

PLAYBACK

Normal, Brightlight lead pack at 10th Leos

by: Alison Cunningham

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This month will mark the 10th time the B.C. production community has assembled to celebrate itself at the Leo Awards, and although the province has witnessed great industry growth in that time, the director of this year's most nominated film wishes the domestic sector would get bigger still.

"It's always great to be noticed by your community. But I always hope for more feature films to be made here," says Carl Bessai, whose drama *Normal*, about a group of strangers brought together by a tragedy, leads the feature film pack at this year's Leos with 11 nominations. "It's important to have the community acknowledged as not just service workers, but people who actually create films.

"Every province or community has some form of this," he adds. "In a place like Quebec, you see the power of the provincial celebration. You see the effect that's had on [local movie] success."

Normal's Leo nods include best feature-length drama, direction (Bessai), screenwriting (Travis McDonald), cinematography (Bessai) and picture editing (Lisa Binkley). In acting categories, *Normal*'s Callum Keith Rennie and Tygh Runyan will face off for lead male performance, while Camille Sullivan is up for female lead, and Cameron Bright, Britt Irvin and Lauren Lee Smith are shortlisted for their supporting roles.

The recognition caps a banner year for part of *Normal*'s production team - producers Stephen Hegyes and Shawn Williamson of Vancouver's Brightlight Pictures.

Brightlight earned 26 noms in total. Along with *Normal*'s haul, Brightlight's foray into primetime TV, the Global drama *The Guard*, coproduced with Halifax Film, earned accolades for four of its actors: Steve Bacic and Claudette Mink for their lead performances, and Ryan Robbins and Julie Patzwald for supporting.

This year's ceremonies take place May 23 and 24 at the Westin Bayshore Vancouver. Current president Walter Daroshin of Troika Productions founded the event, which is organized by the Motion Picture Arts & Sciences Foundation of British Columbia, in 1999.

"There was a vacuum. I have to be diplomatic how I say this," says Daroshin, noting that, historically, the industry tended to extol its success on the service side. "But there was not one occasion in our calendar year where we would gather as a community and celebrate."

Throughout its history, the Leos have honored B.C.'s creative best, from *Da Vinci's Inquest*, the first program to earn best dramatic series honors, to *Rupert's Land*, the first film to take the trophy for best feature-length drama. During that rookie year, actor Ian Tracey - who happened to be one of the stars of *Da Vinci's* - was honored as best actor for *Rupert's Land*.

The growth of B.C.'s talent pool is evident in the volume of work submitted this year, with 47 jurors having adjudicated 750 entries in 76 categories.

Attendees won't notice anything very different to mark the event's anniversary, says Daroshin. "We are an awards show after all," he says. In one slight change, the awards will precede dinner on the May 24 gala night to allow more time to mingle.

Running a close second to Normal in the feature category is *Elijah*, the story of Manitoba politician Elijah Harper's role in scuttling the Meech Lake Accord in 1990, with eight nominations. The TV movie from Anagram Pictures offers a star turn by Billy Merasty (Moose TV) in the lead role. *Elijah* airs May 25 on CTV.

Meanwhile, the recently cancelled CBC series *jPod* dominates the dramatic TV program categories with 15 nominations. All four nominees for best screenwriting in a dramatic series are *jPod* scribes: Douglas Coupland, Daegan Fryklind, Dennis Heaton and J.B. Sugar.

Sugar and Coupland executive produced the series, working with Sugar's father and business partner Larry Sugar of No Equal Entertainment. *jPod* debuted to 472,000 viewers in January, but that audience would drop to around 100,000 over its 13-episode season.

The nods are "bittersweet," says J.B. Sugar. "We're not coming back for a second season. But it helps to celebrate the work we've done. We're all really proud of the show. I'm really proud that so many of our crew is nominated, and I'm extremely proud personally that we're nominated for [best] series.

This year's noms reflect what a good year it was for Vancouver's Paperny Films, which has earned 17 nods. Its series *Glutton for Punishment* leads the information or lifestyle series category with six noms, while its *Road Hockey Rumble* leads for music, comedy or variety program or series with seven - two more than *Corner Gas*.

As well, Paperny's feature doc *Confessions of an Innocent Man*, directed by David Paperny, is up for best documentary program or series and best overall sound.

"This honor is particularly meaningful. I was one of the producers and the director of the film," says Paperny. "I put a good part of a year of my life into that film. And...we've had great audiences, engaged audiences."

U.S. broadcast rights for *Confessions* were recently acquired by Sundance Channel, which also picked up *The Wild Horse Redemption*, directed by John Zaritsky, which has four Leo nods.

Another Zaritsky documentary, *The Suicide Tourist* (an audience favorite at last year's Hot Docs), leads with six noms in the documentary program or series categories, including best doc, competing against *Confessions*, and best direction.

The short drama category is dominated by *Dog Boy*, with eight nods. It is produced by Caroline Coutts and Diana Wilson, a dynamic young team to watch.

A full list of nominees is available at leoawards.com.