

Leo Awards an excuse for B.C. film and TV to roar

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There's been a great deal of hand-wringing about the British Columbia film and television industry over the past year-and-a-half as it finds itself competing with jurisdictions that offer better tax incentives, such as Ontario and Quebec. This weekend, it will put that aside as it celebrates its accomplishments at the Leo Awards in Vancouver.

Among the nominees is industry veteran Shawn Williamson, whose Brightlight Pictures is up for 34 Leos – including 12 for *Mr. Hockey: The Gordie Howe Story*, and three for the TV series *Witches of East End*, now shooting its second season. The Globe and Mail reached Mr. Williamson on the set of *Witches* this week.

Can you tell me about the beginnings of Brightlight?

We have the 9/11 cover of *Variety* – Sept. 11, 2001, was [when] we launched the company at the Toronto Film Festival. Steve Hegyes and myself combined forces to create a company that would do Canadian content shows that we owned and developed, and American shows that we serviced.

What was your introduction to the industry?

I started in high school in theatre. I was hired into The Arts Club when I was 18, mopping stages and making coffee. And then just was fortunate to shoot into television and film in my early 20s.

I guess your ascent mirrors the ascent of Vancouver as a production centre.

I think so. The first guard of film people were the true ground-breakers here. I was one of the elders of the second group, one of the first groups to do both American work and Canadian work. Because as the industry matured, it became less beholden to purely U.S. work. So we were able to co-finance and produce things that we owned, and also work for the Americans.

The production industry here is often described as a shadow of what it is in Toronto. How do you manage to succeed in that environment?

It's very tough to succeed in the Canadian domestic industry outside of Toronto. The majority of the decisions are being made in Toronto, the creative control is in Toronto, with all the networks and the distributors in feature film being based there. People tend to do business with people they know and like. Not that we are not liked in Toronto, but it's much easier if you can go walk down the hall and go have coffee and do business with them.

You did have a presence in Toronto.

We had our head of development in Toronto for a couple of years. And that ended a few years ago. So we have no presence outside of Vancouver.

But you can still make a go of it.

Of course. But it's beholden on me to bring product that they want to buy. As much as we're 2,000 miles away from the decision makers, it's my job to go and sell them, regardless of where they are.

The other challenge has been the service industry. With the tax credit situation, there was a point when it felt like B.C. was being eclipsed by Ontario.

It has been to a degree. Ontario is incredibly busy, Winnipeg is incredibly busy. Georgia, Louisiana and New Mexico are all incredibly busy. But so is Vancouver. And Vancouver has certain advantages. We have a great local talent base, both crew and cast, which is what the Leos are all about, celebrating the depth of the local acting, producing, directing and crafts. We've built that here over the last 20 years.

Can you recall some career milestones?

I first worked in Los Angeles on a show called [*Lamb Chop's Play-Along*]. I was 24 and starting to produce and work in L.A. with an iconic children's performer [Shari Lewis] who I'd grown up watching. I remember shaking my head, driving to work in Beverly Hills, going, 'What am I doing here? Some kid from North Van. How did I end up here producing a television show?' I cut my teeth with an iconic performer who taught me tons about how things work. But I also began to learn how to navigate Hollywood, which is probably the least common skill in producers in Canada. And the next big moment for me was probably the release of *White Noise*, where a little tiny movie did really, really well. And that put us on the map in Los Angeles, so every agent would take our phone calls. The one my mom is most proud of is the little star on the [B.C. Entertainment Hall of Fame Starwalk], which they just did [recently]. That is the thing that my mom has mentioned; 'We have to go outside the Commodore and find your star.'

What would you say to people who are considering leaving Vancouver or the industry?

I think the industry has a huge future here. I think the infrastructure is so strong and the talent is so deep and the industry will not leave. I think it will always adapt and we have to be smart enough to adapt with it. Things like Netflix and iTunes, who are now producing their own product, that didn't exist years ago. So with the changes comes new opportunity. If I had actual job skills, I might leave the industry. I just don't know what on earth I would do. Maybe the Arts Club would take me back.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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