

UNIONS AND GUILDS



ROLE CHANGE

BY MIRELLA CHRISTOU

Canada's major professional trade groups are evolving with the times as digital convergence and industry consolidation touch every corner of the business.

The Writers Guild of Canada organized a panel during last year's Fan Expo in Toronto to help raise the profile of Canada's writers. In the attention-getting Count costume is writer Ben Joseph (*Doozers*, *Zack & Deuce*) with Simon Racioppa (*Spliced*, *Rated A for Awesome*).

With the current revolution in the entertainment business forcing everyone to re-evaluate their places in it, Canada's screen-professional trade groups are tweaking their offerings to better equip their members to deal with the change.

The Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), a union that is unique in that it has a cohort of youth members that are legally able to work as industry professionals, has reduced the paperwork needed to gain full membership.

"People want to be full professional members of ACTRA – they're trained, they're ready to come in, they want to come in," says Ferne Downey, ACTRA's national president.

She explains that to that end its so-called six permit rule, which required an aspiring actor to amass six acting work permits before he or she could join the union, has been reduced to three permits.

This change, plus an unexpected development – an influx of former actors returning to productions, especially in busy Ontario,

and hence re-joining ACTRA – has boosted its roster. According to the most recent figures, ACTRA membership increased three percent in 2012-13 versus 2011-12, and, following three consecutive years of growth, the national membership now stands at 22,000.

DIGITAL DISRUPTION

On the flip side, the Canadian Media Production Association (CMPA) experienced a drop in member companies to the current 360 from about 400 in past years, according to Michael Hennessy, CMPA president and CEO.

However, this doesn't daunt Hennessy, who notes that producers often let their CMPA membership lapse when they're in quiet periods and then rejoin again when they're busy. He notes that the cohort of narrowly-defined film and television producer members is on the decline as the ones that focus on digital expands.

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"Our existing, traditional members, those companies are changing away from broadcast TV and film. They're also taking account of the online space, the mobile space, looking more internationally, and even at times getting involved in the distribution of their own product," says Hennessey.

The CMPA also realizes that smaller-scale digital producers with projects that don't require union labour won't necessarily see the benefit in joining the association, due to its focus on industrial relations, he explains.

The cornerstone of what guilds and unions do is, of course, collective bargaining. New independent production agreements are getting done, even if some take a year, or 10, to finalize.

The Directors Guild of Canada recently announced an alliance with the Screen Composers Guild of Canada, which sees the creation of a new DGC membership category for composers to help them secure a collective deal with the CMPA. The alliance is meant to eliminate contract-related confusion for both composers and producers when they enter into a commissioning agreement, says Marvin Dolgay, president of the composers' group.

Meanwhile, animation writers received long-awaited good news when the Writers Guild of Canada (WGC) inked an independent production agreement with the CMPA and the Association of Film and Television Producers of Quebec last fall.

"We're the only English-language guild in the world to cover animation writing – with fees, insurance, retirement and credit provisions," observes Maureen Parker, the WGC's executive director. While it may have taken 13 years to negotiate the trailblazing deal that includes minimum rates for animation writers, in the end, hundreds of professionals in Canada will feel the impact, she continues.

Collaboration between the unions has also become a necessary step to achieving goals in the sphere of industry-specific public policy.

"Particularly with the DGC – we are often of one mind on public policy issues and try to find ways to speak with one voice to the federal government," says ACTRA's Downey.

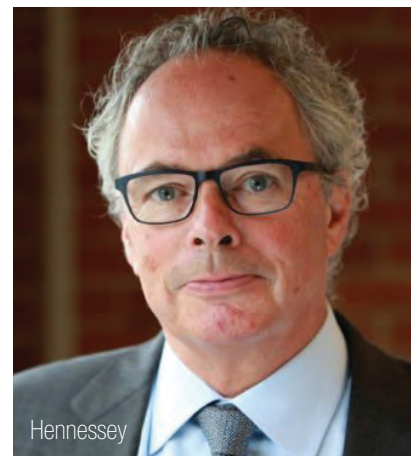
The public policy issues on which ACTRA tends to find common ground with other guilds and unions include copyright protection (such as the 2012 Beijing Treaty on Audiovisual Performance, which hasn't been ratified by Canada yet), income tax deductions for self-employed artists, and stable funding for the CBC, notes Downey.

Composers, many of whom are accustomed to working independently, understand the importance of teaming with like minded associations for greater impact on policy. "It's crucial to them to feel they have a collective voice," Dolgay adds. There are over 350 members of the composers' group, a membership that has been steadily expanding.

HURDLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The front-line professionals today are coming across unique hurdles but also new opportunities as the industry adopts to the realities of convergence. "The industry is in revolutionary stage now, with digital distribution," says Bill Skolnik, executive director of the DGC in Ontario. "Who knows if in the future there's going to be TV or film (as we know it), or if it's all going to be online content? We're constantly asking: 'Are we doing anachronistic things?'"

The DGC is confident it has the right balance of programs in place to help members move their careers along, be it training in digital technology, editing, in the art department, or in design areas, says Skolnik.



Hennessey



Downey



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UNIONS AND GUILDS

To remain attractive to current members, the DGC continues to offer health and financial benefits while also throwing its support behind the proposed Starlight TV Channel, which the guild sees as a way to showcase the work of its members. If approved by the CRTC, Starlight would be a specialty channel entirely devoted to broadcasting and funding Canadian feature films.

To appeal to prospective members, the DGC offers the Guild Apprentice Program, and, like some of the other associations and organizations, reaches out to post-secondary institutions. The result is that the DGC has seen a 15% bump up of members to 3,800 in 2012 from 3,300 in 2011.

The membership of the writers' guild is also on an upswing, rising three percent in the last year to just shy of 2,200 members.

Parker attributes this to a number of reasons, including an increase in local productions, in part due to broadcaster benefits package spending.

Something newly offered last year was a WGC-organized opportunity for writers and showrunners to showcase their work and be in touch with fans at Toronto's Fan Expo. The WGC also continues to host craft nights such as Writers Talking TV, where recently *Orphan Black* creator and TV vet Graeme Manson imparted his insight on how the sci-fi series was made.

The WGC appears to be effectively helping its members navigate the industry's ups and downs. One example concerns the increase in co-ventures between Canadian broadcasters and U.S. networks, where U.S.-industry writing vets often seem to be coveted more than their stay-at-home counterparts. "Financially for the broadcasters and studios, it works. I can say that creatively, our members do like getting a North American audience, but we don't want to be forced to move to L.A. to work on our own shows," says Parker.

In that vein, at the Banff World Media Festival the WGC is to sponsor an event to encourage Canadian and international broadcasters to hire Canadian screenwriters on co-produced and co-financed programs.


For the CMPA, the biggest concerns are industry consolidation whittling down the buyers for projects, as well as the new digital transmedia world, which Hennessy describes as "disrupting the whole value chain."

"It's a frightening, unsettling period of time and potentially a time of tremendous opportunity," says Hennessy. "That is, if we recognize the opportunity when we see it."

TV vet Graeme Manson discussed his creation *Orphan Black* during a Writers Guild of Canada-organized Writers Talking TV event.



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