Canadian Comedy, Eh?: Paul Gross's *Men with Brooms* and Steve Smith's *Red Green's Duct Tape Forever*

By Cynthia Amsden

IF THERE IS SUCH A THING as a comedic Zeitgeist in this country, we are experiencing it now. Canada is known for its art-house fodder. "Introspective, dark, moody, personal, artistic films," says Seaton McLean, president of Alliance Atlantis. And lest we forget the other hallmark of Canadian film, the world knows us for weird sex.

Suddenly, as if springing forth fully formed from the brow of Athena comes not one, but two Canadian comedies striving for the unholy glory of being successful mall movies. Blue plate specials. From Paris to Palookaville, on a non-stop trip, and dammit, we are going to be commercially triumphant–for a change.

Men with Brooms, the Paul Gross fiesta, and *Red Green's Duct Tape Forever*, Steve Smith's Red Green extravaganza, are slated to hit the theatres within weeks of each other this spring. Go ahead. Say it. There's no such thing as a coincidence. Both Gross and Smith are leapfrogging to the big screen from television. Both Smith and Gross are new to the feature-film environment, and both had debut filmmaker epiphanies which–accompanied by forehead slaps–sounded like, "Ohhh, this is what it's all about." So, if not a coincidence, then what is this? One could reasonably answer: it's about time.

It's late November 2001, and Paul Gross emerges into the sunlight from the bowels of Serendipity Point Films where he is in post-production on *Men with Brooms*, a Robert Lantos production, playing with the harmonics of his ensemble cast. Walking around Rosedale, he squints attractively. Asking for a synopsis is almost unfair, but at the same time offers a homeopathic remedy to his morning's stress–cure like with like. Gross exhales his storyline: "There are four guys who used to be a good curling team. Their former coach dies. They gather at the reading of his will, which lets them reconnect after much time apart. A codicil in the will states that the coach's cremated remains are to be placed in the handle of a curling rock. They reunite as a team and win the trophy known as the Golden Broom, which no local team has ever won before."

At the same time this conversation is taking place, Steve Smith is in Florida, impersonating a Canada goose. The storyline of his movie, *Duct Tape Forever*, directed by television veteran Eric Till, equals *Brooms* in its absence of "art." When Possum Lodge is taken to court after a big-shot executive's limousine is damaged in the Lodge parking lot, the boys are ordered to pay $10,000 within 10 days–or they lose their beloved Lodge. Red's nephew, Harold, suggests the upcoming Duct Tape Festival in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which is a competition to create something made of at least 50 per cent duct tape. The boys of Possum Lodge create a large Canada goose and decide it's good enough for third prize, $10,000. Hooking the goose to the Possum van, Red and Harold go on a road trip to take the goose to market.

In the city, forget whips and chains; curling is one of Toronto's dirty little secrets.

High-concept used to mean high art; radical and different. Now it refers to the length of the pause after the pitch. Do they get it? The *Brooms* pitch, "It's a curling movie" achieves the pause, but the length varies geographically. "In L.A., the pause is fairly extended," Gross explains. "In certain areas of Toronto it's the same. I think people here don't discuss curling because of some odd snobbery."

Funny thing about Toronto. Outside the city, there's huge support for the sport. In the city, forget whips and chains; curling is one of Toronto's dirty little secrets. Gross discovered people he's known for years suddenly fessing up

Leslie Nielsen

to curling. Patrick McKenna, who plays Harold on *The Red Green Show*, is not surprised. "Everywhere around Toronto people watch *Red Green*, and Torontonians watch the show, but don't admit it–particularly the executives. They envision themselves as more hip. They always say they know me from *Traders*."

Patricia Rozema once said "Success is forgotten; originality has children" but just now, the urge to make a commercially viable film has crowded out the desire to make a great film. That Smith and Gross are acquainted with enormous success on television speaks to the motivation underlying this next step in their careers. They are hard-wired for expansion of territory.

In 1998, *Due South* had wrapped and nature poured Paul Gross a vacuum. Producer Robert Lantos was there to fill it with ideas about a hockey movie. "I talked to John Krizanc about it," Gross recalls, "but it was too complicated with that number of characters. Besides, hockey is political." Yes, how can one forget the quasi-fascist, religious cult component of ice, a puck and a wooden stick. "It's hard to talk hockey in this country since we think of it as our game, but it's largely owned by others." So Gross replaced the stick with a broom, the puck with a rock, and he kept the ice, which makes us all feel at home. Suddenly, the topic was neutral enough to wrap a plot around it.

Lantos encouraged Gross with a theory: "Canadians have a keen interest in having fun with themselves on screen. I know this to be true because that's what *Due South* was." It's a perceptive theory, particularly since *Due South*, unlike the sketch-comedy formats of other successful Canadian shows, was a narrative, which is the essence of screenplays.

Smith found his way to the big screen differently. "My advantage over other people doing movies is that I have a huge and very vocal fan base. We get lots of emails telling us what they want. They say they want a Red Green hat or T-shirt, so we make them, we sell them, and people say, boy that was lucky, but no, not really. And for the last six or seven years, they've been telling us they need a Red Green movie."

Expanding from television sketches to narrative felt logical for Smith, in spite of the numerous *Saturday Night Live* television-to-big-screen failures. "*SNL* has the same actor doing several roles and audiences indulge him while he pretends to be these characters. Spinning that off into a movie is tough because you're watching that actor play a character. On our show, every actor plays the same character ever time. In fact, our characters are more famous than the actors playing them."

In spite of the similarities between television and film, this was new territory for both filmmakers. Smith discovered

Paul Gross, Peter Outerbridge, Jed Rees and James Allodi

Molly Parker in *Men with Brooms*

that while television is a 180-to-270-degree environment, film is 360 degrees. "We used no part of our television set for the movie, and we had to find a place to use as the Possum Lodge." He begins to laugh at the memory. "People were climbing all over each other offering their place, but then you'd find out it's 20 miles from the road, no hydro, no plumbing, perhaps too realistic. We had a Boy Scout troop offer their meeting place and the building was fantastic, but where you parked the trucks was right where they have the septics."

Smith also learned that television-based characters do not transpose directly onto the big screen. Fiddling is required. "It wasn't so much amplification [of character] as it was complication. At the script level, we had to make it more interesting than for television, more layers, more plot turns. It's a whole different animal getting characters out of that two-minute sketch rhythm. To go into a film with all untried characters and setting, that would be a lot more frightening than what we did."

Unbeknown to Gross, there is a secret code used by some film critics to classify the cliché quality of a sports film: how long before the slow-motion effect is employed. The sooner the slow-mo, the more pedestrian the cinematography. *A Knight's Tale* brings it on fast. *Ali* uses it early, but only in the delivery of certain punches. Gross laughs, "You don't need slow motion because the entire sport of curling is pretty much in slow motion." He pauses and then confesses, "But we do use it—for the very last stone."

Ask for the definition of comedy and the answer is different almost every time. Gross co-wrote *Brooms* while playing Hamlet on stage, which accounts for his response, filtered through classic paradigms. "It was fascinating, while doing *Hamlet*, to see that line between tragedy and comedy. You'd feel it immediately—tragedy is heavier; it sits on itself more. Comedy has buoyancy."

The formal difference between a tragedy and a drama is that audiences know the outcome of a tragedy up front and wait to see it play out, while drama has an uncertain ending. Gross spotted the parallel. "Comedy, in that sense, is closer to tragedy than drama. In comic form, you know the outcome. In Shakespearean comedy, everybody gets married at the end. The form for a romantic comedy is also well established. If at the end of the curling match, they lose and everyone is shot, it just doesn't work well."

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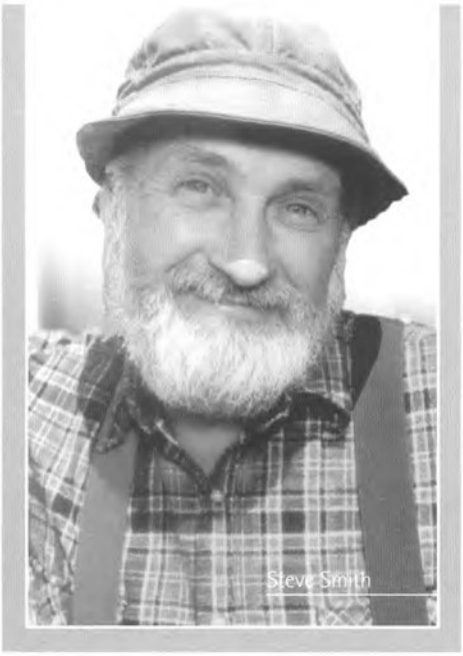
While Smith dealt with his character traumas at the front end, Gross believed he and Krizanc had written themselves clear of those hurdles. And then came post-production. "There's too many people in this story!" His voice goes hyperbolic. "I thought we'd written this teeny, easy script and then I realized there's 12 principal players, not to mention the curling itself, which was ferociously difficult to shoot." Gross continues, but more seriously, "Like any story involving sports, it's about the people, not so much the sport. Every character has a fairly complicated [he coughs with the punctuation of personal knowledge] life and in the course of playing the game, they have the opportunity to revisit things, sort out priorities and get their relationships straightened out. It's curling as therapy."

Smith, who has been honing his Red Green comedic timing for 11 seasons, not counting his *Smith & Smith* years, approaches from a different perspective. "Comedy is the courier, not the package. You can use comedy to put forth any theory and people can laugh at what you say because you're clever at revealing something they didn't expect, but


Steve Smith

eventually they'll open the package and realize what it is you are really saying. To me, if it's a destructive force, I'm not against it; it's just that I'm not interested in it."

It is Patrick McKenna, the host body for nephew Harold, who supplies the most appropriate definition. "It's tragedy, plus time. You don't laugh at a funeral, but later you kind of see the funny things that happened." McKenna could have been talking about the plot of *Men with Brooms*, in which he was originally cast to play the role of Eddie Strombeck, a good-hearted but over-the-hill curler. However, shooting schedules for the two films kept shifting until they overlapped and Harold took priority over Eddie. The role went to Jed Rees.

Comedy does not live by words alone. It is delivery, delivery, delivery and both films have their thoroughbreds: Leslie Nielsen in *Brooms*, and Steve Smith with Patrick McKenna in *Duct Tape Forever*. Nielsen (the *Naked Gun* films, *Airplane!*), Canadian by birth and American by hilarity, plays Gross's father. They worked together before on *Due South*, making him accessible for a request to be in the film, and his presence boosts the comedy aspect of the romantic-comedy positioning. Gross explains, "It's not *Dumb and Dumber*, but we do have slapstick bits and if you have Leslie Nielsen, you have to have bathroom humour." Robert Lantos is producing a movie with bathroom humour? Hello 2002! Gross suppresses a smile. "I can't divulge any secrets, but it's one of Nielsen's favourite areas of humour."

Gross's sense of humour, which is a product of growing up on British rather than American comedy and leans toward a preference for the flights of Monty Python lunacy, has been well cloaked in the presence of journalists. "I have to be fairly organized to do all this stuff," he offers by way of explanation for his tendency to go out and split atoms on his lunch hour. But with a snort, he concedes to the label of "closet lunatic." "God was in a good mood the day Paul Gross was born," declares Lantos, who has crossed a kind of continental divide of the spirit now that he is producing a comedy.

And then there is Steve Smith, also a fan of British comedy, "because I'm old. I'm the Col. Sanders of Canadian comedy. There's lots of people who don't think I'm funny and they may be right, but there aren't enough of them to kill me, so I just ignore them." Smith knows he is funny. Always has been. As a student, when no one else was permitted to speak out in class, he could because he found a way to be funny without being disruptive. He's smart, too. Smart enough to recognize a good foil when he sees one—Harold. Compared to the Red Green character, who is sanguine even at his most stressed out, Harold is explosive. But McKenna had to adjust Harold for the big screen. "I was nervous. Harold's a large character. How do I bring him in and not lose him? So I watched my Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin films because they have the same rhythm. It's so easy just to steal focus when Red is talking. If Harold moves too much, suddenly the whole audience will follow him and you lose Red's thought." *Duct Tape Forever* producer, Sari Friedland, sees Smith as a man who instinctively makes everyone comfortable and he uses his humour to do so. That said, God must have been wearing jockey shorts the day Smith was born.

As comedies originating in the great boreal homeland, the Canadiana content fluctuates. *Brooms* is billing itself as unabashedly Canadian and is filthy with national icons not the least of which are Gross, himself, and Nielsen. There are beavers too. Lots of them, blocking traffic. Herds of them? "Packs," clarifies Seaton McLean. "Wandering packs of beavers." There is curling and the national anthem and the Tragically Hip and there's beer. No doughnuts, though, because this isn't a police story.

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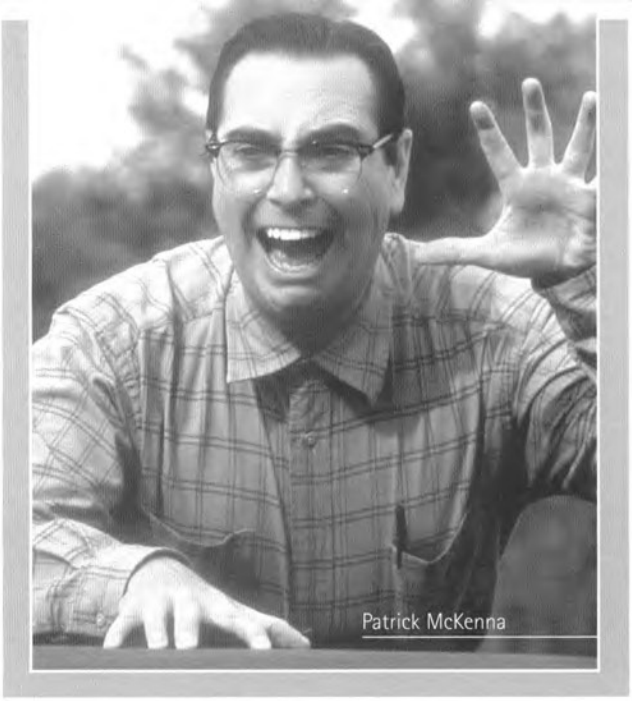


Patrick McKenna

Red Green, while appearing indelibly Canadian to Canadians, actually has an international spirit, not that Kofi Annan is considering Smith as a potential UN delegate. "I run into people all the time who think we do the show in Wisconsin or Minnesota. They don't even know I'm Canadian," Smith states. "There are Ontario plates on the Possum van. When I look at a script and something absolutely has to be Canadian, then I do it." But there is no mindful effort to make Red Green Canadian or non-Canadian. Consider the Red Green mascot—the possum. Not a beaver, not a moose or a caribou, but the possum, which is sometimes thought of as the flavour of the south (where the tooth-to-tattoo ratio is not flattering). More than just roadkill, Smith likes the ecumenical attributes of the possum, "Non-confrontational problem solving. Lie down. Lie low."

There was a curious gung-ho-ness in the making of both films. "We made a $7- or $8-million movie for $3.5 million," says Smith. "We closed the gap with people contributing or working for nothing. We needed 20-to-30 duct-tape sculptures, so we asked the viewers and by the end of the second week, we had 100 pieces. They came from the Yukon; they came from Alaska. Grey Coach gave a deal to anyone sending things to the production." In fact, all the duct-tape art with the exception of the CN tower was made by volunteers and they were paid in the obvious currency—duct tape.

The free-for-all didn't stop there. PBS, which carries the show on 105 of its stations, auctioned off spots as extras on *Duct Tape Forever* as part of its pledge drive. "The highest amount paid was $25,000 by a man in Tampa, Florida. But the most unusual was a doctor from L.A. who paid $1,500 and then paid his way up here," recalls Smith. "When I asked him why, he said he always wanted to be in a movie. So I said, hey, in L.A. they're making a movie on every corner. There was even one man from Houston came up and wanted to invest in the movie." Altogether, there were 100 extras/fans on the set.

Red Green's Duct Tape Forever

Men with Brooms was another fan-magnet. Of its 300 extras, many were curling and Paul Gross fans who helped offset the $7.5-million budget. An invitation was placed on Gross's Internet fan site and answered by acolytes all over North America and from as far away as England. One would almost think the crowd scenes in both movies were written in just to feed the fan-based beast.

The corporate commercial enthusiasm for both films is something introspective, dark, moody, personal films have not engendered in Canada. Alliance Atlantis, the money behind *Brooms*, is putting an unprecedented $1 million of promotional elbow grease into the works including billboards, advance trailers and cross-country press tours. TVA International, the distribution company behind *Duct Tape Forever*, has received a boost from 3M, which was part of the financing package, and then there is the Red Green line of duct tape they put out. Additionally, Famous Players has joined in, running the *Duct Tape Forever* teaser featuring its executive vice-president Michael Kennedy in all its theatres. From a marketing standpoint, the combined effort of both campaigns may well produce a result greater than the sum of their parts. That said, it is with a measured amount of relief that there has been no talk of fast-food merchandise to be handed out with burgers.

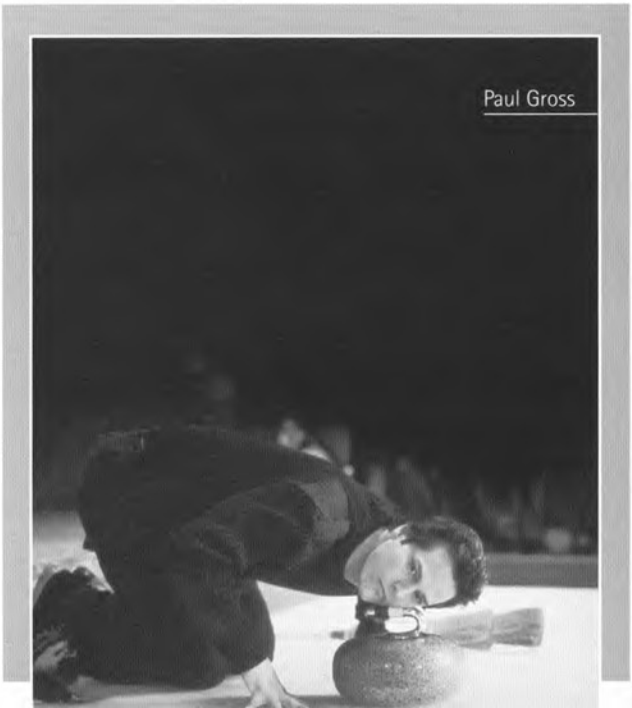
And so, into the breach. From coincidence, to congruence, to harmony, to synergy, the two films have to stand the new ground that they cut. During the production of *Men with Brooms*, producer Robert Lantos said to *The Globe and Mail*, "If this film doesn't get a really large mainstream Canadian audience, then it can't be done with a Canadian film. I, for one, will accept that, and just do art-house films. But I am deeply convinced that is not the case." Presumably Quebec producer Richard Goudreau's comedy, *Les Boys* (1997) would be the case in point. With a box office of $6.1 million, on 60 screens in Quebec alone, one might even say it's been done. And then with *Les Boys II* ($5.5 million, 1998), it was done again. And with *Les Boys III* (2001), it might be done a third time. But is this a fair comparison? On one hand, *Les Boys* and *Les Boys II* outsold any films made in Canada, and they did their box office in Quebec alone; on the other hand, precisely because they performed hugely in Quebec, does that disqualify them as a "Canadian" film?

Sidestepping the definition sinkhole, *Les Boys*'s success has been rationalized as a Quebec audience supporting its own. Xenophobic, jingoistic and loyal right down to the pocketbook, are Quebec audiences unique? Gross himself observes: "Americans go to arts events, including movies, to be entertained. It's Canadians who attend these things to support them, to help them be good." This opens up all movies to the same success potential.

Once out of the safety of the art-house arena, accolades like "critically acclaimed" are cold comfort for mainstream comedies. Unlike other businesses, comedy in any form is founded on one savagely simplistic premise of success: If the audience doesn't laugh, the material isn't funny. In comedy, it is never the audience's fault. So onto the shelf go debates about definition and motivation of ticket purchases. The issue returns to content. Gross and Smith are playing with the funny boys now. Whether on stage, on television or on the big screen, the truth remains: death is easy; comedy is hard.

In *Duct Tape Forever*, as Red, Harold and the goose cross the Canada-U.S. border, a Mountie stops them. Dave Broadfoot plays the Mountie, but it was originally written for Paul Gross who has been a guest on the show. "We sent him the script and he loved it, but he couldn't do it," explains Smith, referring to the schedule overlap. However, a counter-offer for a cameo was not forthcoming from the *Brooms* set, "And that," Smith declares, "is a sign that Paul's will be a pretty good movie."

Cynthia Amsden is a freelance journalist, unit publicist extraordinaire and a member of Take One*'s editorial board.*
This article is reprinted from Take One No. 36, March/April 2002.


Paul Gross