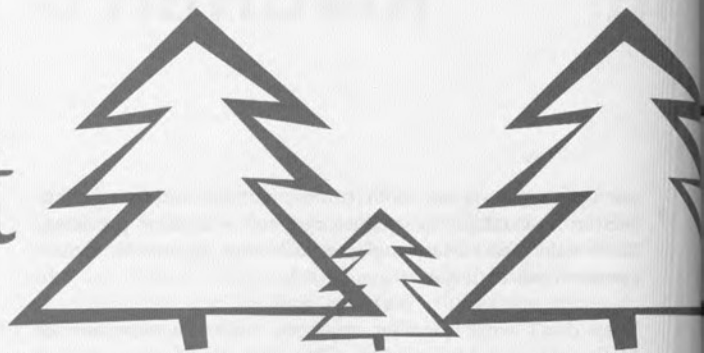


Runaway to the Great White North



BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN

"The money,"
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says Mary Harron, director of *American Psycho*.

"The money,"
says Damon Santostefano, director of *Three To Tango*.

"The money,"
says Andrew Fleming, director of *Dick*.

Sounding like a song from Cabaret, this is the mantra of American directors who decide to make their movies north of the 49th parallel. The not-so-filthy lucre gets their attention and eases the capitalist conscience, particularly in the face of jingoistic protests issuing forth from Hollywood. But as the Gucci family motto goes, "Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten."

From 1998-99, the mandate of the "Made In Canada" section of *Tribute* magazine was to find the reasons why foreign filmmakers selected Canada, and almost to the one the answer was economic-based, but often accompanied by a stipulation: "It's the money, but don't print that. Say it's the location." Location, as it happens, is a significant reason for shooting in Toronto and surrounding environs, but not a straightforward one. If this was Saskatchewan, location would equal landscape and directors, American and Canadian alike, regularly return from there breathless. "The impact of Saskatchewan is all about the indescribable sky and the beauty of the land," says *Conquest* producer Christina Jennings, "but the plot has to incorporate the prairies."

Conversely, few, if any, films shot in Toronto are literally set in Toronto. That city is selected primarily because it's the stand-in capital of the world. In Shakespearean terms, Toronto is "false as water," fitting perfectly into any mould into which it is poured. Shameless urban hussy that it is, Toronto easily does Washington (*Dick*), Chicago (*Three To Tango*), Queens, N.Y. (*Frequency*), Manhattan (*American Psycho*), New Jersey (*The Hurricane*), New Haven (*The Skulls*), generic university towns in New England (*Urban Legend*), the wooded foothills of the Rockies (*Grizzly Falls*), and inexplicably enough, an equatorial rain forest (*Peter Benchley's Amazon*).

So commonplace is the sprouting up of a film crew that the local gaga factor is no more. On the other hand, the ennui has not reached the same levels as in Manhattan where, when Robert De Niro was shooting *Fifteen Minutes* on a blocked-off Madison Avenue early one Sunday morning last spring, pedestrians continued to charge through the middle of the set because that happened to be the shortest distance between point A and B. There is a joke that sums up the Torontonians' civility regarding filmmaking: How do you get Canadian bystanders to move away from a film set? You ask them.

Of the billion dollars of film business that was generated in Ontario in 1999, 47 per cent, or \$438 million, flowed in from foreign productions, according to the Ontario Film Development Corp. (OFDC). But money alone is not sufficient to make these kinds of decisions. When pressed, it invariably ends up being a "money and..." justification. Rhonda



Silverstone, film commissioner for the City of Toronto, happily, but not smugly, notes that many directors and producers are here on their second or third go-round. Gus Van Zant is making *Finding Forester*, his third film in the area after *To Die For* and *Good Will Hunting*. Damon Santostefano is also up for his second time, directing the TV pilot *Kill! Kill! Kill!* just a little more than a year after shooting *Three To Tango* here. Producers Gina Matthews and Neal Moritz have completed both *Urban Legends* in the area, with Moritz returning to produce *The Skulls* and Matthews coming back up as producer on the cable feature *The Wishing Tree*. "At one time," Silverstone says, "film production here used to drop off in the winter. Now it slows down between November and February, and the \$250-million worth of year-round television commercial production keeps crews working."

Indeed, production is a 12-month business, with April to June as the warm-up and July to September the high season; and local film crews receive constant applause. Unlike other industries where the cream of the crop move south, Ontario offers enough work with a lucrative earning potential to hang on to its crews. Silverstone reports that, "In fact, I always get calls from Americans who want to work here, so we now have an immigration form letter to send to them. As of yet, there is no such thing as a Canadian green card."

Marcus Handman, executive director of the Directors Guild of Canada (DGC), notes that 65 per cent of productions are solely American-based, 17 to 18 per cent are Canadian-based and the rest are a canine's brunch of co-productions. This reflects the OFDC's statistic of a 25 per cent increase in the sector and the 37 per cent drop in domestic productions. However, these figures do not tell the entire story. The growth in American production goes beyond principal photography here and post-production boomeranging back to the United States. "Last year, our post-production infrastructure lured a dozen American-based pictures, shot elsewhere in Canada, back to Toronto for post. My sense of it is that DGC sound and picture editors have the same amount of work they had a year ago. There is no downturn; if anything, it's going up a bit."

The influx of American dollars are not necessarily accompanied by America's blessing, meaning that while their reasons for selecting Toronto do not qualify as textbook "sour grapes," they are certainly extremely tart. Hawk Koch is the producer of *Frequency*, which was shot in Toronto last year (a point that is adamantly disguised in the press book with lines such as: "from the beginning everyone involved with *Frequency* wanted to shoot it on location in Queens, New York, a locale that cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world and *Keeping the Faith* which was shot at the same time in New York. He is



Dennis Quaid in *Frequency*: "From the beginning everyone involved with *Frequency* wanted to shoot it on location in Queens, New York, a locale that cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world." Except in the Beach in Toronto.

just slightly less than diplomatic when he explains the location for each film. "*Frequency* should have been shot all in New York. Nothing against Canada, but the reason is pure economics. Everybody in Hollywood is fighting it. I mean, I love Toronto. I had a great time up there and enjoyed the people and the crew. It's just that this was specifically a New York movie. It's just like when we made the deal with Spyglass Entertainment for *Keeping the Faith*, we had the luxury [of shooting in New York] on that movie because we had the power of Edward Norton. On this movie [starring Dennis Quaid and Jim Caviezel], we didn't have that kind of power. They gave us a budget and said this is how much you're going to make the movie for, which is a lot less than the average Hollywood film. The only way to make it for the price we had was to go to Canada."

And the consolation prize goes to...Toronto for fooling the director of *Frequency*. Koch recalled how he made the final decision. "The production designer and I went to Canada and he said if he could find Queens, we'd do it. So we took photos from all over Queens and then we took pictures from the Beach in Toronto and showed Greg Hoblit, the director, and said, "OK, which one is which?" They looked similar enough. The basic architecture was correct in terms of Queens in 1969."



Mary Harron directing Christian Bale in *American Psycho* in Toronto.
"I don't think Toronto does New York," says Harron.

Damon Santostefano, director of the Matthew Perry/Neve Campbell romantic comedy set in Chicago, *Three to Tango*, sang the same financial tune but without the sufferance. "Ultimately it came down to expense," says Santostefano. "Chicago would have been significantly more than Toronto." Footage of Chicago buildings figured heavily into the plot of dueling architects, so Santostefano used the Palais Royale (an art deco former dance palace located in west-end Toronto) and a healthy serving of computer-generated imagery. "Did you notice the Palais is stuck in the middle of Chicago? Nobody from that city has ever said, 'Wait! That's not there in Lincoln Park.' One person from Chicago did call me to say, 'Did they just build that?' I love when that happens."

The integrity of financing is a justification even the most ardent American filmmaker cannot dispute. But it is significant to remember that Canada is not considered until all American locales are discounted. Andrew Fleming, director of the satiric Watergate romp *Dick*, spoke reluctantly about what is happening in the United States on an increasing basis. "We shot there [Toronto] for economic reasons, purely. Well, for several reasons. We needed a White House set and there's one in L.A. and one in Toronto and one in Virginia. The one in Toronto was the most together. It was in a sound stage which was not the best sound stage in the world, but it was a nice set and it was going up for some kind of cable movie and it was the cheapest circumstance. We shot some of the exteriors in Toronto and some in Washington, D.C. because we needed a city with some of the architecture from the Watergate era and that doesn't exist in L.A. The problem is Washington is the only city in the country where the film commissioner's function is basically to get you to go shoot somewhere else. They don't want the business."

The subject of foreign production on Canadian soil cannot be mentioned without a nod in the direction of the stateside protests that came to a head in 1999: a protest on Hollywood Blvd., an altercation at the Showbiz West trade show in L.A. last June where a B.C. film commissioner was threatened by

an American crew member, and a fizzled rally at Locations 2000 in Los Angeles this February. Half the battle is number-sliding while the other half is mudslinging, all to the tune of *South Park's* funny "Blame Canada." The Directors Guild of America (DGA) claimed Canadians absconded with \$2.3 billion (U.S.) of their business in 1998 while a PriceWaterhouseCoopers study initiated by the DGC came up with a figure of \$573 million (U.S.), less than 2 per cent of total Hollywood-based production. The DGA maintains the DGC miscalculated, thereby suggesting \$1.7 billion worth of business was buried. The American notion that Canada might cloak three-quarters of their own success speaks to an indulgence in conspiracy theories. Is Canada, a country of 30 million people with a garrisoned film culture, the Cuba of filmmaking? Have we become such a threat that legislative redress, as mentioned by Brian Unger (the associate western executive director for the DGA), will be brought in, tantamount to the Helms-Burton Law (U.S. legislation intended to punish foreign companies who do business in Cuba)? One can only envision America staying up nights worried that boatloads of Canadian directors are crossing Lake Ontario, heading toward Buffalo, the Miami of the north.

As preposterous as this appears to those living here in the cinematic tundra, to Vancouver-born actor/director Jason Priestly, a habitué of Los Angeles, it defies logic. Priestly is part of the backwash of ex-pat talent who are finding increasingly more work and publicity opportunities (this year's Genies notwithstanding, where he was a last minute no-show) north of the border. In Toronto for the 1999 film festival to promote his music documentary, *Bare Naked in America*, Priestly offered a cross-border overview of the protest: "The American media is propagating this whole thing about runaway productions and it's absolutely ridiculous. I'm a member of the Directors Guild of America and the Directors Guild of Canada, so I get all the materials and it's fascinating. The DGA is saying that there is a loss of \$10 billion in business to Canada and the DGC says, 'OK, we've seen this figure but included in it are Canadian shows shown in America like *PSI*



Ex-pats Matthew Perry and Neve Campbell in *Three to Tango*. "Did you notice that [Toronto's] Palais Royale is stuck in the middle of Chicago?"



The boys of *Detroit Rock City* in front of Copps Collosium in Hamilton. "Politics, smolitics. If I get a bigger bang for my buck in Toronto, I'm going to Toronto," says director Adam Rifkin.

Factor and *Stargate*. These are Canadian productions, guys. Plus, the Americans are including the entire budget of the American movies."

Intent notwithstanding, Ontario just sits on the map like any other potential location and hopes for the best. Often, the manner in which Toronto gets its film business is much the same as how Elizabeth Berkeley landed the lead in *Showgirls*—having the right attributes for the right film. Toronto has the architecture, the landscape and the favourable exchange rate. In the case of Joe Mantegna's *Lakeboat*, we had a lake and we had a harbour that offered a freighter as a set. As for Mary Harron's *American Psycho*, "Lions Gate is based in Toronto and I had a lot of family support in Toronto with my daughter when I was filming." Beyond that, she didn't think much of the exterior location, partially because. "I don't think Toronto does New York. Montreal is easier to make it look like New York, but I don't have any family there."

It is not as if Toronto sprung forth, like Athena from Zeus's brow, wholly formed as the ideal film location. "Over the years," Rhonda Silverstone notes, "we have also developed the service angle. The crews are constantly praised, as are equipment services. Florists and caterers have sprung up to serve the industry. Toronto is also the media centre for the country." But there continue to be details that need refinement. Margaret Mohr, an American costume designer brought in to work on *Lakeboat* enjoyed working here last summer but did note Holt Renfrew and Harry Rosen were the only retail stores offering "studio services." "Designers for films don't know what's going to fit the actors and what's not, so you can go in and sign merchandise out, try it on your actors and bring it back within 48 hours and pay for the things you keep," Mohr explains. "Once we were shooting a film in Alabama and we already had 10 jackets from The Gap, but they were redoing a stunt, so I needed 10 more. I called Studio Services Gap in L.A., gave them the jacket style. Within three days, they had them FedExed in from all over the country to Alabama. But you don't get that service at The Gap up here."

The "not L.A." aspect is also a bankable commodity which was the exact thinking of Adam Rifkin, director of the Kiss homage, *Detroit Rock City*, for which Toronto and Hamilton stood in as Detroit and the American Midwest. "I had a great experience shooting in Toronto. We had a great crew and if we had shot this in L.A., we would have lost that feel of the Midwest. I grew up there and I wanted the film to be as close as possible to what I related to. This movie was about four Midwestern kids in the 1970s going to a rock concert. The light and the colours that we captured were all on purpose. And listen, when I'm making a movie, I don't care about politics. I just want the movie to look the best that it can look and have every dollar be squeezed to its maximum. Politics, smolitics. If I get a bigger bang for my buck in Toronto, I'm going to Toronto. And if people complain about that in Los Angeles, they should be more competitive there."

Capitalism, which appears to have its home base in the United States, is a game that all can play. The underlying concept of the "win" is that it's a right, not a privilege, the latter being what Hollywood appears to assume. For all the protestations about runaway productions, Los Angeles is increasingly less hospitable as a location for making a film, as Rifkin sees it. "Shooting in L.A. is very, very restricting and it's very expensive. I have a friend who was shooting a film here, a small movie and they were so restricted, they had to go up to Vancouver. Listen, I'd love to shoot my movies in L.A. because then I could drive home every night, but I would go back to Toronto."

It's a little like trying to put together a good poker hand. One card is what you're dealt by the patron saint of locations, Mother Nature; another card is turning a weak dollar into the strong incentive; a third is the enhanced economic courtesy of tax credits; a fourth is the enthusiasm and expertise in the area of services and facilities and cooperative film commissions which match or exceed the southern competition; and the trump card, which appeals to every director and producer on the planet, is what no one expects: "It's the Cuban cigars," says Joe Montegna. •