



Keynote address to ACTRA Toronto Performers

delivered by

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I should – I will begin my address today by stating that I plagiarize – I use crib notes – I borrow from the best – I’m more interested in telling a good story than a true one. As the author Seneca stated: “Whatever has been well said is mine.”

Some months ago I gave a speech at the Canadian Club and started by saying: “I am from the government and I am here to help you.”

As you might expect, the subject of government intervention was not greeted with rapturous applause at Canadian Club luncheons.

It would be like starting my speech today with: “I’m from C.A.A. and I’m here to help Canadian actors get work in Canadian productions.”

But I believe when it comes to Canada’s cultural industries, and especially film and television, government participation is good.

No, I’m wrong about that. Government participation is not good – it’s absolutely critical.

It’s the difference between being Canadian and simply not being American.

For well over 75 years, ever since the CBC was founded in 1929, Canada’s governments have been intervening to support and strengthen Canadian culture.

Why?

Because we’re a very small population in a very large space. So creating the myths that shape and distinguish us from the world’s other tribes, communicating the stories that define our identity, isn’t an easy task.

Countries such as Spain, Sweden and Australia have a similar population, and a flourishing culture, *especially* in film and television.

What's the difference? In three words....

Proximity to America.

Our neighbour to the south has 10 times the number of people we do, and has an incredibly strong culture that is also highly aggressive.

I enjoy telling the story of being struck by a car right after seeing my first film when I was 6 and the subsequent “impact” movies have had on my life.

The film was Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* – starring Jimmy Stewart and Shelley Winters.

But the story that resonates more than that dramatic moment was some years later, when I was a teenager living in the west end of Toronto and saw my first Canadian Feature – Don Owens' *Nobody Waved Goodbye* starring Peter Kastner and Julie Biggs.

It had no less an impact than that car – here was a movie on the big screen about my country, set in my neighbourhood, teenager's coming of age – my fears and aspirations.

The commitment to Canadian cinema, its values, stories and talent was planted.

Northrop Frye expressed it best for me: “Identity is local and regional – rooted in the imagination and in works of culture.”

Or Margaret Lawrence when talking of Sinclair Ross' novel *As For Me and My House* – “It taught me that one could write out of the known background of a small prairie town and that everything that happens everywhere also in some ways happens there.”

If there had been no CBC/Radio-Canada to produce original Canadian dramas; if the Canada Council had not been created in 1957 to nurture Canadian writers, dancers, visual artists, opera companies and symphony orchestras; if Ottawa hadn't created the National Film Board in 1939; if the CRTC had not set guidelines regarding what radio stations

could play – songs and performers; if Telefilm Canada had not been created in 1967 to develop a home-grown film and television industry; if provincial governments had not put in place organizations to contribute to this ongoing process ... where would we be today?

I absolutely believe there would be no Margaret Lawrence or Atwood, no Karen Kain, no Atom Egoyan, no Ben Heppner, no Barenaked Ladies, no Denys Arcand, no Paul Gross, no Robert Lantos, no Sarah Polley and no Eric Peterson.

So without the right kind and amount of government support, I believe Canada would be as different from America as... well, as Monaco is from France.

After all, culture today is what sets one nation apart from another and gives people their unique identity.

In the words of Eric Peterson when speaking of the hit CTV series *Corner Gas*: “It’s a huge show and there is nothing parochial about it. It is gentle, witty humour. We are starved for our own shows and our own recognition. To the Canadian mind and heart it is most thrilling when you say Moose Jaw in a sentence.”

And far from being a producer of ‘soft’ ephemeral jobs, the film and television industries in particular create the very jobs – the ‘above-the-neck’ jobs - that will secure Canada’s economic prosperity in the years to come.

The American academic, Richard Florida, first made the link between the density of cultural creativity and the economic prospects of a city or region.

He talks about a ‘super-creative class’ – by this he means artists, entertainers, musicians and cultural producers. But he also means research scientists, engineers, doctors – whose creativity.... well.... *creates* new kinds of wealth and with it, new sources of economic growth.

For Florida, there are three “T”s of economic development: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. In this new “economic geography,” the cities, regions and countries that succeed will do so by attracting and keeping these super-creative producers.

It’s no coincidence that Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are three of the most creative cities on the continent and all are rich in cultural diversity.

And we will become even richer for as the Globe and Mail reported by 2012 more than 50% of Canadians will be visible minorities.

If, we are a nation of communities – “a community of communities” as I believe Joe Clark once proposed.

And if identity is local and regional, as Northrop Frye stated, then Canada has an enormous opportunity and a great advantage over other countries.

We have a talent pool of diverse cultural communities filled with dramatic stories, and the emerging talent to bring them to the screens of the world.

I believe our finest drama will originate from our diverse cultures. One need not look further than the success of: *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* and the films of Clement Virgo and Deepa Mehta, who’s new film *Water* will open this years Toronto International Film Festival just to name a few.

And it’s not about political correctness. It’s about creative smarts and good business.

I am confident the much-desired breakout Canadian theatrical feature will emerge from our modern urban multicultural communities and the dramas that are unfolding every day.

The New Zealand Minister of State was more pointed: “We no longer think of immigration as a gate-keeping function but as a talent attraction function – necessary for economic success.”

Congratulations to Sandy Ross and ACTRA for producing “Mainstream Now”

It’s also no coincidence that we can read in the *New York Times* that film and television studies is the new MBA.

In the knowledge economy very little can make us think as efficiently as movies, the more films we are exposed to from other countries expressing different points of view, the more diverse our own thinking will be.

The Times points out that 600 American colleges and universities now offer programs in film studies. Is it because everyone wants to be a director? Probably! But it’s also about power.

And I quote: “People endowed with social power and prestige are able to use film and media images to reinforce and assert their power. We need to look to film to grant power to those who are marginalized.”

As *The Times* predicts: “Cinema isn’t so much a profession as the professional language of the future.” And “the greatest digital divide is between those who can read and write with media and those who can’t.”

My alma mater – the Canadian Film Centre is firmly placed in this field of influence. And I want to take this opportunity to extend my personal appreciation to ACTRA and its members – especially the hundreds of actors who gave generously of their time, their talent, their knowledge and their patience in support of the Centre’s programs – in the classroom, short films and features.

I didn’t do it enough when I was at the Centre – I’m pleased to be able to do it today – as the head of Telefilm – Thank you and I won’t forget.

Forty years ago, Ottawa decided to create the predecessor to Telefilm Canada, the Canadian Film Development Corporation. It had an initial budget of \$10 million a year to fund Canadian films and Canadian talent. Today, in part because of Telefilm's consistent and rising level of support, that industry is worth over \$3 billion to our national economy and plays a significant role in virtually every provincial economy.

Now Los Angeles isn't a bad place, and many Canadians have chosen to move there, to work in Hollywood. But government support – Telefilm support – has made it possible for literally thousands of Canadian writers, directors, producers, actors and technicians to build their careers here at home, to work in their own part of Canada and their mother tongue.

My decision to not renew the contract with CAA reflects my belief, my commitment to that purpose.

David Cronenberg said it best: “Telefilm's involvement in my filmmaking kept me in Canada.”

Eric Peterson stated: “*Street Legal* is why I own a house.”

Having said that, we can continue to learn from our neighbours to the south.

Some months ago I read an excellent article in *The New York Times*, by A.O. Scott, on independent cinema. He heralded the appearance of the “mid-size movie – the middle way.” – *Sideways*.

The middle ground can be defined economically – the films are not extravagant blockbusters or seat-of-the-pants ultra-low budget.

And they can be defined culturally – the public they seek is not the global mass audience or a small group of cinephiles, but rather something in between.

“Find an original voice. Come with original material. Be bold. And we will back you.”
That could be Telefilm’s new motto.

Actually, it’s a statement from James Schamus – co-president of Focus Features – the company that released *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *The Pianist* and *Lost In Translation*.

In 1988, a British mountain climber named Joe Simpson wrote a book called *Touching the Void*, a harrowing account of near death in the Peruvian Andes. It got good reviews but, only a modest success, it was soon forgotten. Then, a decade later, a strange thing happened. Jon Krakauer wrote *Into Thin Air*, another book about a mountain-climbing tragedy, which became a publishing sensation.

Suddenly *Touching the Void* started to sell again. Random House rushed out a new edition to keep up with demand. Booksellers began to promote it next to their *Into Thin Air* displays, and sales rose further. A revised paperback edition, which came out in January, spent 14 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

That same month, IFC Films released a docudrama of the story to critical acclaim. Now *Touching the Void* outsells *Into Thin Air* more than two to one. What happened? In short, Amazon.com recommendations.

The online bookseller’s software noted patterns in buying behaviour and suggested that readers who liked *Into Thin Air* would also like *Touching the Void*. People took the suggestion, agreed wholeheartedly, and wrote rhapsodic reviews. More sales, more algorithm-fuelled recommendations, and the positive feedback loop kicked in.

This is not just a virtue of online booksellers, it is an example of an entirely new economic model for the media and entertainment industries – one that is just beginning to show its powers.

“The future of entertainment is in the niche markets.”

Rule #1 – Make everything available

Rule #2 – Help me find it

Ten years ago, Quebec producers, who are making films for a market that's a third the size of the English-speaking Canadian market, productions by Quebecers about Quebec, accounted for only 6% of all box office receipts in the province. Today, that figure stands at 21%, more than triple what it was in 1995.

When I told a friend about this remarkable transformation, he assured me the reason wasn't so much SODEC's funding, but the fact that Quebec culture is so much more concentrated and has the linguistic advantage. I had to remind him that I was almost sure Quebecers were speaking French long before SODEC brought in its new programs.

No, Quebec's success is the product of stable financial support, as part of a long-term plan to build audiences, encourage talent, and in the process, create highly skilled, well-paying jobs. What's the ultimate goal? To assert more and more of their culture.

But the renaissance in Quebec film is not limited to theatres; it's also happening on television. Over the past 20 years in French Canada, viewership for American television programs has fallen by more than half.

This repatriation is not just happening in Quebec. In Great Britain, in Italy, in Sweden, in fact, all over Europe, audiences have been watching less and less foreign programming and more and more of their own.

Today, the lines between movies that play in theatres and movies that play on flat-screen HDTVs with wraparound sound in the comfort of our homes are completely blurred.

So while the second half of our organization's name is rooted in film, the first part is rooted in the most powerful form of communication developed by humankind – television.

In fact, so enticing and satisfying is television that, despite the Internet, despite countless other things to do, despite no NHL hockey, Canadians continue to spend an average of 24 hours a week with the flickering blue screen.

It makes sense then, that another of the keys to building the new economic landscape is strengthening Canadian television, especially English Canadian drama.

To quote Phyllis Yaffe in a Toronto Start article: “Canadians should own their culture and we should be the gatekeeper in our country.”

These days, it seems the more “Canadian” some programs are, the more they resonate with viewers. On CBC, the two-part epic series *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion* drew two million viewers a night.

Corner Gas, the comedy series on CTV, drew close to 2 million viewers each week. And *Degrassi: The Next Generation* regularly attracted more than 600,000 Canadian viewers each week.

It's also attracting the attention of the world's most powerful media pundits. Recently, the *New York Times Magazine* profiled the original *Degrassi*, calling it “the best teen TV in the world,” and told how it has become an American cult hit.

Degrassi? A cult hit? Absolutely. In the rigidly politically correct world of primetime American television, issues like date rape, Ritalin abuse and gay boyfriends never make it on the major networks.

But millions of American teens now search out the hard to find digital channel that dares to broadcast a series about teen stories from a teen's point of view.

I guess teens in 150 countries (outside of prime-time America) prove you can tell stories about a high school two miles east of where we're having lunch and have the world flock to watch them.

And speaking of cult hits, let's not forget *Trailer Park Boys*, which is now in its fourth year on the Canadian specialty channel, Showcase. And in June of 2006 will be a major summer release in a theatre near you.

“Identity is local and regional – rooted in the imagination and works of culture.”

“Everything that happens everywhere also in some ways happens there – in that small prairie town.”

When I arrived at Telefilm, I found a huge stack of documents on my desk for me to review. One of the first things I read was a report by Trina McQueen, one of Canada's most accomplished broadcasting executives. Trina also sits on Telefilm's board.

It was on the state of English-Canadian drama in May of 2003.

The weather report for drama since production started in 1952 has remained constant: fairly cloudy, with patches of fog and drizzle, and on occasion glimmers of sunlight – a typical Newfoundland day. It's just missing heavy snowfall.

And yet even in that inclement weather our creators have filled every role that has been asked of them.

Actors have created memorable characters. They have vividly brought us our history: Trudeau, Dieppe and the Dionne quintuplets. They have taken us to the heart of our country's darkest hours: *Milgaard* and *the Boys of St. Vincent*. And they have produced

stars such as Sonja, Cynthia, Megan, Gordon, Paul, Colm, Bruno and Al... we know them by their first names.

There is no failure in our drama that relates to some inherent national inability.

Our drama shares many characteristics, especially a sense of place, which is often so particular and vivid that – like all good drama – it’s a vital character.

What is more local than Brent Leroy’s *Corner Gas* or the boy’s trailer park?

To quote *the Lincoln Report*: “the loyalty of audiences is tied to their sense of place and belonging, and whether or not their needs are being served.”

Northrop Frye’s words continue to resonate – local and regional rooted in the imagination and works of culture.

These achievements in drama have occurred against all odds and their successes conceal a central problem: financing.

Drama is the most expensive and risky of all forms of television; it can also be the most profitable.

The Hollywood Reporter a few years ago published its list of license fees paid for dramatic series.

The highest license fee reported was for *E.R.*, which at the then 70-cent Canadian dollar (ah... the good old days!) amounted to \$17 million per episode.

It’s not surprising that up against these escalating dollars we ask ourselves whether the will is strong enough for drama to survive?

In her study, Trina quotes a respected programmer who wrote: “what if it is too late? What if we are embarking on a risky expensive mission with little hope of achievement?”

My response: we have nothing to fear but fear itself...

Or, in the words of the CRTC's Charles Dalfen: "Drama is compelling stories, and storytelling is close to the heart of human culture." The need to tell and hear stories is a primal one.

Yes, we have wonderful shows, like *Da Vinci's Inquest*, and *This Is Wonderland*. But we need more of them – and I'm encouraged by the significant – "dramatic" – increase in series recently submitted by broadcasters and financed by CTF and Telefilm – *Whistler – Falcon Beach* and *Da Vinci's City Hall*.

Well-produced Canadian drama – shows by and about Canadians – whether they live in a trailer park in Dartmouth, work in a courthouse in downtown Toronto, or a general store in Dog River, Saskatchewan, will, given half a chance, find an audience, not only in Canada, but beyond our borders as well.

So in both television and film, it's tempting to conclude that the country has the confidence, the government has the commitment and the industry has the critical mass to shift into and reach the potential so many people, including many from this podium, have predicted for Canadian culture.

However, I am reminded of a quote "People who are in power seek to magnify their importance and there's no greater way to do that than to paint the present as an outstanding victory, the happy ending. That way we can sit back, relax and watch the world go by. But if the world we are presented is flawed, then we've got to do something about it."

What is clear after 40 years of federal government support for Canada's film and television industries is that we are reaching a tipping point. All of those sustained investments have created a multi-billion dollar industry where none existed before.

But in a business that's been described as the ultimate collaborative act, we're going to need continued effort for that tipping point we've reached to really tip.

To quote your president, Karl Pruner, in the recent issue of *ACTRA Magazine*: "We can win the fight for prime time Canadian drama. We can win the fight to get our films and television shows distributed and marketed. We can win the fight to create a Canadian star system."

At the Canadian Association of Broadcasters conference in early December, and again at the Canadian Film and Television Producers Association conference in February, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Honourable Liza Frulla set forth her priorities.

One commitment she made was to work to maintain the Canadian Television Fund and to work with industry leaders to address the Governance of the Fund.

Two weeks ago, at the recent Banff Television Festival, she was clear in her direction: "Telefilm Canada will assume responsibility for all administration and guided by a single board of directors – the CTF, with the Minister and her Department providing policy direction."

She further committed to renewal of the \$100 million Canadian Television Fund for next fiscal 2006-2007.

The Minister also committed to having artists/creators represented on the CTF Board. This is much needed – the voice – no – the force of the creative community must be heard and active.

Pundit Allan Gregg drew the link between the strength of a nation's culture and the political engagement of its citizens. But he also observed that funding for the arts and culture is invariably at the bottom of the list when Canadians are asked what their priorities are for government spending.

I find this odd and contradictory given the extraordinary renaissance that has taken place here in Toronto because of the hundreds of millions of dollars in new money that has poured into the city to build new homes for the arts and culture, rivalling the most dazzling anywhere in the world.

While people use to complain about being caught in traffic caused by a film production, now the complaint is about all that construction – at the AGO, at the ROM, at the Royal Conservatory, at the Opera House up and soon I hope the Toronto International Film Festival’s new home.

Yes, this revitalization of Toronto is well underway, and it’s happening because the governments, federal and provincial; corporations and people who may claim that arts and culture is their lowest priority, but who have made it their highest priority.

So let’s make Canadian cinema and television our highest priority.

To quote Eric Peterson talking about his “old fart syndrome”: “I saw a Smart Car the other day. I was on the cell with Annie and I said those Smart Cars, boy do they ever look stupid. She said it’s a perfect *Corner Gas*, Oscar Leroy line. That’s my responsibility, to run off at the mouth and talk about the world.”

I’ve run off at the mouth, enough today...

Thank you.