

EAST COAST UPDATE

BY RON FOLEY MACDONALD



Left to right: Paul Donovan, Michael Donovan (of Salter Street Films) and Michael MacMillan, CEO of Alliance Atlantis Communications.

The East Coast entered a new age in film and television production when the CRTC awarded Halifax's Salter Street Films a licence for the new first-tier specialty cable TV service, The Independent Film Channel. Salter beat out major national players such as Alliance, Astral, Chorus and Citytv in a hotly contested competition. The channel is scheduled to begin transmission in September 2001.

The awarding of the highly sought-after channel brought on a rush of takeover and buyout rumours that swirled around Salter Street, the East Coast's biggest production company, founded and run by Michael and Paul Donovan, for weeks on end. Less than three months after Salter gained the channel, those rumours took on substance. Alliance Atlantis, Canada's largest producer of film and television products, announced that it had reached an agreement to buy Salter with the expressed intent of continuing its Halifax operations with the Donovans at the head. To please the CRTC and maintain the conditions of the licence, the indie movie channel will also be operated out of the East Coast.

Atlantic filmmakers experienced, at first, disbelief, and then disappointment. The legendary \$400 cup of coffee to meet Toronto or Montreal broadcast officials, commissioning editors and distributors suddenly looked like it might shrink to a local \$4 espresso. When the buyout was announced, euphoria sank back to cynicism and despair. Surely, Alliance Atlantis's massive catalogue of indie films would probably fill out the first three or four years of the indie channel's life, dispensing with the necessity of any new programming.

The reality, of course, lies somewhere in between. Certainly, it's still an advantage for East Coast filmmakers to have the indie channel located in Halifax. As a specialty service, however, it will be responsible for servicing the entire country. Alliance Atlantis will undoubtedly have a great influence over the station, making an Atlantic gold rush a bit unlikely. And while some Toronto business commentators, particularly those in the *National Post*, sneered at all three parties (Salter, Alliance Atlantis and especially the CRTC), it's clear that some of those negative comments (that Salter never wanted the channel and that the CRTC has been made a fool of by the takeover since Alliance Atlantis had applied for the channel itself) were a bit overstated.

The truth is that Alliance Atlantis had already owned a significant part of Salter (20 per cent before the company went public) and has worked closely with the Donovan brothers on a

number of major films and television series, including Paul Donovan's *Buried on Sunday* and the CBC's *Emily of New Moon*. The infrastructure Salter has built up in the Atlantic region, and the company's proven ability to access provincial and federal funding programs, makes the deal look quite solid and infinitely sensible. Valued at about \$80 million, the buyout also makes Alliance Atlantis a less likely candidate for takeover from one of the larger media conglomerates because of its newly accumulated debt from the transaction. And Nova Scotia will probably see even more production resulting from the deal due to Salter's lower production costs.

That said, there is some irony in the fact that the fourth season of the Halifax-shot series *Made in Canada* is rumoured to be heading to Toronto precisely because all of Salter's facilities are filled to the gills with the likes of the sci-fi series *The Lexx*. *Made in Canada* has just been picked up by the American Bravo network (titled *The Industry* in the U.S.) and it may surpass Ken Finkleman's *No More Tears* as a cult item down south.

Meanwhile non-Salter studios are crammed to the rafters with huge American shoots like Lasse Halstrom's *The Shipping News* and pre-production on Kathryn Bigalow's submarine actioner *K-19: The Widowmaker*, starring Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson. A surplus Russian sub has been enduring a massive makeover for the project; filming begins in Halifax in the late spring. What little space is left is being taken up by American MOWs (*Three Days* and *The Town without Christmas*, both for the Fox Network) in a rush to finish before the possible U.S. writer and actor strikes predicted for the early summer. There are even two British projects currently shooting in Nova Scotia: a modest-scaled dramatic feature entitled *My Little Eye* (by the producers of *Billy Elliott*) and a sizeable three-part docudrama for the BBC on the Battle of the Atlantic.

Local filmmakers are still carrying on regardless in the midst of these offshore productions. Perhaps highest on the profile meter is a multi-faceted project from IMX producers Jan Miller and Chris Zimmer that will spring four or five low-budget features out of a single concept. Entitled *Seats 3A and 3C*, it unravels the diverse tales of strangers who meet on long air flights. Budgeted at \$750,000 each and to be shot on digital video for visual immediacy, the project inked Thom Fitzgerald (*The Hanging Garden*) and Gary Burns (*waydowntown*) as two of its writer/directors. First up is *New Waterford Girl* scriptwriter Tricia Fish with her directoral debut *Dragonwheel*, a brisk comedy about the sordid adventures of a misbegotten boy band.

TAKE ONE