



America's Noisy Neighbour

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By Denis Seguin

In Vancouver's Brightlight Pictures, Shawn Williamson and Stephen Hegyes have created one of the bright spots in Canada's film industry, mirroring the country's split personality, as both service-provider, and originator of projects.

"My days are *Whisper* and my nights are *Slither*." Shawn Williamson is describing life at Brightlight Pictures, the Vancouver-based production company he founded with partner Stephen Hegyes in 2001. *Whisper* and *Slither* are two projects the company is service-producing for Gold Circle Films, both horror titles set for domestic distributions through Universal.

Service production has been a growth industry in Canada over the past decade. But with the increasing value of the Canadian dollar against the US greenback and heightened competition in the US and internationally, making somebody else's movies has lost some of its lustre.

Brightlight seems to have found a happy medium; the four year old company is now living up to its name, one of the few bright lights in the Canadian production scene and certainly the go-to company on the West Coast, not just for international co-productions from which the company earns a producer's fee and a piece of the back-end.

The company has carved a niche as a one-stop co-production partner, with the know-how and connections to source extra equity investment or even development capital – "things that typical service producers may find more challenging", as Williamson puts it ever-so-diplomatically. "We've helped finance scripts, and found writers, and that brings us in at the ground floor."

The deal structures are new, but not the partners. Cases in point: *White Noise* starring Michael Keaton, which hit the top spot at the North American box office in January, and comedy *The Long Weekend*. Both are collaborations with Gold Circle, but this time the projects are structured as Canada-UK co-productions. Williamson demurs from discussing specifics of the deals, saying simply: "We have ownership positions in both."

But the biggest collaboration is a slate of video-game adaptations the company is co-producing with Uwe Boll's German tax-backed production investment fund Boll KG.

That relationship started as a service production on Boll's first video-game based property, *Sanctimony*, and has morphed into a seven-film run, with the latest, *Dungeon Siege*, the fourth to be structured as a Canada-Germany co-production.

The Brightlight business plan calls for more in-house production, but Williamson says the goal is not for production to be more Canadian but for the company to be more a member of the world production community. "Our goal is to produce in a traditional American style, where it's being produced because

it's the right economic model period, and not because it fits into the right Canadian-content model.”

Not that service work has any negative connotations. As Williamson says, it gives invaluable access. He gives the example of Millennium films' *Edison*, starring Morgan Freeman and Kevin Spacey, which Brightlight is service producing.

“In the middle of the shoot, Morgan Freeman came to me and said he loved Canada and wanted to make a Western and did we have one we could develop together. So we went and found a project that would be appropriate to him and we're developing that now. I wouldn't have been able to do that with Morgan unless we had had conversations on set.” And he adds, Spacey's Trigger Street Films is in touch concerning potential collaborations. “I wouldn't have that access if we weren't doing some pure service.”

As for the service, Gold Circle's Paul Brooks, who first hired Williamson and Hegyes on the comedy *Jiminy Glick Goes To LaLa Wood*, is one happy customer, and indeed friend. He says: “They are very professional and completely reliable, reliable to the extent that we trust them to make decisions in our absence. The whole business is relationship-driven. People want to work with people they like.”

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