

IN VANCOUVER » THE PRODUCERS

Meet a pragmatist whose success mirrors B.C.'s

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VANCOUVER

According to the British Columbia Film Commission, domestic spending on film and TV projects made in the province in 2006 grew to \$278-million, up from \$225-million in 2005. Foreign TV series spending increased 45 per cent to \$433-million. A total of 230 productions were completed in British Columbia last year, including 53 feature films, 39 television series, 63 movies of the week, 33 documentaries, 18 animation projects, 13 television pilots and 11 short films.

Add up the numbers and \$1.2-billion was contributed to the provincial economy.

In Ontario, according to the most recent numbers I've seen, TV and film production in 2006 amounted to only \$888-million, a decline from \$933-million the year before.

But it's not all big-budget features and network TV dramas in B.C. And it's not all about money. A lot of what happens

here are low-key TV productions - from serious-minded documentaries to the sort of slight but successful TV productions that fill up the hours on a host of specialty channels. Yesterday, I was telling you about an innovator based in Vancouver and his Internet/TV project. Today, I'll tell you about a pragmatist and his company.

"We live with rejection," David Paperny says, with a laugh, about Paperny Films as we chat in his pleasant offices. "We create all types of TV. Some succeed, some are rejected by broadcasters at the initial pitch. But we're not a factory. We're proud of hand-making these shows."

What he means by "these shows" is an eclectic list of productions, including: *Confessions of An Innocent Man*, a documentary for CTV about William Sampson, who was tortured repeatedly in the 2½ years he spent in a jail in Saudi Arabia for a crime he didn't commit; a doc about the homeless in Vancouver being mentored and helped to live a different, settled life; another doc called *The Blonde Mystique*, about the allure of "the blonde;" and *Kink*, the series that chronicles people "living on the sexual edge" in various Canadian cities.

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The Sampson doc is deeply serious, and Paperny proudly shows me the first few minutes of it. He and an editor are adding in narration by Martin Sheen. In truth, most of the other material is frivolous. There's *Crash Test Mommy*, which will have another season on Slice later this year, and *Glutton For Punishment*, featuring "food personality" Bob Blumer getting all wacky with food in various parts of the world. It airs on the Food Network in Canada and on *Fine Living* in the United States.

Right now, Paperny and his partners, Audrey Mehler and Cal Shumiatcher, are preoccupied with *The Week the Women Went*, a reality series to air on CBC in early 2008. The premise, which originated with the BBC, has all the women leaving a small town for a week, forcing the local men to cope with everything their wives or partners might normally perform. Paperny got the call to make the series for CBC and chose the small Alberta town of Hardisty, population 743. The filming was done in June and, according to Paperny, the show is both bizarre and entertaining. "I think this is the sort of populist programming that CBC wants to do right now. And I think it will be a hit. The footage of the women - they

went to Canmore to enjoy themselves - is utterly fascinating."

For the past few years, Paperny Films has been listed by *realscreenmagazine* as "one of the most influential production companies in the world." To justify this lofty description, Paperny points to *First Comes Love*, a reality series about gay and lesbian weddings.

It's a new version of *My Fabulous Gay Wedding*, a six-part reality series made by Paperny that aired on Global in 2005. Scott Thompson was the host, playing "the Wedding Fairy" who helped to create a dream wedding for a gay or lesbian couple. Global declined to air it for a second season and now it is being made, with Elvira Kurt as host, for Logo, an MTV offshoot in the United States that's aimed at gays and lesbians.

Asked why Global dropped the popular, fun series, Paperny shrugs. "I think the Aspers [the family that owns Global] were nervous about it and the reaction they got to it. It's going fine now for Logo."

There's a relaxed air in the Paperny Films office the day I'm there. One of the first things I notice is that almost everybody wants to say hello to me. On the rare occasions when I've visited a production

office or broadcaster in Toronto, most of the staff and executives act in an oddly wary manner. Some are outright hostile, citing a negative review I wrote. I've dismissed several Paperny Films productions as fluff, but here, nobody seems to be bothered.

Paperny laughs at the idea of hostility. "We take our business seriously, but we're not uptight. We're working on the margins here, being based in Vancouver. It can be harder to get the attention of broadcasters in Toronto, but we manage to do it. In Toronto, production companies are 10 a penny. We're out here. But if we go to Toronto, the key people want to meet us, because we're not running into them all the time. There are fewer decision-makers in Vancouver, but that can work to our advantage. We have a freedom and flexibility. It's easier than being in the middle of things."

Yeah, but: In the first column I wrote from here, I said, "I'm following the creative shift to the West in Canadian TV." And, after a few days in Vancouver talking to Canadian TV people here, visiting sets and looking at those stats about money spent on production here, I'd say that, right now, Paperny is wrong - Vancouver is the centre of things.