

# It's SHOW

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Toronto has become the second-largest television production centre in North America. Out of the 62 *Movie of the Weeks*, mini-series, specials, pilots and docudramas produced in Toronto in 1995, 66 per cent were Canadian-produced.

BY ANGELA BALDASSARRE

# TIME! in Toronto

**I**n a warehouse space on Lansdowne Avenue in downtown Toronto, seasoned actor Ruby Dee (*Jungle Fever*) and up-and-comer Isaiah Washington (*Clockers*) are huddled behind a piece of plywood waiting for Timothy Hutton (*Beautiful Girls*) and Lela Rochon (*Waiting to Exhale*) to deliver their lines and cue their entrance. The cable movie, for Showtime in the U.S., is *Mr. & Mrs. Loving*. The setting is 1960s Washington, D.C. The Canadian production company is Dufferin Gate Productions.

On the other side of town, a helicopter is hovering above Toronto's business district. Cover girl Kathy Ireland and one of America's most successful TV producers, *Baywatch*'s David Hasselhoff, are running between cars, dodging bullets from the bad guys. The TV movie-of-the-week (MOW) is *Gridlock*. The producer is Toronto's Alliance Entertainment. The setting is New York City, today.

In a warehouse by Toronto's lakeshore, the inside of a spaceship is being equipped to represent the story of the day. In the dressing room, TV's most famous Starfleet Commander, William (Captain Kirk) Shatner is preparing his lines. The series is *TekWar*, produced by Atlantis Films. The setting is somewhere and sometime in the far distant future.

Up north, just past the city limits, first-time director Kevin Bacon (*Apollo 13*) is making last-minute changes to the country house where a family drama will take place. Actor Kyra Sedgwick (*Something to Talk About*) observes from afar. The cable movie, again for Showtime, is *Losing Chase*. The setting is a country estate in mid-west U.S.A.

The list goes on. Big names, big productions, all shot in and around Toronto, and to a large extent produced by Canadian-owned companies. Toronto has become the second-largest television production centre in

# SHOWTIME

Photo: Chris Haston



**Hasselhoff dodges bullets from the bad guys.**

North America (after Los Angeles). Out of the 62 MOWs, mini-series, specials, pilots and docudramas produced in Toronto in 1995, 66 per cent were Canadian-produced in association with American cable outlets. Little-known companies such as Dufferin Gate Productions and Power Pictures accounted for 22 MOWs in 1995. This is in addition to the established players like Alliance Entertainment and Atlantis Films, which have come to dominate Canadian-U.S.

cable production. "History will say that Toronto is a television town," says Toronto Film Commissioner David Plant. "We've always been a production centre, and that has a lot to do with the fact that the CBC and CTV have been here for years and years. So, there's an established production community."

While Toronto is also a major feature film centre, explains Plant, the one thing that's important for television production, as opposed to feature film production which tends to be either *auteur* based or more Hollywood-looking, is to find efficient ways of doing the shows. "What you need for television, in addition to an established and deep crew base, is also a broad range of on-camera talent," says Plant. "We have the technical talent available, and, because we're the third largest English-speaking theatre centre after London and New York, we have the on-camera talent. This means that the same people are not appearing in front of the cameras over and over again. There's a richness and a depth of creative talent that's available here that allows people to be able to come and shoot episode after episode of television, or a television movie, and not be showing the same thing all of the time. There is also a really wide and diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and architecture. You can pick up elements of architecture and neighbourhoods in Toronto that can double for places all around the world."

Unlike big-budget feature films, MOWs don't normally have the dollars to allow casts and crews to hop on a plane and fly to Vietnam. "If you're going to do something that's set in another part of the world, you need to be able to shoot those things as cost effectively as possible," Plant says. "For example, we recently did the Showtime movie *Kissinger and Nixon*. Toronto doubled for North Vietnam with war sequences shot down near the Port of Toronto. By the same token a place up by the Bridle Path stood in for the American embassy in Paris. So we can be, in one television program, in Washington, D.C., Paris and Hanoi."

New York-based Showtime Network, owned by the media giant Viacom, is one of the many American companies that have been shooting regularly in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. "Of the 40 cable movies we shot in 1995, 75 per cent were shot in Canada," says Showtime spokesman Larry Landsman. "We have 40 more slotted in 1996, with a big hunk in Canada. We are, in fact, the largest supplier of independent movies in Hollywood." Aside from *Mr. & Mrs. Loving*, *The Phantoms* and *Loving Chase*, Showtime, with Dufferin Gate, produced in Toronto, in the past year, *Hidden in America* with Jeff Bridges; *Beyond the Jail* with Sissy Spacek and David Strathairn; *Mrs. Munck* by and with Diane Ladd and Bruce Dern; and *Moonshine Highway* with Kyle MacLachlan and Randy Quaid.

Canadian-owned Power Pictures is one of the most prolific companies to produce shows for American networks. "We've developed a certain expertise introducing quality product in the TV movie realm, and we are able to develop interesting stories and produce them at a very competitive price," says producer Julien Marks on Power Pictures' increasing production activity. "We have tremendous locations here, so we've been able to shoot Toronto as Toronto as well as having it stand in for virtually every other city in America and Europe. The talent pool is extraordinary, and it's commensurate with the level of production. The growing level of production has created a pool of talented actors that certainly did not exist 10 years ago." Power Pictures produced more than 14 MOWs for American cable television in 1995, including *Danielle Steele's Remembrance* and *A Reasonable Woman: The Kerry Ellison Story*.

Another Toronto company that has been successful in marketing their product south of the border (and indeed world-wide) is Atlantis Films. They have produced William

Photo courtesy of Atlantis Films

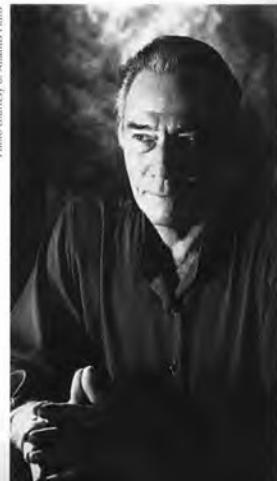


**William (Captain Kirk) Shatner, right, was the force behind TekWar.**

Shatner's *TekWar* in association with USA Network; four MOWs and 18 episodes of *TekWar* were shot before wrapping in 1995. *Kurt Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron* with Sean Astin and Christopher Plummer is being produced with Showtime. *The Man in the Attic* with Anne Archer (*Patriot Games*) is another Atlantis/Showtime/CBS co-production; *Night of the Twisters* with Devon Sawa and John Schneider is a co-production with the (U.S.) Family Channel; and *The Possession of Michael D.* with Sheila McCarthy and Stephen Lang was produced in association with the Fox Broadcasting Network.

The 1995 production slate for American cable in Toronto was impressive and Plant looks forward to another record year in 1996. "There's something I want to say to those people who say that the only reason we have all this production here is because the Canadian dollar is soft," he says. "My response to that is that the dollar is the gas. It's not the car. You get cheap gas, yes, but what you are driving determines whether or not you're going to enjoy the trip." ■

Photo courtesy of Atlantis Films



**KURT VONNEGUT'S HARRISON BERGERON with Christopher Plummer.**