

# halifax

## magazine

### Making movie magic

Jan Miller connects local filmmakers with Hollywood

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# Making movie magic

Behind the scenes at the Atlantic Film Festival, the industry's movers and shakers strike big deals for Halifax

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**J**an Miller is waiting for that day in the middle of the Atlantic Film Festival, when the elevator doors will open at the eighth floor of the Delta Halifax, letting out film producers from as far away as South Africa, the U.K. and Australia. All of them will arrive with an idea. All will head to the ballroom, where dozens of small tables for two will be set up. All will sit down, and immediately begin to dream about how to bring those ideas to life, together.

This is Strategic Partners, Miller's brainchild. It's one of the most important co-production markets in Canada, a place where film and television dramas are born.

"The producer is the financier, the psychologist, the strong arm, the accountant, the mother, the housekeeper," says Miller. The producer's job is to find the money and talent to make the film.

Co-production, a collaboration between two or more film production houses, shares that responsibility. Miller has produced feature films and TV shows. "For me, the producer has the most difficult job in the business," she says. "They are the support for the writer and director, and if the producer isn't able to give the writer or director that support, then generally their projects don't get made."

Thirteen years ago, Miller began to see that Canadian producers were forced to go abroad to festivals such as Cannes or the Berlin Film Festival to find international partners. She wanted a small, intimate conference of filmmakers who all made the same type and scope of films.

Strategic Partners has become even more important as the industry changes, says Chaz Thorne, the Halifax-based maker of films such as *Whirligig*, *Just Buried* and *Poor Boy's Game*.

"The landscape for film financing... has completely changed," he says. "You can no longer finance a film of any significant size or production value solely in Canada anymore. Many of the financing sources that were available even five years ago, some no longer exist."

Still, Thorne says he doesn't go into the conference with the intention of sealing a deal on the spot. "You really have to focus on long leads," he says. "It really is all about relationships."

Relationships are what made a success out of *Combat Hospital*, a new drama on Global about military surgeons in Afghanistan. The show debuted in Canada in June. The first few episodes have been among the top most watched shows in the country. The show has U.K., Canadian, and American connections, all forged at Strategic Partners in 2009.

"I'm not sure if ABC in America or Sony International would have bought into the project if it were just a Canadian production," says U.K.-based producer Gub Neal of Artists Studio. "What those broadcasters, especially Sony, were looking for was a diversity of talent and also characters that would make it more attractive to the international market."

Neal is quick to point out that doesn't mean a single-country film can't succeed: "I just think it would not have sold that extensively or that successfully as the show subsequently did." Aside from one-on-one meetings picked out by the attendees, there are panel discussions about new issues in the world of filmmaking. Victoria Ha of Stitch Media in Toronto is planning to attend her first Strategic Partners conference this September. She will be a panelist on "transmedia," telling producers how to integrate different platforms such as web, film, television, or mobile content.

"A good transmedia project shouldn't just be a website," Ha says. "It should be strategically reaching out to where your audience exists." Part of the reason she wants to attend Strategic Partners this year is to network, and to learn.

Miller says the action happens in a relaxed atmosphere, making it easier to talk to people and build relationships. Strategic Partners occurs during the Atlantic Film Festival, directly after the Toronto Film Festival. That's intentional, so that producers who come from around the globe can take a short, two-hour flight from Toronto and decompress in Halifax.

"Producers are coming from all over the world, and many are coming from Toronto, and they're absolutely exhausted," Miller says. "When they come to us, we pick them up at the airport, we bring them to the hotel, we provide everyone with their own pre-scheduled set of meetings which they have requested so they



Global's *Combat Hospital* came about through Strategic Partners.

don't have to do that, and we guide them through the three days.”

That simply doesn't happen at places like Toronto and Cannes, says Chaz Thorne.

“They're zoos, they're just zoos,” he says. “The other ones are just so aggressive, and business, and you're being pulled in this direction and that direction.”

At larger film festivals, a producer might meet a range of people, and not all of them will have similar goals. Strategic Partners limits attendance to 200 people. All of them focus on feature or television fictional dramas, and all are working at roughly the

same level. No producer should feel unable to compete. Conversely, no producer should feel like he or she is a big fish in a pond that's far too small.

“You're not talking to sales or distribution people on their own,” says Gub Neal. “You're talking to people who are essentially colleagues and peers in the market internationally. You meet writers, you meet producers, you meet directors. It's great.”

Strategic Partners has played off its low-key setting in Halifax since the beginning. In return, the Nova Scotian film industry has benefited from hosting the international conference each year.



## III Cover Story III

“There’s no question that it’s put Nova Scotia on the map,” Miller says. Introducing producers to this province is an integral part of the conference, from van tours to shooting locations to a big closing lobster dinner.

“The number of people, the people that talk about planning to shoot in Nova Scotia, that they have a project that’s Nova Scotia-specific,” Miller says. “I think a lot of those things would not happen if it wasn’t for their introduction to this incredible province.” ■■■

### ATLANTIC FILM FESTIVAL MUST-SEES

*Roller Town.* Local comedy troupe Picnicface gets its big-screen debut. A small-town skater saves the roller rink, while romancing the mayor’s daughter and fighting off suicidal gangsters. Director: Andrew Bush.

*Cloudburst.* Stella and Dot have lived together for 31 years. When Dot’s family places her in a nursing home, Stella must break out her mate and make a dash for Nova Scotia, where gay marriage is legal. Director: Thom Fitzgerald.

*Afghan Luke.* Journalist Luke travels to Afghanistan to research a story, but his trip deteriorates into a modern-day *Apocalypse Now* set in Central Asia. Director: Mike Clattenburg.

*Charlie Zone.* A washed-up Aboriginal boxer is hired by a mysterious woman to retrieve a kidnapped girl from a Halifax heroin den. But it turns out the kidnappee has her own dark agenda. Director: Michael Melski.

*Snow.* A survivor of the Sri Lankan tsunami tries to rebuild her life in Canada. After a forbidden romance, she’s disowned by her family and journeys to the ocean trying to find herself. Director: Rohan Fernando.

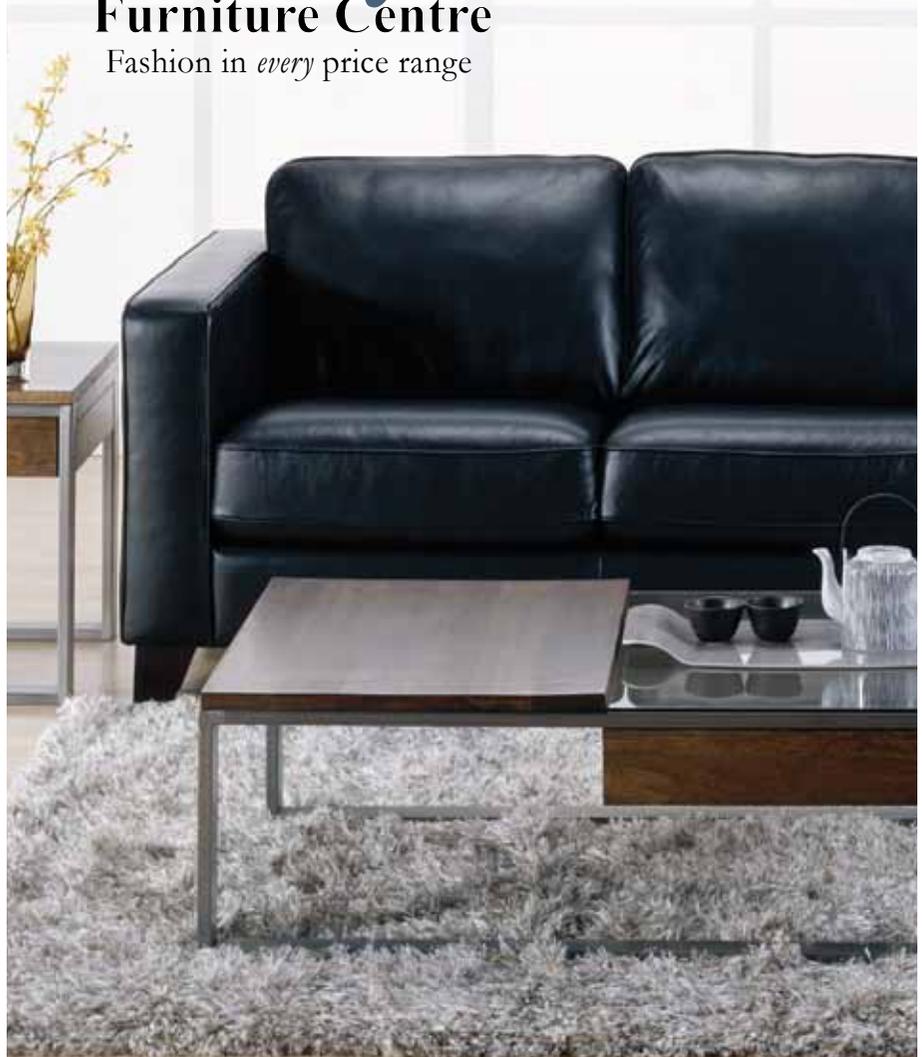
For more on Atlantic Film Festival programming, surf to [www.atlanticfilm.com](http://www.atlanticfilm.com). The festival runs from September 15 to 24.

#### FEEDBACK

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