

Documentary *Gone South* looks at the Canadian presence in Hollywood

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From America's Sweetheart Mary Pickford to *America's Got Talent* judge Howie Mandel, Canadians have always had a big presence in Hollywood. In their documentary *Gone South: How Canada Invented Hollywood*, Victoria-based directors Leslie D. Bland and Ian Ferguson examine the migration going right back to the early days of Hollywood, which Canadians helped establish.

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There are now more than one million sorry-saying, Smarties-craving Canadians in Los Angeles, a bunch of whom were interviewed for the film, including Alex Trebek, David Foster and Neve Campbell.

"It's like you're exotic but not threatening," offers Tim Long of the Canadian-in-L.A. experience. The Manitoba-born comedy writer (*The Simpsons*, *Late Show with David Letterman*) figures Canadians are funny "because we possess a unique combination of alienation and resentment which breeds comedy as a survival mechanism," he says in the film.

Gone South has its B.C. premiere at the Victoria Film Festival on Friday. The Globe and Mail reached Mr. Ferguson (also co-author of *How to be a Canadian*, with his brother Will Ferguson) in Victoria.

What made you want to make a film about Canadians in Hollywood?

It was originally an idea I had for a book because any time I've gone down to the States, particularly in Hollywood, I kept bumping into Canadians who were way more patriotic than

they are in Canada. In Canada if I'm from Edmonton and you're from Toronto, we don't necessarily decide that's enough for us to be pals.

But when you're in Hollywood – 'Oh, you're from Scarborough – fantastic!'

And I've also always been one of those Canadians who goes "Oh, Barry Morse in *Space: 1999*, he was Canadian; Leslie Nielsen was Canadian." So I started looking into it as a book. And I was surprised by the history of Hollywood; that it really did start with a bunch of Canadians ending up out there for studio builds.

Then I realized that the first four Academy Awards for Best Actress – three of them went to Canadians [Mary Pickford, Norma Shearer and Marie Dressler].

I was surprised by the history of Canadians helping to establish Hollywood as well.

That's the part I think people don't realize; we know Lorne Greene's Canadian or Bill Shatner's Canadian, but the idea that the whole studio system was created, designed and built by Canadians – MGM, Warner Bros., Mack Sennett. ... Mack Sennett invented comedy on film.

Who were you going for in terms of interview subjects?

We wanted to get a range of people from established big names to people who are up and coming because we wanted a full range of what it's like to be a Canadian in Hollywood, what it's like to try to break into show business. Like Erin Karpluk: She's the star of *Being Erica*, but she crosses the border and being the star of *Being Erica* on CBC is the equivalent to having performed with the Scarborough Little Theatre; they don't care.

Were there Canadians you felt you absolutely must speak to for this project?

I didn't approach it that way because I think a lot of people have that idea that if you do a film about Canadians in Hollywood it's going to be William Shatner and whatnot.

The first person to actually say yes to us was Martin Short, and the scheduling just didn't work out for him.

But he did put us in touch with Alan Thicke and David Foster. Some of the people I had the most fun with aren't necessarily the biggest names in terms of public reaction, but I got to hang out with Ted Kotcheff and I was such a huge fan and his whole relationship with Mordecai Richler and the two of them sharing an apartment in London, England, and Mordecai writing *Duddy Kravitz* and handing each chapter to Ted, and Ted, who was directing live TV for the BBC, saying 'I'm going to make this movie.' And even the people that said no said no in an incredibly polite way, because they're Canadian.

Who said no politely?

Jay Baruchel. He called me personally and said, 'I think this is a great idea for a film. I don't consider myself a Canadian in Hollywood. I still live in Montreal.'

It sounds as if you met a lot of nice Canadians.

The first interview we did was Monty Hall. We drove down to Beverly Hills and got there at 8 in the morning and Monty Hall comes out and I say, 'We'll be in and out and try to get this done in half an hour.'

He said, 'Hold on. What time did you guys get up this morning?' I said '6 to get here by 8.' He said, 'So nobody's really had breakfast.' And he said, 'Let's make a deal;' he actually said that.

He said, 'We'll start the interview after everyone's had juice and some muffins' and he walks us into his kitchen and he's got juice and muffins and yogurt and coffee. That's very Canadian, right? At the end of the interview with Ted Kotcheff he said, 'Well I'm going to throw some burgers on and crack some beers.' The great Arthur Hiller, we finished his interview and he said, 'All right; I think that calls for a glass of scotch.' Shannon Tweed brought us homemade chocolate chip cookies. I made the mistake of telling Howie Mandel, 'I'm a big fan and if you say something funny I'm not going to laugh because it'll mess up the sound,' and he just got this glint in his eye. So we've got 15, 20 minutes of me just laughing so hard that I ruined the take.

Were you surprised by anything you learned?

It's not in the doc because it didn't fit into the story we were trying to tell, but I was surprised by how many people had really bitter CBC stories.

We probably could have done a 60-minute special of just people looking into the camera and

talking about how they would still be in Canada [if they'd been treated better or recognized by the CBC].

You're working in the TV business now – in Victoria.

There's a recipe for success, eh?

Have you ever considered a move to Hollywood?

I'm like a cowboy, I guess. I would go where the work took me.

I think if I got offered work that took me there for a long enough period of time that would be great.

Victoria's not a hardship posting. I came here because my friend Leslie D. Bland started up Less Bland Productions and wanted a creative director and thought I'd be a good fit, so that's what brought me to Victoria. It's not exactly the epicentre of Canadian show business, let alone international show business, but [these days] you can sort of work anywhere.

If David Shore [the Canadian creator of *House M.D.*] phoned me up next week and said, 'I kind of liked talking to you and the movie doesn't suck,' I'd be like yes, I'm there.

But I'd also go to Sudbury if the work was interesting and the people were nice. That sounds like I'm slamming Sudbury. And I shouldn't slam Sudbury. I should slam Regina.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

The Victoria Film Festival runs Feb. 6-15. Gone South is at The Vic Theatre Feb. 6 at 6 p.m.

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