

CANADIANS DON'T NEED FOREIGN SCREENWRITERS TO HELP SELL CANADIAN CONTENT ABROAD

BY MATTHEW HAYS

Canadians were euphoric on Emmy night back in September, when Tatiana Maslany accepted her well-earned award for starring as numerous clones in the show *Orphan Black*. It's a moment I won't ever forget, because of this: In the Mile End Montreal neighbourhood I live in, for some reason there are a number of people who work in film and/or TV. It was a warm autumn night, so everyone had their windows open. When Maslany's name was called, I could hear shrieks of euphoria through my window. It was a moment of intense pride in our national culture, the things we create and the people who make them.

This was the big leagues — a show and its star taking home the gold in the arena of TV, a medium everyone acknowledges is home to the greatest ideas, writing and talent (a stunning revolution, really, given that a few decades ago TV was seen as the lowbrow medium). It was a tribute to its screenwriters and especially the showrunners, Graeme Manson and John Fawcett.

Yet amid all of this, the collective blood pressure of those who work in Canadian cultural industries was driven sky-high by the CRTC's announcement that they intended to significantly alter the funding system: in order to tap in to vital Certified Independent Production funds, producers would only need six Canadian points instead of eight. A two-point drop might not sound like much, but as

many *Canadian Screenwriter* readers know too well, in a milieu as small as the Canadian screen-based industry, it will mean a negative impact on Canadian screenwriter jobs.

In a blistering *Globe and Mail* column, critic Kate Taylor put it very well: pointing to Maslany's Emmy-winning moment, she asked why the point system would be changed, when it's obvious if producers have the choice, they will hire American talent rather than take a risk on lesser-known Canadians. "Media producers had told the CRTC that they need to be able to hire more foreigners in key creative roles and the CRTC listened," Taylor wrote, "buying the dubious argument that, in a globalized, digitized, multiplatform world, Canadians need outside help to create work that can sell abroad." Taylor rightly posed the gnawing question, an existential one for Canadian screenwriters: "At a certain point you have to wonder, how many planks can you replace with foreign talent and still call it a Canadian ship?"

It's one of those only-in-Canada, WTF moments. How on earth does this argument have any traction, especially in light of the success of the moment, *Orphan Black*? It's time to talk about the epic track record of Canadian programming travelling beyond our borders and into the hearts and minds of international audiences. For example ...



From left to right, top to bottom: *19-2*; *Killjoys*; *Murdoch Mysteries*; *Wynonna Earp*; *Degrassi Junior High*; *Corner Gas*; *Heartland*

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19-2

The cop show *19-2* has won international praise and attention for its no-nonsense — and astonishingly realistic — depiction of cops on the job. It has been nominated for an International Emmy, up against formidable series from Argentina, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates. And it gets praise like this from *The New York Times* (note to the CRTC: that’s not a Canadian newspaper): “To watch *19-2* is to be reminded that there is more than one way to pace a police drama... The series is in the tradition of shows like *The Wire*, portraying law enforcement less flashily and less noisily than others, and thus more accurately.”

Killjoys

The sci-fi show *Killjoys* features a kickass cast in a plot that involves outer-space bounty hunters. Since debuting last year, the show has risen to the top ten list of best-rated shows on the genre Syfy Channel. Industry bible *Variety* calls *Killjoys* “a light, well-made, zippy show that knows what it is and delivers solid action, adventure and character development despite its limited budget. The cast has terrific chemistry, and the second season of the show ably builds on the strengths of the quite enjoyable first.”

Murdoch Mysteries

The series’ creators set out to make a mystery show that was fun and charming. And they have succeeded, making it clear that a hit show on home turf can have legs. Now in its tenth season, *Murdoch* Fever has spread to the U.K., where it is the leading original series on the British crime drama channel Alibi. In France it is one of the top three highest-rated shows, where a French network broadcasts a three-hour *Murdoch* marathon every Sunday (the show appears to have taken on a religious reverence). And in Finland, *Murdoch Mysteries* beat mega-hit *Downton Abbey* as the most watched foreign program in 2014.

Wynonna Earp

Taking its comic book origins to new heights, *Wynonna Earp* recounts the adventures of Wyatt Earp’s great granddaughter, as she goes to war with an odd assortment of otherworldly creatures. The show has also proven a hit on the Syfy Channel, prompting *The Hollywood Reporter* to take note: “Syfy’s *Wynonna Earp* was developed for television by Emily Andras [*Lost Girl* showrunner]... Looking over the resumes of the show’s other writers and stars, you’ll notice a lot of *Lost Girl*, *Killjoys*, *Dark Matter* and *Being Human* credits, a reminder of how good the Canadian genre pipeline has been to Syfy.”

DeGrassi

No article on this topic could not bring up the sensation that is *DeGrassi*, a show that has evolved from an earnest show about Toronto youth called *The Kids of DeGrassi Street* into an international sensation. Initially a series of after-school specials that first aired in 1979, the show has taken on a huge array of social issues, from bullying to teen alcoholism to homophobia and transphobia. It has also famously earned the love and deeply-felt admiration of acclaimed indie filmmaker Kevin Smith, who can talk about his passion for all things *DeGrassi* for (quite literally) hours.

Corner Gas

Now off the air after a successful five-year run and a feature film, *Corner Gas* became a hit with domestic audiences while also appealing to international ones. “The other myth is that Canadians don’t watch Canadian TV,” says Gary Pearson, who wrote for the show. “If a show has been properly promoted and is high quality, Canadians will watch in high numbers. This has been proven time and again. I worked on *Corner*

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Gas, *22 Minutes*, *That’s So Weird*, *The Ron James Show* and others. They all got plenty of viewers. We often don’t hear about the successes, as so much of our culture likes to focus on American shows. There are many success stories of Canadian TV shows, both popular with Canadians and sold worldwide.”

Heartland

In a bid to take CBC’s coveted Sunday night slot back to nostalgic family viewing like *The Beachcombers* or *Road to Avonlea*, *Heartland* creators took the show about horses and the people who love them and shifted the locale to mountainous Alberta. As Leila Basen, one of the writers for the show explains, “The thing about *Heartland*, it was based on a series of books written by a British writer with stories set in Connecticut. The original pilot was to be shot in horse country outside Montreal, the idea being that it was a generic eastern seaboard location. The CBC’s genius move was to move the stories to the foothills of the Rockies and be loudly and proudly Albertan. The series has sold all over the world, even a hit in North Dakota [please see sidebar], without ever compromising its Canadian pedigree, both in front of and behind the camera. So to me, this move by the CRTC is a throwback to the bad old days when D-list American showrunners would come up to Canada to run thoroughly forgettable shows.”

If we leave writers from other countries to write our stories, we could see characters similar to past examples with Canadians limited to being of Scottish, English or French Canadian extraction — with the same hackneyed views. Evil French Canadian trappers (*Revenant*, *Twin Peaks*), Kilted Canadians (*Devil’s Brigade*), even Canadian-splottation movies like *Canadian Mounties Vs. Atomic Invaders*. Maybe those are the kinds of stories bureaucrats behind the funding points plans want to see, but is it what Canadians want? ■

The Best Anecdotal Evidence that Canadian Shows Travel

Leila Basen has written numerous episodes of *Heartland*, the family favourite that airs on CBC Sunday nights. She learned firsthand about just how far and wide the show is loved and appreciated one year while travelling across the continent. “It was Easter Weekend in 2010 and I was driving my pickup truck from Quebec to Alberta, heading out to start work on the fourth season of *Heartland*,” she recalls. “Hearing an unfortunate grinding sound coming from the engine, I pull off the highway. I’m in Bismarck, North Dakota, and manage to find a GMC dealer that’s open. There’s desperation in my voice as I explain that I have to be in Alberta the next day because I start work on a television series. One thing led to another and it turned out that the boys in the garage loved *Heartland* — it was their favourite series. They opened the shop especially for me on Easter Sunday and I was back on the road by noon.” ■