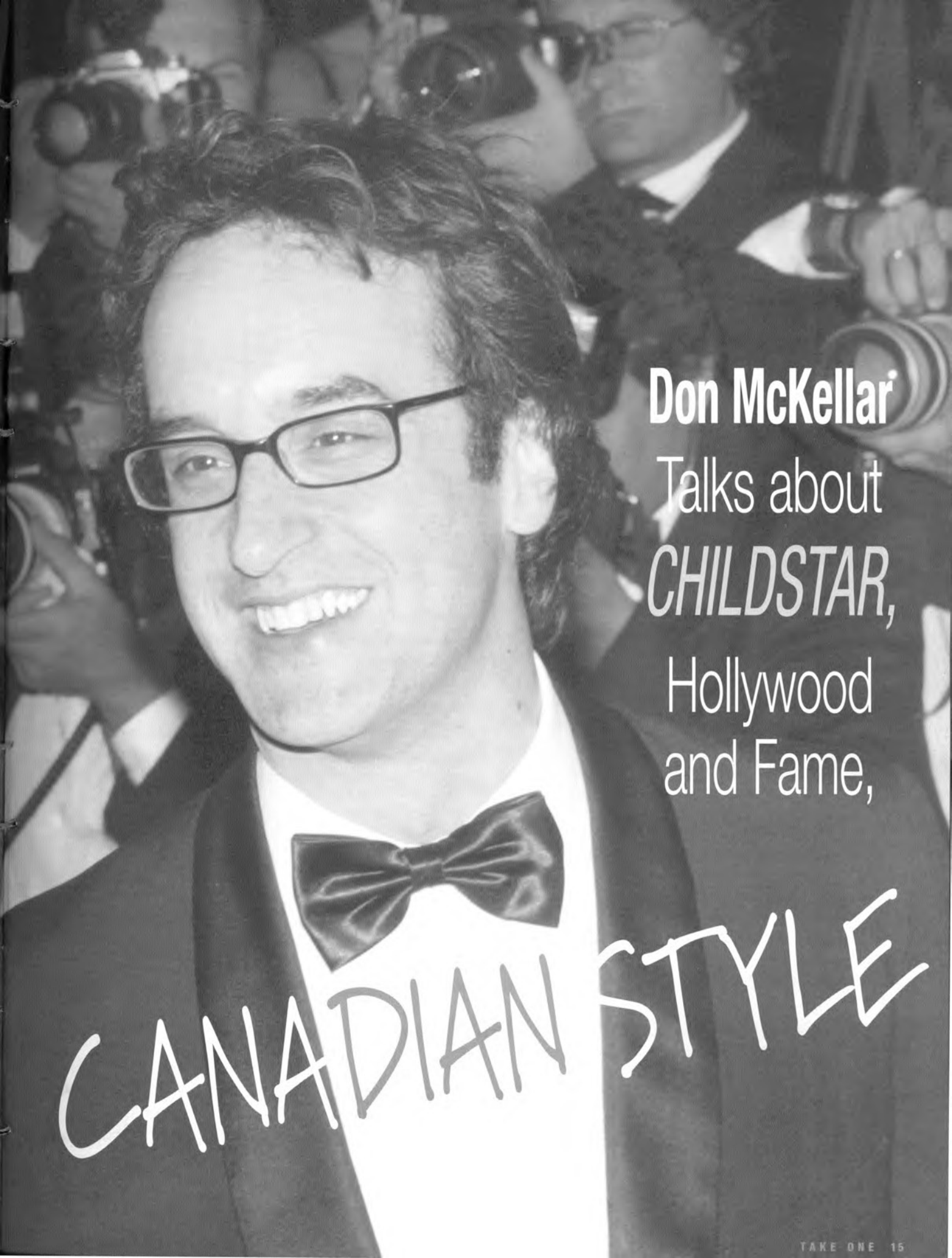


Don McKellar's credits read like a list of the very best in contemporary English-Canadian cinema: author of *Roadkill* (1990) and *Highway 61* (1992); co-author of *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1994), *Dance Me Outside* (1995) and *The Red Violin* (1998); with notable appearances in *Roadkill*, *Highway 61*, *Thirty-Two Short Films*, *The Red Violin*, *Exotica* (1994), *When Night Is Falling* (1995) and *Joe's So Mean to Josephine* (1997). Although it has been six years since the release of *Last Night*, his debut feature released in 1998, Don McKellar has been a busy lad, nothing like the slacker filmmaker he portrays in his second feature, *Childstar*. Apart from adapting Nobel Prize-winner José Saramago's novel *Blindness* for Rhombus Media, in the past half-dozen years he has written and starred in all 13 episodes of the CBC series *Twitch City* (1998/2000) and has appeared in countless films and television movies such as *The Herd* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Sea People* (1999), *The Passion of Ayn Rand* (1999), *Vinyl* (2000), *waydowntown* (2000), *Cinderella and Me* (2001), *The Art of Woo* (2002), *Rub & Tug* (2002), *Trudeau* (2002), *The Event* (2003), *Public Domain* (2004), and the upcoming co-production *Clean*, which had its English-Canadian debut at this year's edition of TIFF. As *Toronto Star* film critic Geoff Pevere points out in the Special Edition of *Take One* that examines the so-called Toronto new wave (now available on newsstands and for purchase on *Take One's* Web site), "[McKellar is] the closet thing English-Canadian cinema has to a household name...[his] contributions are so abundant and crucial it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that cinema without him."

His latest is a character-driven comedy about the innate ridiculousness of child actors and their parents in a culture where the kids act too old and adults act too young. It's also a spoof on American runaway productions and an incisive take on Hollywood as seen through the eyes of Canadians. McKellar stars as Rick, an idealist and failed experimental filmmaker/slacker turned production driver for an American blockbuster being shot in Toronto, who is drawn into a world of American stardom that is beyond his comprehension. Forced to play babysitter to a brat who suddenly disappears from the set, it is Rick who needs to get his life together and come to grips with the films he wants to make. *Childstar* also stars Jennifer Jason Leigh (*eXistenZ*, *Single White Female*), Dave Foley (*Kids in the Hall*, *Dick*), Michael Murphy (*Year of Living Dangerously*, *Batman Returns*), Eric Stoltz (*Pulp Fiction*) and (at the time of filming) the 15-year-old Mark Rendall, who already has a number of film and television credits under his belt and is the current voice of Arthur on the very popular children's show of the same name.

Childstar was given a Special Presentation screening at this year's Toronto International Film Festival and will be distributed by TVA for general release in the fall.

Wyndham Wise



Don McKellar
Talks about
CHILDSTAR,
Hollywood
and Fame,

CANADIAN STYLE

Where did the idea for Childstar come from?

I was at the Oscar® party for *The Red Violin* [2000], and we went to the Dreamworks party afterwards. I found myself sitting at the bar talking to Haley Joel Osment. We were talking about the business and about the Oscars®, which were the longest in history. It was late at night, and what was interesting about this was that after about 10 minutes into the conversation I thought, "Oh my God, I'm talking to an 11-year-old." It was a Hollywood party and it didn't occur to me that any children were present. Instead, I was talking to a celebrity. He seemed to perfectly encapsulate American stardom. This was just after *The Sixth Sense* and before *A.I.* He was an example of something, but I didn't know what. He was preternaturally mature, extremely young but unnatural. There was something spooky about it, if you thought about it. He sort of summed up in an instant all my feelings about Hollywood, all my Hollywood experiences. I carried that away with me. At the time I was working on *Blindness*, which was a heavy slog, and I was obsessed by it. Then this

"The film is self-reflective in a major way."

— Don McKellar

idea formulated in my head about a child star. It was rumbling around in my head and I was entertaining it as a lighter diversion, but the more I thought about it the more I became intrigued. I told my idea to Mike Goldbach, who, at the time, was a writer up at the Canadian Film Centre.

He was a writer-in-residence?

That's right. I had been at the Film Centre as an advisor, or mentor, or whatever the term they use at the Centre. I liked his work and he showed me a feature script. While we were

talking about that, I told him about my idea for a film about an American child star who comes up to Canada to shoot a big Hollywood film but runs away from the set. He really responded to it. So I asked if he wanted to run with it.

The American film the kid is shooting up here is called...?

The First Son. It's a film about a president who is kidnapped by terrorists and his son, who has come home from summer camp, has to take over.

Isn't that the vice-president's job?

You would think so, but it's a bit of a laugh. You remember the general who said he was in charge when President Reagan was shot?

You mean Haig, who sent shivers through everyone's spine when he said he was in charge?

It's a bit of the Haig phenomena. The son is not given official responsibility, but the White House is closed down and he has to take charge. When I was first approaching people to finance the film, I met with an American distributor who was convinced that there was no way we could approximate a blockbuster. I knew logistically there would be problems, but I'm happy with the way it turned out.

How did you overcome those problems?

These days, when you look at a lot of the bigger films, they're all shot against a blue screen. You don't have to build giant sets anymore. Now it's basically a sound stage with a blue screen and some guy on wires. Yes, of course, it requires a lot of crew members and high-tech stuff, but it's doable. Actually, there's a standing White House set in Toronto. It's expensive to rent, but I had strategies and we only used it for a few days.

Your character is...?

My character is an experimental filmmaker who is working on the film as a driver who gets sucked into the kid's life. Basically, he ends up sleeping with the kid's mother and gets deeper and deeper into his life and problems.

Childstar images courtesy Rhombus Media.

Don McKellar





Kristin Adams and Mark Rendall

Why did you choose to make your character a filmmaker?

The film is obviously an exploration of the contrast between this giant spectacle and the hands-on type of low-budget filmmaking my character represents. The film is self-reflective in a major way and, as I said, it comes out of my experiences in Hollywood. I used a lot of my feelings about Hollywood and Canadian films, which is something I have been struggling with for awhile. So, in a way, it's a very personal film.

Your character becomes involved because he has to babysit the kid?

Basically, yes. Then my character has to act like a detective and track the kid down once he goes AWOL.

Why does he disappear?

It's a plot device. It's more like a reversal of the way things normally are. It's not that he is out of control, say like Drew Barrymore used to be when she was younger. It's more like he wants a family life. He wants a structure in his life. His mother is a flake. She's devoted to him, but she's irresponsible. His father is kind of greedy and neglectful, so the kid's trying to stabilize his life. The film is a metaphor for a lot of

things, sort of like a free-floating metaphor for American cultural imperialism—this kid in another country, this monstrous force, immature but very powerful. It's also about creating art and compromising, about trying to find a centre and grow up artistically.

For your character or the kid?

Both, actually. In a way, the kid is the most mature person in the film. It's about taking responsibility. It's not just about America. It's about filmmaking, about art, about art in a commercial world. It's about how you can still express yourself personally and still reach people in a system that is very commodified.

Is the film within the film meant to be a satire of runaway productions?

It developed as I was working on the script. It was always there in my story, but it became a larger issue when Schwarzenegger became governor of California. In my film, Toronto is definitely Toronto but in *The First Son*, Toronto is trying to be Washington. There's a lot of jokes about that, about using CGI to take away the snow and putting in grass. We had horrible luck with the weather. We ended up shooting in the late fall, which I thought was ridiculous, but then I thought it might help with *The First Son* because the producers are trying to shoot Washington and make it look like summer. However, the weather was just awful, with gale force winds and lots of rain. We had to drop a lot of exteriors. We had to shoot scenes from exterior to interior when it was pouring rain and freezing cold, although you see none of this in the film because [cinematographer] André [Turpin] did an amazing job, even though his main light source at one location sank into the mud. He had to re-light and cover everything with tarpaulins to make it look like sunny California. We had to CGI-out breath.

"It's about creating art and compromising, about trying to find a centre and grow up artistically."

— McKellar

"I don't think there's anything wrong with an intellectual protagonist."

— McKellar

Who do you have in the cast?

We have Jennifer Jason Leigh, who plays the mother. I worked with her before on *eXistenZ*, and she said she wanted to work with me again. So I took her at her word and called her up for a cameo in the second season of *Twitch City*. She also agreed to do *Childstar*. We have Dave Foley as the film's producer who is saddled with this ridiculous production but would rather be making Truffaut films. Eric Stoltz is the father. I cast him because he said in an interview with the *National Post* that he wanted to be in one of my films. The *Post* used it as a pull quote: "Stoltz wants to act in a McKellar film." So I figured, why not? We asked his agent and he agreed. Michael Murphy plays the actor playing the American president. Brendan Fehr plays an older child star who is the Secretary of State in the film. He's the cautionary tale of the grown-up child star who has been in and out of rehab.

And the actor who plays the child star?

Mark Rendall. He was the main casting decision. People who were going to invest in the film wanted to know who we were going to choose because the whole success of the film turns on that character. No one really believed we could find an actor to pull it off.

Did you consider Haley Joel Osment?

He's too old. All the famous child stars are too old right now. I talked to the Culkins about their youngest son, Rory, but there were some issues there.

Actually, I always wanted to shoot with a Canadian, and we found Mark, who is fantastic. Our casting person recommended him right off the top. I knew he was a great actor, but I wasn't sure he could be monstrous enough or American enough. I auditioned him three or four times, then realized it was smart to go with the best actor instead of type casting. It was definitely the right decision and early on I realized he could do anything. He is the anchor right throughout the film. People will be very impressed with him.

Once again you wrote, directed and acted in the film. How do you respond to this sort of pressure?

It's a pressure all right, but perhaps more so with public perception. I was afraid of doing this again because of that perception, but the way things evolved, it just seemed like the natural and most honest way of doing this film. It's about a Canadian filmmaker, making a movie in Canada with a big American cast. I wanted Canadians to play Canadians, so it seemed odd to cast a similar actor as myself in the role of my character. I won't always do it and some ways it was a burden.

What do you think about the cliché of the male role model in our films; the loser; the conflicted man?

I have thought about that. I definitely think there's a pattern. My characters in *Highway 61*, *Roadkill* and *Last Night* are ironic takes on that image. With those films, I was trying to make a statement about the male protagonist. In this film, my character starts out passive but becomes more activated. He may start as the intellectually distanced protagonist, but he ends up having to take responsibility. The film pushes him to act all the way to the very end.



Kristin Adams



Do you feel a burden to reinvent the Canadian male image?

On the one hand, Telefilm and the new policy for commercial filmmaking would like to put the Canadian protagonist of old to rest. People seem to be really against that now and want to move on. I have to say part of the purpose of *Last Night*, and even this film, is to validate that character. I don't think there is anything wrong with an intellectual protagonist. I like to think part of the Canadian project is to come up with a protagonist that offers an alternative to the American individualist, everyone-for-himself man of violence.

The kind who speaks softly and carries a big stick?

Exactly. There is some humour at the expense of that kind of stick in *Childstar*. I don't think it's a bad thing to explore other kinds of protagonists. I don't think it's unprecedented in cinema history, and certainly it's there in terms of novels and storytelling. On the other hand, I think there's a danger of falling into a trap of aloof disengagement. I guess I'm trying to have it both ways. I'm trying to say we have to find another kind of heroism in our films. We have to find another kind of storytelling than we find in most American films. It's not serving us well. That narrative, as we are seeing in Iraq, doesn't necessarily have the best results. American casting is so restrictive. It's frustrating. They have such a narrow focus on what is acceptable, what is attractive, and it's not even true half of the time. I hate that sort of cold, model type. You can be a sexy scientist and not look like a fashion model. I do feel it is important for Canadian films to push those restrictions a little bit and become sort of a bridge between American and European films. You find actors in European films who would never make it in American films.

Any thoughts on the so-called sophomore curse? This is your second feature after all, even though it has been quite a while since Last Night.

It's been a long, long difficult process getting to my second film. I've been working on *Blindness* for a long time and I definitely had that second-film fear. That's why I sort of snuck this film in, almost fooling myself into thinking this was my film—and-a-half. I had to trick myself into doing it, and it's self-reflective in that way. But I'm not afraid, really. I've written scripts since *Last Night*, so it doesn't feel like a second film.



McKellar with Dave Foley

Mark Rendall in "The First Son"

You must have heard the siren call of Hollywood during that time.

I had tons of scripts offered to me and I wasn't resistant to the idea of working down there, but ultimately I felt it would be disrespectful not to exploit the opportunity I had been given in Canada. I can make, direct, write and act in films here. I thought, how rude of me to abandon this for a situation in America that I may not have any control over. I began to realize the great strength we have up here is that we have control over our films and we can make idiosyncratic, personal films. That's what Telefilm has to realize. It's a gift that all my American friends are jealous of. Control, that's an unbelievable privilege. I've watched as several of my friends have gone down to Hollywood and made films that they were embarrassed about four years later. I thought the braver thing to do, certainly from my own vanity, was to try and succeed in Canada. People think that you are chicken not to go for the American prize—fame and fortune—but I always thought the opposite. The much braver thing to do is to go for the Canadian prize, which is much harder to get, God knows (he laughs). If I were to go down to the States and succeed in the best of circumstances, I would only be one of thousands. But to do it up here, that would be almost unprecedented.

Wyndham Wise is the publisher/editor-in-chief of Take One.