

FEATURE FILM

The Feature Film Project: A Springboard to the Industry, or a One Shot Feature Film Opportunity?



By Janis Cole

“What do you get when you give a wildly eclectic group of young filmmakers absolute creative freedom and (almost) enough money, and encourage them to take risks?” It was a question posed by guerilla-style independent entrepreneur Colin Brunton, the producer of Bruce MacDonald’s *Roadkill* and *Highway 61*, when he was made the first executive director of the Canadian Film Centre’s (CFC) Feature Film Project (FFP). Between 1992 and 1997 Brunton’s risky, low-budget equation resulted in *Blood & Donuts* (Holly Dale), *Rude* (Clement Virgo), *House* (Laurie Lynd), *Shoemaker* (Colleen Murphy) and *Cube* (Vincenzo Natali).

All five films Brunton oversaw did well on the film festival circuit, receiving critical attention, with the majority returning profits. Justine Whyte, the current executive director of the FFP, confirms an assertion Brunton makes, that *Cube* and *Blood & Donuts* are still the strongest financial hits of the 12 FFP films in general release, adding that *Rude* has also done very well. With the latest features made at the CFC – David Weaver’s *Siblings*, Paul Fox’s *The Dark Hours*, Cassandra Nicolaou’s *Show Me* and Tony Asimakopoulos’ *Horsie’s Retreat* – only receiving limited exposure at festivals and commercial cinemas, it may be time to ask: is the FFP still performing at peak capacity in today’s marketplace? And does it continue to be the most relevant first feature film opportunity in the country?

The Formative Years

Peter O’Brien, the first executive director at the CFC, recalls his successor Wayne Clarkson inviting him to a dinner party to flesh out a germinating idea with Alex Raffe, Bill House, Debra Henderson, Michael Burns and a few others. Clarkson, the former head of the Toronto Festival of Festivals (now TIFF) and the Ontario Film Development Corporation (OFDC) in its

glory days, expressed to them his plan to provide alumni of the CFC with a fully financed feature. He had been impressed with the steady increase of talented grads passing through the Centre, but Clarkson was concerned about their bulk landing in a highly competitive industry.

O'Brien, the distinguished producer of Philip Borsos' *The Grey Fox* and Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin*, was enthusiastic about Clarkson's idea. He felt that it not only offered an opportunity at the end of CFC residency, but also, "it could bring attention to the Centre, help to bring focus on the grads, and put some of them through one more experience to help prepare them" for commercial work.

Ultra-inventive India producer Alex Raffé, the co-producer of *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, masterminded the business plan for the FFP. She started negotiations with unions and guilds, helped align the OFDC, Telefilm Canada and the CRB Foundation, and provided the board, of which she was a member, with a viable strategy to make low-budget, industry-standard 35mm films for less than \$400,000 cash, but with an additional \$300,00 to \$500,000 in deferrals.

To assure that the FFP would be most beneficial to CFC grads, there was an initial stipulation that at least two roles among writer, producer and director had to be filled by CFC alumni. That rule has since loosened, and now anyone who fits the FFP's budget structure and first feature mandate can apply to make a film, or to undergo development.

The funding started falling into place and Clarkson needed to find the right person, in a hurry, to run the FFP. It had to be someone with a thorough knowledge of the film industry, who was highly experienced in making feature films and possessed an ability to do wonders with low budgets. In the event the candidate was a filmmaker, it would have to be one who would forfeit making their own films in favour of helping others make theirs.

Colin Brunton remembers running into Alex Raffé, who immediately [clicked](#)([MARC?](#)) that she was looking at the ideal person to run the FFP. Brunton met with Clarkson and before he knew it he found himself in a role he calls "the equivalent of having a mini film studio, with the full authority to green-light projects. I spent the first year closing all the industry deals that Wayne and Alex had initiated. I worked closely with the board. We brought in Justine [Whyte] to production-manage the FFP. She is really good at what she does. And since we were complete opposites, I'd make sure the broad strokes were covered and put my faith in details, while she nailed down every detail. We worked well together".

The Make-or-Break Years

Brunton selected *Blood & Donuts* by writer Andrew Rai Berzins, who was being offered his first taste of moviemaking. He was struck by the appeal of Berzin's quirky, offbeat dark comedy about a vampire who wanted to be human. He brought in CFC producer workshop grad Steve Hoban who has gone on to produce the Canadian cult hit *Gingersnaps* and win the 2005 Oscar for producing the stunningly quirky, animated short, *Ryan*. And based on her CFC short *Dead Meat*, which made it onto Clarkson's top 10 as part of the TIFF's 10x10 series, Holly Dale was chosen by Brunton to direct "because her stylized short was perfect for the feel of the project." Whyte adds, "Andrew had written the script on an *Underwood*, which added to the appeal, and *Dead Meat* is still one of the best shorts ever made at the centre."

The creative team of *Blood & Donuts* was offered cash funds of \$377,000 and roughly the same in deferments. Brunton clearly remembers that first experience. "It's impressive what they came up with, including a stellar cast, dynamic special effects and a superb soundtrack. The film became a cult classic but there was mixed critical attention. This is a typical thing that happened with the film: it would open in a city and one newspaper would give it one star while another gave it four or five. It's a genre film. Some people got it, and some didn't." And despite uneven critical nods, the film has culled steady audiences of young

devotees and [Web site hosts](#)([Marc: fan sites?](#)) over the past decade.

Next up was *Rude*, an inventive, highly stylized feature by emerging writer/director Clement Virgo, and produced by Damon D'Olivera and Karen King. The film caused a splash of excitement when it went to Cannes and received good critical notices, and yet, like many Canadian films, it had a shy commercial outing. A similar pattern was repeated with the next film Brunton backed, *House*, Laurie Lynd's beautifully stylized adaptation of a whimsical play written by and starring Daniel MacIvor, and produced by Karen Lee Hall. *House* held great appeal on the festival circuit, and received strong critical notices, but it did not fare so well in commercial release.

It wasn't until Vincenzo Natali's breakthrough film, *Cube*, hit big in North America, and then abroad, that the FFP received both the critical attention and audience numbers it desired. Brunton agrees that while the FFP films he supported did well on the festival circuit, *Blood & Donuts* had been the sole financial success until *Cube* made lots of money. After *Cube* opened in France, and was embraced by international critics, it was commonly perceived as the standout hit film from the Brunton era, and remains one of the FFP major successes to date.

The Selection Process

Four people have held the executive director position at the FFP: Colin Brunton (1992 to 1997), Dezso Magyar (1998 to 2000), Peter O'Brien (2000 to 2001) and Justine Whyte (2002 to present). It has been their project selections, along with advice from their board members that determined what got made.

Brunton started receiving scripts right around the time that *Basic Instinct* was popular, and he remembers, "I got at least 10 script submissions about bisexual, coke-sniffing murderers. What I was searching for was something fresh that could fit within the budget I'd been given to work with.

"The goal of the selection process is twofold," he says. "First you learn to hone your selection instincts, and then you learn to trust that your instincts are right." He recalls, "Selecting the right projects was tricky. There were politics. The advisory committee was weighty and they debated the merits of each project. Part of my job was convincing them to back my instincts."

Brunton received a large number of scripts from budding directors at the Film Centre. "*Save My Lost Nigga Soul* was a short film Clement (Virgo) made at the CFC to prove to us he could do *Rude*. The same with Vincenzo (Natali) who had made *Elevated*, about three people confined in an elevator. Then he brought us *Cube*, about a larger number of people being trapped in a confined space. Laurie (Lynd) and Daniel MacIvor had worked together on *The Fairy Who Didn't Want to be a Fairy Anymore*, and Colleen (Murphy) had a script that was unbelievably sweet after making the dark CFC short *Putty Worm*. These were all projects where I could see what the director had done, and get a good idea of what they wanted to do."

Once he made up his mind to greenlight a project, Brunton says the FFP offered filmmakers "hands-on help, and arm's-length creative input. A big part of it was making sure that filmmakers came through on time and on budget, but with a film that was very much [in their own] voice."

Prior to running the FFP for two years, Peter O'Brien had once been pitched a story idea by a guy in the next urinal. "People did the strangest things to get to me," he says. "I was surprised when I was at the FFP that no one camped out on the lawn to pitch me or threw stones in my window with little story notes attached."

Instead, he received endless submissions, sifting through volumes of drug-deal-gone-wrong loser movies and stories about characters in rough times, who end up even worse off in the end. He chose to make



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Helen Lee's *The Art of Woo* and Asghar Massombagi's *Khaled* because "with those projects I could help good directors with material I liked, and the filmmakers were at the right point in their careers to make a feature. They could work within the parameters of the FFP and fit the budget requirements," which were \$500,000 for *The Art of Woo* and \$150,000 for *Khaled*.

Justine Whyte, who started working at the FFP during Brunton's tenure, has been involved in the selection of every film. She has been running the FFP for the past four years. Whyte searches for projects that stand out, with clever scripts. She says that a filmmaker's passion is important, along with a short film that demonstrates the team can pull off a feature. "I also consider if projects can fit within the financial structure. If they're too big, they have to be compromised too much. With both *Rude* and *Clutch* we were able to cut about 22 lead performances to 11, and with the film *19 Months*, we worked out a strong financing plan. In the past two years we have finished four films. When you compare that to what was made across Canada, it's pretty good".

Clarkson chose to play a smaller part in the selection process as people running the FFP took on larger roles. "The first three, for me, embody everything that the project is about," he comments. "*House* is based on a play and it's inventive. *Blood & Donuts* is a genre film with attitude, and *Rude* is very stylized.

"What we look for is something budget savvy, dramatic and different. It comes down to a reaction to the screenplay and the talent of the director. We [the FFP] take a measured risk, both on talent and on screenplay."

Working With Low Budgets

"Low-budget independent filmmaking is fraught with bodies along the road to completion," says Brunton. "What the FFP needs is the same thing the Canadian film industry needs – more money, and taking more risks. Aiming for commercial films is unrealistic, but there needs to be enough money for the peculiar and unbelievably original ones." He recalls Virgo having to 'kill' the brand names in *Rude* for E&O purposes and Dale offering Brunton her salary to get the crane shot she wanted in *Blood & Donuts*.

Financing for FFP projects has changed since Brunton's time. There are now two funding opportunities: the ultra low-budget digital feature with a maximum of \$250,000 cash, and the low-budget feature, with a mandatory 35mm release plan built into maximum budgets of roughly \$500,000 cash. And deferrals can no longer be built into the

financing scheme.

Natali feels fortunate to have made *Cube* before the strategy changed over to making more films for cheaper budgets. He says, "With all its sets and effects, *Cube* would never have been possible to finance in the new model."

Dale's approach to *Blood & Donuts* was making the most of what little you had, "It was a hard-working, truly low-budget and highly inventive environment. They [Brunton and Whyte] didn't get in the way of your ideas, they got behind them. It was a completely organic and fertile place to grow."

"Part of the charm is the risk you can take with a low budget," says Whyte, who green-lighted the FFP's current four films: *Horsie's Retreat* (Tony Asimakopoulos), *Show Me* (Cassandra Nicolaou), *The Dark Hours* (Wil Zmak) and *Siblings* (David Weaver). Of these four, Weaver's morose look at family life, *Siblings*, made for \$520,000 cash, has had the heartiest launch, premiering at the 2004 Toronto International Film Festival and opening in selected Canadian release.

Weaver, who has made one previous feature, *Century Hotel*, chose to take *Siblings* to the FFP because "they have a tradition of respecting the director's vision and there was the added attraction of receiving full financing



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in one place." Whyte was able to accept *Siblings* under their mandate of first features because, "three people filling key creative roles were making their first feature."

Weaver's film has a rich look and strong cast, but getting these results involved serious considerations and huge decisions around shooting format, number of locations and shooting days. And he says, "The shooting format wasn't a creative decision. You want to shoot on 35mm but there isn't money to do that. It's a budget constraint decision to shoot on another format and blow the film up to 35mm in the end."



Khaled
Asghar Massombagi
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they crash, they crash. The comfort around film programs is false: the success (or failure) is with the individual filmmakers and their films. The

"Choosing the films they'll make at the FFP and shaping the scripts for production is really about 'can it be done for this much money?'" says Nicolaou, who has kept a busy film festival schedule and acquired an agent since directing her engaging thriller *Show Me*. "But even with the low budget constraints, they backed me when I ended up finding the perfect location for *Show Me* and it was three hours north of Toronto. As you can imagine, it was a real strain on the production, but nothing closer to the city had the elements I needed, and they supported me on that."

"They could definitely use more money at the FFP," Weaver offers, "but Canadians are conservative with spending, and they like their spending to result in something for everyone. Film is high risk and Canadians in general are nervous about risk. The country that came up with Medicare is not about to willingly risk big on the cultural forum of our time. But that's what we need; we need to be in that arena. It takes risk, investment, and a willingness to lose money sometimes."

Looking to the Future

Peter O'Brien recalls a simile David Perlmutter used during a lecture at the CFC that has stuck with him over the years. "When pilots learn to fly planes, they're in a simulator, so when the plane crashes no one gets hurt. Film schools that offer production training give filmmakers a form of simulator, but if

THE FEATURE FILM PROJECT'S FEATURE FILMS:

- Blood & Donuts (1993)*, (d) Holly Dale, (w) Andrew Rai Berzins, (p) Steve Hoban, (ex) Colin Brunton
- Rude (1994)*, (d/w) Clement Virgo, (p) Karen King, Damon D'Oliveira, (ex) Brunton
- House (1995)*, (d/w) Laurie Lynd, (w) Daniel MacIvor, (p) Karen Lee Hall, (ex) Brunton
- Shoemaker (1996)*, (d) Colleen Murphy, (w) Jaan Kolk, (p) Elizabeth Yake, (ex) Brunton
- Cube (1997)*, (d/w) Vincenzo Natali, (w) Andre Bijelic, Graeme Manson, (p) Mehra Meh, Betty Orr, (ex) Brunton
- Clutch (1998)*, (d/w) Chris Grismer, (p) Allison Lewis, Chan Park, (ex) Dezzo Magyar
- Too Much Sex (1998)*, (d/w) Andrew Ainsworth, (p) Tina Grewal, Jeffrey Berman, (ex) Magyar
- The Uncles (2000)*, (d/w) Jim Allodi, (p) Nick de Pencier, (ex) Magyar
- The Art of Woo (2001)*, (d/w) Helen Lee, (p) Anita Lee, (ex) Peter O'Brien
- Khaled (2001)*, (d/w) Asghar Massombagi, (p) Paul Scherzer, (ex) O'Brien
- 19 Months (2002)*, (d/w) Randall Cole, (p) Jim Mauro, (ex) Justine Whyte
- Fairytales & Pornography (2002)*, (2002), (d/w/co-p) Chris Philpott, (p) Rick Warden, Kelly Harms, (ex) Whyte
- Horsie's Retreat (2003)*, (d/w) Tony Asimakopoulos, (p) Karina Griffith, (ex) Whyte
- Show Me (2003)*, (d/w) Cassandra Nicolaou, (p) Howard Fraiberg, (ex) Whyte
- The Dark Hours (2004)*, (d) Paul Fox, (w) Wil Zmak, (p) Brent Barclay, (ex) Whyte
- Siblings (2004)*, (d) David Weaver, (w) Jackie May, (p) Tashi Bieler, Marcia Douglas, (ex) Whyte

program helps, but the filmmakers are on their own."

"The filmmakers need to use the FFP better," insists O'Brien. "When you undertake to make a feature, the filmmaker takes responsibility for the film and the FFP is responsible for the opportunity." He says, "The advisory board was pleased with *Khaled*. It was a huge success. Helen (Lee) is an accomplished director and *The Art of Woo* is an accomplished film, but romantic comedies usually have movie stars in them. So, how much good do you do for a filmmaker if the film is not well received? That's harder to predict than what happens when a film is successful. *Cube* and *Rude* propelled their directors into the limelight, so that's a one-in-eight percentage. The reasonable expectation of the FFP is to find a star sometimes, give a lab experience to many, and focus on the discovery of new talent."

Virgo remains grateful for his experience. "The FFP gave me the opportunity to make *Rude*, but then it was up to me to make it

work. Everyone helped support me and shape my vision. Colin was instrumental in helping shape the script, Wayne helped in cutting it down, and Justine too. Norman (Jewison) came in just before I went to Cannes and he helped me shape the opening. They all helped. But in the end, I had to make the opportunity work. I had to decide how best to make the film."

"It's great that the FFP is there because where else can you see such a wide range of films, such an eclectic collection?" asks Weaver, "but it would be great if they could make more films, and have better budgets. The pressure is on every film to be the breakout. It's a huge weight of expectation. Yet *Siblings* was made for less than *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. We exist in a film industry that thinks films now should be made at a budget that is less than 15 years ago.

"Trying to prevent losing money is also the wrong thing to do," Weaver continues. "We need to make films for the sake of making good films, not by focusing on increasing audiences by five percent or reflecting our social progress. You can't serve the purpose of social progress, or increased audiences, or anything else for that matter if the film isn't good."

"There have been a handful of financial successes and a huge number of critical successes," says Whyte. "It's a showcase to show what you can do and an opportunity to get the next one made. The FFP could perhaps play a bigger role in presenting the films to the public. It's a bare-bones operation, so having more money, more resources and

more human resources would allow more time to focus."

Nicolaou sees the FFP as a springboard to get from your first feature to your second, and into a full-fledged directing career. She is currently considering directing jobs and developing a new feature. The directors of *Cube*, *Rude* and *Blood & Donuts* – Natali, Virgo and Dale – have worked steadily as dramatic directors of film and television since passing through the CFC and FFP, supporting the notion that combining both experiences can have a favourable impact on careers.

"What the CFC and the FFP do, they do extremely well," says Brunton. "When I look around I see people from both programs working all the time. They're always doing something. But the films need more money, the Feature Film Project needs more money and the Canadian film industry needs more money."

"I'd like to see it [the FFP] expanded nationally," says Clarkson. "Why not have one in B.C., Manitoba, Quebec and Nova Scotia? The success of the FFP is the budget structure, the rigor of the selection process and the benefits of mentoring. Why should that only happen in Ontario? Why not provide the opportunity right across the country?"

With Clarkson's recent move from the CFC to Telefilm, perhaps he's already taken the first step to position himself for introducing more Feature Film Projects across the country, and offering more talented filmmakers the opportunity to springboard into directing feature films.

Janis Cole is a Writing Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design. She has made three widely acclaimed documentary features—*P4W: Prison for Women (1982)* Genie award winner; *Hookers on Davie* and *Calling the Shots* (Genie award nominees).



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