David Weaver's

Century HOTEL

Eighty Years, Seven Stories, One Canadian Hotel Room

BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN

"When you set out to write a script about a hotel room, you're going to be writing about sex, because that's what happens in hotel rooms," explains David Weaver, the director and co–writer of *Century Hotel*, a high–concept entry in this year's Perspective Canada at the Toronto International Film Festival. There is a pause but the expected wink that should suitably follow a comment about sex doesn't occur. Weaver is fighting off a blush and wading in with an anecdotal buffer. "Bridget Newson, who wrote the script with me, has written quite a bit of children's animation, so she was eager to write sex scenes and scenes where people get their heads blown off. She was up for anything that couldn't be animated."

Century Hotel tells the tale of an aging Canadian hotel where the walls of one of the rooms relate stories of every kind of human drama from past decades: an illicit love affair, an unsolved murder, a young woman's first sexual encounter, the creeping onset of madness. The film is an epic tale in syncopated time with rich casting, lush costuming and stylistic photography, which one does not expect in a first–time, low–budget Canadian feature.

Right: Lindy Booth, who appears in both the 1920s story, seen here, and the 1990s story.

Images courtesy of TVA International

Weaver and producer Victoria Hirst shepherded the idea through financing and production, counterbalancing each others' abilities. Sitting in Hirst's west–end Toronto office, they did a Fred–and–Ginger soft–shoe routine talking about the film. "Each time I see it," says Hirst, "I see something more of the relationships and how they intertwine and intermingle. I see the number of lost souls, the unrequited love stories and the connection of the women throughout the century." This seems uncharacteristically romantic for a producer who is traditionally supposed to foster creativity as long as it stays on budget. "I am a romantic," says Hirst. "Were you aware of Victoria's handicap in this area?" I ask Weaver. "I went right for it," he smiles. "Lost souls and unrequited love? What about the ending?" I ask. "There doesn't have to be one ending," Hirst replies. "The individual stories all end in very different ways. There is no happy or sad ending." With seven different story lines, the outcomes were selected from a "love–story salad bar." "Were you aware that you dodged the love–story–ending bullet?" I ask. Weaver and Hirst answer "Yes!" in unison.

Weaver came up with the original idea and then brought in Bridget Newson. Indulging himself in a discourse about the gender politics of the story, he says, "When you decide to make a story about the 20th century, you think about how women's lives have changed. So just making this movie meant dealing with a lot of female protagonists. Since the writer and the producer are women, it had an impact."

Respectfully, this is a collateral benefit of the film and not convincing as the core impetus. With a little prodding, Weaver concedes the less glamorous but infinitely more interesting inspiration: nostalgia. "*Century Hotel* is a dream of the 20th century. It's not meant to be historical. I was born in 1964 and grew up with a pop–cultural knowledge of the 20th century. I had this idea that I could glancingly hit on all the things that I was a little bit in love with – the 1920s jazz age; that period in the 1960s when rock stars ruled the earth; the 1980s, when the masters of the universe ruled Bay Street. What appealed to me was seeing this vast period of time from a very small, very specific place, in this case a hotel room. I conceived the film to be as big a small film as I could make."

However, a sense of unease accompanied the inspiration, which was assuaged by bringing in Newson. With her voice, Weaver ceased worrying that the film would turn out to be "David Weaver's 20th century." Prior to *Century Hotel*, his talents had not been fully tested. A graduate of the University of Toronto, where he was the recipient of the Norman Jewison Fellowship for Film Studies, he went to Columbia University's respected Graduate Film Studies program. Weaver worked for Rhombus Media as a development co–ordinator and the Ontario Film Development Corporation before becoming head of drama at Barna–Alper Productions in Toronto. His list of writing and directing credits include shorts such as *No Mystery, Drive, A Boy's Own Story, In Memory* and the critically acclaimed *Moon Palace*, which screened at last year's Toronto International Film Festival.

Co–writer Newson graduated in 1998 from the Canadian Film Centre, where she was a writer resident, and she moved immediately into writing animated television series. Her work, which includes *Franklin* (for the Disney Channel), *Dumb Bunnies* (for CBS), *Rolie Polie Olie* (for TVO) and *Marvin the Tap–Dancing Horse* (for PBS), has been broadcast in more than 50 countries. She has also written a number of feature–length scripts and the play, *Snow Before the Moon*, based on the story of Leon Trotsky. Added to the mix is Hirst, who made her foray into feature filmmaking as the co–producer on Peter Wellington's *Joe's So Mean to Josephine*, which sported the essential Canadian casting ingredients of Don McKellar and Sarah Polley and earned Wellington the Claude Jutra Award at the 1996 Genies. Hirst was also the associate producer on Stephen Williams's *Soul Survivor*, line producer on Mary Harron's controversial *American Psycho*, and followed that as line producer on the Naomi Campbell film/event, *Prisoner of Love*. She recently completed work on *Owning Maloney*, the Alliance Atlantis/HBO film starring Philip Seymour Hoffman and directed by Richard Kwietniowski, on which she served as co–producer.

There was a unified awareness by Weaver, Newson and Hirst of the inherent difficulties in making a film like *Century Hotel* work, but devotion to a good script makes people do funny things. The sex, for instance, was an issue that had to move beyond the titillation factor. This is Canada, after all, where sex in film is a triumph of subjectivity. That the trio elected to make a film with not one, but seven stories that were sexually charged to some degree, is a testament to a certain bravado. Weaver's criterion, which contrasts with the existing portrayal of sex in domestic filmmaking, was to make each story about the depth of the relationship rather than the physical or emotional perversity of it.

The 1980s segment (the second to last story) stands front and centre as an example of Weaver's thesis. The salad days of that decadent decade brought about a certain self–indulgence that included the whims of an out–of–town businessman, Nicholas (Tom McCamus), who engages his first call girl, Dominique (Mia Kirshner). Their chemistry, which goes beyond the thrill of contract fellatio, endures and they agree to meet at yearly

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intervals. It's a nefarious take on *Same Time, Next Year* with nary a trace of Alan Alda. "There were stories I looked for that were reflections of myself and there were stories that were more distant from me," says Weaver. "The 1980s segment, even though Tom's character is middle–aged and even though I've never been with a prostitute, was about something that is real to me in my life. I have had that connection with a woman – a deep sexual connection that throws the rest of your life into disarray – but I've never seen this story, that kind of connection, portrayed on film in any kind of real way."

The conceit of a single location and a heavily fragmented storyline placed an inordinate burden on both the script and the cast. Ultimately, words are cheap, but to make the script work, *Century Hotel* required the type of champagne casting that was unlikely on a Canadian–beer budget. Optimistically, Hirst and Weaver hoped the script itself would lure such a cast. They began their pitch with Colm Feore (*Thirty–Two Short Films about Glenn Gould, The Red Violin*). Weaver recalls the process. "We got the script to his agent, and he was interested enough to meet with us for a drink at the rooftop bar at the Park Hyatt; however, he doesn't drink. So I just sat there and got drunk while Feore, who is no small intellect, drank espresso and peppered me incessantly for four hours with questions about his role. Hirst says, "We just rode it out. We just tried to be as forthright about the film as we could be. Engaging with Colm about the depth of his character was important."

Evidently their powers of persuasion worked and Feore came on board. Landing him was a coup, both for his name – with appearances in such big–budget fare as *The Insider, Face Off, Titus* and *Pearl Harbor*, Feore is now much in demand in both Canadian and American films — but more so because of the beautifully restrained way in which he plays the role as a poetry–addled British professor who searches for his errant wife (Michelle Nolden) with the help of the hotel detective (Earl Pastko) in the 1950s segment. Certainly, the dynamic quality of the script was a contributing factor. To offer Feore a part in the film was not to offer him a cameo appearance, in the way Sean Penn peppers his films with major names in minor parts. Each story has its own integrity and each character comes fully equipped with a beginning, middle and end.

Feore was the first to accept, but the most amusing of the casting anecdotes was for the 1960s rock–star story. It concerns a young musician, Damon, played by Raine Maida (from the real–life Toronto band Our Lady Peace), who refuses to leave his hotel room and becomes enamoured with the maid, played by Winnipeg singer and Juno Award–winner Chantal Kreviazuk in her acting debut. "We had a number of possible Marys in mind, but it was all contingent on who we cast as Damon." Hirst recalls. "We had been seriously looking at Raine Maida when Chantal's agent called our casting director and said she was extremely interested in talking to us about the role of Mary. I'm on the phone thinking, 'how the hell did she know who Mary is?'" At the time, neither Hirst nor Weaver were aware that Kreviazuk is, in fact, married to Maida.

The success of locking in Feore created casting momentum. Anything seemed within the realm of possibility. Why not Genie–winner McCamus (*I Love a Man in Uniform*)? Why not David Hewlett (*Traders, Cube*)? Why not Janet Kidder, Margot Kidder's niece, who was in the A&E movie–of–week, *The Heist*, and is starting to make a name for herself? Why not indeed. "The wildest casting was probably Mia Kirshner (*Exotica, Love and Human Remains*) just because it came right out of the blue," says Weaver. "I had never thought of her because it's a role that required nudity. Not that she was afraid of those roles, but I never thought someone of a certain prominence would take the risk with her career at this juncture." Kirshner found out about the part through her agent who also has Lindy Booth (the delightfully dizzy secretary in *Relic Hunter*) as a client. (Booth appears in the first [1920s] and in the last [1990s]

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Sandrine Holt and Russell Yuen in the 1930s segment; insert, Lindy Booth in the 1990s.

stories). "Mia got a hold of the script unintentionally. That's why Rhonda Cooper, our casting agent, is thanked in the credits. When people believe in your film, they start to take possession of it and when they have ideas and are trying to help you, you're nuts if you don't listen to those ideas," Weaver says.

Good fortune, however, only goes so far in filmmaking. The script invariably determines the final outcome, and Weaver and Newson knew they had created an obstacle for themselves that, while well suited to a small budget, is classically hazardous in film. The entire plot is set in one room. This is traditionally verboten, but there are several notable Canadian exceptions to this rule. Recently, Vincenzo Natali's claustrophobic *Cube* was a hit in France and Japan, and looking backwards there has been Bill Fruet's classic *Wedding in White*, Leon Marr's Genie–winning *Dancing in the Dark* with Martha Henry, Vic Sarin's perverse *Cold Comfort*, based on the Jim Garrard play of the same name, and Darrell Wazyk's *H*, about two junkies going through the hell of cold turkey in a basement apartment. Outside of Canada, there has been Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*, *Lifeboat* and *Rear Window*, Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* and any film set on an airplane. The reason for avoiding a one–location screenplay is because it puts inordinate emphasis on the script. If there is even the slightest weakness in the writing, there is nothing to distract the audience – no grand landscapes, no hallucinogenic space travel, no car chases, no explosions; just a group of actors prepared to be hoisted on the petard of the screenwriter's words.

Century Hotel handily takes on the challenge of making audiences want to stay in one room for an hour and a half. With the help of a committed production designer (Julie Eknes) and costume designer (Joanna Syrokomia), plus an elegance of economy in the dialogue, Weaver and Newson were able to embody each decade as the story moves along. This is enhanced by a convergence in the editing. The seven stories are not disparate. "Bridget and I decided to made sure all the stories dovetailed at the end, and the first and last story become essentially one story," Weaver says. By having Lindy Booth play the first and last role, a subtle sense of closure is created. "There was the desire to leave the audience feeling that they had seen something more than a stringing together of a bunch of small films. There is a recurrence of themes, each story touching on the sense of loss or unrequited love. What knits *Century Hotel* together is that it does formally come full circle at the end and all the stories play on each other. This gives the film a bit of a symphonic feeling rather than dissonant notes that have no connection to one another."

Century Hotel is Weaver's first feature, and there is a creative liberation in making a directorial debut. There is no reputation to cause second–guessing. There is no sophomoric curse to fight against. There is only the opportunity to impress with a visual triple salchow – script, performance and cinematography, all carried out for a song. This is the challenge Weaver and Hirst took on. They agreed to devote themselves to the film for six intensive months. Weaver offers this psychological posturing: "I think Victoria and I felt as if the odds were stacked against us when we set out to make this movie. It gives you an attitude, as in 'We're going to make this film no matter what. Give us $50,000, we'll make the movie. Give us $250,000, we'll make the movie. But we're gonna make the movie, so you should give us some money.' That's the best way to make any movie, I think." They decided that if the project showed signs of growth, they'd continue; if it faltered, they'd move in their own directions. In less than six months they had Citytv on board as the Canadian broadcaster and TVA International as the theatrical distributor.

So pleased are Weaver and Hirst with not only the outcome of the film but the collaborative chemistry between them, that they now have a new project in the works. *A Sudden Darkness* is a character–driven film about a group of small–time Canadian petty criminals who become entangled with an American mobster – a coming–of–criminal–age genre film written by Hugh Graham. Currently, they are in the financing stage of development and still flushed with pride for *Century Hotel*, which is gunning their collective engines at the gate. Pride, you say? Yes, indeed. *Century Hotel* was made for under $750,000 – Canadian funds for a Canadian hotel. TAKE ONE