



Power Play!

● PUTTING DRAMA ON ICE

BY PAUL EICHHORN

HOCKEY NIGHT IN CANADA

Saturday evening in front of the TV watching the “good old hockey game” is a cornerstone of the Canadian experience. It ranks right up there with beer, doughnut shops and cold weather. CBC’s *Hockey Night in Canada* (on-air since 1952) remains one of the only Canadian programs in English Canada to regularly make the Top 10 most-watched programs in any given year. Certainly, the love of the game inspired writers/producers William Laurin and Glenn Davis to create their new CTV television drama, *Power Play*. “We have an obsession with the game of hockey,” admits Laurin, sitting in a production office surrounded by table-top hockey games, pairs of skates and pictures of hockey greats on the walls. He and his longtime colleague, Davis, created and are executive producers on the series. They’re hoping that *Power Play*, which appropriately enough is shot in a former Molson brewery in downtown Toronto, scores with Canadian viewers.

Previous efforts to portray hockey on the big or small screen have more often been offside than in the net. Hockey depictions vary from the comedic and still popular *Slap Shot* starring Paul Newman, to the juvenile, ice fantasy *The Mighty Ducks* and its dreadful sequels, to the operatic, beer-laced Canadian hit *Perfectly Normal*, directed by Yves Simoneau, to the recent smash hit from Quebec, Louis Saia’s *Les Boys*. On the small screen, Canadians have viewed various TV programs including the recent drama *Net Worth*, *Gross Misconduct* (directed by Atom Egoyan) and the Radio-Canada series, *Lance et compte*. Hugely popular in Quebec, a poorly dubbed English version, *He Shoots, He Scores*, never caught on in the rest of Canada. Laurin and Davis hope to change that with *Power Play*.

The series revolves around the on-and-off ice activities of a fictional NHL team, the Hamilton Steelheads. The owner’s daughter, Colleen Blessed (Kari Matchett),

and a flashy New York-based agent, expatriate Brett Parker (Michael Riley), scheme to move the team to Houston. It’s a scenario that has been recently played out for real in Winnipeg, Quebec City and (possibly) Edmonton. Parker is a slick operator, working both sides of the game, à la Alan Eagleson. Only after he encounters the ghost of the late Steelhead general manager (Sean McCann), who was also his childhood hockey coach, does Parker decide to keep the team, and himself, in the old hometown.

Producing a hockey show has been something Laurin and Davis have kicked around for years. In the late 1980s, they approached CBS about a series on a women’s pro hockey team. More recently, the duo had been in talks with the CBC about a hockey movie. Davis says Robert Lantos, the former head of Alliance Communications who is now executive producer on *Power Play* through his Serendipity Point Films, asked the pair in

the early '90s what type of TV show they would like to make. Their answer—a hockey show. When the opportunity arose late in 1997, the pair quickly wrote a pilot. CTV became immediately interested after getting the pitch in March. The pilot was shot in July, a quick turnaround by Canadian standards.

The pair, whose last program was CTV's now-cancelled *Once a Thief*, point out that hockey is just a starting point for *Power Play*. "Hockey was an ideal vehicle to talk about certain issues and elements in Canadian life that we really wanted to discuss," Laurin explains. "The show is about many things and most of them not hockey. Hockey is the lens in which we project all the other things." Both Laurin and Davis see the show as re-evaluating the Canadian myth and what memory means in a cultural context. "To us, that's what hockey is really about."

HOME-ICE ADVANTAGE

Coming back to play at the home rink usually offers most hockey teams an advantage. Coming home is also an important theme in *Power Play*'s storyline. The main character, Parker, returns to his Hamilton roots after years of working in the United States. Early on he looks for ways to flee back south of the border. Yet, suddenly, like Saul on the road to Damascus, he decides to remain in his own ancestral home as the Steelheads' GM. In some ways, Davis and Laurin have travelled a similar road. The Montreal natives worked in Hollywood for several years churning out product for the U.S. networks including *South Beach*, *Mann and Machine* and *Scene of the Crime*. "We're the Canadian guys that went away and came back," says Laurin. "*Power Play* is about the stuff that made us come back. Many of the circumstances in the show are related to our experience of being away and looking at the country afresh."

They originally fled to the United States because a "home-ice advantage" for writers didn't exist. They found the American television model which is driven by writers (or as Laurin calls them "show runners") to be liberating. "The great thing about Hollywood is that it's a fierce furnace of ideas. It's relatively easy to get a meeting there. Much easier than in Canada. I can get the president of the Fox network on the phone within 24 hours and I'm not a powerful guy. I

couldn't get a low-level functionary of the CBC to return a call for three days. Americans seize opportunities because the competition is so fierce."

However, the pair admit they're now back in Canada because Canadian television is moving toward the American model. Writers are getting a chance to run the show. "When we left here, the highest we could go was head writer or story editor. We would never be able to run the show. The shows were run by line producers, who knew where the cheap gas was, by financiers, because financing Canadian television was an elaborate undertaking, or by CBC bureaucrats," Laurin explains. "For whatever reason, TV only works when it's run by writers." Laurin and Davis estimate

to the large ensemble cast and shooting the hockey scenes realistically. It's obvious that for some Canadian TV writers and producers, playing at home has become an advantage.

BUILDING A TEAM

A successful hockey team is all about putting together the best squad of players. *Power Play* actually had the difficult task of creating two powerhouse teams—on and off the ice.

Under Laurin's and Davis's leadership, a who's who of Canadian television is bringing *Power Play* to life. Along with the production might of Robert Lantos and Alliance Atlantis Productions, the two



Opposite page: Michael Riley and Al Waxman. Above: Producers/writers William Laurin, left, and Glenn Davis. "We're the Canadian guys that went away and came back. *Power Play* is about the stuff that made us come back"

Canada only has six to eight experienced writer "show runners" like themselves. They hope programs such as *Power Play* contribute to the on-going evolution of Canadian television production.

New money also brought them home. Unlike a decade ago, Canadian entertainment companies, such as Alliance Atlantis, can raise pools of capital on the stock market. It's come in handy for Davis and Laurin. *Power Play* has a hefty per-episode budget of \$1.15 million. The producers attribute the cost

have hired seasoned directors such as John Fawcett, Graeme Lynch and Don McBrearty along with proven writers such as Paul Quarrington. The cast is led by an all-star team of Canadian film and television actors. Michael Riley (who starred in *Perfectly Normal*) is joined by two icons, Gordon Pinsent, who plays the eccentric and philosophic team owner, and Al Waxman, who appears in the early episodes as a Punch Imlach-type head coach. *Power Play* also features several young new talents, including Dean



Power PLAY

THE GAME
IS EVERYTHING

Above: Gordon Pinsent. Building English-Canada's first hockey drama series with an all-star cast.

McDermott as the Mark Messier-esque team captain and Kari Matchett as the owner's scheming daughter. It's rounded out by Caterina Scorsone as Michele, Parker's troubled daughter who is anxious to keep him in Hamilton. Davis and Laurin admit McDermott and other actors playing on the Steelheads had to be great actors and also pretty good hockey players. Some actors were sent to hockey school to improve their skills.

The cast also includes former Boston Bruins coach and TV regular Don Cherry, as (naturally) a rival coach. "Grapes," whose photos adorn the production office wall, was originally given a walk-on as himself in the pilot. He approached Davis and Laurin about playing a character, specifically, the villainous coach of the team from Philadelphia (based on the Flyers) named Jake Nelson. "Don is an absolute natural," says Davis. But the show's producers also needed real hockey players—two full teams worth. Both noticed that most previous hockey movies failed because the players on the ice never looked good enough to be pros. (Case in point—Rob Lowe's amateurish performance in *Youngblood*.) To assemble the on-ice talent, they hired Gerry Meehan, former Buffalo Sabres GM, to recruit two full squads of ex-professional and top-ranking minor league players to portray the Steelheads and opposing teams. "He got us players as good as you're going to get. We know we can put the camera on them and we don't have to be afraid," says Davis. The producers even managed to recruit Stompin' Tom Connors. He sings his classic "The Hockey Song" under the title credits and he is joined by the Canadian group Rusty for something called "The Hockey Song-Steelhead Mix." Davis considers the song "a natural choice."

Hockey is ultimately about what happens on the ice and *Power Play* had a very unconventional launch on ice in early October at Hamilton's Copps Coliseum, home of the Steelheads. Several hundred fans streamed into the stadium for a game between Cherry's real-life team, the Mississauga Ice Dogs and the team of *Power Play* actors. In the end, a TV show broke out when the pilot episode was screened. With the team logo painted on the ice and real players skating around in eye-catching Steelhead uniforms, at times it seemed as if Hamilton had finally scored its own NHL team.

Creating realistic on-ice experience was a major preoccupation for both Davis and Laurin. Along with recruiting believable hockey players, they grappled with the problem of creating realistic hockey sequences. Having unfettered access to an NHL-sized rink was crucial, but other elements were equally necessary. For instance, the team's name and logo were not the result of a writer's imagination but came out of several focus groups. Davis says they approached the selection of a team logo and colours in the same fashion as pro sport franchises. The series also has rink-side advertising featuring many sponsors seen during most NHL games such as Canadian Tire, CCM and Molson Export.

Accurately staging the game sequences was crucial. Davis says they went back and watched previous hockey TV shows and films. "We spent a long time figuring out how to shoot the show. A lot of what's been shot in hockey, *Slap Shot* for instance, have angles that are not from the perspective of the people in the stands. No one is accustomed to seeing the game from ice level," says Davis. They decided to mimic the more traditional camera angles used on *Hockey Night in Canada*. The other element Davis and Laurin found lacking in other hockey films and TV shows were the crowds. "The crowd scenes always looked

too small and not very realistic," comments Davis. Filling an arena full of extras is usually a luxury only available to big-budget feature films. To eliminate the cost and logistical nightmare, *Power Play* employs some digital special effects created by Toronto-based Dan Krech Productions. Davis says 200 extras were shot doing various crowd reactions throughout Copps Coliseum. For the game scenes, the crowds are digitally recreated to fill the entire arena.

As for Hamilton being the home rink for the games, they say the city seemed like the perfect base for the Steelheads. Not only was it close to Toronto for shooting and had a large arena, Hamilton also offered a lot of symbolic elements, according to Davis. "Hamilton is the little place next to the big place, much like Canada next to the United States."

POST-GAME ANALYSIS

All hockey teams are judged by their performance on ice. So far, *Power Play* is off to a good start with audiences. Early ratings reveal that the hockey drama is drawing respectable numbers up against the U.S. megasitcom, *Friends*. Davis says many people have told him the program has reminded them about their childhood growing up in Canada. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear." However, reviews have been mixed. Comments range from *Power Play* "scores with great performances" to "quickly dissolves into a muddle." Headlines about the program are equally diverse: "CTV misses the net..." to "[*Power Play*] scores as offside hockey drama." Much like the armchair athletes of the sport's world, there are always cranky armchair couch-potato television producers.

Nearing the end of a long 13-episode shooting schedule, hockey enthusiast Glenn Davis is satisfied with what he, Laurin and the rest of the *Power Play* team have managed to accomplish. "I think we finally got hockey right on film." ■