

Washington Filmmakers Look for Solutions at Grassroots

"Right now there are 39 film productions in Vancouver alone. I heard about two crews who were shooting chase scenes on the same road, driving in opposite directions. They rounded the same curve and nearly collided. Fortunately, no one was badly hurt." This story came from Kevin Reidy, a line producer fresh from a Vancouver film shoot and a member of the impressive panel of filmmakers invited to speak at the Washington State Film Symposium 2000 held at On-the-Boards Theater April 1st.

"Canada may be 18% cheaper, but it's getting over-saturated and the unions are full of novices," Reidy continued. "With their seniority system, my crew changes every day. From the standpoint of quality, even the Canadians would like some of the work to stay stateside."

Reidy's testimony pointed up the purpose of the Film Symposium coordinated by Suzy Kellett of the Washington State Film Office. In an effort to address the 'bust' in film production after years of 'boom, Kellett asked filmmakers from the East and West Coasts, including our own backyard, to talk about the decline in Northwest film production, a decline that has directly impacted the nearly 300 screenwriters, technicians, union members, talent and politicians who packed the theater.

The morning panel addressed 'On Location Feature and Television Production - The LA Perspective.' In addition to Reidy, the group included Tom Brodek, Jeffrey Davidson, Donna Smith and Ron Smith. As the panelists spoke, it quickly became clear that the problem is not Washington's alone. States across the country are losing jobs to Canada with its low exchange rates, government subsidies and chameleon-like ability to 'shoot-for' nearly any city in the world.

They agreed that Washington, and Seattle in particular, has an abundance of highly skilled production professionals and acting talent, and is home to one of the best state film commissions in the country, if not the best. So, what is the problem? Money, of course, and a lack of vision by Hollywood studios.

"Part of the problem is the dramatic increase in actors' salaries. It used to be 20/80, with the 20% going above-the-line to pay the talent and 80% going below-the-line to pay for the equipment and the crew," Tom Brodek said. Brodek is 20-year veteran film producer from California who wants to shoot a mini-series in Washington. "Now it's 70/30 the other way around. I hate to ask my grips to take a pay cut in order to keep my movie in the states, but that's what's happening. After they pay the talent, no one can afford to shoot anywhere in the U.S. As an industry, we spent 10-billion dollars last year to make American movies in Canada."

Brodek harkened back to the 1946 federal ruling against Paramount Studios which stripped them of the right to own and distribute through their own theaters. Lawyers and accountants quickly took over the studios and the storytellers and visionaries who created

the industry were phased out. As producers became distanced from their audiences, they relied more and more on bankable stars and predictable plots to sell tickets. The result 50 years later is that the Hollywood brand movie that guarantees an A-list face in a reliable plot, is produced by a rookie executive with a business degree who's afraid he'll lose his job if he bombs with a controversial film like 'American Beauty.' No one is willing to rock the boat and so it's sinking."

Act Two

With reality ringing in their ears, the audience broke for lunch, then reconvened for the afternoon panel on 'Crossing the Bridge - Independent Production.' This panel consisted of William Azaroff, Melanie Backer, Roni Equia, Chris McCune, Meg Richman, Brad Simpson and Ron Wechsler. Kathleen McGinnis from the Seattle International Film Festival staff again moderated the panel and fielded questions from the audience.

While acknowledging that independent filmmaking is laborious at best, the panel encouraged the audience to embrace the independent route and build their own industry and solutions, rather than rely on Hollywood for sustenance.

Washington seems poised to lead the next movie revolution with the flush of local Dot-Com companies distributing short films via video streaming technology. 'This will become the paradigm for film delivery in three to ten years,' Chris McCune of Honkworm.com said. "I suggest you abuse it until it falls on its face or makes you famous."

Other suggestions on how to boot-strap the local film industry included:

- Create a state-wide umbrella organization to unite local factions and serve as a clearinghouse for news, training and lobbying efforts.
- Use this umbrella organization, or form a separate centralized callboard for opportunities and resume posting.
- Convince local producers to shoot locally.
- Tap Dot-Com investors for production dollars.
- Form filmmaking schools to teach budgeting and fundraising along with writing and directing.
- Instigate mentoring within the unions and train technicians before they arrive on set.
- Educate communities and politicians through speaker programs.

Reidy suggested politicians and communities be reeducated about the trickle down economic model and deal aggressively with currency exchange rates and subsidy issues. "Unfortunately, the general feeling among politicians is that 'fat cat' producers don't need subsidies. The truth is not all producers are 'fat cats.' Most of them have mortgages just like you."

"This is a clean industry," Brodek added. "We don't dig holes in the earth and pollute rivers. We rent housing, cars and equipment. We buy food, haircuts and clothes. Money from our
~~~~~

productions trickles down, right down to the cobbler who resoles my gaffer's shoes. We drop millions of dollars into the pockets of local workers, talent and craftspeople, then leave without a trace."

Brodek is working to convince his backers to shoot his mini-series in Washington. He suggests that states provide existing facilities, already paid for by taxpayers, to use as locations. "We'd fix them up and give them back better, and we'd have hired 100 people to do the work. It's a win-win situation, but it takes lobbying efforts and good communication to help local government understand that."

On the government side, Suzy Kellett invited people to list their resumes with her office and Donna James of the Seattle Film Office announced a new insurance package available to productions in the city for a flat \$50.