

## Boom time on the Prairie

On the set of Terry Gilliam's new film, JENNIE PUNTER discovers why Saskatchewan is becoming the new Hollywood North: Great people, beautiful scenery and, oh yeah, massive tax credits

**By JENNIE PUNTER**  
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Regina — Earlier this fall, the set of Terry Gilliam's latest film, *Tideland*, was a train wreck -- not the metaphorical kind portrayed in the fascinating 2001 documentary *Lost in La Mancha*, about the filmmaker's ill-fated production of *Don Quixote*, but rather the realistic-looking, five-car pile-up kind that causes locals to pull over, park the truck and try to lend a hand.

"The train tracks were in a remote area, not usable any more, but people stopped to help, thinking there was a real accident," says Gabriella Martinelli, president of Toronto-based Capri Films, with a smile. She and Britain's Jeremy Thomas (*Sexy Beast*, *The Last Emperor*) co-produced David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, and have teamed up again for *Tideland*, an adaptation of Mitch Cullen's novel. The film is a prairie-gothic tale about a precocious young girl who creates a surreal fantasy world to escape a childhood of neglect and hardship.

"The Saskatchewan people are so lovely, that's a good part of being here," Martinelli adds wistfully -- because all afternoon she has been reading e-mails from industry friends in Toronto. That day, more than 1,000 people gathered at the Ontario Legislature to demand help for that province's faltering industry, specifically in the form of tax credits for foreign and domestic productions, which are below those offered by most other provinces.

"I wish I could have been at the rally," says Martinelli. "I prefer to keep business within my province. But we're in a crisis situation." And this is why Martinelli and several of the *Tideland* crew have left gloomtown and, temporarily at least, are working in boomtown. "Here, it's been fantastic," she says. "For one thing, the tax credits in Saskatchewan are between 35 and 40 per cent. We have over double the benefits shooting here than in Ontario. Production here has gone up more than 50 per cent in the last year, and that is because of SaskFilm."

The non-profit SaskFilm and Video Development Corporation is headed by Valerie Creighton, whose background in arts agencies, not to mention her spirited tenacity, gave her the skills to help the province start reaching for the stars when she took the reins in the late 1990s.

"Every time I saw Valerie at some convention or co-production conference in Paris or London or wherever, she'd pitch me Saskatchewan, show me pictures of the various locations and the facilities here. She really hustled," Martinelli recalls. "So when Jeremy said he was thinking of making *Tideland* in Canada I phoned Valerie and said, 'I'm going to make your day.' "We needed an isolated prairie landscape, I call it prairie gothic, and that's what we have," she adds. "It's also great for the province. This is a very high-profile movie."

Despite Saskatchewan's relative physical isolation, SaskFilm commissioner Creighton's outlook is anything but isolated when it comes to her work. "At the end of the day, it's about keeping Canada's industry healthy," she says. "I work within an informal association of agencies to examine the questions of keeping film and TV crews across the country employed."

Still, Creighton has spearheaded initiatives to bolster her home province's industry, which, she says has grown 2,400 per cent since 1998. "We have a strong documentary community, we are strong in series and children's TV," she says. (Indeed, many working in those genres have been in Toronto for the past few days for the Gemini Awards. Productions from the province have earned 17 nominations. The nominations include several for the hit sitcom *Corner Gas*; the drama prizes were to be presented last night). "But," Creighton continues, "we didn't have large feature experience here, so we launched an international campaign, with partners at Foreign Affairs, Telefilm and other agencies."

Since then, Saskatchewan producers and companies have partnered with companies from around the world on dozens of feature and TV-movie projects.

"The co-operative movement is rooted here, so people know if you don't work together you ain't getting nowhere," Creighton says, adding, "If we don't have experience in the province we can deem someone from another province or country a Saskatchewan resident. And unlike other tax programs, we can pay it out above the line, that is, on producers, key cast and directors."

As "deemed" labour, Gilliam had to agree to mentor a Saskatchewan resident. Over the course of production, four young filmmakers shadowed the man who was not only the creative genius behind such films as *Time Bandits*, *The Fisher King* and *Twelve Monkeys*, but also a member of Monty Python's Flying Circus. How cool is that?

Watching Gilliam direct an interior scene with Janet McTeer, Brendan Fletcher and Jodelle Ferland that afternoon, one suspects spending time in the director's shadow is more than just cool. His energetic and very verbal working relationship with Italian cinematographer Nicola Pecorini, his openness to ideas, his "we're in this together" spirit make a set visit a lively filmmaking lesson.

In-between takes, Gilliam weighs in on his Saskatchewan experience. "The money was the lure," he agrees. "But to our surprise, we went to the Qu'Appelle Valley, discovered this beautiful landscape scar and found all our exterior locations. This is the most sensible film I've been involved with," says Gilliam, who shot *The Brothers Grimm* last year for several times the \$20-million (U.S.) *Tideland* budget. "Our concern here was getting through three weeks of exterior shooting before the winter. The day after we finished there was four inches of snow.

"However, Saskatchewan was having fun with us because since then it's been beautiful and we're stuck in the studio.

"The crew is game and I've been working their asses off. It's not quite guerrilla filmmaking but sometimes it feels like that," says Gilliam. "The people here are good company. We can joke around and still do the work."

This week, *Tideland* will break down its production offices in the Canada Saskatchewan Production Studios. The state-of-the-art facility opened in Regina in 2002 and is another attraction for outside productions; *The Tommy Douglas Story*, a miniseries directed by John N. Smith (*The Boys of St. Vincent*), and the romantic comedy *Just Friends*, which New Line Cinema just acquired from British Columbia's Infinity Media, are ready to roll in various locations in the province in early 2005.

"You hear of Toronto and Vancouver having location burnout, where residents get sick of movie people," Creighton says. "But in Saskatchewan it's more likely the people next door will be bringing over apple pies."