

Wojeck director

Honest Thief's director action film specialist

By PAUL DORSEY
Herald staff writer

In the first few months after his arrival in Hollywood, George McCowan looked on, jobless, as several Canadian actors he had directed for the CBC's Wojeck series landed roles in various American productions, but circumstances were soon to change.

From what might have been discouraging beginnings, George McCowan, the would-be philosophy professor turned Stratford Festival director turned film-maker, rose in the space of a few years to enviable heights within the motion picture industry.

With a half-dozen feature films under his belt, McCowan is still best-known and most revered for his work in television, having directed literally hundreds of episodes of network series, including The FBI, The Invaders, Run for Your Life, The Mod Squad, The Young Rebels, The Most Deadly Game, Dan August, Cannon, The Streets of San Francisco, Banacek, Vegas, Starsky and Hutch, SWAT, Fantasy Island and Charlie's Angels.

REMINISCING

And, God bless our 'quintessential Canadian small-town', here he is eating dessert and reminiscing about the early years with The Herald, in The Cellar restaurant on Georgetown's Main Street.

McCowan was in California directing Return of the Mod Squad, a made-for-television movie sequel to the original series, when he was contacted by producer Zale Magder about Never Trust an Honest Thief.

After an initial delay which saw the script temporarily shelved, the project finally got off the ground and McCowan travelled to Las Vegas to coax the legendary Orson Welles into emoting for his cameras.

The Vegas meeting took place less than two months ago, and location filming on the movie which McCowan describes as "an unpretentious story" is expected to be completed within another month's time. McCowan will then head back to Hollywood's television studios, probably for more work with Charlie's Angels, before returning to Magder Studios in Scarborough to edit Never Trust an Honest Thief in preparation for its mid-April release.

The light-hearted nature of Honest Thief was a prime factor in McCowan's decision to return to Canada, and to movie-making in general, after years spent directing action series for television, for which he admits he has been



DIRECTOR COMES HOME

George McCowan (right), director of Never Trust an Honest Thief, has created hundreds of episodes of television series you probably watch every day, from Streets of San Francisco (he insists Michael Douglas, who shot part of filming here, had nothing to do with Honest Thief being shot in Georgetown) to Charlie's Angels to Fantasy Island. Shown here in a moment of intense consultation with assistant director David Shepherd, McCowan spoke with the Herald this week about the community, his career and his early days as an actor on the amateur stage in Toronto. (Herald photo by Paul Dorsey)

"typed" by Hollywood, or else working on occasional film projects.

MAXIMUM ACCLAIM

Although he received maximum acclaim in his native Canada for directing Separation, CTV's television movie about the country's unity woes, McCowan frankly admits he's bored with the theme of Canadian identity. Honest Thief is a comedy caper and not just another statement about Tom Thomson.

Of Georgetown, McCowan said he liked the community's "look" from the start and his opinion of the town and its citizens has not changed. "The co-operation we've

received has been phenomenal here," he said, "especially when you consider we've really tied the town up for four weeks. Georgetown has a look about it; it's not as much urban renewal as a lot of other towns around here."

According to McCowan, the Honest Thief crew originally planned to wander outside the town limits to the popular, rain-filled quarry near Waterfalls Playground for some additional shooting. The location proved unnecessary, however, and by the time you read this, the crew will be working around Toronto, dividing their time between Magder Studios and downtown locations such as Queen's Park.

It was only a few short blocks from Queen's Park where McCowan got his somewhat unlikely start in show business while attending the University of Toronto and studying Philosophy and English. Born in Winnipeg, he had some initial acting experience in high school and carried the pastime on years later at Hart House, in the Crest Theatre and among the Straw Hat Players. Soon after, he accepted an invitation to act with the Canadian Repertory Theatre in Ottawa.

It was almost an accident that led McCowan to directing. A dispute with an established director at the Crest Theatre prompted him to try the show

his own way, and, not surprisingly, it worked.

EVERY THEATRE

McCowan had worked at virtually every theatre in Canada, including the Neptune Theatre in Halifax, which he opened, by the time he leaped to television, more as a source of additional income than as a preferable medium.

After a successful two-year stint as an actor and director at the prestigious Stratford Festival, McCowan went to work for the CBC directing such nationally-televized series as Wojeck, GM Theatre, Forest Rangers and Seaway.

In 1967, McCowan said, there was no real film industry in Canada, so he set off for California with "a can of film under my arm" representing some of his work on the Wojeck series. Ironically, the Wojeck clips generated a lot of interest in its featured Canadian actors, leading John Vernon (who has gone from Wojeck's title role to such box office smashes as Animal House) to a small but intense role in Lee Marvin's film Point Blank, and to a screening for Jennifer Lee with director Mike Nichols.

With some help from an old colleague, Norman Jewison (who more recently directed The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz and Jesus Christ, Superstar), McCowan himself finally got some work south of the border directing episodes of Felony Squad, which he now calls "an easily forgettable" project, but one which found him a place in producer Quinn Martin's stable of film-makers.

It has been with Quinn Martin and the Spelling-Goldberg studios where McCowan has done much of his television work, rapidly moving to the forefront among small-screen directors and, as mentioned earlier, becoming typed as a maker of action series and cop shows.

SOME IRONY

Again, it is with some irony that the man who brought us so many episodes of formula-type, knock-'em-down, drag-'em-out police dramas thinks he may have done the viewing public something of a disservice by "making violence appear poetic".

While stopping short of condemning such television fare, McCowan pointed out that, "for five or six years, the news in America was much more violent than anything we were doing". Still, if he was in complete control, he said, he would make television vio-

lence totally realistic and brutally gory in an effort to underline its negative nature.

McCowan's transition from television to the big screen was, again, an unassuming move, which first produced the Canadian film Face-Off and American projects like The Magnificent Seven Ride, Frugs, To Kill the King and Shadow of the Hawk.

McCowan has also worked overseas, directing television movies of the week in London and a feature film in Spain. McCowan said he is not intimidated having to direct Orson Welles in Honest Thief, a man who has been acclaimed worldwide as the groundbreaking director of Citizen

Kane and other epics.

McCowan points out that he's done enough acting and directing in his career, but at the same time tries to leave room for his actors to innovate and suggest alternative ideas.

"Good actors should always bring a number of possibilities to work with them," he said. "It's one of the basic functions of a director to make sure they do."

And what of Georgetown when the American flags and bunting come down and the movie crew moves on to Toronto and then Las Vegas? Well, if George McCowan had his way, the world premiere of Never Trust an Honest Thief, with some 10,000 Georgetown

area residents among its featured performers, would be held right here.

"And maybe it will," he said.

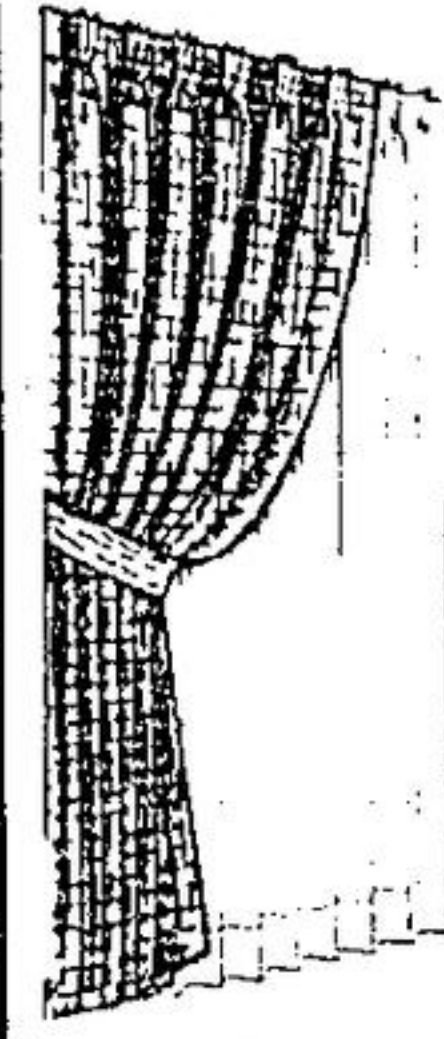
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Change promised Glen landowners

Town council has complied with a request by two Glen Williams landowners to have property which would have been designated Open Space in the new Secondary Plan for the hamlet zoned residential instead.

Mayor Pete Pomeroy had verbally assured R.J. Haines that his request on behalf of his parents, Roland and Joan Haines, would probably be honored by the town after Mr. Haines made his submission the week previous when the Secondary Plan was unveiled. There was, however, no formal motion to that effect at the time.

Last week, council complied with the request, involving a small property adjacent to the Credit River and opposite Arno's Volkswagen Service, almost as an afterthought in reviewing the planning-board minutes from the week before.

Planning director Mario Venditti is now in the midst of reviewing other submissions

made to the board by Glen residents and other concerned parties. Final revisions are to be made to the Secondary Plan in keeping with the submissions before the document is returned to the board for approval.

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