

From the Down-Home Sounds of Don Messer to the Lust-in-Space *Lexx: The Dark Zone Stories*,

Television in ATLANTIC CANADA Has Come a Long Way

By Ron Foley Macdonald

Television has been a driving force behind most of the boom in East Coast production of late. With a small, spread-out population base, it's no wonder that the industry is forced to concentrate on exporting its culture, whether it's to the rest of Canada (the top-rated CBC program *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*) or to the rest of the world (*Lexx: The Dark Zone Stories*). With the arrival of the new specialty channels, the Atlantic Region has provided a low-budget work force for formula magazine television that serves as the bulk of specialty programming.

While the combination of the three words "formula," "magazine" and "television" might sound a bit frightening when taken together, it reveals a sea change in the East Coast scene. The struggling, marginalized, auteur-model of independent filmmaking has been replaced by the rigors of regular work, tough delivery schedules and the constant to-and-fro of filling the growing market demand.

Television in Atlantic Canada used to be a one-way street. Since the 1950s the only significant production came from the CBC's major production centre in Halifax and its secondary plant in St. John's, Nfld. Both specialized in short- and long-form news programming with a secondary stream of variety shows like *Don Messer's Jubilee* that gained national exposure, much to the embarrassment of the executives in Toronto. Drama came from somewhere else, mostly from the United States, except for *The Forest Rangers* and the odd prime-time project like *Quentin Durgens, M.P.*; children's programming consisted of central Canadian fixtures like *The Friendly Giant* and *Mr. Dressup*. For the most part, Atlantic Canada didn't get to see much of itself on the little screen.

The situation remained unchanged until the mid-1980s when Telefilm Canada responded to regional pressures to decentralize the industry in the wake of

pay- and specialty-TV expansion. It was strongly suggested that each new service include material from outside the Montreal/Toronto axis. The Atlantic Region, with its strong oral traditions, was ideally placed to take advantage of this opening. The first breakthrough was the satirical *CODCO*. A Newfoundland sketch-comedy series made in Halifax and broadcast nationally. *CODCO* was a private (Salter Street Films), public sector (CBC) co-production that drew upon the expertise that had been developed through 10 years of broadcasting *Don Messer*. Salter Street, then and still, is the largest private sector production house in the region, followed the pattern set by the industry in the rest of the country. This pattern, based on the establishment of strong, stable production companies, meant the Canadian film and television industry had an orientation toward process rather than content.

Once Atlantic directors and producers clued into the process, things started to move quickly. While Salter Street retains its supremacy in the region, other companies began to piece together co-production deals that blended cost reductions (made possible by the new digital technology) with the Maritimes's traditional geographic strengths. A closeness to Europe and ready access to the ocean allowed Echo-Nova, initially an environmental tourism tour company, to develop a successful aquatic history series called *Oceans of Mystery* for the Discovery Channel.

The real breakthrough came with the prime time drama *Black Harbour*, a show in which the issue of place is central to the whole storyline. Part neocolonial import and part legitimate quest for the soul of the East Coast, *Black Harbour* sums up almost all of the compromises that both plague and fuel prime-time television drama—the collision of the real and the ideal—exemplified by bouts of kitchen-sink realism punctuated with touristy vistas and quaint folkloric characterizations. It's the fed-up Toronto

esthetic searching for old roots and instead finding a weird, unsettling mixture of diamonds and rubbish.

On the other side is Salter Street's *Lexx: The Dark Zone Stories*, a joyously juvenile science fiction series that scrupulously ignores any ideas of local content. *Lexx* represents the growing internationalization of television in Atlantic Canada which has seen several major links with European producers in the last few years. While *Lexx*'s co-production partners are German, a steady stream of British projects have found themselves in the region, mostly exploring Celtic musical and cultural roots. Salter Street's *Celtic Electric* special brought together musicians and dancers from Cape Breton, Ireland and Scotland in association with the BBC.

With the arrival of Live Productions (makers of the *Nikita* action TV series), it looks like New Brunswick is following quickly in Nova Scotia's footsteps. Unfortunately, the province is much further behind in its development of key personnel. New Brunswick's crews consist of many who went down the road years ago and are only now returning. Prince Edward Island's experience with the Cinar/Salter Street series *Emily of New Moon* is much the same, with approximately one-third of its crew being Nova Scotians, one-third coming from Quebec and the rest scattered between the Island, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Ontario. The editorial control of the show rests in Halifax and Montreal, which is an improvement over the *Road to Avonlea* series which barely even shot second unit material in P.E.I., and yet one can't help thinking the Island's industry has exchanged one set of remote-controlled colonial masters for another.

It's not that the smaller provinces are not year ready for prime time, it's more that they're going from zero to 60 in a very short period of time. ■