

Feature Docs **The Funding Crunch**

By Janis Cole

“There’ll be pennies from heaven for you and me...” with ‘you’ being drama series and ‘me’ being reality TV. Leftovers fetched from the ground go toward television movies and TV documentaries, while virtually omitted from industry payouts are indigenous theatrical dramas and auteur theatrical documentaries.

When feature documentary directors get a timely idea, they don’t race off to start churning out their film, nor are they likely to find themselves in a development deal. That’s common practice in drama but not in documentary. Instead, this brand of filmmaker develops, finances and makes their film concurrently, focusing varying degrees of attention on the chores as required.

Most doc filmmakers have learned to produce or co-produce their films, either by choice (to maintain creative control), or necessity (lacking others to do it), and their hunt for funds can take longer than the actual fieldwork. Before fervent documentarians set off with director’s tools in hand, they first don producer’s garb to align major broadcast presales, seek distribution advances, persuade NFB co-productions, hunt up investment dollars from various industry pots and compete for scant grants. All are key pieces in the intricate financing puzzle, stacked together in various ways to fund independent Canadian films. Factor in live pitching sessions, proposal writing, schmoozing and promoting, and the exhaustion of making a one-off, auteur doc in this country becomes glaringly evident. By taking on their own front-end fundraising, and backend reporting, filmmakers are pulled away from full creative focus, and additionally, wide gaps of time are imposed between their productions.

Canada is world renowned for documentaries, yet has historically been reluctant to release adequate financing for theatrical docs. Keeping the genre alive has been left to a smattering of filmmakers, toiling the funding trenches to make their one-off features in an industry that is increasingly encouraging cheap, easy to produce lifestyle or reality series. But it appears that the feature doc’s time may have finally arrived. They are popular, sexy and glamorous, making money and drawing crowds at the box office. Ears started perking when *Bowling for Columbine*, made for a budget of \$3,000,000, started turning \$40,000,000 in profits, and the interest continues with Morgan Spurlock’s breakthrough smash hit *Super Size Me*, well on its way to similar profits. Canada also has a perfectly timed theatrical doc breakthrough, *The Corporation*, already grossing over a million dollars in early theatrical release.

Until this recent wave of hot docs swung open the marketplace door, it was up to tenacious filmmakers to forge their own theatrical successes.

Now they wait to see if the funding system will be revamped quickly enough to allow them to be less caught up in deal making, and more freed up for filmmaking. No one denies that feature docs must be worked into the industry’s realm of funding viability, but what are the chances of meaningful change taking place quickly enough to bolster production output levels needed to carry the current momentum?

Two maverick documentarians programmed at Hot Docs, and the creator of Canada’s runaway box-office hit, were asked to discuss the current documentary phenomenon, their producing strategies and the Canadian funding system for feature docs.

Nettie Wild has been a major doc fixture in British Columbia since the eighties. She just picked up a Genie for her stellar feature doc, *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*, which also screened during a spotlight retrospective of her work in Hot Docs, alongside her previous feature docs *A Place Called Chiapas*, *A Rustling of Leaves* and *Blockade*. *Fix* follows a trying-to-go-straight drug addict, a drug activist-cum-drug addict’s girlfriend, and the (then) Mayor of Vancouver through their quest to get a safe injection site in Canada’s worst drug area, that city’s Downtown Eastside. Wild produced the film with Betsy Carson on a budget of \$375,000. It was shot on Mini-DV (later blown up to 35mm for an additional \$100,00), with CTV, CTF, Rogers Core Funding, Tax Credits, BC Film, and Arts Council grants. The 92-minute feature played well theatrically while the 48-minute TV version received a local (BC only) CTV broadcast. Wild knew her story was a feature, but her broadcaster only had a television hour available. This affected her funding structure, filmmaking process and marketing strategy, resulting in both the feature version she wanted and the shorter one she was required to deliver.

Peter Raymont has a long history of award-winning documentaries. He unveiled his feature-length version (82 minutes) of *The World Stopped Watching* in the Canadian Spectrum at Hot Docs, and cut two shorter versions (48 minutes and 58 minutes) for his broadcasters. Fifteen years after the Sandinista/Contra revolution that thrust Nicaragua and its people into the media spotlight (which Raymont captured in his earlier feature doc, *The World is Watching*), he follows four journalists traveling back to Nicaragua, to investigate the devastating effects of post media saturation. The film was shot on Beta SP and made through an NFB co-production, a presale to TVO, Rogers funding, the Sundance fund, Knowledge Network, CFCE, SCN, CTF and tax credits. Currently doing the festival circuit, *The World Stopped Watching* will be distributed as a feature by the NFB while the shorter versions run out their broadcast life.



Jessica Kerr

Pictured: Nettie Wild



Pictured: Peter Raymont



Nancy Bleck

Pictured: Mark Achbar

Mark Achbar continues touring the festival circuit while simultaneously reaping box office profits with his feature-length doc *The Corporation*, which, through a slew of well-chosen interviews and slick graphics, analyzes the personality of the corporation, determining it to be a classic psychopath. Achbar produced the film with co-creators Joel Bakan and Jennifer Abbott, and shot it on Beta SP (later blown up to 35mm) for a budget totaling \$1.39 million. Achbar estimates there were roughly fifteen funding sources involved in making the film possible, with each being crucial to securing the production. He credits Vision TV, TVO and Rogers Core Funding for being on board early enough to secure the film's development plausibility. Achbar knew *The Corporation* was a feature idea, but to get the required television licenses, TVO agreed to purchase the film as a series of three one-hours. (TVO ran the series in February, and since the film's unprecedented theatrical success, aired the feature version, intact, in May).

The trend these renowned documentarians followed to get their films made is a 'two version' solution: finance the broadcast length and then, to a large extent, subsidize the theatrical feature. This may be viable on occasion but it's not healthy. Even with the documentary resurgence showing profits in our cinemas, filmmakers continue to find themselves bumping into policy roadblocks and navigating their way through funding disadvantages.

POV spoke with Mark Achbar by cell-phone while he was being chauffeured to a Los Angeles festival screening, squeezed in a late night discussion with Peter Raymont at a party for his Hot Docs premiere and joined Nettie Wild for an early breakfast while she was in town for her retrospective. All three filmmakers have released their latest features during the popular wave of hot theatrical docs, and each has taken risks to make the feature versions possible.

POV: Why are we witnessing such heated interest in feature documentaries right now?

ACHBAR: Political docs are providing a service people want to consume. These films are about issues that audiences care about, and if mainstream media isn't dealing with these subjects, independent filmmakers will do it.

RAYMONT: News reports are called docs, but viewers know better; they're fed up with not getting at the deeper meaning of the subjects. They want films where filmmakers take their time. They don't need to see balance, they want to see point-of-view. Who would have thought *The Corporation* would have such great appeal, but it makes perfect sense. We live in a time where Media Literacy Studies educate people about media seduction, and they end up wanting more meaning. Enter the documentary.

WILD: With the exception of *The Corporation* the docs people are talking about are not Canadian. We're not leading. By and large we're set up in an

industry that would have us churn out bland sausages. (Richard) Stursberg is the head of the biggest cultural agency in the country (Telefilm Canada). At the recent Doc Summit (in Toronto, in late April), he cited (as a good example) how *The Corporation* started out as three one-hours for TV and then grew to become a feature. The problem is the industry has manufactured itself on its own fiction. In reality, Achbar had a great idea for a big movie and the only way he could get it financed was through one-hour licenses. It was only because Rudy (Buttignol, at TVO) gets it, and knows he'll benefit by the hoopla created in the theatres, that the film got financed.

POV: Are Canadian funding policies effective for feature docs?

ACHBAR: It took six years to make *The Corporation*. I spent three and a half years raising money before I got to the creative. Rogers Core Funding made a difference at a key moment. Films Transit and Mongrel Media came in (at other critical points). It all helps. While we were making the film, it felt like doors were closing. There were some dark times. Maybe now the film is helping to show some of these institutions to support theatrical docs. Telefilm made a commitment, changed their minds and had to be coaxed, badgered really, and now that the film is a success, they're happy. But I had to go in there with confidence, entitlement, and push (the project) through.

RAYMONT: Funding agencies are behind the curve. In the States there's money to blow the films up and do mass release. We don't necessarily need to spend the dollars on blow-ups. If we had good venues and good video projectors, it would be enough to create a critical mass.

WILD: When we needed to get a blow-up for the theatrical release of *Fix*, Telefilm and the NFB didn't get it, but Mayor (Philip) Owen got it in about five minutes. He kick-started it with a benefit to raise half the money, then BC Telefilm came in. But it was Owen who had the vision. To Stursberg specifically, I'd like to say, 'your programs don't fit us, there was no money for theatrical release blow-ups at Telefilm because we're a documentary.' The NFB was well meaning but not moving at a rapid enough pace. Our allies in all the outlets are trying their best to stretch the rules, but documentaries need to be written into the feature film fund at Telefilm. Broadcasters have to come up with feature doc slots. There's hope with the NFB, a major source of funding, to get driven again by docs whose stories need to be whatever length they may be. First have the policies, then let the stories rip.

POV: Do we have any funding sources out there we can be grateful for?

ACHBAR: Vision TV has got to be saved. They need 2% more from each subscriber and we need to support them. Attempts to privatize public TV are nauseating. We need to keep them public. TVO, Access, Knowledge... they're all important and we



A scene from the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protest in 1999 as seen in *The Corporation*, a film by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott and Joel Bakan.



The World Stopped Watching | Peter Raymond

The World Stopped Watching journalist Ry Ryan shows footage of the 1987 film *The World is Watching* to 82-year-old grandmother Carmela Requesnes Martinez. She was in the earlier film after an ABC film crew covered the destruction of her village.



The World Stopped Watching | Peter Raymond

Photographer Bill Gentile poses ex-Contra mercenary, Ciriaco “Lucero” Pulido, now a peasant farmer living in the village of Ciudad Antigua, near the Nicaraguan-Honduran border.

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can't take them for granted or let them erode, we need to care for these things.

RAYMONT: Without enough funding you don't get something—you don't get paid, or don't get enough shooting days or don't get the equipment needs met. License fees have to be pushed up. TVO is good for the auteur; Rudy has been a filmmaker and he's made a niche where docs have a home. Jerry (McIntosh) is more open than previous CBC'ers, and is always available. NFB is committed to docs and to funding them properly.

WILD: Two projects were chosen for Rogers Core Funding, and we were one. They got it going. CTV was flexible to let production start while development was happening. Arts Council money is the clout to hold onto creative control. The Canada Council, BC Cultural Services—the peer jury system really works and says, 'go with this film, take this step.' The spirit that drives these places is art, and we have to keep talking about the 'A' word. Robin Mirsky (Rogers) and Robin Jackson Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund (CIFVF) are two women in the industry who get it. They pour more money into filmmaker's hands than anyone else. Rogers money comes with no grief, no approvals, no stress. Even though they're in the business industry, they see themselves as a cultural entity. They're saying, 'this is for your film, we want you to grow, go for it.' Everything else is saying, 'can I get my money back?'

POV: Where do you see problems in the current funding structures?

ACHBAR: What's the point of multi-million dollar corporations tapping public money? Allowing publicly traded companies access to public funding money makes no sense. They're designed for profit and we can't let them consume our resources.

RAYMONT: The new funding scheme falls 15% short of the old system. License fees haven't been pushed up. You have to max out your tax credit and you need to defer wages. Under the new funding scheme we're likely to see films collapsing.

WILD: The NFB and Telefilm must be inclusive of feature docs, not TV driven docs, but theatrical auteur driven docs. CTV commissioned a TV hour (of *Fix*), which raises a big discussion about features versus one-hour. We knew we were headed towards a feature and we pushed to keep them open to playing it, because when you go from a 92-minute feature to a 48-minute TV hour you lose something. You lose a whole big chunk of story. While broadcasters won't stand in the way of features that can be cut down to an hour the filmmaker ends up subsidizing the extra length. And if you want the TV license you have to do the cut-down. There you are with a great big story, scaling it down for a broadcaster, ad-hoc, to the point of lunacy. Peer driven juries are a good solid process and they put the money directly into the hands of the filmmaker. Everything else fuels the producer—it's a different emphasis. The industry funding emphasis is imbalanced, and needs to be

rebalanced in favour of cultural funding.

POV: How have funding dilemmas affected you personally?

ACHBAR: On *The Corporation* I had a friend acting as an intermediary for \$250,000 of financing that fell through. I had to scramble and quickly reconceive the financing or lose the film. My family stepped in when it was about to collapse.

RAYMONT: I started thirty years ago and back then the NFB was making great films but they weren't getting on TV. I went independent in 1977 and lobbied Telefilm, and later the OFDC to fund docs. Now money goes into them, but not enough. You should be able to develop docs much like you can develop drama.

WILD: I've been around twenty years and it's gotten worse every year. In the past five years the funding shifts have been monumental. The rules are always changing. If you play by the rules you have about a 15% chance to eat, and it's unlikely you'll be able to make the film you want. I gave a speech at Hot Docs one year about how much time is given to details, and how much it takes away from my time to create. Two thirds of the room were out of their seats, standing and applauding, but none of them could give me a job. The third still in their seats were the people who could, and I thought, 'I'm never going to work again.'

POV: In a perfect world, what would be your ideal funding scenario?

ACHBAR: How about re-conceiving the public sphere? We would work reasonable hours, receive reasonable pay, have no deferrals and own our own channel to show the work. This could be quite a revolutionary model.

RAYMONT: Broadcasters have to put up a much higher part of the budget. Tax credits have to be interim financed; this alone would be huge, and it's easy to do. Use the 'Medici' model, treating filmmakers like national treasures who need to be supported.

WILD: Use the peer jury method. Have the NFB in (more co-productions), and the feature film fund at Telefilm be open to feature docs. Have longer broadcast slots. Vision something new, where the timing of the broadcast encourages the theatrical launch, where they feed each other. From beginning to end everyone buys into the feature doc, rather than doing it ad-hoc, where, if you're lucky, some people will buy in. There is magic in the cinema—you take people someplace, it's an experience and they love it. TV audiences give you your numbers whereas theatrical audiences give you clout. If we could turn the priority of timeslots around on TV, we could close that gap.

Re-conceiving the old, and envisioning something new requires leadership and guts. To be most effectual, cohesive changes will need to take place this summer instead of next. With theatrical docs at an all-time high, will major players in the industry embrace singular voices of feature doc auteurs, and can it happen quickly enough? POV

Funding Tunnel holds Glimmer of Light

FUNDING SOURCES IN CANADA MAKE IT POSSIBLE TO FUND A ONE-OFF, FEATURE-LENGTH 'AUTEUR' DOC, BUT THE PROCESS CAN BE UNDENIABLY LABORIOUS, TIME CONSUMING, COMPROMISING AND EVEN DOWNRIGHT DISCOURAGING. Filmmakers who have been kicking around a long time have only a handful of assiduous industry supporters to regularly back them. Rudy Buttignol (TVO), Michael Burns (The Documentary Channel), Jay Switzer (CHUM) Jerry McIntosh (CBC), Jan Rofekamp (Films Transit international sales) and NFB producers such as Ontario Studio's Silva Basmajian and recently appointed Pacific Studio's Rina Fraticelli are among Canada's wholehearted doc supporters, but they may also wish to help 'shape' films they fund or commission. Within the maze of financing deficiencies, strident rules and collaborative requirements, it's rare to find anyone who is willing to back individualistic doc 'voices' without imposing creative requirements. Few choose to put their dough directly into the outstretched hand of a filmmaker selling their vision rather than their film's recoupment schedule.

Robin Mirsky is one of those voices. She is the Executive Director of Rogers Telefund (interim financing), Rogers Documentary Fund (RDF, for grants) and Rogers Cable Fund (equity investment), all of which support independent production, and help bolster a film's market viability. The three funds are available to doc filmmakers, and the RDF stream is exclusive to their needs.

The documentary fund grants money three times a year in the form of core funding (maximum \$100,000) and top-up funding (maximum \$35,000). Mirsky is seeking original, high quality, provocative docs that Rogers wants to be associated with, and she imposes minimum requirements. Before applying, a filmmaker must first secure a national broadcast commitment (TVO along with a second regional broadcaster is also acceptable), and the license fee must be at fair market value. Unlike other partners who factor into financing, the Documentary Fund requires no creative approvals. Mirsky recognizes that filmmakers essentially have to satisfy the end-user so she aims to keep it simple. She either likes a film or she doesn't.

Since unveiling the Documentary Fund eight years ago, Rogers has supported feature doc veterans like Allan King (*Dying at Grace*), Ron Mann (*Grass*) and Nettie Wild (*Fix: the Story of an Addicted City*). If their films have required an hour version for the broadcaster, Mirsky still backed their theatrical feature. When producer Mark Achbar was struggling to get his three-hour mega-doc *The Corporation* off the ground back in 1999, Rogers gave him full backing (\$100,000). It wasn't always evident how successful his film would become during the six years it took to make, and Achbar recognizes the timing of the core-funding grant as crucial to setting his film in motion.

Shelly Saywell (*Generation of Hate*), Peter Raymont (*The World Stopped Watching*), Lindalee Tracy (*The Anatomy of Burlesque*), David Paperny (*KINK*), and Harry Sutherland (*Little Sisters vs. Big Brothers*) are additional customers Mirsky has supported. She is impressed by all the filmmakers she backs and enthusiastic about their quality productions and unique brands of subject matter.

The biggest setback with the Documentary Fund is a plight every funding source faces—the producers' demands far exceeds financing ability. Filmmakers who get grants aptly find it terrific, while those who don't, have limited options for finding similar money within the industry sector. By putting non-recoupable, hands-off cash into the pockets of documentary filmmakers, Rogers is getting it right. If more industry investors replicated this style, wouldn't it bolster the volume of auteur driven, one-off feature docs intended for theatrical release?

Director Nettie Wild videos Dean Wilson, president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) as he leads a demonstration inside the chambers of Vancouver's city council

The Fix | Elaine Briere



At a filmmaker's panel session in Hot Docs, Albert Maysles spoke about the difference between 'feature-length docs' and 'documentary features,' with the former being longer versions of short stories, and the latter being great material for novels. The wave of films that are leading the way to the bank are in the 'documentary features' category. It takes skilled assessors to recognize the opportunity of backing these kinds of stories.

Specialty channels increasingly offer doc features at home, with pre-buyers like History, Bravo!, TVO and CBC being among the stronger supporters Mirsky regularly sees showing up on Rogers applications. The Documentary Channel runs docs 24/7. The sweeping growth of the Hot Docs Film Festival, (Mirsky is on the Board of Directors, and Rogers is a major festival contributor) has become a pivotal force in encouraging this current trend for non-fiction features. Hot Docs offers a showcase that has made the public hungry. Forever seen as the underdog of Canadian funding, theatrical documentaries have gained a dash of momentum. Now it's time for funders to catch up with the wave that is well out in front of them.

—Janis Cole