

Sinking loonie raises service sector hopes

by: Denis Seguin

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Remember the good old days of 2002/03, when the loonie sat safely at 63 cents American, when The Aviator was circling Montreal, Cat Woman was stalking Vancouver and Chicago was in T.O.? The U.K.'s Pinewood Shepperton was even going to build a giant film studio on Toronto's portlands.

Then our beloved dollar started its march towards parity. As it passed each high-water mark - 80, 85, 90 cents - Canadian service watchers said it could go no further without killing business. They were wrong until they were right. Toronto has been eerily quiet since The Hulk left town last summer. This summer the city got its megastudio - no thanks to the English - just in time for the recession.

Now that, amid all the market turmoil, the dollar has sunk back to 85 cents on the greenback, is it time for the Canadian service production industry to breathe again? The answer is yes, but not too deeply - especially as you travel west to east.

Vancouver has definitely picked up, at least on the telephone. Shawn Williamson of Brightlight Pictures says the Vancouver-based production company has been receiving "one and two calls a day" from service clients new and old. The key is nimbleness. Brightlight has prepared spec budgets on seven projects that would shoot this winter or next spring. But, he cautions, "we hope to get one out of 10."

In Toronto, Filmport president Ken Ferguson says the megastudio has "heard from one major studio that 88 cents is a threshold that they would like to see. So being south of that is encouraging. I'm not sure we can take comfort that it will stay there."

Daniel Bissonnette, commissioner of the Montreal Film and Television Commission, says Montreal has been quiet for months. The last U.S.-financed service production was The Orphan, one of six Quebec-shot features as part of the \$18-million production stimulation package signed by Quebec's Société générale de financement du Québec and Joel Silver's Dark Castle Productions.

But no one is holding their breath for the next pictures from that deal; according to the SGF, Dark Castle has until September 2012 to begin production on the final three titles.

Bissonnette blames the prolonged Screen Actors Guild negotiations. "In the past months we have had so many inquiries and we are sending out so many photo packages. They [U.S. producers] are preparing projects, but none seem to be going ahead," he says.

But Ferguson says there are signs of a shift. "Two things are starting to happen," he says. "The major studios are starting to move forward with a slate of feature films that they have been holding off due to the SAG negotiations. Now they are getting ready to proceed with those films irrespective of the lack of an agreement. With more features, and the dollar going down, that bodes well."

Williamson says Brightlight is well-positioned for an unpredictable marketplace because of its diversified skill set. The company does service work, such as the Fox 21 pilot Mistresses, which shot in Vancouver in August, but it also co-finances projects with foreign partners such as Kari Skogland's Fifty Dead Men Walking, a Canada/Britain coproduction with London's HandMade Films and Future Films of Belfast.

"It's a bonus on multiple levels," says Williamson, "because we end up making new partnerships with people we might not have met."