

The Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation: Its Rise and Demise

An Interview with Garry Toth

In 1981, the Alberta government created the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation (AMPDC), the first English-Canadian provincial film agency. (Quebec has had a film funding agency, in one form or another, since 1975.) Instrumental in launching the careers of Anne Wheeler (*Loyalties*, *Bye Bye Blues*) and Francis Damberger (*Solitaire*, *Road to Saddle River*) and bringing the hit CBC-TV series *North of 60* to Alberta, the AMPDC was nevertheless closed down earlier this year. Fran Humphreys interviewed former CEO Garry Toth for *Take One* and asked him to assess the importance of the AMPDC and the reasons for its closure.

The AMPDC was the first Crown corporation formed in English Canada to assist in the development of a local film and television industry. How did the AMPDC get started and what was its vision?

It was the Lougheed era and they were halcyon days. We were flush with money and looking for new ways to diversify. The Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association was formed in the late 1970s, principally to lobby the government to develop an initiative that would stem the flow of investment dollars leaving the province. Those were the days of the federal Capital Cost Allowance, and there were many Alberta doctors, lawyers and accountants putting millions into the Ontario film industry. The idea certainly had the support of the premier and key cabinet ministers, and so the AMPDC was created. Therein lies the irony: we were the first English-speaking province to create an agency like this and we were the first to close. But we were leaders and every province copied us. From 1982 to 1988, we simply provided financing and consulting on research and development, but in 1987, the AMPDC's mandate was expanded to include assistance in financing the production and marketing of Albertan film and television productions. There was a tremendous spurt of growth in the industry when we were able to do that.

What would you consider to be the greatest accomplishments of the AMPDC over this period?

I would say it was an accomplishment to have been the first agency to be set up in the way we were. It showed tremendous foresight and vision on the part of both the industry and the politicians. At the industry's request, the corporation focused on bringing in a domestic drama series and we were able to accomplish that very quickly. *North of 60* was the first on stream. I...we...the board were really proud that we were able to very aggressively land a series like *North of 60*. I wouldn't say the corporation can take direct credit for any of the activity of the industry because it's the industry itself that generates that activity, but we were there to support and facilitate. And we were able to take on a series when we didn't initially have the skills to fill some of the above-the-line positions, especially in writing. By working with the Writers Guild, the producers and the broadcasters, we were able to do some gentle arm-twisting to ensure that Albertans were afforded opportunities. That was one of the

leverages the AMPDC could bring to a project, and now we've got lots of people working and writing on series and even story editing. Last year, we did roughly \$30-million worth of productions and of that, approximately \$18-million was spent directly in the province. The AMPDC's contribution to that was about \$1.8-million. Those are direct dollars, not spin. The spin on the dollars to the industry is about 2.2 times, or you could say that there is an economic impact of \$32- to \$36-million to the province purely on that domestic product. It was pretty good bang for your buck.

So, what happened? When did you sense the support for AMPDC wane?

It was philosophy, in the end. I don't think it had a lot to do with the AMPDC. It boiled down to whether or not government was prepared to put up any new money for reinvestment. The decision was no. It's clear to me, the government is staying its course in saying that its role is to facilitate, not to get in bed, with business. I said that we, as an agency, were like salmon spawning. I mean, we were going upstream. I think we went a long way in swimming upstream in convincing politicians of the worth of having an agency such as this, but in the end, the decision to shut the AMPDC down was consistent with its mandate.

Initially, you had the support of some members of the government. What was your plan?

Basically, what we proposed was to close down the AMPDC and work with the industry to create a new entity, to privately finance and provide the services that the AMPDC did. This involved a number of different strategies, but in the end, there was no new money to finance this plan.

How much did you need?

About \$2-million. What we asked for was a transition year. We presented the government with a thumbnail sketch of what the new corporation could be and we wanted \$2-million to flesh this out. It's important to understand that this was not a case of an agency trying to save its ass. We presented the government with a number of options. We were trying to find a new way. It wasn't to preserve the status quo, or keep the AMPDC at all costs.

What has been the impact on the production community since the closure?



North of 60

I know there were a couple of projects lost. There's no doubt that the AMPDC's demise played a role in those losses. It's not unusual for one partner to fall out of bed only to be replaced by another; that's the nature of the film business, but we did lose some product. I'm only aware of two series, *North of 60* and *Jake and the Kid*, that are still going, and I know that a third series that we had spent money developing will likely relocate to British Columbia.

What does the future hold for the independent Alberta producer without the AMPDC?

I don't want to say that it's a total demise of the domestic industry in the short term. Right now the industry is at the strongest it's ever been. Domestically, we've got the two series going and from the foreign side, specifically in Calgary, it's one of the best years ever. But it will be more difficult for independent producers in Alberta to remain here. In the long term, in this bottom-line business, productions can be financed in other provinces. And I am concerned about the level of research and development funds, because if you're not able to develop talent I think you're on a slippery slope downhill. If the domestic industry disappears, that removes work for writers, producers and craft service persons. It's a source of revenue that's lost, and this means fewer working days for the industry in Alberta. As much as you hope to have foreign films fill the gap, if you look at the past 20 years of foreign production, it's inconsistent.

Do you see the possibility of a rebirth of the AMPDC?

I think we should never say never. I really believe in the philosophy of the independent producer and I wouldn't want to write off Alberta just yet. ■