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How Canada created Hollywood

by RACHEL SURMAN on Nov 15, 2013 • 6:28 pm

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Leslie Bland is excited about his new production. It's evident from the tone of his voice as he answers his phone on the Los Angeles set of his new documentary, *Gone South: How Canada Invented Hollywood*.

Bland has just finished filming an interview in Griffith Park with Sergio Di Zio, the Canadian actor who played Michelangelo "Spike" Scarlatti on the TV series *Flashpoint*.

"Essentially, what our documentary does is it covers the huge influence Canadians have had in Hollywood from the very beginning right up to the present day," says Bland.

The documentary does this through a series of interviews with Canadian celebrities, as well as up-and-comers in Hollywood experiencing their first big break.

Ian Ferguson, Bland's creative partner, originally received a research advance for *Gone South* to write a book for Douglas & McIntyre, a Canadian publishing company. Ultimately, they counter-pitched the idea to create a feature-length documentary that was picked up by Super Channel, a Canadian broadcaster.

Tracy Thomas, a Canadian actor and singer-songwriter, narrates the film and links the interviews together as she "bumps" into numerous other Canadian stars in L.A. Through this premise, Bland puts a comedic spin on the stereotype that all Canadians know each other.

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The production team is interviewing everyone from Calum Worthy, 22, who stars in *Austin and Ally* on the Disney Channel, right up to 92-year-old Monty Hall, a legendary producer and sportscaster.

Gone South champions Canadian culture by arguing that without Canadian influence, Hollywood would be unrecognizable as it is today.

"It reminds Canadians that for years and decades we have punched above our weight in Hollywood," says Bland. "Canadians have a great track record of success, with not only developing culture within Canada, but internationally as well."

Bland cites famous Canadians in Hollywood such as the Warner brothers and Louis B. Mayer, the film producer of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in its golden years. Out of the first four Academy Award winners, three of them were Canadian, including "America's Sweetheart" Mary Pickford.

There is even a theory that actors sound the way they do in old Hollywood pictures because actors in the United States started talking in a Canadian accent.

Bland explains how the film touches base on "Canadiana," meaning all things relative to Canadian culture. As Thomas wanders around L.A., the film makes a point to include funny Canadianisms that are easily recognizable to all Canadians.

An example of this is a scene where Thomas and Neve Campbell both drink Caesars, a cocktail that was invented in Calgary.

They also film Thomas with Dean McDermott and his wife, Tori Spelling. McDermott has been featured on reality TV cooking shows and will be the host of *Chopped Canada* on the Food Network in 2014. In *Gone South*, he is filmed trying to get Spelling to explain the taste of a Hawkins Cheezies, a Canadian snack.

Bland wanted to include these fun Canadiana "shenanigans" in the documentary to inject some comedy into the film.

The documentary also features archival footage and photographs from old Hollywood. Bland notes that in the early days of Hollywood it was easy to pick out the Canadians who had influence, such as Mack Sennett. Sennett discovered Charlie Chaplin, and essentially invented comedy on film.

Now it seems the times have changed, as there are hundreds of Canadian movers and shakers in Hollywood, such as James Cameron and Jason Reitman. There's a whole history now of people that have shaped the business in Hollywood, says Bland.

"Canadians do consume a lot of American culture, but we don't realize that sometimes what we are viewing as American culture is in some ways ourselves reflected back to us because of Canada's influence in Hollywood and what Hollywood does," says Bland.

Gone South will receive both Canadian and international distribution. They are expecting to release the film in March 2014 and will make its film festival debut shortly after, according to Bland. It will air on Super Channel in Canada on TV Oct. 31, 2014.

The United States premiere of *Gone South* is quite fitting, as it will debut at the Consulate General of Canada in L.A. on Canada Day 2014.

"It's giving us a great opportunity to network with our fellow Canadians that are down here and it's been a really rewarding experience," says Bland.

Rachel Surman is a regular contributor for CanCulture.

Photography courtesy of **Leslie Bland**.

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