

Pitching The Corporation

by Joel Bakan

"I saw the back of Michelle Pfeiffer's head," says Joel Bakan. She was sitting a hundred rows in front of him, watching her husband, Ally McBeal creator David E. Kelley, accept a "Rockie" award at the Banff Television Festival. Martin Short was also there, picking up an award. The audience, a Who's Who of international television, applauded with sincerity and on cue, lapping up the very moment of celebrity and glitter. But the glamour left Bakan cold. "Scenes from [our film] *Manufacturing Consent* danced through my mind", says Bakan, a UBC law professor and author. He went to the Banff Television Festival with Mark Achbar, one of the makers of **Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media**, to propose a new documentary series about the history and nature of large corporations. From his perspective as a neophyte in Television Land, here is Joel Bakan's report on pitching **THE CORPORATION** to television executives from around the world.



Pitching The Corporation often seemed futile. After two days and a dozen pitches, I felt like Sanchos, with Achbar playing Don Quixote, tilting at satellite dishes. During each pitch we had to convince a distracted and over-booked broadcaster representative that our show was more exciting than all the others she or he had been pitched about.

The problem for me, an academic non-fiction writer, was that most television people don't get turned on by ideas and analysis. Even the documentary side of television often seemed to be driven by entertainment concerns, with ideas taking a back seat or having to stand in the aisle. "That sounds like a great book idea", was a typical response. "But who are the characters? What are the stories? Where's the drama?"

I quickly learned to adjust the pitch, trotting out interesting stories and characters first, and then, slipping in an idea, an analysis, maybe even a statistic, as though it was an afterthought. The academic in me bristled. But this was



showbiz.

Some television people seemed almost hostile to thought. Accepting his award for *Ally McBeal*, David E. Kelly told the adoring crowd how unfair it was that people criticized him for the show's portrayal of women. "It's just a story about a woman", he complained, "it's not meant to say anything about what women are or should be." Semioticians be damned!

In one session a big-wig American producer snorted that the key-note address of the Festival - a graceful and constructive critique of television delivered by Mark Kingwell, Canada's hippest intellectual - reminded the producer again why he abhorred intellectual analyses of TV.

Such anti-intellectualism is a strong voice in TV land, but not the only one. Some pitch sessions - such as ours with TV Ontario, the National Film Board, Vision TV and BBC, to name a few - were thoroughly engaging. In them I met TV people who were deep thinkers, and more intellectual fun than most of my academic colleagues.

Perhaps the greatest frustration for me as a writer in TV land was the apparent irrelevance of writing - at least when pitching. Achbar and I brought a twenty-five page treatment document to Banff, a model of concision. Few wanted to read it. "Get it down to two pages", was the straight-faced advice from one Canadian broadcaster heavy. That seemed generous compared to the high-brow BBC, which wanted only one page. Television people want to hear you, not read you.



There was a certain irony in pitching *The Corporation* at Banff. Banff, after all, is hyper-corporate. Corporate logos, corporate sponsorships, corporate people

were all over the place. At one event, Michael MacMillan, head of Atlantis Alliance Inc., was treated like some kind of demi-god, escorted to the stage by four Mounties (their appearance licensed by corporate rival, Disney) and a piper, to receive an award. Many of the people I spoke with seemed concerned about television's increasing corporatization. Partly to blame, according to some of them, is the Canadian funding structure.

Outside the slashed and burned CBC, private sector corporations, driven primarily by their - and their advertisers - bottom-lines, decide what we see on TV, and make lots of money for showing it. Public agencies subsidize the system by providing taxpayer cash, and the use of the publicly-owned air waves.

To take one example of the absurdity of this system, Atlantis Alliance, touted as a Canadian private-sector success story, and the eleventh largest production house in the world after Time Warner, felt compelled to kill Justice, its flagship show for next season, when public money from Telefilm Canada did not materialize.

But its not all gloom and doom in television land. The independent television artists I met are reason for a cautious optimism about television's future. These mainly young writers, directors and producers are creative and tenacious, intensely committed to making challenging and edgy TV. Despite all its warts, television is pretty tempting.

Even I - a mere tourist in TV land - was tempted to stay at Banff. I was transfixed by one session, titled Two in a Room, a cross between the one-day novel writing contest and Wheel of Fortune.

Two executives, each representing a different broadcaster, one Canadian, one foreign, sit on a stage and negotiate criteria for an international co-production in front of 500 people. Once the criteria are set, audience members are given two days to write up and submit proposals. The winning proposal gets a \$10,000 development deal and a shot at having the show produced. After much drama and suspense, the two executives agreed the show should be about music, related to youth, entertaining, interesting and highly visual.

My idea was Hoof Dreams, a documentary about the resurgence of tap dancing among African-American Youth. I think I could have smoked the winning idea,

Piano Lessons, a film about the relationship of pianists to their pianos, but I never got around to writing up my proposal.

I was too busy pitching.

[Joel Bakan / BCBW Autumn 1999]