

DEAR CBC:

BY DIANE WILD

Dear CBC,

How's things? You're looking mighty fine for 75, my friend. Sounds like you're keeping active too, what with the giant birthday celebration and five-year plan. It's good to see you can still be optimistic about the future with that license renewal hearing coming up in June 2012. Don't lose that pluck. We think you'll need it in the coming year.

You don't have to pretend to be strong for me, though. We know you're worried the government might be looking at cutting your budget by as much as 10-15 per cent. We're worried too.

We've had some good times in those 75 years, haven't we? We feel closer than ever, in some ways, given that you're the only conventional network airing Canadian shows throughout the year. The one that reaches more Canadians than any other. One of the very few places Canadian screenwriters can pitch distinctively Canadian shows. We need you. We want you. We appreciate you.

So we feel we can share our feelings with you and you'll know they come from a place of love. Some of us, well, we've been talking. And... we think you have a problem.

Here it is: we think you need to break your addiction to minority co-productions and reality shows. Maybe even cut back on your 10pm news dependency - don't you have a sister station who could help you shoulder that news burden? (Don't worry, we're not going to try to take hockey away from you. We are Canadians, after all.)

Your current issues have been creeping up on us for a long time. In fact, the root of the problem has probably been there for longer than we realized. Chris Haddock believes it was the fact that, over your distinguished lifetime, you were a "good and constant critic of the most crucial Canadian politics and business issues" that helped lead to your current precarious position. He worries the mandate you've been handed in the last decade has been designed to weaken your voice, diminish our access to public discourse, and deliver your audience to private broadcasters.

We can't let that happen. We're here for you.

In speaking with some of your screenwriting friends, it seems all agree that the only purpose of a public broadcaster is to produce the kind of shows a private network can't or won't. Peer pressure's a bitch, we know, but we hate to see you on the street like this. You don't need to run with that crowd.

You've got a good start in drama with popular shows such as **Republic of Doyle** and **Heartland**. Gary Pearson thinks you could use the 10 o'clock slot for even more scripted dramas, "like every other network in the world," and use those extra five hours a week to give us the kind of Canadian dramas we can't get somewhere else.

Pearson had some ideas to broaden your comedy offerings, to go beyond your usual niche sitcoms and attempt some multi-camera comedies. "There's a whole realm of popular programming they're not even attempting."

In fact he'd like to see more comedies in general. You do many of those so well: **Rick Mercer Report**, **Insecurity**, **22 Minutes**, **The Ron James Show** and more. See, we're not asking you to abandon your strengths. We just want to help you overcome your weaknesses.

Mark De Angelis thinks you're on the right track with the new series **Michael: Tuesdays and Thursdays** and the upcoming **Mr. D**. "The one thing Canadians are so proud of - besides their hockey - is their comedies. There are so many talented writers in this country. Many of them are in the U.S. now, but maybe if we did more comedies here they wouldn't be going."

Matt Watts appreciates your efforts to find distinct voices like Bob Martin's on *Michael: Tuesdays & Thursdays*, and like Ken Finkleman's back in *The Newsroom* days. "They need a broader range of shows. Stuff that appeals to everybody and stuff that has more of a niche audience."

You probably can't get more broadly appealing or Canadian in concept than *Battle of the Blades* unless you pair the hockey players with moose, but, as the Writers Guild of Canada suggests, maybe exercise some moderation in your singing/dancing/dieting reality show intake and make more room for quality programming.

You don't necessarily need to go cold turkey on the dramatic co-productions, either. David Barlow says he "understand[s] the financial motivation to run a *Tudors*. Or a *Wheel of Fortune* for that matter. There's always a distance between idealistic aspiration and pragmatism." But, he says, "I don't think they should be doing international mini-series co-productions unless there is a distinct on-screen presence in the form of Canadian actors and subject matter directly proportionate to the Canadian investment."

We're not asking you to require passports or anything, CBC, but we've got to think the English accents of the people selling you *Pillars of the Earth* and *The Tudors* might have started you wondering. And then maybe an alarm bell or two might have gone off when you saw that their 'quintessentially Canadian stories' were set in medieval England? And yet now we've got *Camelot* - about our national hero King Arthur?

Barlow wishes "they would embrace our history with the same enthusiasm as they seem to be embracing English history." Don't get me wrong, we love a good bodice-ripper as much as the next person, but we're pretty sure there's many a juicy story in Canadian history and literature, too, with many a Canadian writer willing and able to supply the juice. *John A: Birth of a Country* proved you're strong enough to do gripping historical drama on your own.

We know, we know, those minority co-productions, reality shows and even American programs you seem to lean on more lately might be inexpensive ways to draw viewers in. The WGC knows that a budget cut will make it even tougher for you to get clean - but they say you have to remember that you're our broadcaster first, and you're supposed to be giving us the good stuff - Canadian arts, drama, comedies and documentaries. That's your mandate, and you get more than \$1B from Canadians to deliver. It's hard for the WGC to fight to get you further support when you keep diluting what you put out there.

Let's be frank: sometimes we worry you're trying too hard to be popular by fitting in with the commercial networks. As Alex Epstein said, "if ratings are the only criteria, then why do we need to support them? Commercial networks are supposed to support themselves."

Don't mean to get you down here. We know you're in a tough position. And as Barlow recalls, there's an old line: "the CBC was created so Canadians have something to complain about besides the weather."

Pearson puts your position this way: "right now, CBC has a bizarre, huge mandate to be all things to all people. But if no private broadcaster is serious about airing primetime Canadian drama and comedy through the year, then CBC should be doing that."

You have been a good friend to writers, and we want to be good friends to you. With all the recent cancellations on private networks, more than ever, we appreciate what you're doing with your slate of year-round Canadian shows. And maybe some of your self-destructive behaviour is a cry for help. We hear you; we're here for you.

We only hope you'll strive for more.

With love,
Canadian screenwriters

AN INTERVENTION