

# How Reel Canada is SCHOOLING Canadians (not just students) about Canadian film

In Conversation with  
Jack Blum and Vinay Virmani

**Vinay:** How did Reel Canada start?

**Jack:** It truly began because Sharon Corder (Artistic Director and Co-Founder) and I saw our colleagues in the industry feeling so defeated by the challenges of getting into the marketplace, and as a result starting to believe that the movies weren't any good. We just thought if we could show young people some of the really great work that's been done, they might actually like it. Of course, it has gone much further than that, as you yourself can testify: You've probably personally met about 20,000 or more high school students through your touring with Reel Canada. What's that been like for you?

**Vinay:** It has been one of the most incredible experiences I've had as an artist, an actor and, generally, just as a person to be honest. The reality is that it's the young movie audiences today that are driving the business; so it's important to engage with them, to really hear how they think, what they want to see, what they find funny. Reel Canada provides a lot of fuel for creativity. And what Reel Canada does—taking us directly into schools to engage with young people—is such an integral part of our movie industry here in Canada today. I am not only able to promote the Canadian story and our culture, but I'm also able to form that direct bond with them.

**Jack:** You mention the “Canadian story,” which is right at the heart of what we're trying to do. Canada for me is all about a diversity celebration that works—a vast range of geographical regions and climates, ethnic subcultures, multicultural families with different roots, newcomers and established clans, Indigenous peoples and gender differences—and it all somehow comes together and functions better than any other country in the world. So for me, the “Canadian story” is always the “Canadian stories,” plural, going right back to our English, French and Indigenous founding cultures. It has never just been one story, and that is something to cherish and celebrate.

**Vinay:** That's something Reel Canada is really on the forefront of; not only with diverse audiences in high schools but also with screenings for new Canadians. Meeting those audiences has been such an enriching and humbling experience for me. I really value the time I've been able to spend with these audiences, taking their questions, hearing their stories. For so many of them, their journey has been SO difficult; adapting to a new culture, to a new climate. To welcome people to Canada from all around the world through film is such a powerful and positive initiative. It's actually inspiring—for them and for us, the artists that have the privilege of presenting our work to them. What's it like for you? What's the most rewarding part of this?

Vinay Virmani snaps a selfie with an audience member at a Reel Canada screening





Jack Blum

**Jack:** It's extremely gratifying to experience the students' excitement when they've seen a film that really turned them on and then have an actor, like yourself, walk out from backstage. You've seen it: They go crazy. At that point, we don't have to say anything about Canadian film or supporting Canadian storytelling. They are connecting with their own culture in a way they will remember. I remember the things that came at me in high school that absolutely influenced the course of my life and it's great to know we're doing just that for at least some of those kids. They are seeing themselves on screen. When

we see ourselves on screen, we get a better sense of where we live and how we connect with other people in our own country.

**Vinay:** Well, just to build on that, "seeing themselves on screen," what does that mean? Going back to what you said before, we have to look in terms of diversity—in casting, in stories and in voices—we are so ahead of the rest of the world when it comes to this. We're not afraid of putting different ethnicities on screen or telling diverse stories because that's such a Canadian value. When we see ourselves on screen, we get a better sense of where we

live and how we connect with other people in our own country as opposed to watching something that's about other people in other countries.

**Jack:** And that's exactly what we're trying to achieve with these screenings.

**Vinay:** So Reel Canada is obviously having an impact on high school students and new Canadians. What about the rest of the country? Canada's sesquicentennial is next year... which gives us an unprecedented platform for the promotion of Canadian film.

**Jack:** A couple of years ago we started National Canadian Film Day. We wanted to take the excitement we had been experiencing in schools and open it up to everyone. The creation of NCFD helps to ensure every Canadian has an opportunity to see a great Canadian film at least one day a year. Back in April, the third annual NCFD resulted in four hundred screenings taking place in every corner of the country. And Reel Canada is already building the framework for next year when the celebration of

Canada's sesquicentennial will give us an unprecedented platform for the promotion of Canadian film. I'm really hoping ACTRA members will get involved with our 2017 edition, which promises to be even larger with more opportunities to share Canadian stories on Canadian screens than ever before. It will be a moment for the whole industry to step into the national spotlight and take a bow. They can check it out at [canadianfilmday.ca](http://canadianfilmday.ca).

**Vinay:** Well, speaking personally, I urge every actor and filmmaker in the country to get more involved with what you're doing. It's incredibly rewarding, so hats off to Reel Canada.

*Vinay Virmani graduated from York University with a business degree prior to studying filmmaking and theatre at The Lee Strasberg Institute in New York. After writing and starring in the hockey comedy *Breakaway*, he went on to write, star and produce the highly successful *Dr. Cabbie*, which broke the Canadian record for audience numbers on opening day. He can be seen next in *The Steps*, which premiered at TIFF in 2015. Vinay has travelled the country with the Reel Canada screenings of *Breakaway* and *Dr. Cabbie* to high school students and recent immigrants studying English.*

*Jack Blum has acted in dozens of movies and TV shows, and with his partner Sharon Corder, written or produced more than 50 episodes of dramatic television. Their feature film *Babyface* premiered at Cannes. They founded Reel Canada in 2005.*