

Producer's Passion is Key to Broadcast Deals

Contributed by with Shelly Gillen

"I'm a very big supporter of first-time filmmakers," says Shelley Gillen, head of Creative Affairs for Corus Entertainment's Movie Central. "Not that we need so many that the economy can't support them all, but our industry always needs new blood, new talent to keep the engine oiled."

That's happy news for first-time filmmakers, since Gillen oversees the \$1.5-million Made With Pay Development Fund, created by Corus in 2003 to assist in the production of dramatic movies and series that will eventually be broadcast on Movie Central (the Corus-owned, 24-hour-a-day, commercial-free, premium pay-TV service available in Western Canada). "Think HBO," says Gillen, "that's what we aspire to be."

600 submissions each year

Adam Butcher and Campbell Scott in St. Ralph Gillen is not involved in acquisitions, but rather the commissioning and pre-licensing of projects from infancy to finished product. One illustration of how she works is her relationship with Vancouver-based Anagram Pictures. Armed with a background acquired at Simon Fraser University's film program, Andrew Currie, Trent Carlson and Blake Corbet operate like a collective, each taking turns writing, directing and producing. In 2001, with an early draft of the script for their first feature Mile Zero in hand, they approached Gillen.

Gillen's fiscal year begins in September... so it's best to approach her before her budget is drying up

It was one of the approximately 600 submissions she receives each year and, although she isn't able to read all of them herself, she employs a team to make sure everything gets read. Of those 600 — some of which may be existing projects being submitted at different stages of development — about 80 are accepted. There are no set fees, but Gillen says she provides around \$10,000 to \$15,000 per phase, sometimes more on a project that is further along in development. Gillen's fiscal year begins in September and she tends to spend most heavily then, so it's best to approach her before her budget is drying up.

Director Michael McGowan on the set of St. Ralph

Find your own partners "It takes an awful lot to get a film made"

Generally, Gillen explains, she won't take scripts from writers; they must come through a producer. "It takes an awful lot to get a film made," she says. "You may be holed up in your basement writing the most fabulous script, but unless somebody is out there putting all the pieces together and getting it financed, it may not happen. I used to develop scripts myself more often in the beginning, but the relationship between a writer, director and producer is like a marriage and it's a lot better if you find your own partners rather than have me try to match you with someone."

Tips

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Shelly Gillen's three most common mistakes made by first-time filmmakers.

- Sending various materials at different times, often past deadlines. That suggests the team is inexperienced and

disorganized.

- Applying

with a number of different projects. She feels this suggests the team is throwing everything against the wall hoping something will stick. She recommends putting all resources behind the project that everyone most believes in and has a passion for.

- No one likes

filmmakers who are unreasonably stubborn, but being so flexible and open to input that you'll change anything is also a bad sign. As Gillen points out: "That's equally bad because it makes me lose confidence that you have a passionate voice and a strong sense of the story you're planning to tell."

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For first-time writers, she usually wants to see a first-draft screenplay. But in the case of a writer with a proven track record, she might support the project based only on an outline. Gillen also looks carefully at the team. Even if one of her readers submits a critical report based on many flaws in a script, Gillen might fund it anyway if she's confident that the writer can improve the script based on the report and she knows there's a talented producer on board to move the project forward.

A short is a great calling card In the case of Anagram, Gillen was impressed with Andrew Currie's script for Mile Zero. "It's really all about the writing," she says. "Everybody's trying to make product, but anybody who's funding or commissioning or looking to pre-license are all hoping to read a script that stands out and gives them a real buzz. Something that makes them laugh or cry or want to phone all their broadcast friends and say, 'Hey, have you seen this?'" Gillen is based in Vancouver, but she doesn't feel geography is an issue. "It doesn't matter where you live in the country, if you write a great script you'll rise to the top."

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Delicate Art of Parking DVD sleeve courtesy Maple Pictures

Still, there's also the business side. Gillen knew Currie had a track record as an award-winning short filmmaker and co-producers Blake Corbett and Trent Carlson showed her shorts they'd made. All three were willing to work closely with Gillen through the entire development process. (This led to Gillen supporting Anagram's second and third features, The Delicate Art of Parking and Fido.) To Gillen's mind, Anagram is a good model for success.

"They'd gone to film school and formed a company together," she says. "And they'd managed to make some shorts. A short is a great calling card. Getting a film made is a grueling process and making a short is like making a feature in miniature. So I figured they understood what it was going to take."

Passion can be expressed in many ways Typically projects already have development money from other sources, such as Telefilm or Astral Media's Harold Greenberg Fund. And like Telefilm or the provincial funding agencies, development funding from the Made With Pay Fund must be paid back on the first day of principal photography. But as a broadcaster, Gillen has right of first refusal to license the film. "We don't license everything we develop, because we develop a lot of projects, but typically if we like it and put in development money we hope it's going to go the distance."

On the set of It's All Gone Pete Tong with lead Paul Kaye

What makes a project stand out? To Gillen, it's passion. But, she notes, that can be expressed in many ways. It can happen in a two-page synopsis attached to the script or during an in-person interview. Or in some photographs that capture the mood and tone of the project. But, Gillen adds, don't include any visuals that aren't going to be part of the film. "Meaning, don't use a Camcorder to shoot you and your family badly acting out the living room scene and tell me that the real thing will be much better."

When asked to name the single most important element, Gillen replied without hesitation: "The script. A good director and a good cast can elevate a weak script up to a point, but nothing can make a bad script good."