

The prevailing ideology is that when *Twitch City* airs on CBC-TV in early 1998, somebody will have gotten away with something. The question is, who has gotten away with what and will the booty be bankable? *Twitch* director, Bruce McDonald, who lives, eats and breathes subversion, to the point where he might well break into a rash if someone painted a white line down the middle of his back, knew he was pulling a fast one on the set. The actors, Molly Parker, Daniel MacIvor, Callum Keith Rennie and Bruce McCulloch, felt like collaborators even as they were saying their lines. Writer/actor and Atom Egoyan sound-alike/look-alike, Don McKellar, designed *Twitch* to be a Gen-X take on the gospel which was *The King of Kensington*. And behind them all, laughing lightly in her usual fashion, is producer Susan Cavan, head of Accent Entertainment Corp., and the pivotal widget in *Twitch City*. She knew they had gotten away with something—because that is what attracted her to this project in the first place.

TWITCH CITY

By Cynthia Amsden

Twitch City is a six-part mini-series written by Don McKellar. It's a relationship story: man and his television, man and his channel changer, man and his tenants. It is also a postmodern slacker story which goes several café lattes beyond Eric Bogosian's *Suburbia* search for meaning behind a late-night convenience store. *Twitch City* is bathos in reverse.

The plot is deep winter urban cabin fever. Curtis (McKellar), a career layabout, has a roommate Nathan (Daniel MacIvor) who has just moved his girlfriend, Hope, in to share their Kensington apartment. Lucky, the cat, needs food and Nathan goes to the store to buy it. En route, Nathan offs a homeless man (Al Waxman) with the bag of groceries. Nathan goes to jail, his room becomes available, and Curtis has found a calling as a landlord which only marginally infringes on his occupation of television viewing. Hope and the cat become the Greek chorus of conscience while tenant after tenant fill the vacuum



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Left: Director Bruce McDonald; Above: Molly Parker

otherwise know as Curtis's life. If McKellar hadn't written this, Roman Polanski would have—after considerable electroshock therapy.

Barbara Ehrenreich, a regular contributor to *The Nation*, and author of *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, pointed out that television is a beloved instrument of entertainment because it brings us a world were television does not exist. When you watch it, you never see people watching television, with the exception of *Home Improvement* and *3rd Rock from the Sun*. *Twitch City* does the opposite. Not only is each episode centred around the appliance in question, it even builds in, at a secondary level, a laugh track—that four-emotion vocabulary (cheer, boo, hoot and awww) that decrees not only what audiences should feel, but when to start and stop feeling it.

Susan Cavan came to the *Twitch City* project when the path of her life crossed with the greening of the Canadian audiences. McKellar had written the script and shown it to Bruce MacDonald and then brought in Cavan and the fit was good. "There's a little more bravery now in Canada about what's cool to watch, maybe a bit more of an inquisitiveness," she says. She prefers to pick the project first rather than letting the market dictate what will sell, which she believes can easily fail because of market fickleness.

What made *Twitch* particularly good was that it was written for an ensemble cast. Although no one person would ever claim credit for putting the *Twitch* troupe on the same set, the unspoken word on the street is that this kind of casting is one of Cavan's strengths. Picking her way carefully through the set of her new feature, *Dog Park*, the Bruce McCulloch human-canine romantic comedy which has 30 dogs on the cast list, Cavan predictably denies complicity in her own reputation. "I don't know what theory has been given to you about casting, but it's about watching every single part for perfection, no matter if it's one line or more. We all did that collectively, Bruce McDonald, Don and myself with the help of Diane Kerbel, our casting director."

When pushed harder, she conceded, "I think I have really good instincts about casting, about what's needed for a role and I have a lot of patience, lots of stamina and the understanding of the organic nature of how an ensemble works



Producer Susan Cavan:

"I think I have good instincts about casting."

together." Unless a director has the financial backing and the momentum of reputation to access the star system, ensemble casts are just a different way to approach the same question. Instead of writing a star vehicle, "Don wrote parts for a number of lead actors."

Putting together a project intrigues Cavan. "It's quite an intricate and fascinating process because it is a bit like waging war. You do it when you find the thing you really want to make, you do it again when you are putting the money together, you do it again the minute you step on set, then in postproduction and then you do it again when you market it."

Demure as her presentation is, not cloying by any stretch, but distinctly non-combative, she seems to thrill in the face of anything adversarial, even the challenge of dealing with Dame Nature. "In Canadian film, you are waiting and waiting for decisions from various funding agencies, and you're always looking at summer pictures turning into winter pictures or summer pictures becoming fall shoots and racing against the clock to avoid the bad weather. With *Twitch*, the joke became how late can we go. So we were outside in January shooting, and we had Al Waxman out in the pouring rain and the snow, and then we changed from it being a location shoot to a studio shoot."

Pleased as she is with the *Twitch City* project, Cavan prefers to remain in the background, letting McKellar and McDonald occupy the limelight (an interesting move given McDonald has a history of doing the same thing himself). This dichotomy makes sense given her background which can be read at two levels. Cavan was raised in the wholesome west end of Toronto in the 1950s, the oldest of five children in a close knit Irish-Canadian family. In spite of her father being a lawyer, she was drawn to the recklessness of the arts. Participating in theatre in high school and attracted to music clubs, she confesses "I was a 'bad' girl when I was a teenager. I was bad like lots of girls were bad at 15, in the sense of running about with lots of men you shouldn't be with and being in clubs you shouldn't be at."

It was at that point in her life, she ran away. "I went to Quebec City and hitchhiked about, much to my parents horror, but I did come home. Oh, I always came back and did well in school." Safe, but not sidelined by fear. Part of the action, but standing closest to the on/off switch. At 15, Cavan had already booked in her first year of living vicariously. "I was not really a joiner, I was fairly alone, but with lots of friends. I've always had a couple of sides and I've always kept a foot on the other side. I probably knew this then, without being able to articulate it."

Attending University of Toronto from 1970 to 1974, she worked as an underage waitress at the Butcher's Arms at Jarvis and King. "I always found work that let me watch everything without being involved. You see the scene, but you didn't have to go there to drink." She then studied law at Queen's and was called to the bar in 1978. Even though she had specialized in corporate and litigation, "in those years, women were given all the family cases. I did quite a bit of divorce law which is useful for the film industry. And the litigation is good because you think always in preventative measures."

"I started with Garth Drabinsky from 1978 to 1982 and was very lucky to have been part of Cineplex, which was an amazing place to be as a young lawyer. We were doing serious film production. It was not subsidy driven, it was right out there in the real world. I was doing relatively ambitious projects. There was *Silent Partner*, *Tribute* and *Changeling*, films that were working within the system, attracting stars and





Above: Molly Parker with Callum Keith Rennie; Right: Bruce McCulloch; Below: Don McKellar, Molly Parker and Daniel MacIvor.



***Twitch City*: A Gen-X take on the gospel that was *The King of Kensington*.**

being distributed across the continent. Then the multiplexing of the theatres started. It all came together under one roof, and I was right in the thick of that for five years until I really wanted to be much more involved in film production.

"So I leapt off to Montreal and joined International Cinema Corp. [ICC] with John Kemeny and Denis Héroux, who had by this time acquired rights to Simone de Beauvoir's, *Le Sang des autres*. That excited me a lot because it was the first time anyone had obtained the rights to one of her books and Claude Chabrol was going to direct. They were also just about

to start *Quest for Fire* and *Atlantic City*. [The only Canadian feature to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars, *Ed.*'s note.] "I was working in the business-affairs area and we started to work on *The Bay Boy* [1984] with Daniel Petrie. I didn't yet know about the importance of credits for my CV. It's something certain people are masters at. I was given my first credit (executive producer) for *The Bay Boy* because I did the financing. Now, I am getting credits, but these are my projects, so it's natural." By the age of 35, Cavan had worked with Robert Lantos and Steven Roth to form Alliance and held the position of president, which is where she stayed until 1989 when her need to have a more hands-on role in the creation of film projects caused her to "leap immediately to the highest risk so that you're completely in trouble." In other words, she left, and with producer Andras Hamori, formed Accent Entertainment Corp.

Starting with *South of Wawa*, a film which is an enormous source of pride for her, Accent has produced *Joe's So Mean to Josephine* and is currently in development on *Yummy Fur*, the project Bruce McDonald has said is the most dangerous subject matter he has ever considered. Cavan revels in her power of choice. Selecting projects that are somewhat untoward, she explains, "I like the dark side, being on the edge, a little bit perverse, a little bit twisted, although not in a really extreme way. Tiny human things that, when portrayed, become larger. People say the projects I pick are so difficult, you have to do it really well to make them any good. Well, the intention wasn't exactly to do it badly! I think I've become the Queen of the Nonlinear Narrative.

"This is what I love so much about *Twitch City*. Don McKellar is really very subtle. There's a very funny thing going on there. It is, in broad strokes, about love and loneliness. I've always thought *Twitch* was closer to noirish *Mad About You* than those guys thought, but in a really kind of cool, different way." As opposed to the sitcom notion of touring on the angst of a generation, Cavan likes the exploration of risk the characters take "when they are not quite able to talk about commitment and do things just because they can, without thinking about what the repercussions are going to be."

Unlike producers who begin their careers small and independent and work their way up, Cavan went the safe route for a decade-and-a-half first and then, just before turning 40, left the fold. Although relations with Lantos were strained for a brief period, she now has no difficulties interacting with him or any of the other major players with whom she used to be on the same teams with before. If anything, she invokes a modified Nietzschean outlook of what didn't kill her has made her more viable.

Accent Entertainment is more than just proof of durability; it is evidence of some of the core lessons Cavan learned from working at Cineplex, ICC and Alliance. "I have the utmost respect for Lantos. At the end of the day that company was his vision. He set out to do something, he never lost sight of it and he created a company that is a world-class operation, as did Garth in his way. I think that's where the patience and the stamina come in. You just don't let it drop." ■

