Chapman, according to those in the industry who deal with him. And sooner or later in the film industry in western Canada, everyone has to.

Employers, of course, wanted reasonable terms, conditions and rates, flexibility, and continuity - that is, no surprises once the deal was struck. This 'dependability-factor' is valuable in itself.

IATSE's members bought the overall concept, and in five years, aided by the depression that has forced the value of the Canadian dollar to record lows relative to the American dollar, business has gone from a few million to this year's estimated \$200 million in gross budget figures. "We estimate that about 40 per-

cents, terms and conditions is a credit to the membership, who were looking at the long-term. Other unions were raising rates and strengthening terms and conditions to match inflation. That left them out in front when the business receded - like a tide," explains Chapman.

Chapman's experience, and the IATSE membership's growing awareness of global transformations in the industry, made them aware they were competing with nations such as Yugoslavia, Spain, Italy. How could they compete if they weren't competitive? Film producers don't especially like to throw money down a hole. In the first place, money's too hard to find.

"We outlived the 'tax scam' era in Canada. In the past three years, we have come from \$Cdn 11 million to nearly \$Cdn 200 million in 1985. We also referred another \$65 million to other jurisdictions," says Chapman.

A second battle was fought to obtain funding from provincial coffers for the Film Promotion Office. Chapman says it is an indispensable promotion tool, and competes now with promotion offices

from \$100-\$500,000. "It means they can direct the money at higher production values, a more saleable product. Which in turn helps them sell their shows," says Chapman. They can hire more expensive talent, build better sets, and so on.

Cooperation and salesmanship: those words come up time and again in an interview in Chapman's cramped cubbyhole. He's no Ed Lawson with his own private Lear jet to sweep him back and forth around the world. But he does get around.

Canadian corporate culture has had a fatal (near fatal?) weakness that it is beginning to address. For decades a world hungry for our raw resources paid a premium for them. Now we're getting the shit kicked out of us in traditional markets, and in some cases lesser-developed nations have supplanted us with cheaper resources. If our managerial weakness has included not knowing our business from the plant-floor up, especially at the operational level, above all, we don't know how to market or sell.

But George knew that. He recognized that 'selling' was the catalyst that kicks open closed plant doors. We want to make films in Canada? *Get out and sell* became the gospel according to IATSE.

The reader will no doubt experience a sense of dislocation, of vague uneasiness at the way Chapman talks. Where's the discussion of film as art, of cultural independence issues, of the essential role of government funding?

Ironically, B.C. has become Hollywood North in the past few years. Chapman admits the bubble could burst.

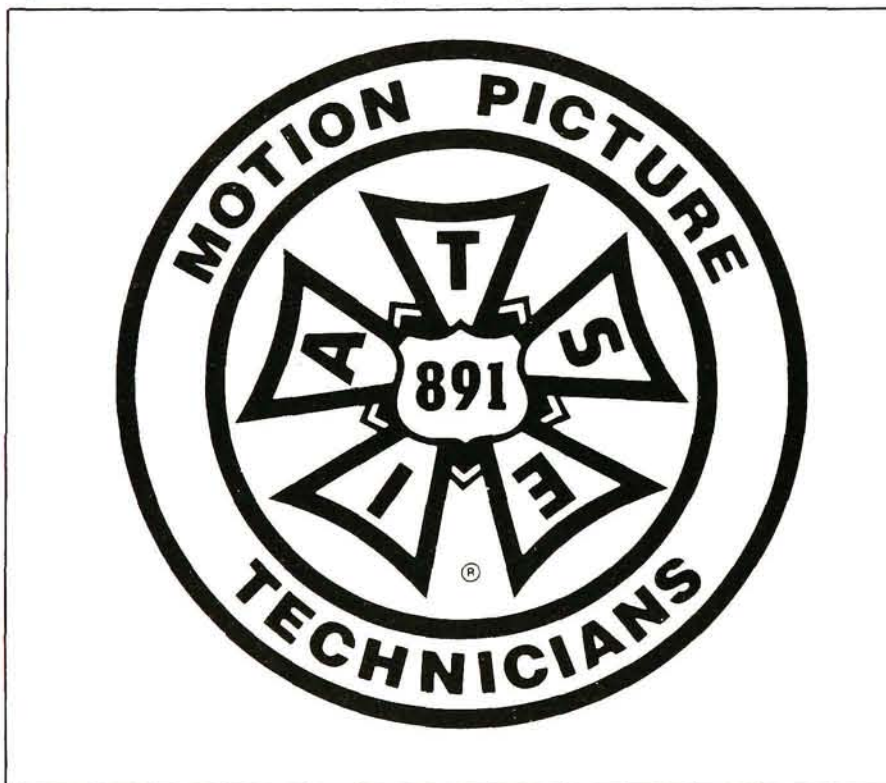
Top advice from economists, accounting firms and political analysts tell the union that it will be quite a number of years before the currency differential changes. In broad trend, our economy is still sliding in value against the strong American economy, they believe.

"We're selling hard. Once the contract is signed with a producer, I leave the administration to other staff. My job is - *promotion*," says Chapman. The rule is that producers go where the talent is. The talent pool is in Canada, and the price is right. So another major piece of the equation finds George Chapman at almost every major industry event on the continent. What is a union man doing here? many people ask.

Within the limited resources of time and people, on behalf of IATSE, George is connecting people to people informally. Do you know so-and-so?, he asks a producer. Have you met such-and-such? he asks a director. And so on. And he has been doing this relentlessly for five years.

At those industry events Chapman attends are producers. Chapman cites a number of cases where salesmanship got B.C. crews all or part of films that would have been done elsewhere *but for the selling*. This is the era of a new consciousness about the bottom line, remember.

Back in 1980, part of the five-year plan Chapman generated included an IATSE film. Let's call it *The Making of an Industry*. (*Hollywood North* wouldn't work as a title because no film has an indefinite shooting schedule: sooner or later, all productions end.)



cent of gross budgets are cash spent in B.C.," says Chapman.

Chapman and other IATSE members gleefully point out that applying the usual multiplier, this means the feature and television film business in B.C. has become a \$300 million industry. They don't compare it to the value of the fishing industry yet, but they will soon - and they'll find it is more valuable. And, they say, it's all non-polluting, doesn't deplete resources, and doesn't require massive infusions of public capital.

Chapman was subsequently elected business representative and each year has been re-elected. He has survived five votes so far and appears set for a few more.

He works under a personal services contract through his own company, and is paid a percentage of the value of the business that flows through IATSE members, most of whom also operate their own companies. Yes, it's been a lucrative year for George Chapman.

Hourly wages for the membership in the past two years have only been increased by a modest \$2.00.

"The vote for the new policy for

in U.S. states and even cities with much larger budgets and many more staff. The FPO started with a single employee, went to three, then back to one and now is back to three.

But, says Chapman, senior governments still are not getting the message. "We're still just a bunch of filmmakers, not an industry."

To explain the perspective of his union members, Chapman says bluntly "We're all entrepreneurs." Seventy percent of his local's members are 'dependant contractors' under B.C.'s labour code. All businessmen. They're certainly 'businesslike' in the new approach.

So what's going on here? The triumph of the new attitude is demonstrated on the bottom line. Is this Yuppie unionism? The head of MacMillan Bloedel himself couldn't sound more foursquare for individual enterprise. But IATSE is a member in good standing of both the CLC and B.C. Federation of Labour.

Producers do their analysis, Chapman explains, and find that in B.C. their development money goes farther. Not only that, the B.C. rates can save them

The real movie we all want to see, Chapman explains, is the one that comes after *The Making of an Industry*. Let's call that *Making Canadian Feature Films and Television Shows*, because, as Chapman says, we need Canadian financing, Canadian producers, Canadian stories, Canadian films.

George tells the story of a major industry convention he recently attended in San Francisco, where television show producers and distributors were trying to sell their wares to the networks. Smack in the Moscone centre a yacht manufacturer had set up a big yacht. Why there? Why not in a boating trade show? The manufacturer said the show had already resulted in three sales of yachts. "I'm the only game here. In a boating show I'd be one among many."

"When people ask me why a union representative is at these special events, that's the story I'll tell them," Chapman explains.

But as more and more competing jurisdictions learn to play the game of promotion, the law of diminishing returns comes into play. Sooner or later.

Chapman took the writer onto the set of *A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend*. We watch Bob Hope for a fleeting second. The rain has been pouring down for weeks.

IATSE members on the set talk a little about Chapman, who has agreed to participate in a commercial for the B.C. government that describes the industry's successes in recent years. He is delighted; it helps him sell the industry to the government.

Because another major issue looms in

B.C. with the death of Panorama Studios, there will be no major studio facility, no home base for the industry. The movie the B.C. Film Industry Association is trying to have made today is *The Dominion Bridge Story*.

A crown corporation the B.C. Development Corporation, has been charged with assessing the future of the film production industry. Their report, soon to be made public, will determine whether the government helps develop an international class production facility. The big numbers from the industry in 1985 may help tip the scales in favour of the project. Research has clearly demonstrated the project's feasibility, says Chapman, who is a vice-president of BCFIA.

So here's one final scene for George's movie.

Location: Brock House Restaurant, a mock tudor fantasy structure that doubles as a community hall for Vancouver oldsters.

Time: Evening. Early dinner hour.

George Chapman, the main man, enters with U.S. veteran producer Bob Stabler. *A Nice Pleasant Deadly Weekend* is being shot nearby in the ritzy Royal Vancouver Yacht Club. Also along is a cinema magazine writer. Chapman has called Allan Simmons, the director of Wendy Wacko's film *Striker's Mountain* and invited him. He comes later. Tables are not ready, kitchen is not

ready. In a somewhat raffish holding bar the three men are served drinks and talk about Stabler's experience in Canada. Stabler knows the scene well, and makes use of it. Chapman and Stabler discuss mutual business briefly.

Byplay between Chapman and restaurant staff person, an attractive young woman of Asian descent. Where's Bob Hope? she asks. And the conversation turns around a promise of free dinner if he would get Bob Hope into the restaurant. Alas, the old folks didn't want their even tenor on a wet, cold afternoon made uneven. Not even for a glimpse of Hope. Chapman is connecting people to people. Simmons arrives before dinner is served. The restaurant fills up with non-film folk. Conversation ranges through the technical (Simmons leading) to the political, from personalities to issues.

There are no hidden agendas. Chapman is connecting people to people. Stabler makes films. Simmons wants to direct more features. Chapman wants work for IATSE members.

You get the picture?

The film industry in western Canada is going through a period of intense transformation. As welcome as American-generated production is, no one today assumes the stabilizing factor of more Canadian production will be easy to achieve.

Since the federal government has made it clear certain cultural industries

will be "on the table" in trade negotiations with the U.S., an overriding issue now faces Canadian producers: Will film, as a cultural industry, be one of the areas in which government intervention would disappear on both sides and talent would be permitted to move freely between countries?

If so, what would this do to the film industry in Canada? As long as there is a currency differential, it is likely productions would come north, but if part of the deal which is struck includes parity or near parity in currencies, that advantage could disappear and, with it, the current bubble of activity.

A lot of work remains to be done within Canada to get freer trade between east and west. There are prominent people within the industry who have stated publicly that they don't believe the west can ever be a significant production centre without American capital.

George Chapman and other key figures in the industry in B.C. now believe it is likely the provincial government will announce support for a production studio and office complex on the Dominion Bridge site. If so, it will be one more major element in the stabilization plan.

Chapman's "five-year-plan" was his own and, with a positive decision about a major facility, the prospects for sustaining activity will be improved greatly. "Research has shown that B.C. could average about \$70 million in annual production over the next decade," says Chapman.

Here's hoping.

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