

GOING FOR GOLD: LET'S MAKE AN APPOINTMENT WITH CANADIAN DRAMA

Notes for an address

by **Charles Dalfen**

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(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Thank you for that generous introduction.

It's a pleasure to join you today. I see the festival as a unique opportunity to meet informally in this beautiful setting with those of you who produce and broadcast the television that Canadians choose to watch on a daily basis.

Over the course of the week, I hope you will take me up on my invitation to discuss some of the issues I will raise today.

This year we celebrate 50 years of Canadian television. And there is much to be proud of. Canadians have hundreds of channels to choose from, including dozens of Canadian conventional, specialty and pay television channels.

Our filmmakers are world-renowned.

Our documentaries and animation awards line the walls of boardrooms from CBC, the National Film Board to private broadcasters such as Corus Entertainment.

What's more, we have proven that we can produce TV programming for the largest and arguably the toughest market in the world.

The question I am interested in exploring today is how, building on our successes over that half century, we can reach the point where we have English-language dramatic television series that we can relate to as Canadians, the way that Americans can relate to West Wing, or that Britons can relate to Coronation Street or that French Canadians can relate to Fortier; dramatic television that reflects us, amuses us, moves us; television that we try and make sure to be home to watch. Since we are at one of the sites of the '88 Winter Olympics, and are still touched by the euphoria of our gold medals in men's and women's hockey in the 2002 Olympics, I've entitled my remarks "Going for Gold: let's make an appointment with Canadian drama".

I raise this question after only five months in my new position as Chairman of the CRTC, but after a great deal of thinking about Canada and the challenges and opportunities facing the Canadian broadcasting system.

I raise these questions, not to minimize our accomplishments to date, because they really are tremendous, but rather, as it was put in the 1999 Policy on Television, to build on our success. I also raise them to express my confidence in our collective capacity – whether it be as producers, broadcasters, regulatory agencies, policy makers or creators.

News, documentaries, magazines, music and variety all have their place. Indeed, the Commission's Television Policy broadened the categories of programming to which it has attached priority status in recognition of their place in the system.

Yet none have quite the impact on our imagination or on our identity as drama.

And within the drama category, no programming allows for quite the degree of identification with characters and themes as does the dramatic series.

Yet, we note the following:

A review of the top-10 dramatic television series in the UK, Germany, France, and French Canada indicates that, as in the US, nearly all of the programs are indigenous; even in Australia, which of course shares the English language – half of the top 10 series – are by and about Australians. In English Canada the number is zero.

A review of the peak time viewing schedules in these same television markets shows a healthy presence of indigenous drama series. The schedules of English language broadcasters in Canada show far less.

As CRTC Chairman, I ask myself whether these indicators are consistent with the *Broadcasting Act*, and particularly with its spirit.

As a Canadian, I ask myself whether they go to national self-respect? Are these somehow the measures of a dependent – rather than an independent - cultural status?

It's been said that years ago one could not get a job on-air at the CBC without an English accent. Is it the case today that one cannot get a show on primetime Canadian television without an American accent?

To use another image, have we turned over to Hollywood the best downtown real estate in the Canadian broadcasting system?

Let me stress at this point that I am completely mindful of the realities of Canadian broadcasting and the immense difficulties producers and broadcasters face in bringing Canadian programming to air.

These include, but are not limited to:

the huge power and attractiveness of American drama programming and of the American publicity machine;
the fact that the costs of that programming can be largely recouped domestically in a market of nearly 300 million people;
contrast that with a small Canadian population stretched across thousands of kilometres of border with the US, able to access that programming through a variety of technologies in a range of shades, from white to grey to black;
the high cost and extreme complexity of financing Canadian drama programming;
a US market with little taste for programs not clearly identifiable as American;
the consequent need to amortize the costs of indigenous English Canadian drama over some 24 million people; and
the enormous disparity between the costs and benefits to Canadian broadcasters of carrying Canadian versus US programming, particularly in peak time.

This isn't a new problem.

In fact, it's part of a very familiar model that cropped up over and over again in the last century.

The American supremacy in entertainment programs, the challenges represented by its geographic proximity and its cultural affinities for English-speaking Canada, the fact that a people should recognize itself and be able to identify with what's on the screen, this objective is so difficult to attain that we may even ask ourselves if we can attain it.

However, if we care, then should we not try and do something about it? And that is a big IF. There is no public outcry.

Canadians watch US programs because they like them, and because they are good – with high production and entertainment values.

However, Canadians do watch Canadian programs.

But as they are used to the best television, not only from America, but from around the world, these programs have to attract them. So that is the challenge.

If we do care, then do we not owe it to ourselves to find a way forward?

If Canadians are willing to schedule their workweeks and their VCR's to catch *Friends*, *West Wing*, *24*, *The Sopranos* or *Sex in the City*, should we not try and engage them with must-watch Canadian choices of the same calibre?

Can we in fact develop appointment television with Canadian drama every week?

I believe that the talent in this room, talent that has created *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, *Traders*, *The Associates* and *DaVinci's Inquest* can rise to the same gold-medal standard and achieve the accolades and the loyalty that imported programming wins.

I believe that producers of English-language Canadian television can provide us with dramatic series that will make it to the top 10, in the way we see British, Australian and French-language Canadian dramatic series hold court in the Neilsen's.

I hope I am not dreaming, but if I am, at this stage in my tenure, I am not yet prepared to give up the dream.

At this stage, I raise questions in the hope of creating a dialogue among the various players in our great industry, so that we can determine whether or not we are in agreement on the objectives and how to attain them.

I must admit that I was encouraged by the initiatives of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Honourable Sheila Copps, and her colleagues aimed at ensuring that the major federal agencies for the audiovisual sector share visions and discuss objectives as they link their common causes within their respective mandates.

I would also like to set a challenge for our industry – to broadcasters, producers and those who finance both – to bring forward their thoughts and ideas on how we can create the business case for taking the necessary risks to invest in, produce and air distinctively Canadian dramatic programming.

Being new on the job, I am open to exploring fresh ways of looking at key issues and creative solutions.

The challenge may be decades old, but I would like to think that this creative industry has not yet exhausted all of its options to find a solution.

In conclusion, may I say how much I appreciate the opportunity to raise with you this morning a number of questions that I consider to be at the heart of my mandate as CRTC Chair. I hope you will permit me to summarize them:

Can we resolve our historic conundrum of creating space for Canadian creative expression on our airwaves and our screens?

Are we prepared to acquiesce in what some might consider a dependent cultural status?

Can we work together to overcome the factors that inhibit the financing and airing of Canadian dramatic series on English language television?

Can our own dramatic programs make it to the list of the top ten most-watched series?

Can our own indigenous productions become appointment television for Canadian viewers?

Can we dream of winning gold?

This is the discussion I'd like to begin with you this week and continue with you as we go forward together.

Thank you.

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