



"Welcome to life, baby, where there is no meaning, there are no rules."

— Calvin Pope

William D. MacGillivray Goes TV with

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By Tom McSorley

Small Victories

All photos: Justin Hall

We are huddled in parkas in a freezing rainstorm in mid-January on the outskirts of St. John's, Newfoundland. It is 1:30 a.m. The Gullage's Flames hockey team is arriving at Goobies Memorial Rink for a game against the Loveless Lagerheads. The building itself is actually an old stable doubling for the arena exterior. Inside, seven silent horses breathe steam and watch impassively as the crew sets up the shot; outside, as the van rolls up for another take, writer-director William D. MacGillivray peers into a portable video monitor and smiles as his characters clamber clumsily out of the van to enter the rink. While the lighting stands shake and the rain struggles to fall against the harsh North Atlantic wind, MacGillivray shouts "Cut!" Then, noting the diminutive size of the stable as compared to the real arena, he explains, half-jokingly, that, "Everything in this show is smaller than life."

The show is *Gullage's*, a new television series about, yes, a very small, very peculiar, utterly unforgettable taxi company in St. John's. Revolving around a fascinating protagonist named Calvin Pope (Bryan Hennessey), and featuring some of Newfoundland's finest acting talents, it is an offbeat, incisive and witty look at urban life in the 1990s on The Rock. The first of six half-hour episodes of *Gullage's*, to be aired this fall on Wednesday nights on CBC-TV, has been described as a cross between *Coronation Street* and *Twin Peaks*. If that seems hard to conjure, imagine *Taxi* (you know, Danny Devito, Judd Hirsch, Andy Kaufman, *et al...*) written by Samuel Beckett and you'll get the idea. However you describe it, *Gullage's* is an impressive series debut for a filmmaker known for producing complex, introspective, stylistically challenging cinema. Not since Denys Arcand directed *Empire, Inc.* for Radio-Canada has a film director of this stature worked in Canadian series television. Given the difficulties in getting films made and seen in Canada, perhaps this is the start of something exciting for our country's small screens.

In the decade since his critically acclaimed *Life Classes*, released in 1987, William D. MacGillivray and *Gullage's* have taken a decidedly circuitous route to the small screen. After the success of *Life Classes* came *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1988), a wry documentary on life at an art school, followed by *The Vacant Lot* (1989), a disappointing drama about a young female rock musician dreaming of escape from Nova Scotia, and then in 1990, *Understanding Bliss*, a brilliantly daring drama about relationships and regional differences. While trying to raise production funds for subsequent feature films, he wrote and directed a half-hour television documentary about the 1917 Halifax Explosion for CBC-Halifax, and in 1994 delivered a revealing but uneven feature documentary for the NFB on the contemporary Canadian family, *For Generations to Come*. Throughout this daunting, often difficult period in his cinematic career, however, MacGillivray was also developing a television series about an imaginary taxi stand in his native city, St. John's.

th *Gullage's*



The Pope of St. John's (Bryan Hennessey, centre) and his peculiar extended family celebrate another year under Angora's (Janice Spence, second from left) tempestuous roof.

"Gullage's evolved almost accidentally," MacGillivray recalls. "One day back in 1989, the regional representative for the CBC, Peter Kelly, suggested we submit an idea to the corporation for a series. Terry Greenlaw [MacGillivray's long-time producer, creative consultant and Picture Plant partner] and I reacted initially by saying something superior like, 'we don't do TV.' Thinking it over, though, we said to ourselves, 'why not?' and I came up with this idea about a cab stand in St. John's. Anyone who's ever been to Newfoundland talks about the legendary St. John's taxis, and given the opportunities for comedy and drama inherent in the strangely interactive cab situation, not to mention the fact that my grandfather was a taxi inspector in St. John's, I thought the idea would be fun to work on. And it was, and here we are."

While the series "bible" and episodes were written in the early 1990s, the CBC was undergoing management changes and funding cuts and would not commit to fund actual production until the summer of 1995. So, literally six years after MacGillivray's first outlines for the series, *Gullage's* went into production at MacGillivray's and Greenlaw's new production company in St. John's, Snig The Goat Limited.

Shot entirely in and around St. John's last December and January, *Gullage's* has a distinctive visual style to complement its quirky, literate script. This, for MacGillivray, was essential to the success of the show. "When we planned *Gullage's*, Terry and I took the approach that we would try to make six little feature films, not simply deliver the traditional sitcom TV show. We wanted a particular look and rhythm, so we shot it all in 16mm with a hand-held camera. Our cinematographer, Kent Nason, has a great eye and a sharp sense of what we were after, and I think it worked well. More than this, and in spite of a few puzzled looks from the CBC, we insisted that the show be filmed in St. John's, because the texture of the language and the humour is linked intimately to the topography and texture of the city itself."

The small, curious world of *Gullage's* begins with Jimmy Gullage (Frank Barry) losing his father's taxi stand in a card

game to a venal, bestial refugee from the outport town of Dildo, Pis Parsons (Michael Wade). From this absurdist corporate takeover opening sequence, the series chronicles life inside and outside the cab stand and revolves around the conflicts between nouveau-capitalist Pis ("Free enterprise: ya wants it, ya takes it. For free.") and veteran Gullage's cabbie Calvin Pope, a man struggling to find meaning in his life as a father, an ethical man confronting the new culture of money, and a would-be novelist. While Pis doggedly pursues profit by bootlegging booze, converting the fleet to propane fuel on a government grant, and starting a hockey team, Calvin and his co-workers struggle to adjust and, in their own unique ways, to resist the new management.

The force of resistance to Pis Parsons within the tiny, twisted war zone of the taxi stand includes all of the idiosyncratic Gullage's staff: the now silent Jimmy Gullage, forever staring at the stand's defective television; the dart-tossing, subtly deranged Nuts O'Neil (Jody Richardson); the philosophically inclined Gullage's Greek chorus, Bert and Russell (Phil Dinn and Brian Best, respectively); and Calvin's rock singer, single-mom daughter, Dolly (Elizabeth Pickard). While they initially do consider killing Pis, they decide instead, perhaps like the island itself, to outwait and outwit this latest in a long line of petty capitalist blowhards.

This series' incisive historical and political echoes do not end there. The cab stand, we learn, was established in 1949, not coincidentally the very year Newfoundland joined that strange and distant political configuration called Canada. It's not too much of an interpretive stretch to see *Gullage's* as a microcosm of contemporary Newfoundland in Confederation: intelligent, sly, tough, resourceful, marginalized. It is also struggling to absorb the closure of the fishery and to adopt the new world order of technocentric continental capitalism. Given the current state of things, *Gullage's* political humour and resonances underscore the disparities between the promises of Confederation and its disappointing delivery. As Bert and Russell deadpan while reading the newspaper, "It says here that Canada is one of the richest countries in the world. It wouldn't hurt to go there. Just to take a look." So, while Newfoundland does embrace the new economic ethos in the characters of Pis Parsons and Calvin's entrepreneurial former partner Iris Hussey (Brenda Devine), it also resists the frenzied pull of North American consumerist culture in the lonely, loveable figure of Calvin Euripides Pope, a walking, talking bewildered embodiment of the dialectics of progress and contemporary Newfoundland history.

Calvin Pope is the bright, befuddled axis upon which the series turns. Now in his mid-40s and living at home with his chain-smoking widowed mother Angora (Janice Spence), daughter and grandchild, and literally next door to "his Iris," Calvin is a boyish everyman attempting to navigate meaningful passage through a chaotic, crazed and changing world. In a world where, as Pis Parsons says, "traditions is dropping like flies,"

Above: Calvin Pope (Hennessey) surveys his kingdom, trying to accept the absurdity of his existence without bitterness.

Below: Bert and Russell (Phil Dinn and Brian Best), *Gullage's* Greek chorus, ponder the state of things.

Inset: Pis Parsons and Nuts O'Neil (Michael Wade and Jody Richardson) wrestle with modernity in the form of a chainsaw that can't be turned off.

where coffee is replacing tea, and where notions of community are under siege, Calvin strides like Don Quixote into the strange existential battlefield that is modern Newfoundland. He runs unsuccessfully for city councillor eight times, lobbies for a Royal Commission to halt the proliferation of vinyl siding in St. John's, dreams of becoming a novelist and of playing hockey like his idol, Pete Mahovolich, and frets about a life where it seems "there is no meaning, there are no rules." At one point in his profound confusion, screaming "Who am I?" at the ocean, like thousands of Newfoundlanders before and after him, he even ponders the possibility of leaving Newfoundland. With his very name invoking the Protestant and Catholic antinomies of rebellion and tradition, Calvin Pope stands between the past he knows and the future he distrusts. The utopian fantasies of progress represented by such things as cellular phones, Nintendo video games, vinyl siding and unfettered amorality do not impress him. Calvin Pope, like many MacGillivray protagonists, seeks his own interpretation of modernity and control of his place within it. While those around him appear to have either ignored the profound shifts in Newfoundland life or have simply accommodated them, Calvin remains restless and displaced, searching for his own form of equilibrium in a world of tumultuous and not necessarily progressive change.

Giving shape to *Gullage's* principal character is the extraordinary Bryan Hennessey, a gifted actor whose film work includes "Uncle Henny Penny" in Michael and Andy Jones's *The Adventure of Faustus Bidgood*, the male lead in MacGillivray's *Understanding Bliss*, and a small role in Michael Jones's *Secret Nation*. A droll, guileless presence on screen, Hennessey's performance as the innocent-savant is a quiet, dignified, often hilarious rendering of a character of considerable, if somewhat confused, depths. Indeed, as the focal point of a whole range of historical, political, familial, and personal tensions, Calvin Pope is one of the most engaging, complicated, and awkwardly graceful characters ever to appear on Canadian television.

For Calvin's and *Gullage's* creator MacGillivray and his production partner Greenlaw, after the trials and disappointments of feature production in recent years, the series has been a rewarding experience on many levels. "It's been exciting to create this little world. The series structure has allowed me to write outside of the constraints of feature films. Within the world of the series, there is no ending per se, so the approach to the narrative can be looser; it's quite liberating, and a lot of fun. You can sit in front of the computer, write, giggle at your own jokes, and not take yourself too seriously—something I've been charged with over the years and not without some justification. In many ways, *Gullage's* has helped me to evolve, to make my own small victories as an artist."

Back at Goobies Memorial Rink, the set is being struck, the lights are turned off and the stable door is closed. As the crew battles the elements to move on to the next set-up, MacGillivray explains through the whipping wind and rain that in the scenes which follow we discover that the *Gullage's* Flames have actually shown up at the wrong arena. Unaware of this, they begin skating around, waiting for the Lagerheads who are at another arena waiting for them. Out on the empty ice, in spite of everything, wearing the number of his beloved "Little M" and barely able to skate, the indomitable Calvin Pope dreams of victory. ■

