

Ottawa: Ontario's Second Production Centre

By Paul Townend

For a brief period of time, the sleepy city of Ottawa was the centre of the Canadian film-production universe. It was the home of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau which merged with the National Film Board of Canada in 1941. It was also home to Crawley Films, Canada's largest independent producer of shorts and industrials. So from 1940 to 1956, the year the NFB moved its operations to Montreal, Ottawa could rightly claim to be the largest producer of non-theatrical films in the world. Today, however, it is struggling to come out from under the shadows of the production powerhouses of Toronto and Montreal, and no one would consider it to be the centre of anything except, perhaps, pork-barrel politics and increasingly ineffectual federal politicians.

"An attempt is being made to coordinate efforts to create a regional identity. We want to make it simple. It will attract more productions," says Ottawa Hull Film and Television Association (OHFTA) president Aimée Britten of the 24 municipalities—13 in Ontario and 11 in Quebec—that comprise the city of Ottawa/Hull, Canada's fourth largest. Her organization represents some 350 members, and they have been lobbying hard for a capital region film office to coordinate the bureaucratic maze that is present-day Ottawa/Hull. Jacques Gedeon from the National Capital Commission echoes Britten's call for a film office to overcome "too many levels" of municipal approval for any major producer to seriously consider shooting in Ottawa. Gedeon also points to the lack of lab facilities and the lack of support at all levels of government. "It's the most beautiful city in Canada," says Gedeon, "but there is also the perception that the city is being run by fat cats" and doesn't need support in this area.

Most of OHFTA members make corporate videos and in-house productions; there is very little feature-film activity. If a filmmaker has talent, it's a short trip down the road to Toronto, and Montreal is even closer. It's hard to resist; but so do. Producer Derek Diorio of Distinct Features has two features under his belt (*Two's a Mob*, 1997, and *House of Luk*, which was shot in 1999) and three in preparation. He concedes that Ottawa's location is a problem (being in the same province as Toronto) and sometimes he has to wait two weeks to see his rushes (which go to Montreal). But for what he wants to do—work at home on films with a modest budget—Ottawa has the best of everything, including experienced crews and actors eager for a break. And there is fringe activity as represented by the Independent Filmmakers Co-op, which has over 150 members who can access equipment, mutual support, and who shot 17 independent productions last year. Indeed, co-op member Lee Demarbre's *Harry Knuckles and the Treasure of the Aztec Mummy*, a 27-minute, 16mm, \$13,000 short was invited to this year's Cannes Film Festival.

And there is animation. It's the legacy of the Film Board and Crawley Films, which essentially ceased operations with the death of its founder, the legendary Budge, in 1986. Crawley's had produced the first animated television series anywhere in North America, *The Wizard of Oz*, in 1962, and several private animation studios such as Atkinson Films and Lacewood Studios have come and gone since then. Currently, Greg Lawrence of Ocnus Productions is producing *Kevin*

Spencer, an animated series about a psychopathic kid who lives with his white-trash parents, a comedy in the vein of *South Park*. *Kevin Spencer* has been sold to CTV and SNL executive producer Lorne Michaels bought the original 12 shorts to use as inserts on the long-running *Saturday Night Live*.

Two annual events have drawn national attention to Ottawa as a vital part of the Canadian cinematic map. First is the Ottawa Animation Film Festival, which operates every two years in the fall, with a student animation festival in the intervening year. The festival has become a major event in the annual animation sweepstakes, which include Cannes in May and Annecy in June. Second is the Summer Institute for Film and Television (SIFT), a crash course in filmmaking first launched 20 years ago at Algonquin College by Tom Shoebridge. Shoebridge was teaching film studies and communications at Algonquin when it occurred to him (after a brief stint on the set of *The Hounds of Notre Dame*, the Fil Fraser feature of 1980, from which he was fired) that he needed more training in the skills of filmmaking. Such courses were only available in the United States. He went back to Algonquin and started his own training centre, offering intensive workshops in producing, directing and writing taught by those who actually made a living in the business. The formula worked and now SIFT is one of the most sought after learning experiences by wannabe filmmakers and experienced professionals alike. It has evolved into a five-day "boot camp" of workshops from nine to four, panel discussions from four to six, and screenings after seven. Filmmakers such as Atom Egoyan and Jeremy Podeswa have brought their films (sometimes prior to general release) for study purposes. The first screening of Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, after its triumphant debut at Cannes, was at SIFT.

Ottawa is an active production centre, perhaps second dog to Toronto, but still one of the busiest in the country. What it needs, and hopefully someday will achieve, is the one defining film that will mark its place on the cinematic map.

Below: Tom Shoebridge gives some advice to a SIFT participant.

