

# Alberta Onscreen

*Why fight for an indigenous film industry?*

In 1919, a silent film called *Back to God's Country* was, for its time, a huge commercial and artistic success, with a reported 300 per cent return to its Canadian investors. More surprising was the fact that this film, starring the celebrated Nell Shipman, was shot on location in Lesser Slave Lake in northern Alberta, and the Canadian investors were Calgarians. Nell and her husband, Ernest Shipman (known as "Ten Percent Ernie"), had arrived in Calgary from Hollywood via Toronto amid much hoopla, then charmed the \$65,000 budget out of the local community for their company, Canadian Photoplays Ltd.

The shoot, however, was marred by what Ernest described in a letter to a Canadian Photoplays stockholder as "obstacles unprecedented and trouble never dreamed of." What were presented in jolly press releases as minor inconveniences were in fact the mutiny and defection of the crew and carpenters once they experienced one day of  $-50^{\circ}$  temperatures (they fled south *en masse* to the more civilized climate of California); the frostbite suffered by the production manager as he laboured, with one native helper, to build an entire set, including a ship, under these conditions, which left him with a lifelong limp; and the more than inconvenient death of the leading man from a "severe cold" which turned to pneumonia. But, in show-must-go-on tradition, after the actor's demise in an Edmonton hos-

pital, he was quickly replaced, and the shoot staggered on under these horrific circumstances. Nell and Ernie were rewarded with international success, thanks to Ernie's marketing know-how, Nell's talent before the camera (including one of the first nude scenes onscreen) and—oh, yes—the Alberta scenery.



Nell Shipman, star of *Back to God's Country*

It's a long haul from an early 1900s silent epic to the turn of the 21st century. Not only has technology advanced, but an Alberta film industry has been established. It may be small by Hollywood standards but nevertheless, it is earning its place on the world stage. This is an industry which, like many art forms, is politically and culturally intertwined, dependent on patrons, yet possessed by the grand notion that cultural voice is vital, significant, and must be fiercely independent of political constraints.

What is an Alberta filmmaker? Whether a quixotic fool or a hardy survivor, an Alberta filmmaker may simply entertain the notion that a Canadian should be able to ply his or her trade in any part of the country, or may have a burning desire to tell Alberta stories onscreen.

Just filming a movie in Alberta does not make it an Alberta film. There is a difference, perhaps not understood by the average Albertan, between location shoots (also referred to as offshore or runaway production) and indigenous production.

The direct and indirect dollars pumped into the Alberta economy

---

BY LINDA KUPECEK

by American companies are very welcome, thank you very much. The work for Alberta crew and talent is welcome. Location shooting is a tremendous boon, and we love those Americans to pieces. But—as we have learned—a few quirks in the dollar, a lack of audience interest in west-erns, even a temporary absence of a film commissioner—and whoops! back to the day job.

Indigenous production originates with an Alberta writer and/or Alberta producer. The key personnel are Albertan. The bucks aren't big. The Winnebagos are regular size. The producers aren't holding court at the Polo Lounge. They are more likely to be grabbing a java on 17th Avenue SW in Calgary or Whyte Avenue in Edmonton, budgeting for their mortgage, paying taxes like any other Albertan, and wondering how they are going to fund their next production.

### Why bother, one may ask?

“We can't just have foreign cultures reflected to us,” says Josh Miller of Mind's Eye Pictures in Edmonton. “The prairies have a distinct identity, and it is not just any one prairie archetype, like the cowboy hat, boots and horses. If you live here, you know there is also a vibrant urban culture.”

Luckily, the Alberta government, no stranger to western alienation, has had the foresight, again and again, to address these issues and step in to support the film industry. Because of this, films like *Bye Bye Blues*, *Cowboys Don't Cry* and series like *North of 60* have been seen by millions of viewers worldwide.

Nell and Ernie Shipman could never have imagined this while they suffered in quest of magic images on a frozen Lesser Slave Lake.

### Where did it all begin?

As early as 1910, the Edison Company shot a silent film called *An Unselfish Love* in Strathmore, Alberta. The romantic drama is a rather touching tribute to both true love and the benefits of irrigating your farmland, sponsored by the CPR as an encouragement to immigration.

After the success of *Back to God's Country*, numerous silents were shot in Alberta, the most notable of which, from a western perspective, are *The Calgary Stampede* (1925), *The Canadian* (1926) and *His Destiny* (1928). *The Calgary Stampede* starred Hoot Gibson as an American rodeo star falsely accused of murder, hiding out from the Mounties on a ranch near Calgary. This entertaining silent contains rare footage of the chuckwagon races, labeled “the roman races” in the film.

*The Canadian* (1926) was set in “the wheat fields of Canada.” Based on a play by Somerset Maugham, the poignant story of love amid the hardships of farming was shot near Calgary. The unpredictable weather was a boon to the filmmakers: the script required that a wheat crop be

devastated by snowfall, and, in mid-September 1926, the southern Alberta skies unexpectedly dropped a blanket of snow onto the location. Although mostly overlooked in its day, *The Canadian* was unearthed by the American Film Institute Theatre for a highly successful screening decades later.



...the film is heartily Albertan in its point of view, as a cowpoke grumbles, “You'd think this was Ottawa, the way things are slowing up around here.”

*His Destiny* (1928) was produced as a British quota film by British Canadian Pictures of Calgary. Guy Weadick, one of the founders of the Calgary Stampede, was the producer, promising the western action film would present “a faithful reproduction of ranch and cowboy life on the Western Canadian plains for the benefit of the people of the British Empire.” American Neil Hart directed and played the leading role. Calgary Herald editor Daniel E.C. Campbell wrote the script, and the cast included a number of Calgarians, including Mary Cross (later Mary Dover), daughter of British Canadian Pictures president A.E. Cross. Packed with scenery, wild horses, a love story, shots of the Stampede and the Prince of Wales ranch, the film is heartily Albertan in its point of view, as a cowpoke grumbles, “You'd think this was Ottawa, the way things are slowing up around here.”

In the 1940s, Alberta served as the occasional backdrop to foreign pictures, sometimes pinch-hitting as Norway (*Son of Lassie*, 1945) or as the Alps (*The Emperor Waltz*, 1948). The 1950s were notable for technicolor American productions that took laughable liberties with history and geography.

In the 1960s, Tiger Productions of Edmonton produced *Wings of Chance*, a bush pilot adventure based on a novel by John Patrick Gillese, and Corona Productions of

Edmonton produced *The Naked Flame*, a Doukhobor melodrama.

The *Little Big Man* shoot west of Calgary in 1969 was a turning point. Insiders suddenly clued in to the economic impact of the film industry. In the early 1970s, the Peter Lougheed government opened the first film locations office in Canada, which was also one of the first in North America. The location shoots landed in Alberta hot and heavy: more than 30 in the mid-1970s, including *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1975), *Days of Heaven* (1976), and *Superman* (1977). Attracted by long hours of sunlight, crisp, clean air (called “a cinematographer’s dream”) the lack of a sales tax, and varied terrain, the visitors pumped direct and indirect dollars into the economy. Now, over 25 years later, nearly every province and state in North America has a film locations office.

Meanwhile, Alberta producers, who at that time were working mostly in documentary and sponsored films, formed the Alberta Motion Picture Industry Association.



Director Eda Lishman (left) on the set of *Primo Baby* in Calgary

Fil Fraser, now President and CEO of Vision TV, had the vision then to produce the bittersweet comedy *Why Shoot the Teacher?* (1977) in Hanna, Alberta, and the historical drama *Marie-Anne* (1978) on location at Fort Edmonton, both distinctive for their prairie perspective. *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, set in Saskatchewan, captures the life of a prairie schoolteacher, while *Marie-Anne* (written by Marjorie Morgan) is the story of the first non-native woman in the Canadian west.

So what is wrong with this picture? Wasn’t the industry thriving? Yes, it was—but primarily on location shooting. Fil Fraser was an exception, not the norm.

What was missing was the Alberta voice. The Alberta film industry was serving only as a backdrop to other cultures, including central Canada. Alberta producers joked about the “thousand dollar cup of coffee,” referring to the

plane flight to Toronto for a meeting with a bureaucrat who believed the only projects worth funding came from Montreal and Toronto.

The Alberta government intervened. In 1981, the Alberta Motion Picture Development Corporation, the first provincial film-funding agency in English-speaking Canada, opened its doors for business. Headed by entertainment lawyer Lorne MacPherson, the AMPDC started as a development lending bank, expanded into partial equity financing, and in its 15-year existence, invested \$16-million in Alberta projects. Other provinces followed. MacPherson, now an Alberta/Manitoba-based producer, says firmly, “There would be no provincial support for the film industry, had the government of the day not set up the AMPDC. It created an industry. People were able to set up production companies and get things done. The Telefilms of the world accepted that regional production was possible because the AMPDC existed. There is now no significant program, including the Canadian Television Fund, that does not have regional incentives, and that can be tracked back to the AMPDC and Peter Lougheed.” *Political Alberta*, embattled against central Canada, recognized the frustrations of *cultural Alberta*.

What made the AMPDC special was its foresight. The results were award-winning dramatic series television and features such as *Loyalties* (1985), written by Sharon Riis and directed by Anne Wheeler; *Bye Bye Blues* (1988), written and directed by Anne Wheeler; *Primo Baby* (1988), written and directed by Eda Lishman; *North of 60* (the highly successful series produced by Doug MacLeod and Tom Dent-Cox); and the *Jake and the Kid* series, produced by Great North Productions. *Loyalties*, in particular, combined contemporary social issues with the images of a remote community. Where else but Alberta does a Ukrainian dancer spin and leap on a picnic table, in silhouette against a lingering northern sun, at a barbecue.

By 1996, the value of film production in Alberta had grown to \$150-million, one-third of which was made by Alberta owned and controlled production companies. Alberta writers, directors and producers like Anne Wheeler, Arvi Liimatainen, Pete White, Sharon Riis, Glynis Whiting and Andrew Wreggitt accumulated substantial credits.

Then, in 1996, the Klein government, resolving to remove itself “from the business of being in business,” closed down the AMPDC.

The results were disastrous.

According to the Report of the Film Development Review Committee in September 1998, total production dropped to \$50-million in 1997, and was a predicted paltry \$15-million in 1998. Series like *Mentors*, produced by Margaret Mardrossian of Anaid Productions and Josh Miller of Mind’s Eye Pictures in Edmonton, considered moving to Saskatchewan.

Without provincial support to access national funding and broadcasters, the Alberta film industry faded. Now the joke was the scramble to “catch the last bus to B.C.” as producers, crew and talent fled a province that could not sustain them professionally.

AMPIA, headed in 1998 by veteran documentary producer Dale Phillips, launched a massive campaign to save the industry. On a hot day in July 1998, MLA Carol Haley, who, the previous month, had been appointed by Ralph Klein to head the Film Industry Review Committee, sat down to a round-table discussion with 50 key industry members. “It was 37 degrees out,” she recalls. “And it was hot inside the room, too. Families were splitting up because people were leaving to take jobs in other provinces. We realized we were still training people (in programs at SAIT, NAIT and MRC) and then they were moving to other provinces to do the work. It was illogical.” The MLA for Airdrie-Rocky View faced a daunting challenge. If any relief was to be included in the February 1999 budget, the recommendations had to be in place by the first week of September 1998.

“We didn’t stop working for 90 days in a row,” says Haley. While Dale Phillips and Doug MacLeod drafted the document, AMPIA board members, producers, writers, performers, directors, unions and related associations rallied. Part of the rationale was the power of personal contact: industry members were urged to meet with MLAs face to face, and share their stories.

Haley quickly understood the nature of the downward spiral. “Why make product in Alberta, if you can save 30 per cent doing it elsewhere?” But she needed to find an approach that would be convincing. “As part of our culture, our heritage and our arts community here, we had to look at ways to assist the industry in a similar fashion to the way in which we assist [the] Glenbow.” Suddenly, film was back in the arts category, after 15 years of being categorized as a business.

The government listened. In October 1998, the new Alberta Film Development Program was announced. The Alberta Foundation for the Arts administers the program, which will use \$5 million a year from lottery revenues over a three-year period.

“I predict an explosion of activity here,” says Doug MacLeod of Bradshaw MacLeod and

## Marie-Anne (Motion Picture Corporation of Alberta, 1978)

FILMED AT FORT EDMONTON

**MADE IN ALBERTA:** Earnest story of the first white woman in the Canadian west, and her conflict with her fur trader husband’s former lover, a young native woman. Campfires, buckskin and never-ending fiddle music at the never-ending dances. Good historical accuracy and effective details of the fort community. Unusual for its day in that it presented the point of view of the betrayed native woman. With the exception of Andree Pelletier and John Juliani, an Alberta cast, including the reliable Paul Coeur.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A CENTRAL CANADIAN COMPANY:**

Even the horses would have been cast in Toronto.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A HOLLYWOOD STUDIO:**

Bloodthirsty fights galore. Métis women snarling and writhing in low-cut polyester dresses. Geography mixed up in the Hollywood blender until none of it resembles reality. Poor white woman victimized by psychotic Indian serial killer, operating under coyote curse.



## The Suburbanators (Red Devil Films, 1995)

FILMED IN CALGARY

**MADE IN ALBERTA:** Deadpan, neo-cool tale of a pair of slackers bumming their way around suburban Calgary, hanging out at the Westbrook Mall and various middle class neighbourhoods. Portrayal of an ethnically expanding city and its disenfranchised youth. No climax, no excitement, except a lot of kudos for the director, writer and production team. Unknown actors cast as the gentle, sad and silly youths.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A CENTRAL CANADIAN COMPANY:** U.S. star would play the lead. Script rewritten to focus on his angst. Major scenes moved to a ranch, where the slackers debate life over mounds of horse stuff and hay.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A HOLLYWOOD STUDIO:** Slackers are a gang of demented serial killers, slashing throats willy-nilly, and destroying buildings until confronted by robot slacker from the future.

## Heart of the Sun (Brenda Liles, Kim Hogan, 1998)

FILMED IN THE MEDICINE HAT AREA

**MADE IN ALBERTA:** A stunning indictment of the eugenics movement in depression-era Alberta. Not only a beautifully filmed tribute to the unmistakable landscape, but an important and authentic film about lies, the corruption of the church and the triumph of the soul over evil. Alberta actors Christianne Hirt and Shaun Johnston are riveting, the script by Kim Hogan (based on the Betty Lambert book, *Jenny’s Story*) never strikes a false note.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A CENTRAL CANADIAN COMPANY:**

Farmers portrayed as comic idiots. Sonja Smits and Nicholas Campbell play the noble couple. Lots of shots with cows and horses to show bucolic bliss.

**IF IT HAD BEEN MADE BY A HOLLYWOOD STUDIO:**

Two major stars dominate film. Eugenics issue turned into futuristic sci-fi horror with couple trying to unravel the mystery while being chased by baddies. Graphic sex scenes under swinging crucifix. Jenny dispatches priest with shotgun blast. Credits roll over bloody face while Jenny and Harry contemplate the sunset.



Associates, who soon had two shows shooting simultaneously: *Bad Faith*, a feature produced by Randy Bradshaw and Tom Dent-Cox for the A-Channel, and *The Sheldon Kennedy Story*.

“You can make a living here again,” says MacLeod. “The AFA program is not just about creating jobs, but also about ensuring that there is a continuing legacy, that something lives on after the program is shot. The residual value remains in Alberta.”

As President of AMPIA, Josh Miller predicts that the cultural and economic benefits of the AFA program will be apparent in 2000. “But,” he says, referring to the three-year timeline, “now we need to work toward a more permanent program. We don’t want to build up momentum, and fall off the precipice again.”

### Why is it important to have a regional film and TV industry?

“We want the opportunity to do more than service work,” says Lance Mueller of White Iron Productions, a prolific production house and editing facility in Calgary. “We want a level playing field, one that would ensure that you are involved with intellectual property that you own, as opposed to being a service provider.”

Wendy Hill-Tout, who wrote and directed *The Perfect Man* (1992), a romantic comedy set in Calgary, says, “Every time I watch CBC, I see that, despite all the choices in the series that are produced, most reflect Toronto to Canada.”

“It’s interesting that the films that support the stereotype of the cowboy seem to be the ones that tend to get funded by non-western funding bodies,” says Josh Miller.

The Alberta personality is increasingly being represented on screens as something other than the western stereotype. For nearly ten years, Bruce

Harvey of Illusions Entertainment has been churning out \$2-million contemporary urban thrillers, mostly written by Calgarian David Schultz, and mostly independent of government funding. The last two, *Silent Cradle* and *Question of Privilege*, were set in Edmonton, which was perfectly fine with his European distributors. But Harvey is frustrated by the Canadian Television Fund guidelines—“people in Toronto deciding what is culturally significant.”

It’s important to have a local film industry so that we can tell our own stories in our own way. “If you only read the *Globe and Mail*,” says Governor General Award winner

Schultz, “and didn’t have a local newspaper, you would be missing the experience of your community.”

### What is an Alberta story?

Andrew Wreggitt, the award-winning screenwriter whose work includes *In the Blue Ground*, the *North of 60* TV movie that drew over a million viewers in English Canada, says *Jake and the Kid* is as authentic to the region as *North of 60*. They both represent a regional perspective that echoes the Alberta experience. *The Suburbanators*, that oh-so-cool film from John Hazlett and James Gottselig of Red Devil Films, is also Albertan, with its images of disenfranchised youth wandering the suburban malls of Calgary. “When we were shooting, we could have turned the camera around and got a shot of the mountains,” recalls Hazlett, “but we were more interested in the parking lot.”

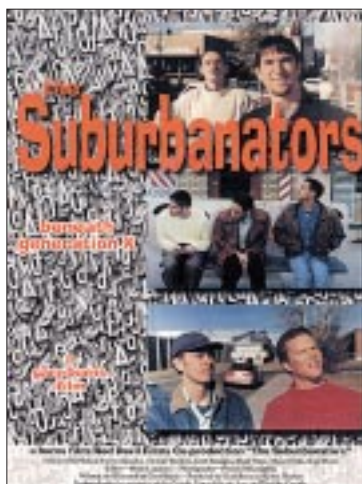
“The issue is not just telling Alberta stories,” says Joanne Levy, head of the A-Channel Drama Fund. “It is also being able to contribute to the body of Canadian cultural work.” Levy, who works closely with Alberta writers and producers, has supported projects as diverse as thrillers, an outdoor adventure (*Grizzly Falls*) and the provocative *Heart of the Sun* (1998), which deals with enforced sterilization. Levy has in development several little-known, Alberta-based stories, including a feature about the murders at the POW camp in Medicine Hat during the Second World War.

The A-Channel Drama Fund and the CFCN Production Fund are two sources of script development financing dedicated to the telling of Alberta stories by Alberta writers.

“What’s important about regional stories is that they should be on the national stage,” says Andrew Wreggitt. At the 20th Banff Television Festival in June 1999 he talked about *North of 60* and about his new series. “The characters are uniquely Albertan, but that doesn’t mean it’s parochial. The notion that any series set in Calgary would be about wheat fields is nonsense,” he says.

The cultural voice of a region is its strength, its way of communicating to itself and to others. Ultimately, just as people who know themselves well address others with assurance and authority, so it strengthens a society to have an articulated culture. We Albertans are a distinct, diverse, somewhat ornery breed. We don’t like to be pushed around, lectured, ignored, dismissed, or labeled as cowpokes or rednecks. And one of the best ways to make sure that doesn’t happen is to share our stories. ☸

Linda Kupecek was a Canadian correspondent for *The Hollywood Reporter* for ten years, and appeared as national film columnist on the CBC Newsworld Network in 1990. She played a supporting role in *Marie-Anne*, has served several terms on the Board of Directors of ACTRA, and currently sits on the Board of Directors of the Alberta Motion Picture Industries Association.



## SELECTED VIDEOGRAPHY

Available at video stores, on television, through Calgary's Glenbow Archives or the Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <i>An Unselfish Love</i> (1910)<br>The Edison Company                                       | <i>Ghostkeeper</i> (1980)<br>Badlands Pictures (Calgary)       | <i>The Suburbanators</i> (1995)<br>Red Devil Films/Burns Films  |
| <i>Back to God's Country</i> (1919)<br>Canada Photoplays (Calgary)                          | <i>Storm</i> (1983)<br>Groundstar Productions<br>(Calgary)     | <i>Samurai Cowboy</i> (1993)<br>Illusions Entertainment         |
| <i>Cameron of the Royal Mounted</i><br>Dominion Productions (1920)                          | <i>Loyalties</i> (1985)<br>Anne Wheeler (Edmonton)             | <i>Portraits of Innocence</i> (1994)<br>Illusions Entertainment |
| <i>The Calgary Stampede</i> (1925)<br>Universal Pictures                                    | <i>Cowboys Don't Cry</i> (1987)<br>Anne Wheeler                | <i>Silent Cradle</i> (1997)<br>Illusions Entertainment          |
| <i>His Destiny</i> (1928)<br>British Canadian Pictures<br>(Calgary)                         | <i>Bye Bye Blues</i> (1988)<br>Anne Wheeler                    | <i>Bad Money</i> (1999)<br>Red Devil Films                      |
| <i>Wings of Chance</i> (1960)<br>Tiger Productions (Edmonton)                               | <i>Primo Baby</i> (1988)<br>Victory Films (Calgary)            | <i>Heart of the Sun</i> (1998)<br>Brenda Liles, Kim Hogan       |
| <i>The Naked Flame</i> (1963)<br>Corona Production Company<br>(Edmonton)                    | <i>A Little Bit of Heaven</i> (1989)<br>Nancy Marano (Calgary) | <i>Deadly Arrangement</i> (1998)<br>Illusions Entertainment     |
| <i>Why Shoot the Teacher?</i> (1977)<br>Motion Picture Corporation of<br>Alberta (Edmonton) | <i>The Perfect Man</i> (1992)<br>Wendy Hill-Tout (Calgary)     | <i>Question of Privilege</i> (1998)<br>Illusions Entertainment  |
|   | <i>North of 60 series</i> (1993-97)<br>Alberta Filmworks       | <i>Kitchen Party</i> (1997)<br>Red Devil Films (filmed in B.C.) |