

Beginning or end for Canadian films?

By Charles Schreger

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TORONTO — Few people realize that *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Meatballs* are Canadian films — movies made in Canada primarily by Canadians with Canadian money.

There lie both the major asset and the major liability of the Canadian film industry, now experiencing the biggest boom in its short history.

Those films look like Hollywood productions. They look as if they were produced in the United States. They were distributed by U.S. companies. The actors speak English and the action appears to take place somewhere in the United States.

Because of that, the films had big box-office potential. Like it or not, the key to commercial success for movies is the U.S. market. Almost without exception, if you can score in the United States, you've got a chance around the world.

And so, Canadians today are making movies for the most part disguised as Hollywood product.

Regardless of quality, most of the 50 movies being produced this year in Canada will at least look as if they were made in the United States. The movies will try to fool audiences by looking "American."

This leads to the question, and it was one asked over and over again at the recently completed Trade Forum at the Toronto Festival of Festivals: What is a Canadian film?

"I believe a Canadian film is only a Canadian film if it is written by a Canadian," said Michael Spencer, former executive director of the Canadian Film Development Corp.

"A Canadian film is one that has its birth here," commented Norman Jewison, the director who left his native Canada 19 years ago, has never worked in his country but insists that his films are "Canadian."

Specific answer

The Canadian government, which is encouraging the burgeoning film industry through tax laws and direct support, also has a specific answer.

It says that a Canadian film is one produced by a Canadian using mostly Canadians (and the government defines "mostly" with an established formula) and one in which 75 percent of the picture's budget was spent in Canada.

Still, most of those who tried to grapple with the question of defining a Canadian film were more tentative. Although it was unclear precisely what he meant, director Robin Spry's definition was acceptable to many: "A Canadian film is one whose *dominant sensibility* is Canadian."

All of this may seem academic, but it's of importance to the Canadians who are attempting to develop an industry and foster a culture.

The pioneers of the Canadian industry are concerned — maybe obsessed — with developing a distinctly Canadian cinema.

But they want a Canadian cinema that is highly commercial like the U.S. cinema.

Speaking at a session on foreign sales, Bill Immer-

man, an independent American producer and former studio executive, referred to "the North American film," meaning movies from both Canada and the United States.

It had a nice ring to the Canadians in the audience.

The game plan in Canada now is to develop the industry and hope that some art emerges out of the volume.

Canada's Bergman or Bunuel have yet to surface.

Hollywood cold shoulder

At the same time, while Canada has developed talent through training at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the National Film Board of Canada, people such as Arthur Hiller, Jewison and Ted Kotcheff, the new boom has yet to produce film makers who are being sought by Hollywood.

When the studios begin to woo the new breed and Canada then has to deal with another problem — how to keep its talent within its borders — it will indicate that the industry has matured.

The feeling at the Trade Forum, which essentially was about commerce not art, was that Canada needs an artistic success; that something of lasting value must emerge out of the activity to give the industry credibility.

Also, it is important that those investing in Canadian

films — in 1979 the total investment in Canadian pictures is expected to hit \$150 million — begin to see profits.

About 20 films have been financed publicly in Canada through stock offerings. The Canadian public is investing in the industry and doubtless its enthusiasm will wane if some investors don't see returns from these stocks.

The financial returns won't begin to trickle in for another 18 months to two years. Some of the pictures produced during the past year reportedly are having difficulty finding distributors.

Finally, as Michael McCabe, executive director of the Canadian Film Development Corp., asserts, the industry must look beyond tax-shelter financing, which today is the basis for most of the investment.

"We must be looking forward to the day when the tax shelters are removed," he said. "If we can't make pictures without that artificial aid, we shouldn't have the business."

At the moment, Canada needs the artificial aid and the government is willing to lend it to start up an industry. If the industry flourishes, it can have a real impact on the Canadian economy.

In a few years, after some of the films are released, history will tell whether the boom of 1979 was the beginning or the end of the Canadian film industry.