

# Say “Rick”

to anyone and the response you get is a patient stare anticipating the rest of your statement. Say “Rick Mercer” and your listener will qualify it without your help. Rick *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* Mercer. Rick *Talking to Americans* Mercer. Rick *Made in Canada* Mercer. Rick “sole civilian recipient of the Canadian Armed Forces Commander Land Force Command commendation for his ongoing public support of Canadian Peacekeepers” Mercer.

By God, I think we’ve got another Canadian icon. Quick! Market the sonuvabitch to within an inch of his life. Ah, but this is Canada where predacious marketing never really happens. Besides, in the case of Mercer, it would never happen. The nature of the Mercer beast is that he has the wherewithal to create a niche for his talents (talents which deserve a niche they can call their own). Very Canadian.

While none of this is news, what is interesting is that Mercer was introduced to the nation on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, smoothly moved on to reappear in *Made in Canada*—a show he co-created with producer Gerald Lunz—and after five seasons moved on again without skipping a beat to *Rick Mercer’s Monday Report*, which airs on CBC in January 2004. Mixed in with this he also hosted History Television’s clip show *It Seems Like Yesterday* and made comedy television history in Canada by creating and co-producing the one-hour CBC special *Talking to Americans* that attracted 2.7 million viewers across Canada, making it the highest-rated comedy special in the history of the CBC. The timing and pattern of these career changes are a testament to Mercer’s keen understanding of how he needs to format himself successfully.

Traditionally, dating back to Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster, Canadian comedy has always been digested in ensemble format. To stand alone, a comic moves south, which might say more about the American inability to pay attention to multiple personalities simultaneously than it does about the Canadian socialist inclination to celebrate groups rather than individuals. Mercer knew about comedy troupes, given this is where executive producer Gerald Lunz found him in the late 1980s, performing with Cory and Wade’s Playhouse. He equates them to bands that evolve as a pack, making their music, moving from stage to recording studio to video. “The dynamic changes when a comedy troupe moves from stage to television, and the

transition isn’t always healthy,” he says. “But *22 Minutes* was different. What the public saw as an ensemble was just a group of people who worked together, but didn’t move as a herd socially. I think that was its strength and made the show fun to do. There wasn’t the added pressure of being an ensemble group.”

The pleasure of this arrangement was more than happenstance from Mercer’s perspective. “I did that intentionally. I didn’t want to be part of a group. From the start I’ve wanted to have a long career and the freedom to do what I want to do.” As evidenced by the careers of the other *22 Minutes* members, the benefits went across the board. That said, Mercer does a quiet about-face and mutters that he has always wanted to be in a band. Uh huh.

He had his band moment in high school. This fact is often mentioned, but never beyond the “amusing anecdote” reference, which is likely sufficient because the bigger lesson he appears to have learned was not about music but that he is a performer. Hands down. Flat out. Whole hog. Loves it. Is honoured by it. He has the entire respect thing going on for the industry and he takes it beyond blowing sunshine. And, thankfully, he doesn’t even go near the humble pit of the self-incrimination routine that reflexively begs listeners to accommodate the conflicted ego. Fact is, he’s pretty clear about straightforward gratitude. “I consider being able to work in this business a real privilege. If you are a writer and you get to write, that’s great. I think it’s a real privilege to be on a set, let alone acting on it.”

This January the public will see the next incarnation of Mercer’s talents in a weekly show, airing Monday nights, which will follow him as he travels around the country covering news and current affairs and doing commentary. He is pleased with the notion of the show, except there is a slight squidginess about the name: *Rick Mercer’s Monday Report*. Recognizing the product identification element here, he erupts into laughter at the lame marketing excuse for settling for something less clever than is his standard.

A black and white close-up portrait of Rick Mercer. He has dark, curly hair and is looking directly at the camera with a slight, thoughtful expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is a plain, light color.

*Rick Mercer's  
Monday Report*

BY CYNTHIA AMSDEN



Greg Thomey and Rick Mercer in *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

It was also at Banff where Manhattan-based Sheila Nevins, head of documentaries for HBO (who was co-executive producer on *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*), made the unfortunate error of publicly attempting to disparage Mercer's presence on the same panel she was on. The festival had several discussion panels showcasing some of the best creative talent in the business. As reported in *The Globe and Mail* (June 21, 2003), "Nevins was miffed because she had assumed she was going to be part of an earlier panel that included *Sopranos*' creator David Chase and *Cheers*' executive producer James Burrows." Instead, she'd been stuck with a Canuck she'd never heard of. Pointing a lacquered nail in Mercer's general direction, Nevins huffed: "I came all the way up here and I find I'm on a panel with *him*." Because of the slight, Nevins then threatened to boycott that evening's festivities, where she was to be given a lifetime achievement award, along with Burrows and McGhee. "Do you know where I'm going to be?" she asked the stunned room. "In my hotel room."

*Pause:* As we remember this is Rick "streeters" on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* Mercer.

*Pause:* As we remember that his book, *Streeters*, published by Doubleday quickly rose to No. 1 on *The Globe and Mail's* National Best Seller List.

*Pause:* As we remember that Mercer is the country's authority on how to talk to Americans.

"Oh, if you're in your room," Mercer offered, "you really should try the club sandwich." Later at the celebratory dinner, a careful check of attendance, including the Pat Fern (Banff president and CEO) sector, resulted in the conclusion that Ms. Nevins might actually be taking the room service menu recommendation under advisement.

The key to Rick Mercer's success is that he is Rick Mercer. "I have an odd career in this country. I'm an actor but I don't get hired to play parts. My career has evolved to the point where I am 'that guy.' People know me as Rick Mercer. If you put me into the Hitler miniseries, and I walked into the room, viewers would snort and say, 'Hey, they put Rick Mercer in the show.' Some actors have that

Leah and Gordon Pincent with Mercer in *Made In Canada*.



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Recalling the debate over the *Made in Canada* title, Mercer says, "I remember a journalist said, 'Why don't you just call it *Don't Watch this Show*.'" But what he did was what he is reputedly able to do—turn a sow's ear into a Prada purse. He certainly did that with the Great Sow to the South in *Talking to Americans*. "I have no particular desire to have my name be the name of the show; I'm quite happy just doing the show. The downside with this title is the possibility of waking up one morning and reading the headline: 'The Rick Mercer Show Cancelled.'"

The location of this interview is the 2003 Banff Television Festival where Mercer had been invited not only to host the Rockie Awards and lead, along with long-time producer, Gerald Lunz, a Master Class which they called "Driving the Comedy Bus." As well, Mercer is there to receive the Sir Peter Ustinov Award, moving him up to the ranks of Barry Humphries (a.k.a. Dame Edna), Bob Newhart, Martin Short, Tracey Ullman, Kelsey Grammer, John Cleese and the late John Candy. Nice neighbours. Throughout the festival, the comedian/writer/performer is not a rarified commodity, and the scheduled interview for *Take One* felt more like a dance of manners rather than the usual orchestrated window of chaperoned accessibility.

It was at Banff where Mercer explained that what makes him laugh most are the naughty bits, that-which-ought-not-to-be said. "The bad things that you can't say on television," he clarified. The Newfoundland accent kicks in. "So yes, it's the really saucy, bad things." But his idea of bad is not the Chris Rock/blunt-force trauma comedy the public has come to expect. And even off-camera, once someone crosses the line and gives him leave to empty both barrels, his sense of humour is viciously subtle, as the best humour should be.

and it's good because it means people know you, but it also means I'm never going to get work in a Hitler miniseries."

Rick Mercer on the set of *Made In Canada*.



This segues nicely into the other half of Mercer's success. He is a writer. One who thinks of himself first as a writer and then after that, as an actor. It also means his best shot at getting acting work is if he writes himself into his own material, which is essentially how he started with the first of his early one-man shows, *Show Me the Button and I'll Push It*, at the National Arts Centre in

Ottawa. Skit-based *22 Minutes* allowed him to maintain his real identity and *Made in Canada* was a curious departure because it was the first time he had done any ensemble character acting. And, it worked. He was able to escape the gravity of his own identity and launch into a fictitious character role without being plagued by the annoying question of "Is your *Made in Canada* character, Richard Strong, autobiographical?"

The reason television viewers were unlikely to confuse Machiavellian television executive Richard Strong with Rick Mercer is because the latter has lived his life, or at least his opinionated life, out loud on screen. The "streeters" clued the public into what is on Mercer's mind. A fourth wall? What fourth wall? "The tone of the streeter was never angry," Mercer explains, "but the genius of it was being 'put out' or thinking something is wrong." While the opinions expressed in "streeters" were not necessarily those of the speaker, the speaker was certainly not averse to expressing a counter position to the one commonly held just for the pure, academic, devil's advocate hell of it.

But there's a difference between pre-recording a lecture on foibles of society and letting loose the dogs of opinion, and the difference is exhaustion. Weekly commentary requires maintaining an acute awareness of everything going on, the interconnectedness, the implications of elements and filling in the blanks of what is not being said. The world is assessed for its rant potential. Ideas are immediately extrapolated into fully formed commentaries. And for an inveterate newspaper reader such as Mercer (every available newspaper, every morning, regardless of location, without fail)



"He is intelligent, private, generous and the next great PRIME MINISTER of Canada."

- Peter Keleghan -

the possibilities are without limit. "I went through a phase after *22 Minutes* where I didn't want to give my opinion on anything. I was tired of it. But now I want to get back to it."

Travelling cross-country, Mercer anticipates two potential hazards with his theory of covering the news; the first being a slow news week, but worse is an event that is too horrific to satirize. Carol Burnett said comedy is tragedy plus time, but Mercer acknowledges that there are places he simply won't go with commentary. The redeeming aspect of the Canadian audience is that they "find the news funny. Canadians watch the news so they've got the set up and they're just waiting for the punch line." And the numbers back him up. It's either CBC or CTV news, but the audiences are there. Add to this the encouragement from south of the border: Pew Research Center for the People and Press showed that 47 per cent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 often gleaned information about the presidential campaign from late-night comedy shows. Bottom line: Mercer could conceivably have another hit on his hands.

The one thing that cannot be gleaned in an interview is a view of the subject from a distance. For that we move to Peter Keleghan, Mercer's *Made in Canada* co-star (and it is a pleasure to be able to write "co-star" and know it's not publicity bio bumph). Keleghan, who played Pyramid CEO Alan Roy, quite literally could not stop praising Mercer. "Egos can be fragile in this business, and Rick's ego was always positive. *Made in Canada* was his show and he felt that it was only as strong as the weakest link and gave us all huge air time. There were characters in it more than Mercer was. He spread the wealth around." Keleghan says of Mercer, "He is intelligent, private, generous and the next great Prime Minister of Canada," a ringing endorsement if there ever was one.

Cynthia Amsden is a member of Take One's editorial board.