



All photos: Marnie Grossman



LAMENT FOR A NATION:

The Rise and Fall of the Avro Arrow

By Tom McSorley



From the bottom left: Dan Aykroyd as Crawford Gordon; The Arrow rolls out on the



Remember *The National Dream*, Pierre Berton's sprawling, hugely popular 1970s television series which documented and dramatized the building of the first transcontinental railway linking Canada from sea to sea? As a specimen of national imagining and collective memory, it had it all: the dream of national unity and resistance to American expansionism, political intrigue, alcohol, corruption, greed, exploitation, romance (although no sex, please, we're still British), and the finest Canadian colonial pluck at the dawn of the new age of technology—the 20th Century. Perhaps there was a time when C.D. Howe's boastful words—"This country does best with a big project"—rang true, when the sheer geographical scale of the young country named Canada demanded colossal undertakings both to mark political territory and to create a modern economy—the national railway, the Hudson's Bay Company, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Trans-Canada Highway. Times change. So do nations.

It is the very drama of change in technology and Canadian national dreaming that's so absorbing about *The Arrow*, a two-part, four-hour CBC-TV mini-series about the controversial evolution and instant devolution of the fabled Avro Arrow supersonic jet fighter. Featuring a gifted cast which includes Dan Aykroyd, Aidan Devine, Sara Botsford, Christopher Plummer and Ron White, *The Arrow* is an exploration of the flip side of the national dream, the side that chooses acquiescence over action, resignation over resistance. Written by Gemini Award-winning Keith Ross Leckie (*Journey Into Darkness: The Bruce Curtis Story*, *Where the Spirit Lives*), directed by Don McBearty (the Oscar-winning *Boys and Girls*; *The Butterbox Babies*), and produced by Leckie's Tapestry Films, FilmWorks of Toronto and John Aaron Productions of Winnipeg, this stylish, visually impressive \$7.8-million production is a rewarding, if downright infuriating journey through a fatalist Canadian labyrinth of hope, vision, political cowardice, pettiness, egomania and Cold War realpolitik.

If an intrinsic part of Canada's history and cultural memory is the conquest of a vast, hostile geography with technology, then the Avro Arrow is a literal and figurative example of that national narrative, with the significant distinction that, unlike other big Canuck projects, the Avro Arrow was built and then



Downsview tarmac for its first press preview in 1958; the prototype is then destroyed and the parts sent to the scrap heap; Christopher Plummer as George Hees, an implacable opponent of the project.

summarily destroyed on a Malton, Ontario, airstrip by the federal government. No last spike unifying the nation in Cold War Canada, circa 1959. Instead, it's just blow torches, "Destruct and Dispose" orders from Ottawa, and trucks to carry off the dismembered remnants of what was almost universally acknowledged to be the most advanced jet aircraft anywhere in the world.

We have the right to ask: was this when Canada became small, lost its "thrust of intention into the future" (in the words of George Grant), becoming a mere appendage on the space program—you know, the arm of the space shuttle—or the perennial short before the American feature? Was it a turning point when John Diefenbaker cancelled the Arrow program and then ordered the total destruction of all existing Arrows, blueprints, models, even patents? While unquestionably an act of monumental petulance (and supremely ironic given Dief's unshakable loyalty to the English monarchy), was it also the moment when Canada exchanged its colonial status from Britain to the new post-war imperial empire of the United States of America? By weaving these persistent, provocative questions into its historical drama about a group of idealistic aviation engineers, executives and employees, *The Arrow* is finely observed and compelling viewing. It asks as much about the contemporary Canadian cultural and political Zeitgeist in the era known euphemistically as "globalization" as it does about the events leading up to what remains, almost four decades later, one of the most troubling, and utterly spectacular moments of national self-immolation.

For the record (or for those of us born after February 20, 1959, the day the Avro Arrow project was cancelled), the historical context of the Arrow's doomed trajectory across the Canadian post-war imagination should be identified. During the frosty opening salvos of the Cold War, Canada needed a new jet aircraft to patrol its vast Arctic territory against a Soviet attack. The Liberal government of McKenzie King, spearheaded by the so-called "minister of everything," C.D Howe, hired the A.V. Roe company to work on a new plane for Canada's air defence in the early 1950s. Although Roe had built the first jet airplane for passenger use in North America (another Canadian first), his company was in trouble. Howe appointed a young,

ambitious executive, Crawford Gordon, to oversee production. Gordon had worked for Howe during the war. The team of engineers at A.V. Roe (Avro, for short) proceeded to design and build an unprecedented, wedge-shaped, high altitude, supersonic interceptor, dubbed the Avro Arrow. Dreams of full production and world sales for the new jet soon encountered a devastating combination of cost overruns (it was very expensive), mounting political and economic pressure from the U.S. military and industrial complex, and the political and fiscal promises of the newly elected Diefenbaker government. In spite of the completion of many test flights and the development of a powerful new jet engine, the Iroquois, production was abruptly

"Memory is never enough to guarantee that a nation can articulate itself in the present. There must be a thrust of intention into the future. When the nation is the intimate neighbour of a dynamic empire, this necessity is more obvious."

George Grant

cancelled and all existing Arrows were ordered destroyed. To meet its defense requirements, the Conservatives simply extended the life of Canada's CF-100 jet fighter fleet and in a further irony, purchased 66 Voodoo jets and Bomarc surface-to-air missiles from the U.S.

Out of this wreckage and apocryphal tales of the Arrow's survival (sightings and tales of Arrows hidden in Canadian



barns; there's even an Arrow website on the internet), comes *The Arrow's* long overdue resurrection of this extraordinary moment in Canadian history. Screenwriter Leckie, who is a licensed pilot, is a self-confessed "Arrow addict." The story has fascinated him since his youth when he worked alongside a former Arrow employee, who still had a burning hatred for the Conservatives. He also remembers how his parents and neighbours spoke with such pride about this special airplane and, after 1959, how suddenly the talk stopped. Leckie would later research the plane's history as a hobby, attracted by "the sheer beauty of the aircraft. It was a sleek thing, an aesthetic leap in terms of aeronautical design."

Becoming a screenwriter and a fan of "telling a good tale" (he admires Hemingway and Findley, Ford and Huston), Leckie eventually began to shape a script from his Arrow obsession, to try to "render an analysis of what happened" into dramatic form. Developed first in 1992 as a made-for-TV movie for the CBC, *The Arrow* encountered almost as much difficulty in getting made as its famous subject. Keith Ross Leckie and his producer partner Mary Young Leckie ran into some early problems with the overall direction of the project from the CBC. Rather than abandon it entirely, they considered making it a theatrical feature film instead. Despite having an early commitment from Dan Aykroyd (the Leckies by-passed his agent and went directly to the notoriously TV-shy star), they still encountered reluctance on the part of the funding agencies because the production was thought to be too expensive. Later in the process of development, Ross Leckie again pitched the mini-series idea to CBC-TV programming executives, but this time, he said, as "a metaphor for the CBC's own battles to preserve its vision and mandate. The parallels—dreams being dashed by short-sighted funding policies—are obvious, but I'd never said them out loud before. Finally, we got the go ahead."

But would Aykroyd agree, now that the project was definitely a mini-series for television? Aykroyd made an exception in the case of *The Arrow*, he said, because, "I believe in this story. I'm a patriot, a citizen of this country, and loyal to its interests. There's lots of great Canadian ingenuity. This is a great Canadian story about what we can do when we set our minds to it, which is to achieve industrial triumphs. Look at the success of Corel, for example." The Ottawa-born native also had a curious personal connection to his role as Crawford Gordon, Avro's starchily aggressive, mercurial chief executive. "My mother knew Crawford Gordon," he said, "because she worked for C.D. Howe in the munitions industry, and Crawford was in and out of Howe's office all the time."

While Crawford Gordon is clearly the centre of the political and personal storms gathering around Avro, *The Arrow's* dramatic scope is much broader. Merging vintage television newsreels, A.V. Roe's own sponsored films (at the dawn of infomercials), as well as those homey, hokey and still chilling "duck and cover" warning films about nuclear war, this ambitious series attempts to dramatize the lives and events of those at virtually every level of the Arrow's production line. From the brilliant and boyish chief engineer Jim Chamberlain (Aidan Devine), to the dedicated proto-feminist flight engineer Kate O'Hara (Sara Botsford), to the aggressive patriotism of test pilot Jack Woodman (Ron White), to the inquisitive, politically savvy aviation beat reporter June Callwood (Mauralea Austin), *The Arrow* is a collective drama about collective dreams and ultimately, collective failures.

Opposite page: Mauralea Austin as aviation beat reporter, June Callwood; Aykroyd as Gordon. This page: Aykroyd and Gary Reineke. Gordon was his own worst enemy, a fascinating mixture of arrogance and deference. In *The Arrow*, Aykroyd turns in a performance of surprising subtle and textured nuance.



Lest this sound like a patriotic postcard representation of Canada in the 1950s, it is important to point out that for every dedicated Arrow idealist, there are, in the dense and dark underbrush, just as many enemies of the project. There is the professional jealousy of engine designer Edward Critchley (Ian D. Clark), the ferocious political gamesmanship of Finance Minister George Hees (a masterful character study by Christopher Plummer), the vacillating and ineffectual defence minister George Pearkes (Vernon Chapman), and the volatile and vengeful Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (Robert Haley). Beyond the conflict in Canada lay the interests of the CIA and its U2 spy plane program, which the Arrow had superseded; the U.S. military industrial complex which, naturally, wanted to have total control over the burgeoning business of the Cold War; and President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Michael Moriarty) who advocates that U.S. interests are identical to Canada's while on a friendly fishing trip with Diefenbaker.

In addition to these foes of the project, Gordon was his own worst enemy, a man whose contempt for Diefenbaker and chaotic personal life combined to accelerate the undoing of all he had helped to build at Avro. A brief but explosive meeting between Gordon and the Prime Minister (a meeting which was reported to be the *coup de grâce* for the Arrow) yields the film's most telling and melancholy line, as Gordon barks at Dief, "It's politicians like you who would keep this country from greatness." The feeling was mutually hostile. Diefenbaker detested Gordon as much for his drinking, smoking and swearing, as for his affiliations with C.D. Howe and the Liberal Party, which had given the go-ahead for the Arrow in the first place. Aykroyd's subtle and surprisingly textured performance offers Crawford Gordon as a fascinating mixture of arrogance and deference, a man with stiff body language, a clipped speaking style and a barely contained emotional complexity which betrays his prim WASP training. Once the project has been finally shelved, while those around him want to maintain the company in a more modest form, Gordon laments the passing of industrial visionaries and the advent of an age dominated by accountants.

In the context of Canadian televised national myth making, where does *The Arrow* land? It's certainly not in the celebratory tradition of *The National Dream*; instead, it's a tale of noble defeat, an all too common theme in former colonies and young nations. Perhaps, as well, it is a call to arms. *The Arrow* asks probing, unsettling questions about this country and raises others by implication. Why doesn't Canada have its own, domestically produced car? Why doesn't Canada have control over the distribution and exhibition of its own films? Australia, which has a smaller population and is also a former colony of England, has both. The story of the Avro Arrow, argues Ross Leckie, is very much about these kinds of questions. "It's all about will," he says. "It's about a process of finding out who we are. Canada has an incredible legacy of achievement. Thirty-three of the top Canadian engineers from Avro went to work for NASA, for example. That's over half the 60 senior engineers who worked on the lunar landing project. It's not a stretch to say that Neil Armstrong may not have walked on the moon without Canadian expertise gained on the Arrow. If nothing else, I hope *The Arrow* is a lesson, albeit a hard one. We must have faith in ourselves and raise our self-confidence and pride."

Clearly, Canada is not a world super power, as Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson once reminded us, but what *The Arrow* dramatically demonstrates is that the time-honoured Canadian tradition of accommodating its colonial masters suddenly took a turn southward, across the border to the United States. This Cold War transference of masters involved the sacrifice of engineering expertise, and to a more significant degree, cultural, economic and political sovereignty. If there is to be American dominance, *The Arrow* suggests, there also must be Canadian submission. For Ross Leckie, the tale of the Arrow is a tale of the failure of political courage, imagination and foresight; a tale of making short-term cuts and ignoring long-term gains. Consequently, *The Arrow* is a powerful reminder of how small-time pettiness makes for bad business as well as bad politics.

Ron White as ace test pilot,
Jack Woodman



Beyond its exhaustive and important retelling of a transformative and traumatic (and repressed, apparently, as it has taken so long for the story to be dramatized) moment in Canadian history, the timing of *The Arrow* is also significant. It arrives at a critical moment in the history of Canadian cultural institutions. In the current narrow political discourse which shrieks almost exclusively about cutting government spending as if it were intrinsically immoral to be reinvesting tax dollars in public institutions, *The Arrow* points out just how myopic and even irresponsible this philosophy can be. The old-new neo-conservative economics coldly ignores the cultural consequences of its haste, and in spite of loads of evidence to the contrary, politicians still speak in the clichés of cuts, cuts, and more cuts. Both *The Arrow* the mini-series and the *Arrow* the supersonic jet fighter demonstrate just what can be lost, and that includes the profits for Canada (the economic justifications of scrapping the *Arrow* are repeatedly pilloried in the mini-series). To invest in Canada is to reap the benefits in Canada.

Instead of being a leader in aviation technology and, as *The Arrow* suggests, being at the edge of developing our own space program, the elected and non-elected elite of this country choose to knuckle under, to follow. As Ross Leckie argues, "when we cancelled the *Arrow*, we became something less than a first class country." Now we take pride in being an appendage, an arm, on the U.S. space shuttle and cheer as occasionally Canadian astronauts go along for the ride. One can only hope that if *The Arrow* can at least recalibrate the debate about public spending and the notion of a mixed economy, then perhaps the spirit of the original drive to produce the best, most advanced airplane in the world did not perish in the folly of the Diefenbaker purge after all.

The Arrow boldly attempts to penetrate and expose the psychology of the colonized—that paradoxical combination of low-fear, submissiveness, and smugness—which can be said to demonstrate the worst aspects of our national character. The failure to invest in our own, to let someone else take charge, must be regarded as a colonial gesture. After all, it was a duly elected Canadian government which abandoned the *Avro Arrow*, opting instead to buy American. Although *The Arrow* is at pains to be even-handed, to illustrate the complex and competing agendas in the paranoiac context of Cold War power politics, it is clearly a lament for a nation which (as former Prime Minister Trudeau wrote recently in another context) "dares not speak its name."

Perhaps it is best it remains unspoken, for if we were to say Canada's name in the second half of the 20th Century, we would pronounce two melancholy syllables instead of three, and they would sound out one unforgettable word—*Arrow*. ■

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