

Made in Canada

An Inside Take on the World of Canadian Film and Television

The big talk among Canadian TV-industry types today (right up there with the Canadian Television Fund guidelines and latest kerfuffle over runaway productions) is exactly who *Made In Canada's* Alan Roy—that overly ambitious, conniving but charismatic CEO of Pyramid/Prodigy Productions—is modelled upon.

Over this past season, the sleazy showbiz exec (played by Peter Keleghan) has managed—with the help of his posse, Richard Strong (Rick Mercer), Victor Sela (Dan Lett) and Veronica Miller (Leah Pinsent)—to bring about the merger of two powerhouse entertainment companies. The head of rival Prodigy retired to “return to his first love, directing” and press leaks were avoided because, you see, all those privy to the secret information used code names like Jupiter and Pluto...oh, and Mickey and Minnie as well. Alan then handed out pink slips and watched stocks soar. However, crises continue to arise—a children’s show host caught wife swapping just before merchandising deals are signed; former script writers launching law suits claiming the producers ripped off their ideas; going head-to-head at NATPE with Citytv boss Moses Znaimer to sell a format to U.S. broadcasters. But despite the obstacles, shows continue to be churned out at Pyramid/Prodigy: the turn-of-the-century family drama *Beaver Creek* (just think of an overly earnest CBC series) and the cash-cow action/adventure series *Sword of Damacles* (yes, one of those many rip-offs of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Hercules* or *Sinbad*).

All images courtesy of Salter Street Films



From left: Leah Pinsent, Dan Lett, Peter Keleghan and Rick Mercer.

Hmmm...it all sounds a bit too familiar. Perhaps it's no wonder that everyone in the Canadian TV industry has an opinion about who is being poked fun at each week in the Salter Street Films/Island Edge Entertainment spoof *Made in Canada*. Well, guess no longer. About Alan Roy that is. “The truth is, he is everybody. He’s the composite of every CEO story we have ever heard, all blended together,” says *Made In Canada* executive producer Gerald Lunz, who created the show with Salter Street producer Michael Donovan and actor/story-editor Rick Mercer. “He has the sexual magnetism of a Robert Lantos, the good looks and intellect of Michael Donovan, the corporate structure of Michael McMillan’s *Alliance Atlantis* and the production ideas of Kevin Sullivan.”

I'm supposed to be on a golf course. I didn't get into TV to get stuck on a set making up stories. **Made In Canada**



The small, little world of Canadian television has the opportunity to have a laugh at its own expense each week as *Made In Canada* takes a peek inside a large publicly traded production company. All the daily dilemmas of TV production—those annoying actors who think they can direct; babysitting washed-up divas; outwitting rivals for the option on hot literary properties; schmoozing the press in the hopes of stopping a bad review; selling a family show to a German broadcaster who is really looking for edgy entertainment—are pushed just a bit too far and spoofed to the hilt. We can even see some of their own—CBC host Evan Solomon, actor Kiefer Sutherland, broadcast mogul Moses Znaimer—joining in on the fun and making cameo appearances as themselves.

Richard: It's Beaver Creek. There are not that many roles for women.

Siobhan: Well, do something about it.

Richard: I'd like to, but all the writers are men.

Siobhan: In this show all the women and children and aboriginal people are tired clichés.

Richard: Yeah, it's a family show.

Everyone is a fair target, even Lunz himself. "There's me in there, things I have done," he says. "In the Christmas show, I am the elf, the guy who makes the nuts and bolts and loves Christmas. You know those guys, the kind who say 'we have to get lights on this house.' Rick was making fun of me in those lines, and I had to sit there and take it. All my family and friends called after that episode aired and laughed at me."

But just how real is it all anyway? How close to the truth do these episodes sometimes get? "Well, you aren't going to get an answer from me," laughs Mercer carefully sidestepping the question. "Although there are times when we are shooting we go 'Good God, we are going to get nailed on this one.'" "Writing about what we know is how we got into this," responds Lunz. "And the fact is, in our industry it's not hard to say there's a lot of egos, a lot of divas. We are dealing with a lot of creative people." Mark Farrell, who has written numerous episodes and served as costory-editor with Mercer adds, "When we keep it as real as we can the satire is really self evident because the things that happen are just silly. We don't have to invent crazy scenarios. We just have to find a way to turn these stories about production companies and how decisions are made into a half-hour format."

Alan: Comedy is the result of glandular problems. Yeah, it's true. Haven't you noticed the best comedy writers are always running to the bathroom.

Richard: That's where the cocaine is.

The *Made in Canada* story lines are based on the wealth of lore available in the TV business. "When you are sitting around in a green room with a bunch of actors, the funny things they talk about are the horror stories," says Lunz. "The craziest director, the most absurd production, these stories become legendary onto themselves. They are people's party pieces, and we started collecting these stories and working with the story line. There are touchstones of reality within the humour. People watch and say 'that's not me, someone said that's me.' No, maybe it's not you, but he has your hair, although he is sounding like Robert Lantos. I hope we see ourselves. When we do, I say, 'good, we're doing what we are suppose to.'"

Salter Street Films, itself, has provided much of the inspiration for the show, says Lunz. "When we first began creating the show six years ago, Michael's company was the biggest thing we knew about and the company was going through an initial public offering. As the machinations of a corporate change, there was a lot of good fodder there." So, in many ways, the Halifax-based production company is producing a show satirizing itself. In fact, the initial six episodes were shot on weekends at the Salter Street office after the staff had gone home. "As a story-editor," adds Mercer, "when the writers come to me about the episode they are going to write, I ask them to mine from their worst experiences, their worst director, the worst producer. You can't help but put your personal experiences into the show, but they are all composites."

Its television. Its not rocket science. Its small-engine repair.

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While Mercer is best known for his sharp political criticisms on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, he says *Made In Canada* is not meant to be a biting satire. There's no finger pointing. It's a spoof on the TV industry and its antics are not to be taken too seriously. "There's truisms, but no one is being hurt or slapped," adds Lunz. "We don't have any axe to grind. We aren't getting back at anyone. That's not funny." The basis of the humour in *Made In Canada*, says Lunz, is that unique Canadian ability to laugh at ourselves, mock our successes and chuckle over our failures. With the tremendous growth in the Canadian TV industry over the past few years, it was about time to poke some fun, look at our rapidly expanding TV industry through a cynical, yet humorous lens, point out the essential silliness of it all and knock our egos down a few pegs. Put ourselves back in our rightful lowly place.

"Canadians are good at this," says Lunz. "Most of our conversations with our friends are similar, self-deprecating and cynical but really funny about it. It's a Canadian trait. We don't take ourselves or others too seriously. We have a great laugh at ourselves and move on. Viewers say, 'Hey look they are making fun of us,' but it's okay because they are making fun of themselves too." And the industry is playing along with the joke. Like Moses Znaimer poking fun at his reputation for being totally out of the loop and hiding in an ivory tower at the Citytv building on Toronto's trendy Queen Street West (he doesn't realize that Citytv already has a very popular "Intimate and Interactive" franchise) and alluding to having killed people in the 1980s.

"They play with their reputations and see the humour in it," says Mercer, pointing to the script he wrote with Moses Znaimer as the guest character. Then there's Margot Kidder taking on the role of a washed-up American actress who is brought in as a guest star on Beaver Creek and totally disrupts the set with her tantrums, hallucinations, ravings and eventual breakdown. "Now that's self-deprecating humour and not



taking yourself too seriously," says Lunz. "We asked her to play a diva, with all sorts of problems. Margot is a Canadian. She got the humour in a second. She thought it was a gas."

You want to talk over a scene with an actor? I think that's a big mistake. Made in Canada

A long list of who's who in the Canadian entertainment world have agreed to play themselves on the series or take on some far-from-flattering roles: *Road to Avonlea's* Sarah Polley as the leader of the Spirentology Cult who's out to make some cash, spoofing the strong relationship between Scientology and the entertainment industry; Kiefer Sutherland as himself, trying to break in to TV producing; Maury Chaykin as an oversexed, wife-swapping children's entertainer; *Trader's* Bruce Gray as the penny-pincher at the helm of rival Prodigy Productions; Ann Medina as a journalist who does a scathing undercover



"The most important rule of satire isto satirize what you know, and we knew this industry." Rick Mercer

report on Alan Roy; and Peter Gzowski, Gino Empry and Evan Soloman—all starring as themselves.

TV is not about art, its about commerce. Producers and executive producers are at the very top of the food chain. They are ultimately in charge of every single detail and when things go right they take the credit. When things go wrong they assign the blame. Thats why its very important when it comes to dealing with executive producers to ignore everything they say...and tell them nothing **Made in Canada**

But while the TV-production business provides the backdrop for the show, the bottom line is that industry insiders are a small percentage of the viewing population. While one level of the humour is aimed at those on the inside, all the jokes have to hit the funny bone of the general viewer. "Ultimately it's funny that wins," says Lunz. "It's the funny that got 887,000 people to tune in on a Monday night. Most of my audience doesn't know who Kevin Sullivan and Michael Donovan are, but if I draw these big, wealthy, ambitious people—everyone can relate. It's their boss."

"Sure insider jokes are planted in the episodes," continues Lunz, "but not at the cost of the plot nor at the cost of the one basic concept we hold to and that's the Dilbert reality. What happens inside Pyramid/Prodigy could happen inside a manufacturing company, or Canadian Tire. It's people working together in a publicly traded corporation at the mid-management and upper-management level. That's the corporate stuff that happens anywhere."

Farrell also says that the industry satire is second to the ultimate goal of creating a sitcom that is entertaining to its audience. "Yes, we are writing a show about the TV industry, but it wouldn't be wise to aim it just at the industry. I don't want the show to become one big inside joke, like night two at the Geminis. We are trying to get a lot of people to watch." And take away all the trappings of production sets and scripts and at its heart *Made In Canada* is a satire on corporate climbing, office politics and the sad but true reality that the dumb guy who dotes on the boss rises to the top while the ones with the real brains are still down on the ground shining the bosses

shoes. No one trusts anyone else, each is out for themselves and will stab in the back a co-worker they joined forces with just the day before. Alan, the paranoid boss, hires a detective who pretends to hire his staff away, just to prove their loyalty. And since the world of TV production has become so corporate, the entertainment aspect melds well with the spoof on office politics. "The TV business has the same bureaucratic structure as other offices," says Farrell. "It's very much about the idiots in every office, the people in charge who don't know what the hell they are doing, the underlings who do all the work and the overlords who get all the credit. It's an age-old bureaucratic story we are telling. We are making fun of people who abuse power."

Alan: Here's the problem [with the show]. The problem is no one is in jeopardy or peril.

Richard: Jeopardy and peril cost money.

Ironically, when executive producers Michael Donovan, George Lunz and Mercer first discussed doing a new series together, the backdrop did not include a film and TV production company at all. "We wanted to do a show about an individual's Machiavellian rise to the top. A person who would not care who he hurts on the way up, who is entirely focused on moving up the ladder one rung at a time," explains Mercer. They brain stormed about setting this overly ambitious character in a number of situations—Parliament Hill, an advertising agency, even a MuchMusic-type setting was considered. "That would have been fun to write, but I would be making it up," says Mercer. "I haven't worked in that environment so I would

have to guess what's going on. The most important rule of satire is to satirize what you know, and we knew this industry," explains Mercer. "We felt we had a voice of authority. I know that sounds egomaniacal but all it means is if you know it well enough you can satirize it."

Do you have any idea how cheap it is to make TV that doesn't have to be any good. I'm proud to say that our library of third-rate material is second to none. Made in Canada

With 19 half-hours and two seasons wrapped, and fresh fodder for new episodes never far away, the producers are hammering out ideas for a third season. And with *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* the latest craze, Lunz thinks Pyramid/Prodigy should jump on the game-show bandwagon as well. Oh, and he also thinks it would be too much fun to get Jim Perry, the host of *Definition*, on the show.

Pyramid/Prodigy Productions' *Sword of Damacles: a Xena: Warrior Princess rip-off.*

