

# TAKE ONE

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## FROM THE EDITOR

There has been a lot of talk and print lately about Telefilm's renewed initiative to aggressively promote Canadian film product at home and abroad. Coupled with the minister's, the Right Honourable Sheila Copps, dictum that English-Canadian features films shall henceforth occupy no less than five per cent of the screen time in Canada within five years, the announcements bespeak of a joint strategy that is bound to fail by trying to achieve too much.

When Copps announced the ministry's target at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 2000, it appeared, at least, to this observer, that the bar had risen too high and expectations were inflated. The most reliable figure to date with regard to Canadian percentage at the box office is nine per cent in Quebec and two per cent in the rest of Canada (and this only applies to major English-Canadian markets such as Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver). The realities are such that it will be a real struggle for English-Canadian penetration to reach three per cent. What the minister has not learnt from a quick study of Canadian film history is that English-Canadian films represented less than one per cent of screen time in 1924. It has risen to two per cent in 78 years. Do the math.

While this might seem unduly pessimistic, what the minister is proposing is a *Men with Brooms*-type of box-office success at the minimum every six months. Now this happens in Quebec all the time. Witness the recent Golden Reel Award winners from that province: *The Art of War*, *Les Nuit des noces*, *Les Boys*, *Les Boys II*, *La Florida*, etc. The likelihood of English Canada turning out another comedy that is a genuine box-office success is once every 10 years. Before *Men with Brooms*, it was Yves Simoneau's *Perfectly Normal*, which was released in 1990.

On the upside, more promotional dollars for Telefilm is a good idea, and long overdue. It's been some time since the free-spending, heyday of tax-shelter films in the late 1970s and early 1980s that Telefilm has made such a serious effort tackling major international markets. However, this time it's a little different and Telefilm has entered into arrangements with private-sector partners, such as the Canadian Film and Television Producers Association, to represent Canadian film and television abroad.

On the downside, with such an unrealistic target of five per cent of screen time in the rest of Canada doomed to failure, once again there will be a gnashing of teeth and wailing about the poor state of Canadian feature-film production. No star system. Not enough promotion. And no action on the core problem—that of a Canadian film-distribution business dominated and owned by American multinationals with an endless supply of American product. Our borders are wide open to a flood of American films with big American stars—many of them Canadian-born—and big American promotional dollars. A modestly budgeted homegrown feature doesn't stand a chance. It's survival of the biggest and loudest.

However, I wouldn't want you, dear reader, to feel yours truly is entirely pessimistic. In 1971, when I first started to write about Canadian film, there were four Canadian films released in Toronto that year: Harvey Hart's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, Sylvia Spring's *Madeleine Is...*, Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* and Don Shebib's *Rip-Off*. Last year, there were over 40. Still far too many spend only two weeks at the local art-house theatre, but that's a 10-fold improvement. Maybe someday Canadian features will achieve five per cent screen time, but not in my lifetime.

W. P. Wise