

Can Canadian Film or Television Have a Global Hit?

Pursuing the Unlikely Dream

Peter S. Grant

In this essay, I explore the often sought but almost never achieved dream of all Canadian film and television producers. It is also a dream of many observers of the film and television scene in Canada.

Can Canada produce a global hit?

We are all used to seeing Hollywood films or TV series that turn out to be successful around the world. But while Hollywood may be the principal source of such hits, we also see occasional global hits from other countries. For example, Australia can point to *Crocodile Dundee* which was decidedly Australian and was a huge global hit in 1983. France can point to *Amélie*, released in 2001, which was one of the few French films to break out in the international market. And England can point to a stream of more recent hits that look very British – from *Downton Abbey* to *Harry Potter* to *Notting Hill*.

So what are the chances for such a global hit to come from Canada?

In discussing this question, we have to make one thing clear. We are not talking about global hits that may have been made in Canada but would not be seen as Canadian. For example, the Oscar-winning film *Chicago* was entirely made in Toronto but no one would think it was Canadian. Around the world, that movie would be seen quite properly as a Hollywood production.

So what would qualify as a *Canadian* global hit? For the purpose of this analysis, the production would need to meet three conditions:

1. It would be shot in Canada by a Canadian production company and would feature Canadian creative talent, allowing it to qualify as “Canadian content” under the CRTC rules.
2. For the audience outside Canada, it would “look” Canadian and be recognizably Canadian whether through theme, subject matter or other elements.
3. It would be a huge ratings success outside Canada as well as in Canada itself.

I should note that whether or not a Canadian production achieves international success is not an appropriate basis for Canadian regulatory or financial support. After all, the prime object of our domestic policies should be to make programs that appeal to Canadians, not the world. But if the world also likes those programs, and if those programs can garner revenue outside Canada, so much the better.

So have we ever had a Canadian production that both looked Canadian and was a global hit? And if not, why not?

Let’s start by looking at each of the three conditions more closely.

Canadian Talent

In the global hit category, Canadian creators have often played a major role. Countless Canadian actors have found success in Hollywood, as have Canadian directors.

However, the fact that global hits like *Titanic* and *Avatar* were directed by James Cameron, born in Kapuskasing, Ontario, does not make them Canadian. Hollywood has a huge Canadian talent diaspora but they dance to Hollywood's direction. Nor do their productions look Canadian.

As with the movie *Chicago*, some of these productions may even be shot in Canada. But the fact that Canadian director Norman Jewison shot most of *Moonstruck* in Toronto does not make it Canadian. In fact, we have a long list of foreign location or "service productions" that are shot in Canada to take advantage of provincial tax credits and the lower Canadian dollar. Some of these productions may use Canadian actors or a Canadian director. Examples include many of the Hallmark romantic productions. But none of the Hallmark MOWs qualify as Canadian under CRTC rules. In fact they brilliantly masquerade as being shot in the US or in mythical communities that could be anywhere.

So we have a plethora of Canadian talent. But Canadian talent and an indistinguishable Canadian location is not enough. What about a Canadian theme?

Does the Production Look Canadian?

This is a difficult element of the three-part test to pin down. Broadcasters in Canada have scheduling and expenditure requirements to support "Canadian content" as defined by the CRTC. But the Canadian content rules set by the Commission do not require that the subject-matter be Canadian or that the film or program "look" Canadian.

There is in fact a lively debate about this question. Richard Stursberg, in his recent book *The Tangled Garden*, has argued that Canada should adopt the British rules, which only hand out tax credits if the program is seen as British. Points are given if the characters are identifiably British, if the program is clearly set in Britain, and whether it is based on British subject matter.

One could imagine having similar rules in Canada. But others argue that adopting such a system would unfairly limit the freedom of expression of Canadian writers.

Occasionally even Hollywood will make a movie with a recognizable Canadian theme. In 1983, Disney made *Never Cry Wolf*, an adventure film set in the Canadian sub-arctic based on Farley Mowat's 1963 book of the same name. Had that film been made by a Canadian production company and had a Canadian director and Canadian actors, we would celebrate it as a bona fide Canadian hit. But none of those elements were Canadian. Accordingly, the production film sits as just another nature film in the Disney library.

Another recognizable Canadian story is *Anne of Green Gables*. Following the global success of the 1903 book by Lucy Maud Montgomery, the US studio RKO made a global hit out of it in 1934. Since then, numerous TV productions made in Canada by Canadian companies have capitalized on its early success. We have gone back to the *Anne* well again and again. The British equivalent would be the lively industry in the UK churning out multiple versions of *Pride and Prejudice*.

But *Anne* apart, it has been hard for Canadian producers to come up with a Canadian theme that might travel abroad. Robert Lantos tried with *Black Robe* in 1991, based in Bryan Moore's novel about a Jesuit missionary among the Hurons in the 17th century. It was decidedly a Canadian-based story and did well for a Canadian film but it grossed less than \$10M worldwide. Lantos tried again in 2002 with *Men with Brooms*, a comedy about curling starring Paul Gross and Leslie Nielsen. But it failed even to get a US film distributor.

A number of Canadian television series that "look" Canadian have had significant foreign sales. Examples include the *Degrassi* series, which was a success on the US teen channel TeenNick (previously The N), and *Murdoch Mysteries*, which has been sold around the world. Both series are recognizably Canadian. But neither series can be described as a global hit. Nor can the Canadian television series *Corner Gas*, which was a hit in Canada but failed miserably outside Canada, despite being picked up by WGN Chicago, the US superstation.

One unmistakably Canadian movie that had international acclaim was *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, a 2001 film directed by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk. It was the first feature film ever to be written, directed and acted entirely in the Inuktitut language. In 2015, a poll of filmmakers and critics in the Toronto International Film Festival named it the greatest Canadian film of all time. But outside Canada it only played in arthouse cinemas and its worldwide revenue was only \$5.1 million. So regrettably it doesn't qualify as a global hit.

More often Canadian producers have tried to underplay any Canadian connection in their programs, in order to enhance the chance of a sale to a US network. They are assisted by the fact that Canadian cities look a lot like cities south of the border.

And of course, Canadian writers have frequently decided to tell stories that are not based in Canada at all. Examples include Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both novels had global success in their audiovisual form. But neither production would have been seen as Canadian, even if produced by a Canadian company. For a global hit to be seen as Canadian by world audiences, the story needs to have a Canadian focus.

Is the Producer Canadian?

To qualify as Canadian under CRTC rules, the production must be produced by a Canadian-owned company. Foreign companies argue that we are being too strict in this regard. If the production looks Canadian and is written and performed by Canadians, why should we care if it was financed and owned by a foreign company?

In the United Kingdom, ownership does not appear to matter. The Harry Potter movies were all financed and owned by Warner Brothers. But the productions all qualified for UK tax credits and no one would think of them as other than British films. Nor did the UK government express concern when a number of successful UK independent production companies were sold to US companies. So Working Title, which produced hits like *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bean*, is now owned by NBCUniversal.

France takes a different view. To be a French film, a film must be produced and financed by a French producer. For example, the French hit *Amélie*, which had a French director, writer and star, and was produced by a French company, received significant support from the French box office levy. But

when three years later, exactly the same creative team came up with *A Very Long Engagement*, they were denied any such support. Why? Because this time, the film was financed by Warner Brothers.

Here in Canada, we follow the French approach. The producer must be a Canadian company for its productions to qualify as Canadian content under the CRTC rules. And although tax credits are available for foreign productions shot in Canada, the tax credits are higher if the producer is owned by Canadians. Canadian content policy has favoured independent Canadian-controlled producers in the interest of diversity and in the hope that the locus of creative decisions will stay in Canada. So when Entertainment One, Canada's largest independent producer/distributor, was sold to Hasbro last year, it was careful to say that eOne's Canadian film and TV operations would "remain as a separate Canadian-controlled unit within the combined business."

Is There Hope?

So we come back to my question: Can Canada produce a global hit, meeting the three criteria I have outlined?

While the skill set to produce a world-class production is here, the real problem is to find a Canadian story that will resonate with global audiences. Yes, *Anne of Green Gables* met that test. But Canada's track record since Lucy Maud Montgomery came up with that story is not very encouraging.

The closest we have come is the recent international success of *Schitt's Creek*, the Canadian TV series. That TV series, originally launched on the CBC, received significant ratings in the United States when carried by POP TV and Netflix. It also recently garnered seven Emmys and has been lauded as a Canadian hit by TV critics in a number of countries. But some have argued that viewers outside Canada would not see the series as "looking" Canadian even though the street signs are in kilometers and the post office boxes say Canada Post.

So what kind of story would be attractive to people outside of Canada but be unmistakably Canadian? Would it be a spy story with Ryan Gosling playing the part of a Canadian Mountie? Would it be a Canadian romcom starring Rachel McAdams and set in Niagara Falls? Would it be a comedy starring Jim Carrey seeking to save the world as Captain Canada? Who is to say?

At least, Canadian producers can take heart from the live theatre. Before the Covid-19 crisis closed the theatres, the smash hit on Broadway and in the West End in London was an unlikely musical called *Come From Away*. Here was a quintessential Canadian story that found international success. So there still may be hope for a Canadian film or television to be a hit in the global market.

But who knows?