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EDITORIAL OFFICE

Phone: 416-944-1096; Fax: 416-465-4356

Email: takeone@interlog.com

www.takeonemagazine.ca

ADVERTISING SALES

Nardina Grande

Phone: 416-289-7123; Fax: 416-289-7375

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FROM THE EDITOR

Runaway productions, like Hollywood North, has a nice ring to it. And like Hollywood North, it's a meaningless expression, an easy, media-friendly hook to pull focus away from the realities of 21-century moviemaking. Film production, like all big business, has gone global. There is no more Hollywood North, than there is Hollywood West, East or South. Anyway, Hollywood has always been a state of mind, and the production of American film and television product takes place anywhere and everywhere in the world today.

In January, the Canadian Conference of the Arts organized a visit for seven media journalists (including myself) to Los Angeles for a cultural exchange that included meetings with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and an ad hoc group calling itself the Film and Television Action Committee (FTAC). Runaway productions are all the rage in L.A. and a hot-button issue. Brent Swift – an out-of-work production designer who now acts as a full-time spokesperson for FTAC – met with us over breakfast at the Universal Hilton. His group is so incensed by the tax credits handed out by the Canadian government – which he figures to be in the range of 20-to-40 per cent of the production budget from both the feds and provinces – that FTAC, the Screen Actors Guild and other unions petitioned the U.S. Commerce Department in December 2001 to levy punitive tariff duties on American films shot in Canada. Unfortunately for Swift and the FTAC, with the post-September 11th global war on terrorism and the Enron scandal swirling around Washington, occupying the time and energy of every existing government standing committee, the petition failed to catch any legislator's serious attention.

Jack Valenti, the powerful 80-year-old chairman of the MPAA, opposes any legislation that restricts the right of its members to shoot wherever they want. "I support the right of a producer to film his production in whatever locale he chooses," he told a meeting of the Canadian Film and Television Production Association in Ottawa in February. This is hugely ironic coming from a lobbyist – the best in Washington, according to *Time* magazine – who has spent his many years with the MPAA maintaining Hollywood's iron grip on distribution and exhibition revenues in Canada. He has rightly been seen as a major obstacle to the creation of a Canadian market for indigenous Canadian films. However, Valenti, and the organization he represents, has no objection to tax incentives for producers and studios, whoever provides them, whether it be Canada, Mexico, Australia, Ireland, the Czech Republic, or Texas, South Carolina or any other "right-to-work" state of the union.

The fact is, the American film and television unions, especially in New York and California, have priced themselves out of the market. *Variety* recently ran a cover story on "H'Wood's Runaway Train" that claimed an assistant director in Canada, for example, makes \$2,930 a week, whereas his counterpart in the United States makes \$3,300 for studio time and \$4,600 on location, and that's in American dollars. The Canadian government's incentives, where producers are eligible for an average rebate of \$2.5 million per movie, coupled with the lower dollar and cheaper labour costs, have recently tipped the playing field in favour of Canada. Producers of a film can save 10 to 15 per cent of their budget by filming in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto or especially Vancouver, where a lot of American television is shot these days. Unions making too few concessions and rigid application of regulations and overtime rules in Los Angeles are a big part of what's chasing film production elsewhere. American features shot in Canada more than doubled in the past year, while features shot in L.A. fell by 11 per cent, resulting in 30,000 lost jobs. Brent Swift estimates that 85 per cent of all American cable television movies are now shot in Canada.

Is this another case of Blame Canada Syndrome? For 75 years the American production/distribution majors – Warner Bros., MGM, Universal, etc. – in collusion with Canadian-managed-but-American-owned exhibitors, have dominated film distribution and exhibition in this country, and the MPAA has actively worked against the growth of a Canadian film industry in the past either by monopolistic business practices or such policies as the infamous Canadian Cooperation Project of 1948. Now it's lobbying in favour of more American film and television production in Canada. How the world turns. Are the writers of *South Park* coming up with this script?

W. P. Wise