

# There's no easy way to get films to the people

When Canadian film people get together in Montreal on October 8 for the annual Canadian Film Awards, you can bet your last Martini olive that one of the hot topics will be distribution.

And right in the thick of those conversations will be one man who has done his fair share to get Canadian films distributed here and abroad. And he is not likely to be too charitable with those (like myself) who make sweeping generalizations about "those damn distributors."

The man is John Dunning of Cinepix. And some of the facts and figures he will undoubtedly trot out will curl the long hair of the film-makers and their supporters, who are as certain as I was — before Dunning and I had a long talk last week — that much of the blame for Canadian films' poor showing lies with the distributors.

"It's almost impossible for a film with a half-million dollar budget to make its money back in Canada alone," Dunning said.

"In order for \$500,000 costs to be recouped the film must gross \$3 million. That means that two million Canadians must be informed enough and interested enough to shell out the cash to see the film.

"Well, I don't know when a film has had those kinds of figures in Canada — no matter what its origins."

## EXPERIENCE

Dunning, who last year handled almost every acclaimed Canadian feature in both French and English, is speaking from plenty of practical experience.

For example, two of last year's most critically successful English-language films were *The Rowdyman* and *Wedding in White*, and Dunning distributed them both.

"We got eight weeks in both Toronto and Montreal with *Wedding in White*, and comparable runs in Ottawa and Vancouver. But the film still lost money. It's not the kind of film which is going to go down well in small towns, even though we got it into plenty of smaller places. So it must make its money in the big centres and this one just didn't.

"Don't ask me why because if I knew I'd be a lot richer than I am. I mean, it got into New York and picked up good reviews from most of the papers, including *The New York Times*, and it still only lasted two weeks. And if you don't hack it in New York you can almost write off the rest of the states, except the West Coast."

But Dunning and his cohorts don't give up easily. They've now decided to run *The Rowdyman* and *Wedding in White* on a double bill, to be released across the country this autumn.

## SUCCESSFUL

It is this kind of angle-searching which has made Cinepix one of the country's most successful distributors, and at the same time made a believer in Canadian films out of Dunning.

The bulk of Cinepix's money has come from their successful skin flick trade, but the handling of "serious" Canadian films is by no means done as a kind of condescending gesture of noblesse oblige.

Dunning takes on his Canadian films in the hope that he will not only make money

## Dave Billington



himself, but get as much back on the films for the production people as he can.

"I think that one of the problems lies in the fact that many Canadian film-makers expect too much from Canadian distribution. If a film has a specifically Canadian slant it probably won't have too much universal appeal. Films like that should have smaller budgets, certainly not more than \$250,000.

"That's the way they do it in Denmark. When they make a film which they know will have mostly local appeal they make them for about \$150,000. Then, when they make films for export they budget them in the half-million area because they know their chances of full recovery are pretty good."

## MARKET

Dunning knows his international market. He's placed skin flicks in 38 countries, so he knows what the houses want in most of the world's cinema-buying areas. This experience has sharpened his approach to a property, because there's nothing like losing money to teach you a lesson.

For example, one of last year's better Quebecois films was *Le temps d'une chasse*, which Dunning undertook to distribute. It died a humiliating death at the box office.

"It was a good film which had a lot to say to women," he said. "But the title killed it. People thought it was a hunting picture and there's no way you can get women to go out and watch a hunting picture.

"We tried to skate around it, but even the film was against us because almost every still we could get had a picture of somebody either wearing a hunting hat or carrying a gun. Yet when we passed out cards at sample screenings, most of the women who filled in the cards said they liked it. So we lost out."

## PROBLEMS

Dunning does not avoid the fact that there are problems with distribution and he does not claim that everybody, including himself, is doing all he can. What he rightly claims is that, within the context of the film world, he and most of his colleagues are doing a great deal more than they are often given credit for.

"It's getting a lot easier to sell Canadian films," he said, pointing with justifiable pride to films which are already doing well at the box office, films like *U-Turn* and *The Pyx*.

"Five years ago theatre-owners would run and hide at the very thought of a Canadian film. Now they can be sold. We get better theatres all the time, but we've still got a long way to go."

It will be interesting to listen in to some of those between-film discussions which will take place during awards week, especially if and when John Dunning is involved.