

Shaftesbury Films: Planning For the Future

By Cheryl Binning

The foundation of Toronto's Shaftesbury Films was built on feature films, beginning in 1992 with *Camilla*, and followed by *Swann* and *Painted Angels*. From the beginning, Shaftesbury recognized the importance of fostering relationships—co-producing its features with long-standing partners in other parts of Canada and overseas. *Swann*, for example, was a co-production with Greenpoint Films of England; *Painted Angels* and *Conquest* were both partnerships with Heartland Motion Pictures of Regina and Greenpoint; and Shaftesbury's latest film *Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang* was produced with Salter Street Films of Halifax.

Small-to-mid-size producers in Toronto face numerous challenges financing their projects, says Shaftesbury producer, Christina Jennings, and co-producing has been a viable solution, particularly when it comes down to finding that last 10 to 15 per cent of financing. Jennings admits that the Ontario credit is not as generous as other provinces and without any equity program, it often makes sense to co-produce with another province. "We have not relied heavily on government money but sometimes when you are missing that final bit of financing, if New Brunswick or Saskatchewan can offer some help, you definitely have to think about it," she says. In Saskatchewan, for example, Jennings has been able to take advantage not only of the province's generous tax credit but also access equity-investment funding to help get her films financed.

With a slate of co-productions providing the company with a solid base, Jennings and Shaftesbury president Jonathan Barker quickly realized that for a small Toronto production company, diversification was key. They slowly began to expand the company's sphere to where it is today—a busy production house working in features, long-form drama and series, with a growing large-format division and a distribution operation.

"We made a decision to go into the TV business because at the end of the day features are difficult to get made," explains Jennings. "There's a stable demand for television product, and we needed to ensure we had strong revenues to continue to make our features." In 1998, Shaftesbury produced its first MOW, *External Affairs*, an adaptation of Timothy Findlay's play *The Stillborn Lover*, followed by *Deadly Appearances* and *Love & Murder*, adaptations of Gail Bowne's Joanne Kilbourn mystery series starring Wendy Crewson and Victor Garber.

With a number of features to its credit, Shaftesbury was well aware of the challenges involved in getting feature films on Canadian screens. In late 1998, Jennings and Barker decided to take matters into their own hands and further diversify their company by launching a feature-film distribution arm in partnership with Oasis Pictures, also of Toronto. At the time, a consolidation trend had swept the distribution industry with many of the small releasing companies being absorbed by larger entities. Shaftesbury/Oasis spied an opening for a niche film distributor, Oasis Shaftesbury Releasing. The company will release Shaftesbury's slate of films and annually acquire a few Canadian films a year for distribution in Canada.

In the meantime, Shaftesbury's MOW slate has continued to grow. During the upcoming year Jennings plans to shoot the

third and fourth installment of the Gail Bowne series, to be directed by Brad Turner (*Major Crime, Peacekeepers*), as well as *Torso*, the true story of Evelyn Dick, the famous case in which a Hamilton woman was found guilty of murdering her husband. Although the story is set in Hamilton, *Torso* will be shot in Toronto with a couple days of exteriors in the steel city. The high cost of bringing cast, crew and equipment to Hamilton is the only reason the entire shoot is not landing in the city, says Jennings. Unlike the film and TV tax credits available in other provinces—which often provide regional bonuses for shooting outside major centres—there is no incentive to encourage shooting outside Toronto in the Ontario credit. Finding available crew is another difficulty in Toronto, says Jennings. Toronto producers are very often competing with American offshore work—as well as each other—to find available crews. "All the Toronto producers find out if they have accessed Canadian Television Fund money in April and at that time everyone starts fighting for crews," explains Jennings, "although its already too late because the Americans start up in March and have a leg up on everyone else."

Despite these challenges, Shaftesbury has no plans to set up shop out West or further East. "These other places are still very young businesses," says Jennings. "Meanwhile Ontario has the best sound facilities, labs, composers, a strong acting community—the best people all around. This film community is very strong and the suppliers here are very supportive of Toronto companies."

The next frontiers for Shaftesbury are in the large-format realm. Two years ago Shaftesbury teamed up with Imax Corp. co-founder Robert Kerr and formed SK Films, a large-format division which will both produce and distribute films for the extra-large screen. The company is now gearing up to produce its first IMAX films, including *Up, Up and Away*, a film about vertical flight to be directed by Dave Douglas (*Fires of Kuwait*). "We saw the large-format network as a growth area and a complement to what we were doing as long-form producers," says Barker, formerly a vice-president at Imax Corp. "Once the large-format business grows to a sufficient degree, then we will begin to look at a cross-pollination between the feature-film, television and large-format divisions," says Barker. "In the future, these formats will start to collide. We are starting to plan for that future."



Christina Jennings



Photo at Right: (left to right) Robert Hays, Wendy Crewson and Victor Garber in the Shaftesbury Films' production of *Criminal Instinct*.