

The Film Works: A Long Journey to Success

By Paul Eichhorn

Toronto-based film and TV production company The Film Works, is enjoying the positive critical and audience response to its feature *Such a Long Journey*. Based on the acclaimed novel by Rohinton Mistry, the film marks the firm's most ambitious production to date. And like the film's title, it has also been a long journey for The Film Works to reach these heights.

Founded in the late 1970s by Paul Stephens and Eric Jordan, The Film Works began by producing low-budget TV documentaries. "We actually got into producing so we could make our own material come to life," explains Jordan. He recalls the firm's past work surrounded by costumes, props, promo posters and awards from these very productions—*The Arrow*, *The Planet of Junior Brown* and *Where the Spirit Lives*. He and Stephens initially received notice for their TV series *Spirit Bay*. This low-budget production led to the award-winning MOW *Where The Spirit Lives* in 1989. "It proved that we could do quality drama. The movie was a breakthrough for us around the world."

Today The Film Works is enjoying another global success with *Such a Long Journey*. After landing the rights to the novel, the company hooked up with former documentary filmmaker Sturla Gunnarsson for a demanding shoot on location in India. The shoot was marred by protesters shutting down production at one point. Eventually, the project was uprooted and moved to a new location 965 km north. The firm's dedication and hard work paid off. The film has received critical praise here and abroad as well as strong box office returns in Canada, the United States and Britain.

The film's success can be attributed in part to veteran producer Victor Solnicki (*The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome*) who joined The Film Works in the early 1990s. Since then, the production company has embarked on several projects that have received international notice including *Ganesh: Ordinary Magic* and *The Planet of Junior Brown*. That feature (initially a MOW) directed by Clement Virgo, has received scores of awards (including an Emmy nomination) and was well-received by American audiences. The Film Works is currently wrapping production on Virgo's second feature, *Love Come Down*, starring Deborah Cox. For Jordan, working with auteurs like Virgo is one of the firm's strengths.

"As a company, we like to work with directors who are auteurs. But we're now also concentrating on producing literary products." Jordan is referring to upcoming productions such as *Away* (based on Jane Urquhart's novel) and an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride*. The Film Works is also producing a book-inspired MOW, *J.J. Harper—A Ghost Story*, adapted by acclaimed playwright Thomson Highway.

Even though feature films are becoming increasingly important to The Film Works, Jordan points out that TV has been and continues to be an important medium for the firm. He and his colleagues have produced a number of productions for the small screen including *Life with Billy*, *Peter Ustinov's Russia*, *Lyddie* and *Witness to Yesterday*. Their mini-series *The Arrow* received high ratings, several awards and worldwide sales. The Film Works is also finding new cable specialty channels

an ideal venue for their productions. It has made, or is making, a series to air on the History, Discovery and the Comedy channels.

The company is located in an old carpet factory in west-end Toronto, also home to other production companies and new media/Internet developers. Jordan certainly recognizes the advantages of being based in the heart of a creative community. "The creative people are here [in Toronto] and that's good for us. And the Toronto International Film Festival has been a great venue for us to gain global exposure. The OFDC has also helped firms such as ours market productions at the festival. People look at everything at the festival."

Jordan and his colleagues, like many other Toronto-based producers, do find it's becoming harder to get experienced crews to work on low-budget productions. More and more crews are opting for high-paying gigs on American productions shot in Toronto. And it's not surprising that financing is a big concern to a growing firm like The Film Works. Jordan says the company is always looking for funding partners in other provinces and countries. Producing features is currently difficult in this country since funding from the Cable Production Fund or Telefilm tends to work in favour of TV, according to Jordan. "For example, a feature might get \$200,000 from the Cable Fund whereas a TV production receives \$800,000. We need a new film fund to kick in."

Jordan also doesn't understand the rationale behind the Ontario government's current tax-credit system. It does benefit his firm but also provides financial advantages to big-budget U.S. productions. He considers the current provincial government out of touch when it comes to arts and culture. "To [Ontario Premier Mike] Harris, playing golf is culture. The current tax-credit system is cumbersome. It's great that it's there but the lack of direct funding has made it more difficult to produce films in Ontario."

Despite the funding challenges, The Film Works is committed to its Toronto and Ontario roots. "We find people here we like to work with," Jordan explains. "We like working with Canadian talent and we love doing indigenous Canadian productions."

The Genie-winning *Such a Long Journey*

