

# NEW Waterford GIRL

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Nicholas Campbell, Liane Balaban and Tara Spencer Nairn in Allan Moyle's *New Waterford Girl*, written by Tricia Fish.

# The Rules According to Moyle

By Cynthia Amsden

There must be something in the water of Shawinigan Falls. For a village in the countryside of Quebec, the municipal equivalent of *WKRP in Cincinnati*, it produces a disproportionate number of celebrities. Jean Chrétien grew up drinking the town water, and it inspired him to get political. An impressive move, "although we know he's from Shawinigan *sud* which isn't as cool as Shawinigan," qualifies director Allan Moyle about his hometown compatriot. For Moyle, who also spent his formative years there, the water had the same effect, creating an urge to go global. One chose politics; the other chose film. And both understand that in their respective businesses, you're only as good as your last gig.

Allan Moyle is the Canadian-born director who fled south in the 1970s, drawn to higher-energy centres of creativity. He has approached and abandoned the filmmaking process repeatedly, transforming himself into a cinematic Bedouin, moving from the States, back to Canada, to Europe and the Far East. He rebuffs singular labels such as "teen-movie director" or "eccentric screenwriter" because, on any given project, he immerses himself into the role for the duration of the task. Allan Moyle is not the sum of his parts but rather a part of his sums.

The directorial balance sheet, in reverse chronological order between 1978 and now, includes: *Jailbait* (2000), *New Waterford Girl* (2000), *Empire Records* (1995), *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* (1992), the award-winning *Pump Up the Volume* (1990) *Times Square* (1980) and *The Rubber Gun* (1978). The list of his written accomplishments demonstrates the overlap of talents: *Love Crimes* (1991), *Pump Up the Volume*, *Red Blooded American Girl* (1990) *Times Square*, *The Rubber Gun*, *East End Hustle* (1976) and *Montreal Main* (1974).

It's the glasses that stood out at the Alliance Atlantis party at the Royal Ontario Museum during the 1999 Toronto International Film Festival. The glasses that walk, the glasses that socialize, the glasses that Allan Moyle confesses that he hides behind—"Swiftly Lazar" of the Great Frozen North. Moyle takes pleasure in his ability as a deipnosophist. Schmoozing is one of his talents. But there was pitifully little socializing potential in that little town north of Trois-Rivières. He had no alternative but to head out. "I must have been born

an American even then. Here I was at the age of 14, reading Alexander Korda's book on power that I got out of my parents' issue of *Reader's Digest* in Shawinigan Falls." In hindsight, he had unerring ability to move to the right place at the right time.

At the impetuous age of 16, he first wandered south to do summer stock in New Hampshire at the New London Barn Theater. This intrigued him enough to return for a second summer as prop master. After that experience, he upped the ante by running away, not to join the circus, but to travel to Europe for a year with a girlfriend. After Moyle's European jaunt, he blended together three elements that were classic ingredients for life circa early 1970s: university life; San Francisco at the Berkeley Hippie House with Jefferson Airplane; and New York City's Greenwich Village. During this period, he did due diligence and attended McGill in Montreal where he helped found The Players' Theatre, which continues to flourish. Formal education was not Moyle's forte; although, it is difficult to say if this was because he intrinsically knew more than his instructors or because, for an individual who enjoys a modicum of outrage in his life, university presented too easy a target audience.

The youth-quake milieu of Moyle's San Francisco experience shook him loose from the last vestiges of Shawinigan Falls while permitting him to participate in the American rebel yell. Years later, his psyche shows evidence of his early days on the Left Coast, as indicated by his openness to personal spiritualism, his affection for teen-dissident dramas and his eternal quest to live a life less ordinary. Shortly thereafter, he travelled east to New York and worked as psychiatric technician at St. Vincent's Hospital before moving on to work at Beth Israel Psychiatric Institute, which jelled perfectly with time spent at Max's Kansas City. Moyle was at ground zero of a cultural explosion. Right place. Right time. It was the confluence of all the best factors: Andy Warhol, John Cassevettes, the theatre, the street. He studied acting with legendary director Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*) and had a role in the original production of *American Hurrah*. Another element which is part of the legend that is Moyle is his role in John G. Avildsen's hippie cult classic *Joe*, which was Susan Sarandon's film debut and brought Peter Boyle to prominence.

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This erstwhile flower child came back to Canada to act in Richard Benner's *Outrageous* in which he had a substantial role opposite Craig Russell and Hollis McLaren. But he did more. He was writing. *Montreal Main*, *East End Hustle* and *The Rubber Gun* were three of his screenplays in which he also acted. *The Rubber Gun* was his directorial debut. To date, it remains his favourite film. It was also the beginning of a creative life cleaved into halves. After that film, he retreated to Greece for two years to write a novel, which eventually became the basis for the screenplay of *Pump Up the Volume*. This brought him back to civilization where he worked in Los Angeles. After directing *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag*, he hightailed it out to Bali, only to return again to work as a script doctor. After directing *Empire Records*, Moyle again wanted out. That was when *New Waterford Girl* fell into his hands.

As much as Moyle clings to his "type B" writer's persona, he cannot divorce himself from the "type A" director persona which vies for control within him. He is his own doppelganger. "I'm a writer as well as a director," Moyle explains from the restaurant at the top of the Park Hyatt during the Toronto festival where *New Waterford Girl* had its world premier. "I say to myself, 'I could make two-thirds of the money writing and have a lot less stress.' While writing, you're in a committee of one and that's a delicious moment. And then, of course, you have to sell yourself like the hooker that you are. But I write on spec because no one is telling you what to do, at least until you take it to the first person who says, 'No one will ever buy this.'"

He cannot explain, or rather, refuses to seriously consider the process by which he gets his directing jobs, preferring to chalk it up to the mysteries of the movie-making universe—which he is currently feeling at one with. "These projects come in over the transom in a weird way. They find me. In fact, *New Waterford Girl* arrived in my hands on a day when I was in the mood to get out of L.A. I thought it was a sign. I'm a Pisces. I believe in signs." A deal memo in hand is traditionally viewed, by even



Liane Balaban with Tara Spencer Nairn

the most spiritual, as a substantive sign. But the inner battle rages on.

Moyle certainly does not view himself as "the supreme commander," as he describes blockbuster film directors. If anything, he is fond of underplaying his profile, claiming difficulty with the simplest of tasks, such as ordering breakfast. (In spite of his deftly commandeering the menu from this journalist's hands and ordering eggs and salmon with the decree: "You'll enjoy this.") What is likely at the core of this attitude is that he'd rather just direct a film in a relaxed, supportive environment, something he doesn't see happening with a studio production. In his mind, "The antidote to the studio film would be *New Waterford Girl*." He then adds, "How could I possibly screw up a movie this small?"

Written by Tricia Fish (a Canadian Film Centre graduate whom he regards as the spirit and soul of the film), *New Waterford Girl* is set during the 1970s in the coal-mining town of New Waterford, Cape Breton. Fifteen-year-old Moonie Potter (beautifully played by newcomer Liane Balaban) is a misfit stuck in her own hometown where young women leave in only one way, and it's not by choice. What Moonie wants is not on the local menu of boyfriends, but a ticket out, preferably to art school in New York. When she meets Lou (Tara Spencer Nairn), a pugilistic 16-year-old import from the Bronx, the notion of boys takes on a whole new meaning. Together they hatch a plan—get pregnant now; lose virginity later.

In the case of *New Waterford Girl*, the Mies van der Rohe theory of "less is more" comes into play. Capitalizing on the raw beauty of the Cape Breton coastline, the raw talent of the young cast and the raw impetus of a low-budget production, Moyle delivered a film layered in uncontrived freshness. This quality was noted and awarded at the 1999 Toronto International Film Festival with a Special Jury Congratulations to Liane Balaban in the Best Canadian First Feature Film. A month later, *New Waterford Girl* won the Best Canadian Feature Award at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax. Odeon Films has picked it up for distribution in Canada.

Moyle seems to take his inspiration wherever he can get it. Sighing wistfully, he stares into the distance. "I'm looking behind you at this rain and it's such a tonic." And then begins the lullaby about weather. Moyle is having a moment—with nature. "Look out there, it's amazing. You're so used to Canada, you don't care." He speaks as the newly returned son, not realizing that *The Weather Channel* is a success in this country because it approaches religion. The moment ends. But his enthusiasm remains and this may be the key to why he directs. Based on his history, he needs two ingredients in his life: anarchy and good company. "I am sociable and that's a gift for which I'm grateful. If I was to use that gift properly, I'd be directing, not be sitting in a room writing. I like to think of myself [during the moviemaking process] as master to the rebels, the guy who's in charge of morale, the guy who is trying to create a family or tribe



of happy creative people out on a mission we all share. That's a really attractive image to me. Let's say we are wrapping up a night shoot at dawn and we're the only people in the city and we're cold and miserable, but we share such a bond. Soon we see all the normal people going to their jobs. There's a feeling of superiority that we're the tribe that goes out at night and does the real work creating the entertainment for all the other people who are on automatic pilot."

The maverick image receives a continuous feed from producers who request Moyle to helm their teen films. Between the Toronto festival and Sundance 2000, where *New Waterford Girl* was invited to be screened, he's back in Canada, this time to direct *Jailbait*, an MTV movie starring Mary Gross, Matt Frewer and Mo Gaffney, expected to air in early spring, bolstered by massive MTVesque promotion. But after more than a quarter century of movie making, why is he staying with the genre? "That's why they for send me. I've got a reputation for it. People aren't thinking of me when they want a director for *Hamlet*." This is the honest answer, to be sure, and the humble answer, devoid of spin doctoring. Yet, there is verifiable support for why producers think of him. Soundtracks, which have become a formidable aspect of filmmaking today, is something Moyle has been blending in with his films for years (*Pump Up the Volume*, *Empire Records*). In Moyle's hands, pop-music soundtracks are an intrinsic part of the story rather than a merchandising afterthought.

Another point is that teen movies means teen talent and he has a knack for dealing with this category of actor. He loves them—"It's refreshing working with young people. Older actors are easier. They're adults. They're trained, but there's something magical about young people"—and they love him. "He's very organic and he's like my demented uncle. In one scene in an alley, he ran up to me and said, 'OK, Liane, I need you to be low-key so please, just lower your chakras,'" says *New Waterford Girl* star, Balaban. On a deeper level, a level that one should always bear in mind when discussing anything Moyle, this director is fully aware that he keeps returning to this genre for reasons beyond those contractual. "There's something there. This

isn't in the observer's imagination. I'm very much into the purity of kids of that age and their dilemmas. I am deeply rotating at that age internally. There's something going on and I don't know what it is."

One possible explanation might be shock, or perhaps just the freedom to do so. He really does like the idea of shock, even if 50 years on the planet has tempered his idea of it down to just a mild, tingling sensation. The high-voltage variety is the domain of youth. Moyle feigns surprise that his name would be connected with any kind of eccentricity and immediately cautions that a little is spice and too much of that seasoning makes producers have second thoughts. "Shock still resides in screenplays. In *Jailbait*, there are mild things like a shot in the dance sequence with the white-cotton-panty cam. I wanted a shot going up the girl's leg as she's dancing to show some white cotton panties. Right now everyone's laughing at me because I'm such a dirty old man, but this is nothing out of the norm for MTV."

When it comes to freedom, the idea of indie film has been subsumed into the studio system, leaving Moyle less breathing room than he likes. There is a growing belief that the independent spirit now resides in, of all places, television. The shrinking mainstream networks, the increased number of specialty channels, the high cost of making films compared to the relatively low cost of television programming, need for movies to appeal to broad audiences as opposed to television's fragmented audiences; all this makes the lower risk of television a fertile ground for experimentation and innovation.

Moyle has noted these changes and finds comfort in moving from film to television, wherever he can extend himself with ease. "I think I'm independent, outside of the mainstream. On occasion, I have worked inside the mainstream to try and make an indie idea work. If I can get an idea made and distributed to mass markets, then I am pulling off a coup for the indie spirit. I'm in my best bubble if I am free of tension and encouraged to be my slightly quirky, slightly antic, teasing but basically loving self." ●



Director Allan Moyle on right.

Nova Scotia's fiddling bad boy, Ashley MacLissac



New Waterford, N.S., where the only way out for a young girl is to get pregnant.

