

DANCE WITH THE ELEPHANT: CANADIAN STORY TELLING IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Good afternoon and thank you. It's a great honour to be here, among so many distinguished colleagues. I hope I can add value, and encourage you to dialogue with me.

I recently wrote an essay revising Pierre Trudeau's famous words to the Washington Press Club in 1969: "living next to the US is like sleeping with an elephant...one is affected by every twitch and grunt." Our world has changed so much since then, I wondered, what might the brilliant Trudeau say about Canada and the US today? Answer: to come.

My essay suggested Canada's broadcast system, because it relies on geographic rights, is uniquely vulnerable to the forces of convergence, the situation under discussion at the ongoing CRTC hearing. In fact, the situation in the broadcast sector may be more dire than ever, making it critical that, in Canada, we think far ahead about how to succeed on a global playing field, both in the broadcast and production sectors.

Any type of global, borderless distribution, which would be an alternate type of financing for the hits, would greatly devalue geographic rights, and could catalyse a collapse of the Canadian system, which has been a concern since the audience paradigm shifts began in the year 2000.

As my work flows from my passion for story-telling, I'll continue to explore with you the effect of these current trends on the drama sector.

By many parameters, our industry is an incredible success story. The challenge today is to take it to the next level, before it is too late. The web has already transformed drama producers into multi-platform content providers. Success will demand a variety of global strategies, which should be great for Canada because our problem has been people. Moreover, in a borderless marketplace, content owners *should* be in the catbird seat.

But we'll need to be bold and honest with ourselves if Canadian drama is to thrive in the digital era. We have the talent. We can succeed.

However, for the most part, nationalist drama strategy, *supply via subsidy*, has not even delivered a national audience. Why should we care?

One, Canadian taxpayers finance nearly half of every show.¹ Two, drama, as cultural story telling, whether around a campfire, radio, or screen, is valued by many nations including ours; in fact it's law, inherent in our Broadcast Act.

In pondering this resistant drama problem, I began to wonder if the *presumed* weakness in our drama sector has become a self-fulfilling dependency, which might prevent us from seizing new opportunities in today's paradigm shifts, by reinforcing four cultural myopias: (1) rhetoric versus regulation; (2) Cancon versus Amcon; (3) bureaucracy versus meritocracy; (4) train and drain.

(1) With respect to regulation, in contrast to saving *Canada from American* tv, the viability of our system is pegged to an instrument not possible in any other country, little understood by the public, and which turns on the enduring affection of our audiences *for American* hits.

By contrast, our rhetoric is simple, powerful; who would argue with a strong *Canada*? It often wins. But it doesn't work as a business model. Even our broadcasters found "anti-America" to be unworkable, and in 1970 confronted geography, and invented the remarkable win-win regulatory underpinning just described, simultaneous substitution, which I call *Amcon for Cancon*.

Today it seems clear this business model has a limited future, given the likelihood that a few years from now, the financial model for distribution of hits won't be primarily geographic. So it doesn't seem quite fair to continue to expect the broadcast sector, with its urgent need to experiment with many types of new digital era revenue models, to continue indefinitely as the main subsidy for another sector. The corollary is our production sector must also become globally competitive.

(2): Research suggests people in countries with national broadcast regimes believe other countries have them too.² Perhaps we see the hits as

"American" because our drama is so officially "Canadian." The point is there's no such thing as *Amcon* in America.

(3): Twinning the words "entertainment" and "Canadian" may have enabled a cultural misconception about what constitutes great writing. Not bureaucracy. Getting it right demands meritocracy. Only one question matters: "is it great?"

(4): *Train and drain*, has been with us since since Wayne and Shuster. Convoluted rules push our story-tellers to compete in a steep meritocracy, and they win. Often, their prize is to be disowned as Canadians. David Shore, from London, ON worked on *Traders* and won a 2005 Emmy for creating the hit series, *House*, Canada's #1 show. Paul Haggis, also from London, won the 2006 and 2005 Oscars for best movie, *Crash* and *Million Dollar Baby*. Yann Martel's 2001 *The Life of Pi* is in pre-production in Hollywood. A common example, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, won 9 Oscars, but didn't count as Cancon. I mention it today because because its powerful theme is on-point to this discussion: the impossibility of transcending nationality.

But let me take a moment to make it clear my concern isn't really the Ivan Reitman's (whose first job was at CITY-TV), the Lorne Michaels', or Denise DiNovi's. It's the 20-somethings, our young talent who, as a nation, we seem to produce at an incredible rate, perhaps BECAUSE of our unique proximity/distance thing. I'm thinking of 2 kids, who already figured out they can't make a life out of paperwork and no money, productions and no audience, and have gone. One's already got a job writing a big feature. There are many on-the-ground win/win strategies we can design...it's a matter of perception, so back to the point, which is...

LA is perhaps not best described as a political place, but a *marketplace*, with the critical mass of skills and money to produce the high-risk, high-ticket content so adored by global audiences, including ours.

Perhaps a solution to the "drama crisis" starts with fresh perceptions. The familiar Canadian viewing curve shows prime-time audiences watching 90% American drama, which might be the only thing in the biz that HASN'T changed since 2000. And it might not. Despite new web genres and screen habits of aging youth, when the distribution dust settles, it could still turn out 8-11 PM will always be adult let-down, lean-back, screen-story time, when

the only thing the audience wants, regardless of delivery mode, is a 'great story, well told.' The difference might be, how they get these hits.

So let's look again, inspired by Albert Einstein, who said "We can't solve problems using the same level of thinking we used when we created them." ³

What I deduce from this, is the problem may not be the US; it's us. A strategy to deliver Canadian audiences is make sure our stories are world-class, good enough to sell in LA, and get them simulcast. Lean *towards* the US, not away from it. Strengthening Canadian drama may mean reversing our interpretation 180 and see this picture, not devoid of "Canadian," but *full* of opportunity to participate in the hit parade.

I would like to suggest "we versus they" does a disservice to all of us, broadcasters and producers (who are in the lifeboat together), Canada (especially our young talent) and America (our neighbor and major trading partner).

We could embrace our countries' profound interconnectivity, and rebrand Canada as having the *luckiest* location on earth for drama, understanding this approach could make our industry *more* globally competitive and put Canadian stories, not only on *our* screens, but per a goal of last month's 2006 Broadcast Monitoring Report, "on the world's stage." ⁴

Now, a return to Trudeau. Given global realities, perhaps sleeping next to an elephant is no disadvantage. The problem may be, Canada's been *sleeping*. To guard Canadian drama for the digital age, Trudeau might say *dance with the elephant*.

Here are some suggested initiatives, or "dance steps:" They say "lift the LCD curtain" and give our young talent a chance to get into the game. It could be so win/win/win/win, for our broadcasters, producers, Canada, and global audiences.

Most seem consistent with reports of the 1980's, another era of rapid technological change. Applebaum-Hebert recommended global competitiveness.⁵ Caplan-Savaugau wondered, "will technology be the ultimate deregulator?"⁶

1. Simplify Cancon: by a Canadian

2. Re-define audience: 30 to 300 million

30 million has never been enough; it's been astutely noted Canadian dramas cost the same per audience capita as US hits.⁷

3. Telefilm in Los Angeles

Provide services to Canadian broadcasters meeting there and thousands of Canadian writers, producers, directors, and actors working there.

4. Create incentives to develop simulcast content

Step-up bonuses or licence fees as Canadians pitch projects which progress through the system to become simulcasts.

5. Design training and apprenticeship programs

Pro-actively engage with US system. Synchronize practices, such as development schedules and job titles.

6. Convert brain drain into brain gain

Ireland, a small English-speaking country near a powerhouse, transformed itself via measures like tax incentives for artists.⁸

7. Rebrand Cancon as CanBrand

"Made by Canadians" deserves a proud, world-wide reputation.

In closing, at the very least, this type of goal should put trickle-up pressure on the quality of our dramas, and make them more valuable for global distribution, if not as hits, then domestically and at the far end of the new global demand curve for content created by the web, which Chris Anderson has dubbed "the long tail."⁹ I've recently initiated new research on Canadian long tail strategies, which I think, will represent complementary opportunity for Canadian story telling in the digital era, to the strategies for hits I've just described. Thank you.

¹ Canada, Standing Committee of Ministry of Heritage (2003), *Our Cultural Sovereignty, The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting*, Clifford Lincoln, Chair, June, p. 138.

² Lewis, Justin (2001), *Constructing Public Opinion*, NY: Columbia University Press, p. 183.

³ www.quoteland.com/author.asp, "Collected Quotes from Albert Einstein."

⁴ Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission/CRTC (2006), Broadcast Monitoring Report, p. 47. www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/PolicyMonitoring/2006.

⁵ Canada, Department of Communications (1982), *Report of the Federal Cultural Review Committee*, Louis Applebaum and Jacques Hebert, Co-chairs, November, p. 57.

⁶ Canada, Industry Canada (1986), *Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy*, Gerald Lewis Caplan and Florian Sauvageau, Co-Chairs, September, p. 76.

⁷ McQueen, Trina (2003), *Dramatic Choices, a report on Canadian English-language drama, prepared for the CRTC and Telefilm Canada*, May. www.crtc.gc.ca, p. 4.

⁸ Alvarez, Lizette (2005), Letter from Europe: "Suddenly Rich, Poor Old Ireland Seems Bewildered," *New York Times*, February 2.

⁹ Anderson, Chris (2006), *The Long Tail*, NY: Hyperion.