



RETURN TO

HOLLYWOOD NORTH

VETERAN PRODUCER PETER O'BRIAN TAKES A TURN BEHIND THE CAMERA

BY JANIGE KAYE

→ THE OFFICES OF PETER O'BRIAN, perhaps one of Canada's best-known film producers, are hidden away in an industrial building behind Yonge Street in midtown Toronto, across a narrow parkette from a set of gentrified new renos. With sandy brick walls and wooden-beamed high ceilings, the interior is late 1970s, early 1980s funky—the kind of space many film companies rented during “the bad old tax-shelter days,” when the industry was wild with the possibilities and shame of the phenomenon known as Hollywood North. O'Brian has chosen a story set in this period for his directorial debut—*Hollywood North*, a multi-layered satire about producing a tax-shelter movie that had its debut Canadian screening at the Toronto International Film Festival's Perspective Canada.

From 1977 to 1981, the Canadian Film Development Corporation (now Telefilm Canada) made millions of dollars available to produce big-budget movies intended to compete in the North American market. Most often set in U.S. locales, with second-rate American stars, Canadian expatriates, Canadian crews and supporting casts, they featured genres unfamiliar to the Canadian cinematic lexicon: sex comedies, political thrillers, disaster and horror movies. Industry stories abounded of producers scandalously skimming “off the top.” The movies mostly flopped, many never seeing the light of day; Canada was in drag, masquerading as the United States.

Like many others, O'Brian considers the 100 per cent capital cost allowance tax write-off “ill-fated and ill-considered.” He set out “deliberately” to make two pictures in that system. “I thought, ‘I've gotta use this money before it's too late,’” he remembers. “For me, the money was to create our own identifiable cinema but we didn't. There was a real opportunity and it was blown.” O'Brian wisely balances his criticism of the tax-shelter era by generously granting “that the bureaucrats did their best.” The fever pitch of 1979 saw 47 features made, compared to 23 the year before and only eight in 1968. TSE would be a fitting acronym for the tax-shelter era, since the Toronto Stock Exchange [editor's note: now the TSX] and the investment sector considerably influenced the tax-shelter films, many of which were financed with

public offerings through unit sales. O'Brian's best-known TSE films were (using production rather than release dates) *The Grey Fox* (d. Phillip Borsos, 1980)—still on most critics' Canadian Top Ten list—and *My American Cousin* (d. Sandy Wilson, 1984). He also has produced *Me* (d. John Palmer, 1974, co-produced with Christopher Dalton), *Love at First Sight* (d. Rex Bromfield, 1975), *Outrageous!* (d. Richard Benner, on which he was associate producer, 1977), *Blood & Guts* (d. Paul Lynch, 1977), *Fast Company* (d. David Cronenberg, 1978), *One Magic Christmas* (d. Phillip Borsos, 1985), *John and the Missus* (d. Gordon Pinsent, 1985), *Milk and Honey* (d. Glen Salzman and Rebecca Yates, 1987) and *Far from Home: The Adventures of Yellow Dog* (d. Phillip Borsos, 1994).

His first movie as a solo producer, *Love at First Sight*, starring a young Dan Aykroyd as its blind hero, remains not only better than most Canadian movies but also significantly underrated. It's a blind spot in the history of Canadian film—omitted from serious academic and journalistic discussion—like the TSE itself. In *Hollywood North*, Bobby, the hapless Canadian lawyer turned producer (played by American Matthew Modine), deals with his blind spot this way: "I've learned to turn off the shame and guilt parts of my brain," he says. Although the TSE illustrates the case of an industry and a government suffering not only blindness but also temporary insanity, without its attempts to carve out a space for Canadian film in world cinema there might not be a Canadian film industry at all, or a Peter O'Brian.

What could be more Canadian than a movie from a Canadian novel about a repressed young P.E.I. schoolteacher, starring a psychotic has-been American star (played with extreme gusto by Brit Alan Bates) who rewrites the novel as a political thriller about the U.S. ambassador in Colombia? Suddenly *Lantern Moon* becomes *Flight to Bogota*. "For industry insiders, there will be some guesswork about who the characters are based on," acknowledges O'Brian, who came up with the *Hollywood North* concept. Screenwriters Tony Johnston, long-time O'Brian collaborator John Hunter and Barry Healey (all Canadians) collectively contributed to the script. It features John Neville as the lisping, pullover-clad British director who hasn't made a movie in 15 years; Jennifer Tilly as the talentless

American leading lady, all hormones and breathy voice, confiding, "I hate real life"; Kim Coates, luminescent eyes as blue as a Saskatchewan sky, as the egotistical American co-star playing a South American revolutionary; and Alan Thicke as the smarmy investment banker/executive producer who insists on American star power. "Real" Canadian films are represented by a documentary filmmaker (played by Deborah Kara Unger) shooting a "making-of" as well as her own black-and-white feature. "You aimed for Frost, you got Faust," she reprimands Bobby. The films-within-a-film technique required three different aspect ratios used in five different ways—a particular challenge for the entire crew.

I asked O'Brian why he chose to make *Hollywood North*. "It's a celebration and affectionate look at where we've come from," he said. "We are an established cinema, mature enough that we can laugh at ourselves and not be upset. Before it was too precarious, too fragile. The era could have produced all kinds of great things, but we screwed it up, exploited it and destroyed and pillaged and desecrated it. The capital cost allowance was great; it was a great opportunity. It was out of anger and frustration over that loss that I wanted to make *Hollywood North*."

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— Peter O'Brian

Behind O'Brian's plain oaken desk hangs a poster of David Lean's classic *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the first movie he ever saw. Though born in Canada, until the age of 12 he lived in England where his Canadian father served in the Royal Air Force. Back in Toronto he played second guitar in a local rock band, The Whisky Sours. "Some nights we were pretty good," he laughs. "Then in 1966 we had our equipment stolen." O'Brian headed across the border to study communications at Boston's Emerson College where, he reminisces, "Everybody wanted to direct. I was saying, 'So... where do we get the camera?' The other thing that really sealed it for me was *Goin' down the Road*," he says. "I saw we could tell our own stories. That and *Nobody Waved Good-Bye*. They were colossal in my life." In fact, in *Hollywood North* he pays homage to the roots of modern Canadian filmmaking with a lingering shot on an archival still of Don Shebib with his stars on the set of *Goin' down the Road*. "I talked to a lot of people about *Hollywood North* over the years. What every film needs is the passionate



guy in the middle of it. I had to do that to get this film made.”

O'Brian chose another passionate guy as his producer. John Gillespie, who studied law and then film in the United States, says, “Bobby, Matthew Modine’s character, is a dreamer. He just wants to make this book into a movie. Those are his wax wings. He

compromises his better judgment, and that’s the beginning of the end. Once you have that original sin, you can’t patch it up and you can’t mask it...you have to have faith in it...you can’t give up at any stage. The boulder will just roll down the hill.”

Faith. Original sin. The wax wings of Icarus. The stone of Sisyphus. The Biblical and mythmaking references have particular resonance to Canadian film because we have had little faith, few myths and no movie icons of our own. The TSE flew on its wax wings too close to the blinding light of Hollywood and the dream of Canadian competition crashed to the ground. “Stay true to your film and don’t worry about citizenship or membership or where the money comes from,” says Gillespie, who has never applied for government financing and has seven movies to his credit, including *Triggermen* (d. John Bradshaw, 2001), a dark fish-out-of-water comedy about two Brits in Chicago mistaken for hitmen. He says O'Brian knew what he wanted and how hard it would be to get a picture like this off the ground. “It’s not everyone’s cup of tea.” They shot *Hollywood North* in only 20 days, 15 days less than the shooting schedule for the fictional movie.

I asked O'Brian why he decided to direct after so many years as a successful producer. “There are several answers to that,” he said, “but the main one is that there are some films I feel I must get made before the day is done. I wouldn’t want anyone else to do them so I have to take the creative responsibility. I thought I was doing that in a collaborative way

with the productions and directors I’ve worked with, doing the distasteful business stuff that no one else wanted to do. I did that for 30 years. I feel it’s a growth stage for me. The making of films...that’s what I know. For me, being a director is not to be the guy with the bullhorn. It’s to make a particular film.

“The common thread in the advice I got from director friends was, ‘Don’t try to produce your first movie.’ It was difficult for me to resist wandering into John’s office and bite my nails because I had tremendous empathy for the producer’s role and I wanted to help. But I had too much to do. I think John will say I acted like a director and not like a producer. There were times when I told myself the needs of the film came first, before the budget. But if I thought something would cause a problem financially, we would discuss it and decide if it was really necessary and how to make it happen.”

Some might say that *Hollywood North* is only a movie for insiders, those who understand the era and the jokes. O'Brian agrees that “it’s a backstager,” but adds, “I hope it’s accessible. We see more and more backstage stuff now—bloopers and outtakes, reality television, hijinks, on-set stuff. It’s everywhere. It’s a special world with ordinary people in it. There are more movie-themed movies than there used to be. *Hollywood North* has some levels in it that are cinematic—it’s four films in one. It’s not an art film. Its primary objective is to entertain.”

The Bates character (called Baytes) hates the script and rants, “It would put a hyperactive kid to sleep!” alluding to the differences between American and Canadian narratives and the fact that the general movie-going Canadian public still thinks Canadian movies are boring. “Canada, is it a good idea?” asks

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Baytes, waving a gun, a reference to the unlikeliness of Canada as a nation, a subtlety likely to fly above the heads of an American audience. But Canadians will howl with knowing laughter at the scene of a blinding snowstorm, the earliest on record, falling on the fake palm trees of *Hollywood North*. Other references will be caught only by people familiar with *Hollywood North* or lovers of obscure Canadian films, such as *Screamers under the Stairs*, a subtle reference to Cronenberg's *The Brood*. Alert viewers can glimpse posters for *In Praise of Older Women*, *Cry of the Wild*, *The Rowdyman*, *Outrageous!* and *Fast Company* in the background.

"I want Canadians to go to their own movies, and by that I mean English Canadians," says O'Brian, a man who has been trying to induce them to do just that for almost three decades. "It boils down to this: for English Canadians it's our proximity to the U.S. and acceptance and love of all American movies. Movies mean American movies. By the stats, Canadians actually love American movies slightly more than Americans do. It's a deep conditioning. American movies are our movies, their stars are our stars and the movies we've made haven't changed our minds about that. When a bunch of Canadians get in a room to talk about making Canadian film, the entertainment factor goes out the window. Ivan Reitman and Jim Carrey—they made the decision to go to Hollywood and make movies that make a lot of money. For those who remain, it's a case of earnestness, a desire to be really serious about telling a story—the documentary truth.

In nation building, people need icons and we don't provide them. The sizzle, the showmanship part of filmmaking is not endorsed by Canadians. I think maybe there's a reluctance to do that. We know we define ourselves by what we aren't. We don't want to be American. We don't want to show off. We want to be well-thought-of, nice and fair. We resist providing the

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entertainment ingredient to the public. Is it passive-aggressive to do that? Critics say we don't want to make films the way the Americans do, but there are conventions of entertainment that do not preclude originality. We want our own special culture and yet we don't want to entertain the audience. It's a paradox." He smiles ruefully. He's seen it all before.

I show him an article from the morning paper about the opening of *Owning Mahowny*. At one point O'Brian wanted to buy the rights and turn it into film, but it's Americans and Brits who have told this particular Canadian story. It's surely ironic that the same problems exist for the film business in 2003 as in 1979. Yet O'Brian still wants to make Canadian movies. As I take my leave after our interview, he prevents me from backing into a pile of garbage strewn on the small thoroughfare—almost an alley—below the offices of his Independent Pictures. It may be more luxurious on the other side of the street, but Peter O'Brian is not, nor has he ever been, gazing enviously across the fence at his well-heeled neighbours.

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JENNIFER TILLEY WITH FABRIZIO FILIPPO ON HER RIGHT AND MATTHEW MODINE ON HER LEFT.

