

**TELEVISION DRAMA:
ENGLISH CANADA'S MOST IMPORTANT
CULTURAL CHALLENGE**

**A speech delivered to
The Broadcast Executives Society
by Richard Stursberg
Executive Vice President,
CBC English Television**

**Four Season's Hotel
Toronto**

Thursday, February 17, 2005

Please check against delivery

C B C

Richard Stursberg “Drama” Speech

English Canada’s Most Important Cultural Challenge

The most important cultural challenge facing English Canada today happens to be the most important programming challenge facing Canada’s public broadcaster.

That challenge is drama.

It’s also a challenge the CBC is uniquely able to address – and one we’re determined to address, with vigor, imagination . . . and success.

The “drama” I’m referring to is English-language televised dramatic programming. To us at CBC, that means dramatic series, comedy and entertainment programming. It means the kind of shows that are not only produced in Canada, but that are made for Canadians and reflect our unique sensibility.

What’s the problem?

Many components of English Canadian culture are thriving: writing, music, dance, opera, news and documentary production, newspapers, radio and live theatre. We are reaching

record audience levels and critical acclaim, both at home and abroad. Arguably, English Canadian culture has never been so diverse and so successful.

Except in drama. With a few notable exceptions, we have yet to make a real breakthrough in terms of drawing large audiences on a consistent basis to see our own stories brought to life on the small screen. While drama is the most popular category of prime-time programming – it accounts for more than half of screen time – Canadian drama accounts for only 9% of screen time and 5% of viewers. And every year since 1998, that viewership has been falling.

This is unfortunate since television is the most important of all the mass media. Television reaches vastly more people than books, dance, theatre or newspapers. Success in English TV drama can dwarf those of all the others combined.

In Canada today, a best-selling book sells 5,000 copies; if you add in library and other sales, maybe 20,000 Canadians read a Canadian authored best-seller. The combined audience for all live professional dance last year in Canada was just over a million people. Yet a single episode of a successful Canadian drama can draw as many viewers.

So why does English drama do so poorly?

Some people contend that the audiences for English TV drama are small because Canadians don't want to watch Canadian programming. We think this is untrue. What

Canadians don't want to watch is bad Canadian programming. But when they are offered great shows – shows like *H2O*, *Shattered City*, *Corner Gas*, *Rick Mercer's Monday Report*, *Trudeau*, or *Canada, A People's History* – they respond with enthusiasm and in large numbers.

They respond well when they are offered beautifully made, engaging programming that is designed for them, that is rooted in their sense of humour, their values, their lives and their history. In this sense, English Canadians are the same as television viewers throughout the world – whether in France, Germany, Australia or the United States – if they are offered wonderful shows that speak to them, they will embrace them.

Other Countries Have Faced the Challenge

Almost all of the big industrialized countries have faced the challenge we currently face. Fifteen years ago, their prime time schedules were dominated by American shows. Throughout Europe and Australia, people were watching shows made by North Americans that had little or no relationship to their local cultures. And then a strange thing happened: the European broadcasters, their governments and independent producers began a concerted effort to make domestic drama that would connect with their audiences.

The result was that as they moved to replace foreign with domestic content, they thrived. Their networks thrived. Their independent producers thrived. Their audiences thrived.

The reason is simple: people are tribal and like watching stories about their tribe more than they do other tribes. You don't have to be a very big tribe, either. Original, French-language programming based in Quebec is more popular than ever. In a province of seven million people, some shows get audiences of two to three million – every week! Prime time in Quebec is now completely dominated by popular, successful Canadian shows.

Key is Prime Time

And that touches on the key part of the problem: Prime Time. Even though the industry often thinks of prime time as 7 – 11 every day; real prime time is 8 – 11 Sunday to Thursday. During real prime time viewing on the big conventional over-the-air broadcasters increases by more than 25% over the 'off-peak' prime time. Unfortunately, real prime time is largely not available for Canadian drama.

Even the most beautiful program in the world won't do well if it's on at a time that is inconvenient for the audience, and unfortunately much of the Canadian drama that is available is shown in off-peak prime time, not when most Canadians are available to watch, during the real prime time 8 – 11 Sunday to Thursday. For drama to succeed, you have to put it on the air when Canadians are watching TV.

And then, what you have to do is offer them dramatic programming that is 'densely available'. In other words, a lot of it. One of the reasons Canadians are such rabid

consumers of Canadian news and sports on television is not only that it's good, but that it's densely available. If television news were one single newscast for half an hour at 11 p.m., fewer viewers would tune in – a case where supply drives demand. The more there is – especially of something that's well-produced and inherently interesting – the more people will want to watch it. You just can't have a constituency for something that's not there. You can't care about something you've rarely seen or experienced.

If drama were densely available in real prime time, it would create an opportunity to build the category as a whole. It would create an opportunity to build critical mass, to create a sense of excitement and momentum, and – dare we say it – to lay the basis for the creation of an English Canadian star system. Dense availability is absolutely central to finding a solution to the drama crisis.

It's hard to remember, but before 1968, lots of Canadians were asking: “Who needs Canadian music?” “Who cares about Canadian novelists?” Then changes in policy were made to permit these tiny industries to survive. Did they survive? They thrived, and do so today because we said: “We care.”

To begin ‘solving’ the English Canadian drama crisis, there are two parties who must act decisively and in concert in order to give Canadians the kind of programming they deserve.

The first is the CBC and the second is Ottawa.

We are not asking Canada's private broadcasters to play a big role in this transformation. Everyone recognizes that they are limited in what they can do. This is not because they are unwilling. It's because they're structured to telecast and profit from foreign programming, and especially American prime time programming. Yes, they do do domestic dramatic programming, and sometimes they do it very well. But the only broadcaster in the country with the shelf space – the real shelf space: the Sunday to Thursday 8 – 11 shelf space – to devote to English Canadian drama is the CBC. The other networks' deep prime time is almost completely taken up with simulcast and non-simulcast US programs. They cannot free up this time without compromising their responsibilities to their shareholders.

But aside from available real estate, CBC also has the mandate, the skill, the DNA and the vision to significantly increase and sustain the level of English dramatic programming. It is our job. It is precisely what our shareholders want us to do.

This is not to say that it can be business as usual at the Corporation. Our renewed emphasis on drama will require us to change as well. We will have to put greater emphasis on our audiences. We will have to understand that there is no incompatibility

between quality and success. That, indeed, popularity cannot be achieved without quality; and quality with nobody watching is a hollow victory at best.

This will require a shift in how we operate. We will need to strengthen our development process, improve our testing and market research, sharpen our production decisions and improve the quality of our promotion. We will have to foster a culture that celebrates greatness and success.

We will have to foster an even stronger and more collaborative relationship with the independent production community, since they are our most important partners in this endeavour. This is a task we can only accomplish if we work very closely together even more effectively than we have in the past.

To begin to address the drama crisis, the CBC proposes to act as the anchor for a significant expansion and renewal of all aspects of drama, including comedy, mini-series, soap operas and high impact programs. We would like effectively to double the deep prime time weekday schedule devoted to Canadian drama. We believe this is possible, but we will need the support of the federal government.

We're not asking for new money. But having had the value of the CBC's allocation cut by over \$400 million in the past decade, what we're asking for is a guarantee of reasonable funding levels.

This means two things: one, no more cuts please. More Canadian dramatic programming takes more money to produce, not less. And two, we want the Canadian Television Fund to guarantee that 50% of its funding goes to independent Canadian producers whose programs are bought for prime time telecast by the CBC.

50% of the fund simply returns the CBC to its traditional draw within the CTF. Beyond this, we need it to be allocated in the form of a multi-year envelope to reflect the multi-year requirements associated with developing, producing and telecasting drama.

Recently the CRTC has released its decision on how to incent Canadian drama production on the private networks by increasing the number of ads they can sell.

From the CBC's perspective, a number of unfortunate consequences flow from this decision.

First, it has the effect of making American programming more valuable to the networks and their advertisers. As a result, it will be even harder to move these shows out of real prime time. So the private networks will get more money to produce more Canadian drama; they just will not be able to put it in real prime time, where the audiences are.

Second, since the CBC has no American dramatic programming in prime time, we can't avail ourselves of the benefits of this new regulation. In other words, the one network that

has the schedule available, the skills and the mandate to boost Canadian drama is the only one that can't benefit.

Third, by increasing the advertising pot available to the private networks for US programs, the CRTC may have unintentionally reduced the amount of advertising dollars available to be spent on CBC's Canadian programs. Ironically the effects of the policy may be to damage the broadcaster most committed to Canadian drama.

This brings me to my final question: Can the CBC do it?

Can we do what the public broadcasters of Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Japan did in their own countries? Do we have the skills, the determination, the vision to see this change of direction through?

Does CBC have the chops – not only to boost the incidence of its dramatic programming and to make the necessary internal changes – but help to lead a renaissance in English dramatic programming that will build and secure the entire category? Or to use another metaphor, can we be the locomotive that drives the critical mass of writers, directors, producers and actors to do for televised drama what Canadian fiction writers are now doing around the world?

Of course we can. At the Gemini Awards, held each year to applaud the best in Canadian television, the overwhelming winner in the television drama category, year after year, is

the CBC. The vast majority of people who vote for these awards are people who don't work for CBC. In other words, even our rivals think we can do a great job.

And since coming to the Corporation six months ago, I have met many gifted people, all of whom want to succeed, and all of whom are prepared to work like stink to make it happen. If we can find the tools and access to the Television Fund, I am absolutely convinced we can do the job.

Let me conclude by giving you a preview of how we hope the CBC schedule could look – will look – if we get the cooperation and funding that we need.

Over the next three years, you're going to see the CBC schedule look more like the schedules of the public broadcasters in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Australia and New Zealand. We hope to increase by 50% the hours devoted to Canadian dramatic series. We're going to increase by 10% the hours for Canadian comedy. We're going to more than double the hours of Canadian High Impact Programming. By this, I mean big, special-event shows like *Trudeau*, *Shattered City* and *Last Chapter*.

By 2008, CBC's prime time schedule will, we hope, look completely different from what it is now. Ultimately, our goal is to double the amount of prime time Canadian dramatic programming on the CBC.

So that is what we hope for. We hope to provide the cornerstone for a solution to the Canadian drama crisis. We hope to be able to help address the most important cultural challenge in English Canada. We hope to make programming that Canadians will laugh and cry over in large numbers.

Thank you.

-30-

2200 words