



SMITH
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Last Night:

In the Year of the Don

All photos courtesy of Odeon Films

By Marc Glassman

It is one of those hot summer afternoons when we Canucks don't feel comfortable in our own skins. You could fry an egg on Augusta Street, as an old Toronto saying might go, only neither Don McKellar nor I want an omelette. All we want to do is beat the heat. The local citizenry is out in force. Kensington Market is writhing in the humidity. Bicyclists are dipsy-doodling around the inline skaters who are bursting through the cars and the pedestrians in this crowded downtown corridor. Greengrocers and haberdashers are hawking their wares. As we walk, people nod at Don, a local for many years. A woman in a sequined tank top and cut-off jeans looks



Last Night. On the last day on earth, Sandra Oh (above) plays a woman just trying to get home to her husband.

at Don and says, "Loved the show, man." Don smiles wryly, thanks her, and we move on to a restaurant where we are greeted by the waiters with a respect that I have never encountered at that particular joint before.

It is a week after *Last Night*, Don McKellar's first feature film, won the Prix de la jeunesse at the Cannes Film Festival and two months after *Twitch City*, his quirky postslacker comedy series, finished its successful run on CBC-TV. Whether he desires it or not, the thin, unconventionally handsome actor, writer and director has become a Toronto media star. And the best—or worst, considering how shy McKellar often can be—is yet to come. This September, McKellar is due to break an unofficial Toronto International Film Festival record by appearing in no less than four new films in one year. *The Red Violin*, the McKellar/François Girard-penned and Girard directed feature about the life and times of a musical instrument over three continents and four centuries has garnered the prestigious Opening

Night Gala spot; the aforementioned *Last Night*, McKellar's funny and affecting take on a millennial apocalypse, opens Perspective Canada; *Elimination Dance*, a skilfully realized short adapted from Michael Ondaatje's grim and funny poem by McKellar, his cohort Bruce McDonald, and Ondaatje; and *The Herd*, a NFB docudrama by Peter Lynch, which features a delightful cameo by McKellar as a repressed Depression-era functionary.

And if all this screen time wouldn't be enough to swell even the most sensible of heads, earlier McKellar films will also be shown at the festival as part of a salute to the 10th anniversary of the Canadian Film Centre. His short, *Blue*, a cheeky look at skin mags, stag films and carpet manufacturing, will be shown at the Centre's retrospective along with his first collaboration along with Girard, the Genie-winning biopic, *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould*.

Returning to McKellar's apartment, a three-storey walk-up in the market, his new trophy is sitting on a sideboard. Cannes's Prix de la jeunesse, is its young filmmaker prize and has been won by a lot of hot talents over the years, ranging from Martin Scorsese to Spike Lee to Patricia Rozema. Occupying a prominent place in the kitchen is a huge blowup of a dissolute-looking Al Waxman. The former "King" of Kensington and star of the CBC's most successful conventional sitcom from the 1970s was cast as a repulsive bum and murder victim in the first episode of *Twitch City*. Now Waxman's new image looms over McKellar's Kensington digs.

"My character in *Twitch City*," McKellar admits, "is a kind of caricature of a perception some people might have of me. It's a joke at my expense. It's the way I feel some days when I'm at home feeling pathetic and full of self-loathing and just sitting in front of the television set eating cereal." Curtis, *Twitch City*'s ultimate



Above: Sandra Oh. Top: Geneviève Bujold.

couch potato, is portrayed by McKellar as a slightly sleazy figure who will do anything to maintain his precarious lifestyle. When Nathan (Daniel MacIvor), his “obnoxious anal monster” of a roommate, is arrested for killing Waxman’s hostile, homeless character, Curtis swings into action, bringing in a series of crazy tenants to pay the rent. Nathan’s girlfriend, Hope, is allowed to stay in the flat, provided she takes care of Curtis, buys the food, cleans the place, and pays rent on the closet which serves as her minimalist room.

Molly Parker, who plays Hope, acknowledges that, “I’d never done comedy before and I was terrified. When I said to Don, ‘I don’t know why you guys wanted me for this part,’ he just laughed.” By portraying Hope as someone who is “incredibly earnest without seeming silly or stupid,” she injects romance into a show that would have seemed cold and precious without her. Parker, who says that Don “makes me laugh all the time; he’s sort of deadpan and very smart,”

discovered during the shooting of *Twitch City* that McKellar had never seen her in any film before, not even in Lynne Stopkewich’s controversial feature *Kissed*. But, as she points out, that’s how McKellar works. “If you have the right sensibility, he says, ‘Why don’t you come over and do this thing?’”

The director of *Twitch City*, Bruce McDonald, and McKellar’s first meeting a decade ago mirrors Molly Parker’s anecdote. McKellar was appearing in a self-penned play at Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille when he was introduced to McDonald through a mutual friend, theatre director Daniel Brooks. McDonald was looking for a writer for his first feature film and McKellar assumed for years after that he had seen his show at *Passe Muraille*. “I just found out a couple of months ago,” recalls McKellar, “that Bruce had never actually seen the play. I don’t think he’d actually seen anything that I’d written.”

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McKellar showed up with a 20-page script at McDonald’s digs on College Street, then an ethnic and now a trendy area in downtown Toronto. “It was sort of a *Twitch City*-like apartment. Bruce was cutting [Atom Egoyan’s] *Speaking Parts* and we got along right away. We had similar tastes in music. He showed me record covers and documentation for *Highway 61* and asked me to write a script on spec. Well not on spec—for \$100. I remember thinking he had pretty nutty ideas in his initial proposal, like talking dogs as border guards. He gave me tons of stuff, folders full, and asked me to put them together. I thought, ‘Should I do this or should I try and come up with something I would like myself?’ I decided to do it my own way and maybe miss out on the 100 bucks. When I showed it to him, he really liked it, and I realized that we could work together.”



Don McKellar at work on *Last Night*.

garnering the 1989 Toronto–Citytv Award for Best Canadian Feature Film. Its success allowed production to begin on *Highway 61*, a much slicker road movie. In it, McKellar essays his first starring role as “Pokey Jones,” a Thunder Bay barber who is suckered by big city girl (Valerie Buhagiar) into driving a corpse filled with drugs down *Highway 61* to New Orleans. McKellar’s script is economical and funny, and despite McDonald’s reluctance (“Bruce auditioned everyone in town before me”), McKellar is credible as the naive small-town boy who has to wise up to survive his road trip.

Soon after *Highway 61* hit the festival circuit, McKellar entered the Canadian Film Centre. His background in theatre stood him in good stead in his role as an apprentice film director. “I’ve always been open to all kinds of collaborations like the ones I was able to foster in theatre,” he observes. McKellar was a founding member of the Augusta Company, a theatrical collective which

also included Daniel Brooks and actor Tracy Wright. The trio’s roster of avant-garde plays included *86: An Autopsy*, *Wild Life* and *Indulgence*, which was one of the signal successes of the first Toronto

Fringe Festival. “It was a collective,” McKellar remembers, “and it was quite an intense relationship. It was wonderful, in a way, and it taught us to fight for what we believed in. We co-wrote, co-directed and co-designed all the shows and performed in most of them.”

Observing McDonald on *Roadkill* and *Highway 61* also helped prepare McKellar for his own film short, *Blue*. There McKellar intercuts footage from a faux 1960s “smoker” flick, *The Bellboy and the Bored Housewife*, with a sly account of a carpet manufacturer who controls his employees through verbal intimidation and his sex life through masturbation. “What I wanted to do with *Blue* was to reflect the kind of theatre work I had been doing. I started with a character and tried to come up with a formal device that would explain his split. By juxtaposing

different formats, as we had on stage, using documentary elements, reading transcripts and so on, I could achieve a synthesis that would work for the character.” Director David Cronenberg’s portrayal of Tom, the carpet man, is chillingly effective. His scenes with Tracy Wright, who plays his flirtatious secretary, are funny, tense and sexy. They form the emotional core of the film. McKellar’s script carefully delineates the different attitudes of the “bored housewife” who played in stag films and Cronenberg’s repressed Tom. Porn practitioner and consumer meet in *Blue*’s well-constructed and inevitable denouement.

After *Blue*, McKellar was approached by Rhombus producer Niv Fichman to co-write *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* with director François Girard. McKellar was initially fascinated and repulsed by the idea of a biographical portrait of the pianist. “When I was growing up, while my friends were listening to Pink Floyd, I was in the basement, stoned, listening to Glenn Gould with the lights off,” allows McKellar. “But I thought that it was a particularly bad idea to do the life of Glenn Gould. A less dynamic subject would be difficult to imagine.” It was only when Girard suggested that Gould’s life could be structured around thirty-two episodes in homage to his famed recordings of Bach’s *Goldberg’s Variations* that McKellar became interested. “We weren’t trying to do the definitive biography of Gould,” says McKellar. “It meant that we were saying ‘here’s thirty-two things about him.’” McKellar’s script delineates many aspects of Gould’s life, his virtuoso piano pieces, radio work, philosophical diatribes, his aversion to concert performing and his love of music. All are effectively dramatized by Girard in a film that eschewed melodrama and turned into a surprise art-house hit.

A well-developed sense of structure has characterized every McKellar screenplay. The Gould script is a marvel of economy and insight. *Blue* employs a narrative sleight of hand reminiscent of an O. Henry short story. Even the rock ‘n’ roll road films flow neatly from scene to scene, allowing characters to develop naturally over the course of the trips.

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While McKellar was writing the first draft of *Highway 61*, McDonald was working on a documentary project about a rock band on tour in Northern Ontario. That idea metamorphosed into *Roadkill*, a McKellar-scripted rowdy comedy about a fictional rock group playing gigs in Northern Ontario. McKellar was brought along to do continuity, “because we had very little money. Part of the strategy was to have me along so that if something happened I could incorporate it. I remember in the script I had written something about a statue of a giant sturgeon being in Sturgeon Falls, only it wasn’t there. So we grabbed this big dog, and I changed the script to include a dog instead of a fish.”

The wacky, loose and low-budget *Roadkill* proved to be a Toronto film festival hit,

What McKellar has learned from his theatre days is that characters and situations can be made to be as bizarre as possible as long as the script acknowledges the verities of solid story construction. His hip scripts are hits because audiences can understand the logic of the protagonists and their situations. *Elimination Dance* is a good case in point. Michael Ondaatje's poem is evocatively *outré*, describing various arcane ways in which people can be eliminated from "the dance." The film version dresses up Ondaatje's metaphor and takes it onto a beautifully dressed 1930s dance floor. Before a word of Ondaatje's cunningly dark poetry is recited, McKellar has already given the audience a couple to root for, a charmingly luckless duo played by Tracy Wright and McKellar himself.

Whether by design or happenstance, McKellar's acting career took precedence over his writing following the success of *Thirty-two Short Films*. Always busy, he gives marvellous eccentric performances in Peter Lynch's *Arrowhead* (as a nerd who discovers a dinosaur bone), Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (as a pet shop owner harbouring many secrets for which he won a Best Supporting Actor Genie) and Patricia Rozema's *When Night is Falling* (as the owner of an avant-garde circus). Lynch observes that "Don wears his characters like a chameleon. When you're working with him, he really thinks of every aspect of the filmmaking from the writing to the physical. In *The Herd*, I wanted the government men to be Kafkaesque ciphers, but Don's instinct was to personalize the two so that the audience could connect with them. So, for example, when he is talking about the research that the government had done on the reindeer, all of a sudden he was yelling, 'My research proves this.' Don knows all the dirty little tricks of narrative."

McKellar resisted, or hesitated for a long time before tackling a feature film project, apparently content to write and act with his contemporaries. *Last Night* occurred when he received a phone call from French producer Caroline Benjo (of the firm Haut et Court) who asked him to make one of a group of films dealing with the last day of the



Callum Keith Rennie and Geneviève Bujold: With *Last Night*, Don McKellar offers up a mirror of humanity performing its last rites.

millennium. "To be part of a series made it less presumptuous," allows McKellar. "It's easier to do something when you're asked." Changing the subject from the end of the millennium to the end of the world occurred to McKellar "almost immediately. It was one of the first things I thought of.... I didn't want to do something dated or coy about the millennium which, probably like most people, I have mixed feelings about as to whether it has any meaning at all."

After some ruminations and discussions with friends, McKellar came up with a story line that hasn't changed much at all. There would be no superhuman heroics. Instead, people would be dramatized doing things most of us might do should global scientists accurately predict such a disaster months in advance. McKellar wittily offers up a mirror of humanity performing its last rites: obsessively having sex with anyone and everyone; staying late at a job; holding hands in a family ritual; going to a blow-out concert; or meeting someone new and meaningful. The film is funny, dark and its *mise-en-scène* is well crafted,

but what sets it apart and makes it an exceptional viewing experience is the performance of Sandra Oh as a woman desperately trying to get home to her husband. "She carries the emotional weight of the film," acknowledges McKellar. Her relationship with Patrick (played by McKellar), who comes into her life to help her, gives *Last Night* its power and resonance.

Is there a pattern to the films that McKellar has worked on as a writer, actor and director? Where does the man with the great story sense and a habit of creating quirky situations and characters fit into his own life's work? Always pleasant, McKellar remains a tough character to understand. Peter Lynch's description of him as "a multitask-oriented guy with so many projects on the go that it is mind-boggling" seems appropriate. McKellar has proven himself to be a great team player, but with *Last Night* he has raised the stakes. Time will tell whether McKellar will prove himself to be a stand-alone auteur or continue on his well-trodden path of being a fine film collaborator. ●