

Former PM's son takes on Hollywood

James Martin left his Toronto home five years ago to stake his claim as an indie producer south of the border

By Leigh Stuart

It may seem that a disproportionate number of political offspring in Canada end up in the entertainment business, from Canadian Idol host Ben Mulroney to sometimes docmaker Sacha Trudeau. But Los Angeles-based producer James Martin, son of former prime minister Paul Martin, doesn't think there's necessarily a connection.

"There's just a general pull to this business because you can be a star, and everybody wants to be a star," he says.

Martin is looking to build his own road to fame as a Hollywood movie producer. He is the co-owner, along with Eduardo Levy, of High Treason Productions, and together they recently wrapped their first feature, the psychological drama *Hurt* (starring *Big Love*'s Melora Walters) and are now shopping it for distribution.

For their next film - another psycho-drama entitled *Hysteria* - the prestigious ICM firm has come on board to try to package the project with what Martin refers to as "internationally recognized name" actors.

It's this access to big names that explains why Martin loves living in L.A. Its pool of global players - and the ability to drive 20 minutes to see them in person - is helping him grow his career in ways e-mails or twice-yearly visits to the West Coast wouldn't accomplish.

"I still have a long way to go, but I've surprised myself with the access I have to certain players with whom I could realistically work and get something done," he says.

While many Canadian producers are content to work through the public funding system here at home, for Martin, living in L.A. is key to making it in this crazy business.

He has been living in California for five years, initially coming to L.A. to take a screenwriting course at the American Film Institute, and using that as a means to legally live in the States. His goal switched from writing to producing when he discovered he was better as a constructive critic to his classmates' scripts than as a scribe himself.

"The thing is, I'm an impatient, slow writer who can only do one story at a time," he says. "As a producer, you can juggle tasks and come up with ideas and just give them to a writer."

Martin's background in the industry isn't just with scripts. After leaving Montreal at 18 to study English literature and philosophy at the University of Toronto, he landed marketing positions at The Movie Network and in Astral's distribution division in Toronto. All the while, in his spare time he wrote scripts to try to break into Canada's movie industry, only to be told his vision doesn't work in this country.

"When I sent my stuff to agencies in Toronto," he recalls, "I invariably got the same response: 'We don't do these movies in Canada,' but I should move to the States and pitch there, so that's what I did."

While he still misses his home and native land, chances of him returning are slim, as he believes the industry here doesn't have the necessary pillars to help burgeoning producers build big box-office numbers. While he acknowledges the recent successes of a number of films made for Quebec audiences, as well English-Canadian winners such as *Eastern Promises* and *Away from Her*, he was inspired to leave five years ago because he felt many around him were focusing on stories with little commercial appeal.

He says that he had always believed the Canadian film industry should be less interested in making movies for and about Canadians and instead make films for and about the world.

"That's how I felt when I left, but I'm sure it's gotten better," he adds. Martin's own quest to reach broader audiences means he is now planning to step outside of the psycho-drama themes explored in his company's first two projects and into the comedy/drama genre exemplified by films such as the indie smash *Juno*.

"I want to move into movies that are character-based and can mean something to someone rather than simply entertain them."

And what does his dad think of his foray into Hollywood production?

"He is actually quite interested in what I'm doing in L.A.," Martin explains. "He knows so little about the film biz that he always has questions for me about my projects in particular and the worldwide industry in general. The only negative I get from him is that I never offer to cast him in anything. And while 99% of that is him joking, I am suspect of that other 1%."