Information:

For the information of Committee members, attached (Appendix A to Report PED07183) is an article about the film industry in Hamilton which appeared in the Spring 2007 issue of “Hamilton Magazine”.

“Upstart filmmakers”, Fenian Films, are featured in the article which focuses on independent filmmaking in Hamilton. The Hamilton Film & Television Office endeavors to foster the growth of indigenous film and other creative businesses by easing the way for groups such as Fenian Films, the Cotton Centre for the Arts and the Factory. Hamilton’s creative class is making a name for itself and the growth and success of companies such as Fenian Films is indicative of that.
Reel Life
Upstart filmmakers drive a fresh creative vision, hit familiar obstacles

By DAVID YOUNG
Photograph by ALISHA TOWNSEND

Last year, roughly 90 films were shot on our streets, twice the total of just three years ago. Our streets — which run the gamut of eclectic locations filmmakers crave — are the secret to the city’s appeal. But the cityscape has also inspired creative visions from native talent in a sector largely unaffected by the industry rollercoaster: independent film. The local film industry is more than visiting productions. A surprising number of local filmmakers usher their visions to the screen without ever leaving the city limits. And recent years have seen their numbers steadily grow.

Winter’s six-week strike by the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) stymied big-budget film productions but didn’t faze local indies. Hamilton’s film-

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making fortunes are sheltered from Toronto’s woes. The megacity has reportedly seen film production numbers plunge by almost 25 percent since last year, and revenue drop from $773 million to $594 million. Meanwhile, Hamilton’s film industry has held firm. Last year’s film figures echoed those of 2005, the busiest year of shoots the city has ever seen.

As with big-budget productions, the independent filmmaking process is daunting and riddled with legal, business and financial challenges. But unlike big-budget productions, independents lack a studio’s production infrastructure. So independent filmmakers have developed innovative solutions to ease the cash crunch and they’ve learned to lean on their peers for moral and technical support.

**Big Picture Thinking**

**Nobody has to sell** local independents on synergy. Creative cooperation is simply how things get done here. Jeremy Freiburger, president of the Imperial Cotton Centre for the Arts and co-owner of Open Daily Films, describes the arrangement as a form of social enterprise. “You’re doing business, but intrinsically to that business is a desire to be financially and philosophically involved in developing your community,” he says, pointing to the Centre’s resident creatives as a case in point. (More conventional relationships also bear fruit: Open Daily is currently assembling an documentary on Alzheimer’s that’s being underwritten by a research team at St. Peter’s Hospital.) Freiburger is also struck by the willingness of the local arts community to set aside self-interest in the name of an interesting project and the bigger picture. “We regularly partner with other groups in town,” he says. “Because of the size of the city and the smaller number of cultural workers, working in partnership is often the best way to deliver something.” And collaborators abound. Multi-million-dollar independent film production company Peace Arch Motion Pictures is a recent arrival at the Cotton Centre and he’s regularly approaching other production firms to move to the area. “Hamilton is on the verge of exploding,” he says. “The city’s ready for a film boom.”

The groundwork has already been laid. There’s a broad range of talent within the local media arts community in Hamilton, but the last decade has seen a notable growth in independent film. That first became apparent in the late ’90s when local cinematists Chris and Paul Shannon established Photophobia, a film festival screening short-form experimental film. The annual event has since expanded to include more conventional short-form film, but continually puts the best local work alongside outstanding international submissions in their outdoor screenings at the Art Gallery of Hamilton’s Irving Zucker Sculpture Garden. Photophobia has given cinematic experiments a sense of legitimacy. The Factory: Hamilton Media Arts Centre is running with the torch Photophobia lit. The James Street North non-profit offers nascent filmmakers access to film, video and sound production equipment, as well as post-production facilities. More importantly, it hosts grant-writing workshops, skills training, networking nights and mentorship opportunities. Providing that kind of practical footing can make an otherwise expensive art form accessible and sustainable.

**Creative Confidence**

Among Hamilton’s most promising new film companies is Fenian Films, which is housed in a renovated church on Locke Street. Its partners, director Ryan Furlong and producer-writer Andreas Kyprianou, founded the company five years ago after studying film at university. Furlong’s a grad of Wilfrid Laurier University’s communications and film program, Kyprianou a grad of Wilfrid Laurier University’s communications and film program, who later studied film production at the Vancouver Film School. Furlong, who was inspired to pursue a career in film after seeing Fellini’s 8 ½, understands the commercial realm but is also a dreamer. He has directed short films (The Gift), music videos (for Bob Lanois’ song “Snake Road”) and documentaries (such as a “making-of” reel for Blackie and the Rodeo Kings’ album Let’s Frolic). Kyprianou comes from a more regimented side of the industry, having worked for several years inside MGM. Although the experience was instructive, he’s far more energized by the creative possibilities of an independent venture. His enthusiasm seems warranted, considering a recent string of intriguing potential projects. The company is in talks to develop a feature-length documentary about monasteries on the border of Nepal and India, which would involve travelling to India to interview the Dalai Lama. They’re also negotiating film rights to a best-seller that they’re tight-lipped about. And they’re trying to bring acclaimed German director Wim Wenders (Wings of Desire, Buena Vista Social Club, Million Dollar Hotel) to Hamilton to direct a short film. (Bob Lanois, Fenian Films’ Artistic Director, served as a second unit cameraman for Wenders on the 1998 film At the Teatro.) “It seems so crazy, all this stuff happening in a fairly short time,” Kyprianou says. “But we think we have something unique going on.”

Fenian Films has managed to make some inroads through their work for the Bravo Network, videos like “Snake Road” and shorts like The Gift that have impressed viewers with their vision and polish. The pair admit that budget overruns are the secret to their success, but say the debt is tactical. By giving their all and living lean, the company has seen its BravoFACT development grants grow steadily. Even so, the grants only cover half of a project’s total cost, and the remaining expense can create a handsome debt for a short feature. Fenian has just shot a video for Lanois’ song “The Vampire” on location at Auchmar, and it’s a work they describe as “an epic in three minutes.” It’s not just Bravo they’re trying to impress, of course. They’re also developing relationships with the National Film Board and Telefilm Canada, and are talking distribution with art-house specialists Mongrel Media. “Finding money is still a good part of our week at this point,” says Kyprianou. “Eventually I hope people will just call us and offer us money, but for now we have to go out and hustle.”
Bootstrap B-Movies

That kind of brio comes easily when you’re on a roll, but it’s harder to summon if your fortune hasn’t been as bright. A case in point is local filmmaker Christine Whitlock of CJ Productions, whose horror comedies have been star-crossed.

When it comes to hardships faced by upstart directors, Whitlock is hard to trump. On August 22, 2005, 43-year-old Burlington diver Gerry Tychansky suffered a fatal heart attack in four metres of water near the Royal Hamilton Yacht Club during filming on Whitlock’s horror flick Marina Monster. Forensic investigation later confirmed that he had died of natural causes, but the production was hobbled. Whitlock took the tragic setback as an opportunity to warn her peers about the pitfalls of filmmaking without a net, but was disheartened by the lack of response. “I tried three times to put on a workshop about the problems of safety and health,” she says. “We couldn’t get anybody to take the course. I keep telling independent filmmakers that you have to get insurance. And in my experience you should have WSIB or independent life and disability on all your cast and crew. A lot of people don’t want to pay the money or put it in their budget.”

And budget is certainly a concern. Whitlock self-financed her three films (creature features Sharp Teeth and Marina Monster, as well as Vampire Dentist) but is determined to find a better way forward than bootstrapping her B-movies. She’s been looking for investors since Marina Monster shooting wrapped in November 2005, and is a long way from bankrolling her next film. Part of the difficulty is that Whitlock’s films are a hard sell. Her brand of horror-comedy, which doesn’t feature nudity or graphic violence, doesn’t cut it with studios looking to serve up splatter and skin to the teenage boys who make up the genre’s core audience. Her recent trip to a Chicago independent horror convention confirmed as much. The trailer for David Arquette’s forthcoming Tripper featured plentiful violence and well-lit frontal nudity of both sexes. Whitlock had gone primarily to meet other independent filmmakers to tap their experiences and feel out potential collaborations. She discovered that they were all looking for distribution and money.

She has the distribution — California’s Echelon Studios, which is handling Sharp Teeth and Vampire Dentist — but she doesn’t expect the profits to underwrite her feature work. Sharp Teeth took three years to go from concept to first viewing; it could take another two to get any real money from Echelon. Financing from scratch isn’t any easier: “It can take five to 10 years to get money for a project. In the meantime, I’m writing scripts. And if I sell any scripts, and if I get any money from the distributor, I might be able to do it again myself. I need to pay my bills.” Plot twist: Whitlock is hoping to develop a breakout franchise and is at work on an action-adventure, the top genre of feature films because the lack of dialogue makes international sales a breeze.

Guerilla Tactics

They haven’t racked up as much heartache as Whitlock, but Rabidog Films also believes in a good scare, as well as the power of persistence and conviction. Scrappy, self-reliant and contemptuous of mass market tastes, the horror-minded squad is convinced that you don’t need a big budget to make a good film. The production company, helmed by principals Phil Pattison and Jeff Beckman, are getting the chance to put that belief to the test. Rabidog shot its feature-length debut, the squirm-inducing zombie spectacular Vs. the Dead, in the summer of 2004 for around $50,000. That nanobudget meant that all involved were working for free, and that guerilla-style shoots were the norm. That could be fatal to some genres, but horror seems to look kindly on impoverished productions (witness low-budget legends The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Evil Dead and Halloween). The Rabidog team continues to push through post-production with help from annual fundraising concerts. Their grassroots fervour has helped make up for a shortage of industry connections, and it has bred loyalties that will translate into big-time buzz by the time the film hits video. It seems to be working so far. Even before the film’s release, Rabidog has fielded fan queries from Europe and Japan. But Vs. the Dead is more than splashy storytelling. The filmmakers see this Grand Guignol gesture as a deluxe demo reel, proof that they’re able to without benefit of a fat budget.

Cue Nathan Fleet’s 2005 feature Foyer, a study in filmmaking economy. An inner-city police drama, the film unravels exclusively through the static lens of an apartment security camera, its grainy, ghostly black-and-white images complementing the psychological drama that unfolds. Despite its remarkable economy (Fleet estimates that production costs were around $100), the film is notable for its immediacy. The 74-minute film was shot in a single take during early morning hours, recording the feed from an apartment video security system, ostensibly the perspective of a police surveillance team. Whatever else it accomplishes, Foyer is a calling card for Fleet’s soundtrack skills — the brooding sound design is a fitting complement to the film’s flickering images. He’s currently scoring Lucky 7, a noirish crime drama from director Steve Hayes that’s set proudly locally — it doesn’t pretend to be New Jersey or Detroit.

Geography aside, the fact that Lucky 7 is part of a commercially proven genre means it’ll probably reach a wider audience than anything Fleet has directed to date. He acknowledges that his films don’t court the mass market, and that he’s facing an uphill battle to get distribution as a result. “With my band back in the day, I went through the drill of sending demos to companies, going to seminars, entering into festivals. It’s much the same with film. It’s who you know, it costs a lot of money; you don’t get a lot out of it and finding an audience is tough,” he admits. “Why do I do it? In hopes that at some point someone will see it, it’ll catch on and I’ll either get the opportunity to develop a project with a bigger budget or that someone will share my vision and take the wheel for a bit.”

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Linked to the local film industry? Get on the City’s radar: Contact the Hamilton Film Liaison Office at 905.546.4233 or film@hamilton.ca.