

# WEST COAST UPDATE

BY JACK VERMEE



Bruce Sweeney's Last Wedding

**As the rain comes down** and the province gets ready for a spring election, the multi-million-dollar question on the minds of Vancouver film-industry types is, of course, whether or not there will be a Writers Guild of America strike. The livelihood of thousands of Vancouverites is up in the air as the May 2 contract expiration date rapidly approaches. As I write, negotiations between Hollywood writers and producers have collapsed and things aren't looking very good. Up until now, Vancouver has certainly seen its share of increased Hollywood production geared toward making sure that there's plenty of film in the pipeline in the event of a strike. The CFTPA reports that the year 2000 saw a 32 per cent increase in BC-based production, mainly due to a 49 per cent increase in foreign location shooting, resulting in an industry worth \$1.1 billion last year. Currently, pretty well anyone who can lift a cable, direct traffic or put on a baseball cap backwards is working. That will change dramatically if a strike occurs.

According to Tom Adair, executive director of the B.C. Council of Film Unions, there could be as much as a 60 per cent drop in production with up to 75 per cent of the workforce temporarily displaced from the job market. "It feels like when you're out on the ice, and it's about to split. Hopefully you're wearing a wetsuit and you can swim." But it's not all doom and gloom; Adair sees it as an opportunity as well. "The industry is big enough here to keep going. What'll happen is that indigenous productions, which are nowhere to be seen right now because everybody is at work servicing Hollywood films, will finally have a chance to go to camera over the summer months, something they've had a hard time doing before because summer is traditionally the strongest time for Hollywood productions." Adair points out that the unions have been warning their members of the possibility of a work stoppage for more than a year now. Here's hoping that they listened and have put away a little extra dough.

Moving on to local productions, Bruce Sweeney is putting the final touches on the sound mix for his highly anticipated *Last Wedding*, which should be completed by the time you read this. The drama, produced by Stephen Hegyes and centring on three relationships and their eventual dissolution, will be submitted to the Cannes festival. There's something incongruous about the down-to-earth Sweeney and his usual team (director of photography Dave Pelletier, production designer Tony Devenyi, actors Tom Scholte, Nancy Spivak, Ben Rattner,

along with a newcomer to the Sweeney ensemble, Molly Parker) strolling along the oh-so-glamorous Croisette in Cannes, but here's hoping they get the chance.

The digital revolution continues and the fledgling Pacific new wave picks up speed with two soon-to-be-competed projects, both of which involve Carl Bessai, director of the 1999 Dogma 95 piece *Johnny*. Bessai's second feature, *Lola*, continues the minimalist, cinéma-vérité approach he used in *Johnny*, this time to explore what happens when a troubled young woman (played by Sabrina Grdevich) gets a chance to forge a new identity and a new life. Also in the cast are Colm Feore, Joanna Going, Janet Wright and Ian Tracey.

Bessai is also one of three directors – the other two being Reg Harkema (*A Girl Is a Girl*) and James Dunnison (*Stuff*) – involved in the omnibus digital feature *Bang!* set to screen as a work-in-progress at the Local Heroes Film Festival in Edmonton. Each director came up with a character and each directs his own section of the film but all three of the main characters interact in each piece. Harkema's is titled *Bad Chloe*, Dunnison's is *Sweet Jane* and Bessai's is *Bang!* According to Local Heroes festival director Bill Evans, the triptych is "reminiscent of the French New Wave in the way the directors are using new technologies – in this case, digital technologies – to blend fictional storylines with a documentary approach to locations, sound, etc." Along with Blaine Thurier (*Low Self-Esteem Girl*) and Marc Retailleau (*Noroc*), Bessai, Harkema and Dunnison represent the vanguard of new digital filmmaking in this city, something I hope to be able to report on at greater length in a future issue.

Vancouver's only theatrical distribution company, Red Sky Entertainment, was recently purchased by the production company Keystone Entertainment (the people responsible for *MVP*, the sequel of which is currently shooting in Vancouver). It is too early to tell if Red Sky – who've scored recently with the art-house hits *Not of this World* and *Goya in Bordeaux* – will continue picking up foreign fare, but they haven't had an interesting release for a couple of months now. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that the best Canadian film ever made that wasn't a Canadian film is finally getting a sequel. Yes, *Slapshot II: Breaking the Ice* is currently shooting in arenas around Vancouver. And, yes, the Hansen Brothers are reprising their roles. Old-time hockey, anyone?

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