

Hot Damn

The B.C. film industry's busting out all over

BY ROBIN BRUNET

It's simply amazing how far your dollar goes in British Columbia. With the current exchange rate, three million dollars in L.A., for example, is worth at least four million here. Just think of the time (or talent or special effects) that could buy you. Mind you, it's not much of a bargain if you have to sacrifice the locations and crews you need.

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Hot damn.

Hot Property
Surrey, North West, Columbia

One of the seductive advertisements designed by the B.C. Film Commission to attract filmmakers to the province. Its wealth of superlatives reflect the advantages of natural resources but ignores the perils of dependence.

Commission. If expanded post-production facilities live up to their own expectations then the gross figures could well double over the next 14 months.

With all this black ink you'd expect an air of universal optimism in the westernmost province. You'd be wrong. There's one statistic that takes a lot of the fun out of adding up the totals: a full 95% of last year's production originated in the United States of America. British Columbia is, more than anything else, a Hollywood backlot. In view of the transitory nature of backlots, the province is thought by many to be in a rather desperate race to build on what has been achieved since the early 1980s when this boom began.

"It's simply amazing how far your dollar goes in British Columbia."

Although B.C. has a long history of filmmaking,

one main reason for the '80s boom is the 30 per cent exchange rate on the Canadian dollar. The other reason is that B.C., by and large, is a fresh location for L.A. producers.

Given these reasons and our pool of talent (eight film crews encompassing 3,500 people as well as three studios and post-production houses), feature projects like *Runaway* and *Iceman* ignited the boom in 1984. But it was the relocation of U.S. TV series such as CBS's *Stir Crazy* to Vancouver that same year which caused revenue figures to skyrocket. And figures are still climbing for the same reason.

"The 1986 gross of \$156 million was on account of 25 features and T.V. shows. Last year the number of projects rose by only two, yet we grossed \$282 million - because eight of the projects were TV series each with 25 episodes," says Dianne Neufeld, director of the B.C. Film Commission.

Budget-conscious L.A. producers show no sign of wearying of B.C., even in the face of IATSE's recent move to offer 30% discounts to U.S. productions budgeted under \$6 million if they stay out of Canada (a direct breadbasket blow to our TV revenue). Says Neufeld, "The day after IATSE announced this we had three surveys for movies of the week, and the

producers I talked to didn't believe it would affect anyone seriously."

We are undoubtedly a jewel of a backlot. But a lot of people are realizing the backlot's limitations.

"We have locations that cover every period"

Curtis Petersen, a second-unit director and producer who commutes between Vancouver and Toronto (director of photography on *After Food of the Gods* in Toronto) is one of the many B.C. professionals who fear that local technicians and entrepreneurs are missing out on the long-term advantages that could be reaped from all this backlot activity.

"With a few exceptions, nobody seems to be reinvesting the money they make in film, be it in their own companies, the purchasing of new equipment, or training raw talent. We must do this in order to be taken seriously as a burgeoning film community. We've practically

"W rap 87", the B.C. film industry's year-end party, was one of the biggest bashes of Vancouver's festive season. Literally thousands of people jammed themselves into a soundstage in order to congratulate each other on a record year. You had to wait ages for a drink, a meal or a bathroom but, hey, so what - we made a bundle!

The final breakdown from the B.C. Motion Picture Association justifies the exuberance. The total value of film and television production in British Columbia last year was \$282.9 million Canadian dollars of which \$152.2 million remained in the province. (Five feature films were budgeted at \$74.5 million - \$33.1 stayed behind; fourteen TV movies came in at \$58.5 million - \$30.3 for B.C.; and, there were nine TV series totalled \$147.2 million with \$82.8 left behind.) It was, in short, an all-time high.

This year, 1988, is forecast to be even bigger. Twice as big according to the B.C. Film



Film on the horizon

Robin Brunet is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.

been handed jobs by the U.S., which is terrific, but a lot of people have come to believe as a result that they have the *right* to work. When the U.S. pulls out of here, it's going to be like the sinking of the Titanic if we don't change our attitude fast."

Petersen's assertion that the Americans will eventually leave B.C. is shared by B.C. film 'veterans' (a veteran in this province is anyone who has survived for approximately 20 years); the reason not being an IATSE-type move or the growing value of the Canadian dollar (though if our dollar ever equals the U.S. dollar, we're in trouble), but the eight TV series in Vancouver rapidly turning their surroundings into a worn-out location, which is exactly what L.A. producers came here to escape four years ago.

"I can see location burnout happening in a few years," says Petersen. "These shows are restricted by budget to shooting in the lower mainland. TV crews are literally all over the place. I don't think we're a big enough community to specialize in one medium successfully, and Vancouver will start to look pretty familiar pretty fast. At least we should be more careful in picking locations, and thinking twice before disrupting residents - another

factor that threatens to make TV shoots unpopular here."

"Once you've tried us, you'll swear by us."

Despite the fears and a slow awakening to our independent potential, B.C. film personnel have realistic hopes for the race towards independence being won. Dianne Neufeld began 1988 by taking steps to develop a more varied future for our talent.

"Last year the Japanese shot 500 TV commercials in the U.S. and three in Canada. We've got an economic development officer marketing in Tokyo right now, and we're aiming for 100 commercial projects this year right off the bat.

"Hong Kong has investment that wants to get out. They have a big location filmmaking market, and although their favourite spot is France, they're currently taking an extensive

look at B.C. We're working hard to establish these Pacific Rim connections, and my feeling is we would have to make very, very foolish errors in order to avoid becoming an international production centre."

The provincial government recently showed its commitment to a potentially indigenous industry by announcing a first round of B.C. Film development loans - loans intended to be a lever to stir private investment. Says Neufeld: "There is definitely money out there, but we need to develop an infrastructure - we need producers to give the money to. And they'll appear if private investment is awakened. Financial institutions indigenous to B.C. have come to us since late '87 asking serious questions about investing in film."

Hot Property

We're a hot property in some ways, a fledgling property in others. So far, it seems we can do

little wrong in the film industry - our crews are professional, some are even ingenious. Cannell is going ahead with the construction of his Tilford Park studio, which will increase the number of fully-functional film studios to four (the others are the Burnaby Studio, the Northstar International Studios, and The Bridge). The possibility that the Enterprise Corporation (formerly the B.C. Development Corp) will unload their property and Vancouver's pride and joy - The Bridge - to the highest bidder doesn't seem to quell the enthusiasm of visiting filmmakers or indigenous investors.

So 1988 finds B.C. on the knife-edge of a massive evolution, and how we're doing on that edge depends on who you ask.

"We used to go on a seven year boom cycle and then endure four years of absolutely nothing," says one local production manager. "But there's never been a boom this big, and if the backlash comes again it'll kill us."

"The film commission was taken out of marketing and put into development last December," says Dianne Neufeld. "It's a definite move by the government to capitalize on our assets: even they are no longer regarding B.C. as a 'boutique location.'"

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