

TAKE ONE

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ADVERTISING SALES

Nardina Grande

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

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EDITORIAL OFFICE

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

Email: takeone@interlog.com

www.takeonemagazine.ca

MAILING/COURIER ADDRESS

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FROM THE EDITOR



Call it the one that got away. In the world of whatifs, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* might have been a Canadian movie. Based on growing up in Winnipeg, set in Chicago and filmed in Toronto, Nia Vardalos's autobiographical one-woman play was staged in Los Angeles where it was fortuitously seen by Tom Hanks's wife, Rita Wilson, who realized its big-screen potential. The modest \$5-million film has earned a head-twirling \$200 million (and growing) at the box office, and it's not yet on video or DVD. It's the most successful independent feature in the history of cinema. Wouldn't it be nice—as Brian Wilson once sang—if *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* had some Canadian money in it. It doesn't, which is a shame.

Speaking of which, Canada Heritage Minister Sheila Copps continues to emphasize the commercial over the cultural to achieve her department's policy objectives to increase the share of domestic box office for homegrown features from its present two per cent in English Canada to five per cent in 2006. In a recent speech in Vancouver, Ms. Copps held up the successful French-Canadian film industry as a model for the rest of Canada and highlighted the need to better market Canadian films. What the minister didn't mention is that there are two film industries in this country, just like there are two official languages. The French-Canadian experience is unique and cannot be duplicated in the rest of Canada. It's Canadian social-cultural history 101. Quebec cultural products have a large, homogenous consumer base to nurture and sustain them, not to mention a very generous dispersal of cultural dollars flowing from Ottawa to Quebec City. Quebec has a star system. It has a history of movies dating back to the 1940s and it has the Gaulish respect for cinema as an art form. Language *does* make a difference. And so do box-office figures. No English-Canadian feature can hope to match the \$6 million each the first two *Les Boys* earned in Quebec alone. *Men with Brooms*, the most successful English-Canadian film of all time at the domestic box office, topped just \$4.5 million in 2002. It would have been more helpful if the minister had set a more modest goal for English-Canadian features. Three or 3.5 per cent might be obtainable in four years outside of Quebec.

On a different note, I would like to mark the moment in time when Michael Hirsh, the last of the three original founding members of Nelvana, resigned from the company he founded with partners Clive Smith and Patrick Loubert in 1971. After 30 years of control over what became one of the most important producers of children's television programming in the world, first Smith then Loubert left after Corus Entertainment bought the company in 2000 for \$500 million. Hirsh was the last to go at the end of 2002.

Corus made news in October 2002 by announcing a \$200-million writedown on Nelvana debt and a sweeping new direction for the company. The emphasis is now on creating brand recognition in marketing and sales—à la *Barney* or *Thomas the Tank Train*—while cutting back television production by 40 per cent. This led to the layoff of dozens of employees, from the executive to the mailroom. Things got so bad that *The Globe and Mail* reported a "handful of bomb threats...phoned in, it's presumed, by disgruntled employees." It is a long way from York University in the 1960s for the Belgium-born Hirsh and his friend Loubert, whom he met at film school. After graduation, they soon joined forces with Smith, a gifted British-born animator, to form a company named after a Canadian comic-book hero. Over the years the three remained close friends during the ups and downs in company fortunes. It's only when Corus made them an offer they couldn't refuse that they parted company as very wealthy men. Take the money and run. It was a great run.

W. P. Wise