

Bruce McDonald

AT THE CROSSROADS

WITH **PICTURE CLAIRE**

BY PETER GODDARD

Bruce McDonald is talking about boxing – like, why he’s boxing. There are several opinions because there are at least two Bruces involved.

To kick things off, Street Bruce has to say a tough-guy thing about boxing: “It’s a way to punch the shit out of someone.” Then Corporate Bruce rushes in to clarify. “And there’s a grace to boxing,” he says, smoothing the ruffled image. “It’s getting in shape, feeling sharp. It’s about total sweat. If you want to shoot, you’ve got to be in shape. I’m 42 now. I have to make an extra effort now to work the body. I work the mind enough, but now is the time for the body.” We’re at lunch around the corner from his downtown Toronto office and the McDonald gym of choice, Florida Jack’s Boxing Club Youth Centre Inc. on Yonge Street. The newly minted, boxing-trim McDonald body houses both Bruces, of course. But that doesn’t make them the same guy.

No sir. And that can cause some worry as his latest feature, *Picture Claire* – carrying some \$10 million of producer Robert Lantos’s money – goes out into the world. McDonald stops in mid-munch through a sandwich, his brain revving and reviewing what Corporate Bruce – director of four features plus lots of TV including *Twitch City* – has only just spoken. Jeez, thinks Street Bruce. “Have I, the director who squeezed a line about Karla Homolka’s hair into *Hard Core Logo*, gone that corporate?” Is this the guy who once said he was going to spend his \$25,000 prize money awarded at Toronto’s film festival for his first flick, *Roadkill*, on a “big chunk of hash?”

Maybe Corporate Bruce has a point. *Picture Claire*, some eight years and two producers in the making, is McDonald’s best shot at the big time so far. Well, sort of Big Time. With Mickey Rourke playing Mickey Rourke and Juliette Lewis as the Francophone Quebecker with a Brooklyn

Images courtesy of Alliance Atlantis Pictures

Juliette Lewis



PICTURE CLAIRE

McDonald and Lewis on the set of *Picture Claire*.



Lewis with Gina Gershon

accent, this is an art-house, borderline big time. But still, it could be the real thing. It could be his breakthrough, Big Money-wise. But Street Bruce can't leave well enough alone. "Actually," says Street Bruce. "Florida Jack's is right across the street from the Brass Rail. So you go boxing then you go across the street to see the girls. It's like you're all tuned up and ready to go."

The other tussle McDonald has got himself into makes getting a padded fist in the lip look like a cakewalk. *Picture Claire* didn't make it to the Cannes Film Festival this year. It wasn't the biggest buzz around the Toronto International Film Festival. (It's festival screening was held just

prior to the attacks on September 11 and received very little press.) McDonald says he's happy he missed Cannes. He says he loves the idea of *Picture Claire* opening in his own hometown. "It was shot in Toronto," he says. "It's about Toronto. It's about not having to apologize about shooting in our streets or wondering if Spadina [Avenue] is cool?"

Yet there are questions. Even before it was finished word was out that, well, something was wrong with *Picture Claire*. Indeed, on my way into a screening I met a senior critic and well-respected educator going into a different screening. He was quite happy, he said, not to be seeing *Picture Claire*. In hindsight, the senior critic was wrong. Nevertheless, that was his mindset.

Atom Egoyan had been hearing things too, and was growing impatient. "Not every film gets to Cannes," he says testily when I track him down on the phone one night. "We have

been so accustomed to going there that a certain signal is sent out. It is not easy getting into Cannes. You hear this all the time. It's one of the perverse realities of being in the film world that people will scrutinize your films in that manner." Yet as Egoyan and his good friend McDonald both know, Cannes is not the real issue here. What's really at issue, is growth — McDonald's, his generation's and maybe that of the entire Canadian film industry. McDonald, with his own mini-studio of writers, has arrived at a point in his career — and with him that means, his life — where his art needs to find a way to support him and not vice versa.

Juliette Lewis for one wanted to shoot with him because of *Hard Core Logo*. "I had to meet the guy who ended that film the way he ended it, with no excuses," she tells me. "My goal is to work with artists. Artists who are out there. I want to be a part of important cinema. I want to be a part of something that people can say, 'something is being tried here.'" Before McDonald and Lewis met, he was thinking: "The only way to do Claire is with a Quebec girl. I was totally set on that. But this was with another producer and the project didn't happen because we couldn't raise the money. I couldn't raise any money based on having an unknown person. So Robert Lantos picked it up and said, 'well, we can do it with a good no-name actor and do it for two or three million dollars. Or we can get a star. So let's pick a name.'

"I've never done that before," McDonald goes on. "I've never had a name. We looked in Los Angeles, Toronto and Montreal. Juliette Lewis somehow ended up in the casting session in Los Angeles. Her agent had sent her a script. I always thought of Claire as sort of small — not elfin — but a small person with a bit of an edge, a bit of an attitude. Juliette Lewis is quite distinctive looking: there's no one who looks like her. She looks good in this. She looks quite glamorous in *Claire* — well, not glamorous. Not glamorous like a rich lady, but sexy."

Lewis plus Rourke may make for interesting chemistry on the set. They don't necessarily make for international sales, though. "If [*Claire*] is a huge failure then it's time to kill some people," says Street Bruce. But then there's a change of Bruce-mode. "Then," says the more reflective, Corporate Bruce, "it's time to leave or time to reassess and say, 'Well, this is not working out.'"

"Maybe you go away and start somewhere else, reinvent an approach. I don't know," he goes on. "Success is great, but failure is a little more interesting because it hits a little harder. It hits closer to the bone. It wakes you up. It puts you on red alert. Success kind of lulls you a little bit, right? You think, things are great. But extreme failure is like, 'holy fuck, everything's on red alert. Got to come up with some action plan fast. Either way, it'll be interesting whether it means it's leaving-the-street time, or if it means getting deeper into the street.

"With the gang I started out with, there was an excitement that we were just doing it, just making films. With everybody it was, 'wow, you made a film,' and that would carry you for a while. Then it became, 'what kind of film is it?,' and if it was discovered that it was a serious film, that was good. But in the serious-cinema churches you get to take communion, but the movies are not much fun.

"Now it's time to do something really different. It's time for something new to happen. It's time for the people who've been doing it for 10, 15 years to make a total left turn or right turn, up-turn or down-turn. Or it's time for whomever is coming up - the new kids - to totally challenge them." (As he tells me this, I remember something Egoyan had said: "To make a film by the seat of your pants is a huge blessing." Oh, to never have to grow old and serious.)

"It's kind of getting a little bit boring now," says Street Bruce. "We used to be able to astonish people just by making a movie. Then it was: 'Wow, you actually made a movie that's semi-watchable.' But now we've done that. It's not such a big deal anymore. Now it's about, 'What are you going to tell us?'

It's about, 'Where are you going to take us?' It's about, 'How are you going to stitch it together in a way that hasn't been done or hasn't been done for a long time?'

"It's an interesting time. In a lot of recent Canadian films, the most intriguing character has been the director and not so much the characters themselves. For people like Atom or Patricia or me, it's not enough to just make the movie anymore. Maybe it's really fun to take on genre. Cronenberg does it. Jewison too. Atom takes on the genre of art film. Antonioni, the Kaurismaki brothers and Bergman are his heroes. They're as important to him as Woody Allen or Sergio Leone is to me. *Claire* is maybe the caper genre, the chick-movie genre.

"As well, I have been always curious about how come Toronto and Montreal don't talk? Montreal has always been far ahead of English Canada when it comes to making feature films in this country. There seemed to be way more going on there, and there was a much richer history, a kind of cooler look at characters and a star system. So, that always made me curious. I wanted a big picture that was a Toronto-Montreal bridge.

"My first four movies were maybe a couple of million bucks, very indie," says Corporate Bruce. "This one looks like a movie. It's beautiful. It's got good actors in it. It's fun. It's a good caper movie. It's a pretty simple tale, cops 'n' robbers, yet it's kind of stylish. It's an action movie, basically, and it's beautifully designed. It's the first movie I could actually design, instead of using what was around me, catch as catch can. It's a pop art, stylish caper movie. I know when people saw the rough cuts they thought I couldn't pull it off, but when they see the final version they will be impressed." **TAKE ONE**

Lewis with Callum Keith Rennie

PICTURE CLAIM

