

# Accent Entertainment: Offbeat and Successful

By Paul Eichhorn

It seems rather appropriate that the "office" that houses Accent Entertainment is as quirky and offbeat as some of its productions. Its Queen Street West address takes you to a street-level restaurant. The Accent office is through the door on the left (no sign in sight) and you climb a set of stairs to the second floor. There you find a typical apartment-sized kitchen but instead of a living room, an Accent employee is there to greet you. A few minutes later, Susan Cavan, Accent founder and chairman, comes down from her third-floor office.

"Sometimes couriers show up here and think they've mistakenly walked into someone's apartment," remarks Cavan, a veteran of Canadian film and TV production. She established Accent in 1989 after a decade working with such producers as Garth Drabinsky and Robert Lantos. Her entry into film production was as a lawyer working with Cineplex, beginning in 1979. She soon found herself involved in tax-shelter productions such as *Tribute* and *The Amateur*. This led to her association with International Cinema Corp. in Montreal and work on *Quest For Fire* and *Atlantic City*. She then executive produced the Genie Award-winner *The Bay Boy*. In 1985, she was a founding partner and president of Alliance and was involved with several international co-productions as well as TV series. Cavan was on the front lines during a period of amazing growth in Canadian film and television.

"I decided to open my own boutique production house so I could be a hands-on producer," she says. Accent is firmly rooted in Ontario but she freely admits it hasn't gotten any easier over the past decade. "The business has changed a lot in the last five years. With the OFDC no longer funding projects, it's much more complex to get funds." Cavan says she is attracted to "auteur-driven material." It's one reason she has developed working relationships with directors such as Bruce McCulloch, Bruce McDonald, Don McKeller, Laurie Lynd, Peter Wellington and Chris Grismer. She has spearheaded films such as McCulloch's *Dog Park* and *Superstar*, Wellington's *Dead Aviators* and the McDonald/McKeller *Twitch City* series for CBC-TV. Many of these are slightly offbeat and could be called quirky. That appeals to Cavan. "I like idiosyncratic points of view and I quite like black comedies. Good original writing is something I like to see in our productions," she says, but adds that this type of material can be a challenge to market. She's quick to point out, however, that Wellington's *Dead Aviators* has received interest from buyers around the world. It hasn't hurt that Accent productions have received tons of critical acclaim and several awards.

The firm's early work included the underrated 1991 feature *South of Wawa* and the final version of the CBC-TV series *Material World*. Cavan claims the series creatively did some of the same things *Ally McBeal* is doing today. Cavan also worked as a producer on such projects as the series *Sweating Bullets*, comedy shorts for *Saturday Night Live* and the features *Joe's So Mean to Josephine*, *Mesmer* and *Magic Hunter*.

Funding her productions is an on-going and demanding part of Cavan's daily workload. She manages to find funds in various places from deals with TV broadcasters to international co-production arrangements. She says the Cable Production Fund has to some degree helped to fill in for the loss of OFDC

funding. Unfortunately, Cavan points to young first-time directors as clear victims of the provincial move out of direct film-production funding.

Being based in Toronto has both advantages and disadvantages, according to Cavan. Most the material she produces is created in town. The city offers some of the best crews and facilities in North America, yet the barrage of U.S. productions often means firms like Accent can't access these crews and facilities as easily as she would like. As for the tax-credit system, she says it helps but it's subject to strict audits to determine what constitutes Canadian labour.

Accent is currently going through a small expansion phase as it targets cable and network MOWs along with feature films budgeted from \$5 to \$15 million. Upcoming projects include a new Bruce McCulloch film, a feature from Laurie Lynd entitled *Was* and a dark comedy/drama from Chris Grismer. "Certainly, the material we're producing now is more mainstream but still very original. I'm making sure all the pieces are in place before a project goes into production."

As for the merger mania in the entertainment and media sector, Cavan considers it vital for firms such as Accent to plug into one of these distribution channels and be aware of markets outside Canada. "It's certainly challenging being an independent in this environment." Nevertheless, Cavan predicts Accent has an exciting future ahead with the emergence of new cable specialty channels and the Internet as a distribution channel. "There could be a place for a lot of niche players like Accent."

*Twitch City*: Callum Keith Rennie, Molly Parker, Don McKellar and "Lucky" the cat.



Photo by: Cylla von Tiedemann.