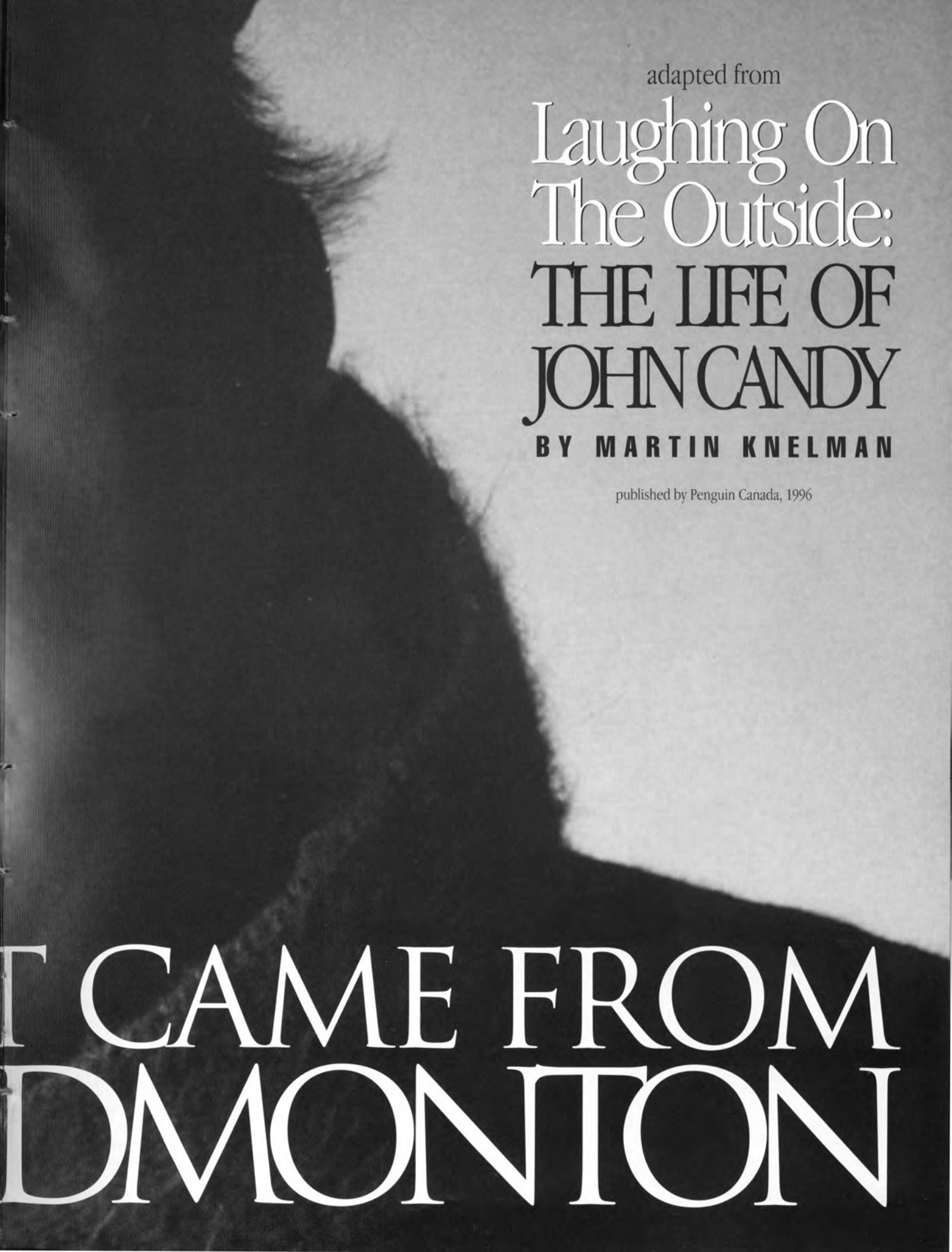


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adapted from

Laughing On
The Outside:
THE LIFE OF
JOHN CANDY

BY MARTIN KNELMAN

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EDMONTON

THE LIFE OF JOHN CANDY

In *Stripes*, a 1981 Hollywood comedy about U.S. Army dunderheads who accidentally turn into great national heroes, John Candy landed the best role of his movie career up to that time. As an oversize recruit named Dewey Oxberger, known as Ox to his buddies, Candy drew laughs just by waddling across the screen.

There's a bit of autobiographical truth to Candy's lines when Ox tells the other recruits why he decided to enlist. "You might have noticed," he remarks sarcastically, "I have a bit of a weight problem." Then he gets a determined look on his face and vows: "I'm going to walk out of here a lean, mean fighting machine." Twelve years earlier, in his last year of high school, John Candy at age 18 had been propelled by similar thoughts when he drove to Buffalo to enlist in the U.S. marines — only to be rejected because of an old football injury.



STRIPES

Photo: Columbia Pictures

Stripes gave Candy a chance to play out on celluloid his own old chubby teen fantasy of macho redemption, and at the same time to be reunited with an old Chicago Second City friend, Bill Murray, and a former SCTV cohort, Harold Ramis. Murray and Ramis were co-starring in this comedy concocted by Canadian expatriate Ivan Reitman, the scrawny boy mogul from Hamilton's McMaster University who had already become one of Hollywood's wealthiest producers thanks to

Animal House, and still had his biggest success, *Ghostbusters*, ahead of him. The same summer *Stripes* came out, another Reitman-produced film was released.

Heavy Metal, a Canadian production directed by National Film Board veteran Gerald Potterton, was a full-length animation feature based on the monthly magazine. It featured an anthology of hip sci-fi stories, rock music, and the speaking voices of well-known actors. The episodes are of highly variable quality, but John Candy was involved in two of the funniest. First he plays a deprived suburban teenager who finds sexual opportunity on another planet. And then he's hilarious as a squeaky-voiced robot having a wild affair with a voluptuous human, female and Jewish, who resists his proposal on the grounds that mixed marriages never work.

Reitman took on the job of directing *Stripes* as well as producing it, with a script by Reitman's longtime collaborator, Dan Goldberg, and Goldberg's partner, Len Blum. Shrewdly, Reitman gave the film the feeling of a Second City escapade not only by casting Bill Murray, Harold Ramis and John Candy but also by including entertaining cameo turns by Dave Thomas and Joe Flaherty. At the beginning of the film, there's a scene about a basic-English class for immigrants that has the stamp of a Second City sketch. Though it lasts for less than a minute, it helps set the tone of the movie—which is wittier than previous Reitman movies like *Meatballs*. The Second City touches save Reitman's comedy from seeming mindlessly boorish. Candy's role is secondary to those of the two stars, but nobody who saw *Stripes* could forget he was in it. It would prove to be a valuable advertisement of his potential for big screen comedy. Yet the making of *Stripes* was an agonizing experience for Candy. In fact, when he first read the script he was reluctant to do it—as was Bill Murray.

"The original character didn't look like much," Candy explained to the *Toronto Star's* Ron Base. "But Ivan said we could change it and I could do some writing. Everything fell together and we realized it could be a lot of fun." However, filming sequences in which Ox kept falling into mud—both in the field and in a bar where he competes against six women in a wrestling match—were anything but fun for Candy. He found the experience so painful that some of Candy's Toronto friends received late-night calls from him while he was in L.A. shooting *Stripes*. "He was very worried about the character he was playing, and questioned what he was doing," recalls George Bloomfield. "He wondered whether he was doing the right thing by participating in the mudwrestling scene. He was afraid it might make him come across as a pig in mud. He felt degraded."

Indeed, from the time he first read the script until the week the scene was filmed, Candy campaigned hard to have it changed. "I was fighting right up to the end to get out of it," he told Ron Base. "It was so painful, and we spent three days doing it. If you're going to mudwrestle with six women, you want to do it in private. It's somewhat inhibiting when there are 300 people watching." Even when *Stripes* was about to be released, and was clearly going to be a hit, Candy felt wounded when he was described as "the elephant" in an unflattering review. "Jerks like that are obvious," Candy grumbled to a reporter from *People* magazine, referring to the reviewer. "I'm sensitive about my weight. I'm the one who



The Shmenge Brothers (Candy and Eugene Levy) on stage in *The Last Polka*.

Photo: T.Sz lukovenyi

has to look in the mirror, and after a while it begins to eat at you." Encouraged by his friend John Belushi, who had recently lost 40 pounds, Candy said he was hiring an exercise coach to help him do the same. Like Ox, he was determined to turn himself into a lean, mean machine.

Just before *Stripes* opened in hundreds of theatres all across North America, John Candy became the most sought-after free agent in television comedy. He was up for grabs in the spring of 1981, after the failure of the TV series *Big City Comedy*. And Candy got caught in the middle of a bizarre internal war between one branch of NBC and another. Andrew Alexander was negotiating with one top NBC executive to get a spot for *SCTV* in the network schedule. Meanwhile Candy was getting overtures from another NBC executive to join the cast of *Saturday Night Live*.

Candy was embarrassed by the controversy, and there was nothing he wanted to do less than face an interrogation by journalists. Media questions made Candy nervous; he brooded about critical comments in the press or cracks about

his weight, and in interviews he was nervous lest he say the wrong thing and be made to look like a fool.

The way Candy handled the media curiosity about his discussions with *Saturday Night Live* was to go into seclusion at his family farm near Newmarket, north of Toronto, and refuse to answer the phone. Candy had heard, along with a lot of other people, that *Saturday Night* was a viper's nest compared to which the tensions at *SCTV* seemed as benign as a Sunday picnic in the country. Moreover, the cast of *SNL* was so large that it was harder for any one performer to make a mark. Besides, Candy had a strong sentimental streak, and after the stresses caused by his defection to *Big City*, he was eager to be reconciled with his former *SCTV* colleagues and heal any wounds.

In the end, Candy opted to sort out his differences with Andrew Alexander—which involved royalty payments for previous *SCTV* shows—and return to *SCTV* now that it was going to be seen on NBC. Alexander found himself in the role of the bad daddy who had been defied and repudiated but was now being offered a chance to acknowledge the true worth of his prodigal son and woo him back. Yet even after their reconciliation, Candy continued to regard Andrew Alexander with a suspicious eye. And Candy was by no means alone in his attitude to Alexander, who had an on-going battle with the cast over the slowness of royalty payments.

Part of the price of returning to *SCTV* was that Candy, along with his colleagues, would have to spend four months of the year in the showbiz wasteland of central Alberta. But Edmonton proved to be surprisingly conducive to creativity, perhaps because there were few distractions. Everyone was living away from home, occupying a hotel room or a rented house (as in the case of John and Rose Candy) and so there was a stronger need for bonding. The playing field had changed drastically from the one Candy had known during *SCTV*'s days at Global's Toronto studio three years earlier. Because of the NBC deal the show had a budget (about \$475,000 per episode) that would once have been beyond anyone's wildest expectations. But there was also more pressure than there had been previously. NBC needed a 90-minute show, which meant 65 minutes of sketch material every week. The network preferred certain kinds of material, and parachuted in its own producers to promote its viewpoint.

Catherine O'Hara returned to the *SCTV* fold at the same time as Candy, and Rick Moranis, who had been recruited during the absence of Candy and O'Hara, stayed on when they returned. This inevitably led to more rivalry over who was getting the best material and the best time slots. Facilities and equipment in Edmonton had certain limitations. *SCTV* could never tape on Wednesdays and Saturdays—because those were the nights of televised Edmonton Oilers hockey games. And in this part of the universe, nothing generated more excitement than Wayne Gretzky and the Stanley Cup. This charming bit of inside detail about working conditions in the hinterlands was always good for a chuckle when one of the cast appeared on a talk show in New York or L.A.

In fact, though, production values were better than ever, and the new, more expensive version of *SCTV* set higher standards



Candy with SCTV mates, Joe Flaherty and Eugene Levy.

in such areas as costumes, hair styling and makeup—giving the performers greater opportunities to go further with their creation of characters. One of the most triumphant combinations of makeup and costume wizardry with performing brilliance occurred when Candy appeared in drag as Divine. And when Candy played Luciano Pavarotti, he looked as if Pavarotti's face has been superimposed on his own. There was a gleefully wicked perfectionism to this impersonation—confirming how shameless Pavarotti could be in his rabble-rousing pyrotechnics. As Candy portrays him, Luciano is in the wings at the Metropolitan Opera, talking to the TV audience while the opera audience is wildly cheering his latest triumph. And what is he doing on TV? A commercial for chewing gum. "It lights up my mouth," explains this inflated tenor. "The only thing I like in my mouth besides a beautiful aria is a beautiful piece of gum."

Candy's most popular character, Johnny LaRue, returned to the air in better form than ever. In one of the most memorable LaRue sketches, the great publisher, producer and bon-vivant holds court in pink lounging pyjamas at a Hugh Hefner style party. "He's a big man getting bigger all the time," comments Geraldo, played by Joe Flaherty. As that most obnoxious of all Vegas style entertainers Bobby Bittman (Eugene Levy) puts it: "This is the side of Johnny everybody loves—the parties, the broads, the booze." Meanwhile Johnny sits surrounded by bunnies, boasting about his wine cellar, looking down from his penthouse at the common folk and telling Geraldo: "You see all those people down there, Geraldo? They look like bugs. I could squash them if I wanted to."

The CBC, which was carrying a one-hour version of SCTV on Fridays (and airing it almost an hour earlier than NBC) had its own requirements, and to that end Thomas and Moranis created those 100-per-cent Canadian dummies, the McKenzie Brothers. If Thomas and Moranis had the McKenzies, John Candy and Eugene Levy developed their own hilarious brothers act. It was while they were in Edmonton that Candy and Levy happened to catch a polka show on a local TV station, out of which came one of their most successful collaborations—the Shmenge Brothers.

Photo courtesy Universal Studios

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Candy remembered that his Yiddish-speaking friend Stephen Young was fond of the word *shmenge*, as in his frequent admonition: "Don't be such a *shmenge*." Candy didn't know what it meant, and he was afraid to ask. Therein came the name for Yosh and Stan—two irresistibly square immigrant Leutonians who both have monotone speaking voices, a reverence for cabbage rolls, and prominent facial moles. The *Shmenge Brothers* would prove to be so enduring that Candy (the clarinet-playing Yosh) and Levy (accordion-playing Stan) would bring them back for one farewell hour-long special (*The Last Polka*) a couple of years after *SCTV* had ceased productions and gone into reruns.

Because he had been consumed with *SCTV*, 1982 was the only year Candy did not have a movie coming out, except for *It Came From Hollywood*—a forgettable anthology of clips from amusingly dreadful movies about aliens. Candy was one of the narrators, along with Cheech and Chong, Gilda Radner and Dan Aykroyd. In March, 1982, about a month after production of *SCTV* moved from Edmonton back to Toronto, John Candy got some shocking news from Los Angeles. His friend John Belushi had been found dead of a drug overdose at the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. As an overweight comedian who had served his apprenticeship at Chicago's Second City club and then graduated from television to movie stardom, Belushi had been a kind of role model for Candy. They were both close friends of Dan Aykroyd. When Belushi visited Toronto in the mid-1970s, performing with the National Lampoon touring show at the El Macombo club, Candy took Belushi out on the town. Later Candy joined the supporting cast of two movies Belushi and Aykroyd were starring in, *1941* and *The Blues Brothers*.

Beyond that there was a special bond between these two guys who were not only both fat and both funny but were also known and loved for their excesses. Suddenly Belushi's death became a warning sign of the price that might have to be paid for excess. John Stocker, Candy's friend from the days of CBC children's shows, remembers that Candy was so devastated by Belushi's death that he sank into a black depression, refusing to go out or even talk to anyone on the phone. Dan Hennessey, another old colleague, recalls that when Candy did emerge from seclusion, it was clear what kind of impact Belushi's death had on him. "It was like a bad Woody Allen joke, and he saw it as a kind of message," says Hennessey. "John knew it was time to go home, clean up and get his career in order."

A few years later, Candy let friends know he was proud of himself for kicking his cocaine habit. ■

THE LIFE OF JOHN CANDY

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Photo: Joyce Rudolph