

The Tao o



Callum Keith Rennie

Here are the ingredients. Sunday afternoon at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills and the Santa Ana winds have eased to a tolerable, breeze. Tuna and rice in a seaweed wrap that looks like AGO's Jamie Kennedy should have made it. A large serving dish of calamari and Callum Keith Rennie – luxury, success, food and talent.

Now let's add some elements to give this some integrity for anyone who knows Mr. Rennie, or any journalist who's interviewed him, or any director who has or might want to cast him. His new truck, a brushed-silver Ford Lightning, is in valet parking. He's wearing an El Camino T-shirt with khakis and sandals. He's sporting a pale-blue baseball hat with the name of a South Carolina golf course on it. He is not toeing the Gucci line of studied casual. No feigned, oops!, I accidentally wore my Ferragamo belt. He's at ease. And he could give a rat's ass that the staff are comforting their bruised sensibilities by doing their compensatory rationalization that his is rebel attire.

Rennie appears to have outgrown his rebel phase; or maybe he has just outlasted it because in its truest form, a rebel goes out in flames – and Rennie is still here. The bad-boy gambit was a good marketing ploy in the early days of his career. *Hard Core Logo* locked in that image, aided by his chain-smoking interviews, slouching demeanour and answers salted with bits of anarchy and vulgarity. It's difficult to determine if he presented that image deliberately or just conveniently adopted it from journalists who seized the first, easy angle. Either way, it's amazing just how much mileage he got out of a two-day growth of beard and a good photographer.

It's easy to forget that Rennie has only been in the business for eight years, which is a more recent entry than his peers. Paul Gross started in 1985 and Don McKellar made his 1989 debut in *Roadkill*. In that time Rennie has traversed the equivalent of a full-media arch, starting with headlines like "late bloomer," "moody Edmonton-born (*sic*) actor poised for the big time," "...has the rugged cool of a bad boy," "man of passion," plus enough other-actor references to make anyone question the integrity of their own identity: "hipper than James Dean," "the most charismatic young actor to appear since the debut of Gary Oldman," and "Canada's answer to Brad Pitt." From a journalistic standpoint, he is on the verge of being labelled as "mature," and it's inevitable some writer is going to get wind of his new, and highly conservative, passion, golf, and use it as proof.

But his image is something Rennie seems to be actively toying with, instead of catering to what has been attributed to him.

His character of Gary Jensen in Lynne Stopkewich's *Suspicious River* strays into something new – malevolence. Blithely referred to as a Canadian *Belle du jour*, this film is based on Laura Kasischke's novel about Leila Murray (Molly Parker), a lonely motel receptionist who allows her submissive nature to be sexually exploited by guests in an effort to find some measure of control in her life. She meets Jensen (Rennie), a stranger who at first protects her and then seduces her into participating in her own destruction. The difference between the two films is that the resolution in *Belle du jour* is limited to plot strategy, while in Stopkewich's film there is emotional closure as well.

In *Suspicious River*, Rennie is almost unrecognizable when he first appears on screen. He has bulked up, losing the whimsical degenerate silhouette that was part of his cachet. Yet, in his character there is something that speaks both to and from the actor, almost a domestic familiarity with the wasteland that is Jensen. "There's a clichéd form in playing the bad guy, a Hollywood-type of bad guy," says Rennie. "It's a very hard thing to break away from. Lynne's film is so realistic and she keeps it at a low hum, like a monotonous sickness, that Jensen couldn't be a character that pops or is telegraphed in anyway that is obvious. Most people who are bad are slow to show their form. He believes he isn't wrong – the joyous Gary Jensen."

"I forced Callum to cram himself into an extremely tight pair of jeans for this movie," Lynne Stopkewich laughs. "I've wanted to work with him ever since I saw him in Mina's *Double Happiness*. I wanted to be the director to really push him, to be the one who was going to give him something he could really sink his teeth into and do something phenomenal. And I have to say I think his performance in *Suspicious River* is the finest I've ever seen from him. I drove him crazy, but he was incredibly generous. He just said to me, 'Make me your meat puppet.'"

Languid malignancy – a character tumour played out, dominating its host – Rennie dials evil down to a murmur in *Suspicious River*. No faux elegance, no glib intellectualizing, nothing to distract from the complete ordinariness of the personality. It's an interesting technique, which he employs again, but differently, in Bruce McDonald's *Picture Claire*. In the pawnshop scene, Rennie's character, a hired thug specializing in "wet work," needs information from the owner. In the motion of leaning over the counter – leaning in, asking a question – he manifests a disturbing quiet. "I just added little bits. There's a promise of nastiness."



"Elegance is refusal," was the proclamation from Diana Vreeland, the 20th-century arbiter of style. "Less is more," wrote the architect Mies van der Rohe. Rennie profits from these philosophies. Star vehicles are not his ambition. As in the rules of composition in fine art, the focus of attention should never be front and centre. Offside is the fertile ground. His characters are in the next room or outside waiting in a car. He doesn't steal films; he causes the camera to turn in his direction. He induces the audience to attend when he is on screen.

Rennie's history is well known, if only because of excessive press repetition and how easily it fits the phoenix-rising-out-of-the-ashes allegory. Canada – being the country where acceptable standards of living are the norm – doesn't offer many hard-luck stories, and Jim Carrey has cornered that market. Rennie's story has a higher punk quotient. Born in 1960, in Sunderland, U.K., he moved with his parents to Edmonton at the age four, growing up to become a restless youth of no account, substance abuse leading to a bar-fight epiphany, and then a haphazard acting career that led to Mike Hoolboom's 1994 short, *Frank's Cock*. Roughly calculated, *Suspicious River*, shot in 1999 and released in 2001, is Rennie's 39th film.

As a proverbial hot property, Rennie sprinted through the Canadian pantheon of directors. Hoolboom led to Mina Shum (*Double Happiness*, 1995), who led to John L'Ecuyer (*Curtis's Charm*, 1996), then Bruce McDonald (*Hard Core Logo*, 1996), Kari Skogland (*Men with Guns*, 1997), Don McKellar (*Last Night*, 1998), David Cronenberg (*eXistenZ*, 1999), back to McDonald (*Picture Claire*, 2001) and then Stopkewich. Television called to him as well, beginning with *X-Files*, two rounds of *Twitch City* and the last two seasons on *Due South*, where he replaced David Marciano as the cop half of the Paul Gross equation. Rennie did well with the routine of a series. The timing was right. The schedule was right. The pay was very right and the players were right. It was lovely while it lasted, but in this country, it has to be safe television comedy if it's going to seriously last.

The culmination of all this work has produced an actor with indie appeal – a testosterone Parker Posey. Not an actor/director. Not a writer/director/actor/producer. Just an actor. Alphabits and omega. Add words – but not too many – and stir him up. "The less lines, the better," he says. "I am the

silent film actor, but not in a slapstick sort of way. Film is an image-based medium, so whatever you can say without the words is far more provocative and punctuating. If the lines are not funny or if they don't advance the story, sometimes it's hard. I hate talk in movies." Partially because of this, Rennie has not been characterized as mall-movie fodder in spite of his staunch cineaste following and lots of gaga, Web-page disciples. The former includes Christopher Nolan, the director of *Memento* (2001), who cast Rennie as the guy in the closet, which modified his art-house status and upped his market value. But extracting that kind of information is difficult. Self-puffery is not his trademark. One can ask all the set-up questions, but Rennie tactically digresses.

Flashback to Toronto, June 1997. The place is the Express Café on Queen Street West. The first season of *Due South* has just wrapped and half-a-year would pass by before the first six half-hours of *Twitch City* would go to air. Rennie explains, "I want to work in the best arena possible [meaning L.A.] but, at the same time, I come from Canada and I want to work here because I choose to, not because it's a consolation prize. I want to be able to make a Canadian film every year."

Los Angeles, October 2001. The L.A. experiment is over. He's packing his gear and moving back north. A latter-day Diogenes, "It's the end of this part of the adventure," Rennie explains. "Now there will be a different plan. I don't think I will have a permanent residence unless I buy a place. I'll come back down here to do missions, covert operations, and then get out with everything still intact. Up until now, I've had bivouac spots, but no base camp.

"I prefer living the life I want to live and I can do that far easier in Canada than down here. I've never participated in L.A. the way one is supposed to as an actor." He laughs at memories he has no intention of sharing. "They want a certain dance here and I have two left feet. Here you have to be two things at the same time: socially affable and a good actor. I am a questionable actor and socially inept. Up north, the dance feels different. The music is different. Maybe there's something in the air. Maybe there's more melancholy here, more desperation. I do believe different places make you focus differently. They make you create differently. I focus better in my truck."

Indeed, better in his truck, with his dog, heading north. "In



CKR with Geneviève Bujold in *Last Night*.

Vancouver, I have a history that's successful in my personal life, and that leaks into my work. The more people I add to my life, the more I get confused." In Vancouver he also has his long-time manager, Elizabeth Hodgson, a nurturing yet obsidian-witted woman whose faith in her actor's talent is as pure as instinct. It was Hodgson who sat beside Rennie at the 1999 Genies. For a brief, shining moment, the dishevelled but shrewd actor was replaced by a polished but flustered man climbing the steps to receive his Genie for Best Supporting Actor in *Last Night*. This was not his first acceptance speech – he won a 1997 Gemini for Best Performance in a Children's or Youth Program or Series for *My Life As a Dog*, and a Vancouver Film Festival Leo for Best Actor in *Suspicious River* – but it was a heartfelt one.

The subject of acting, which can send people like Brad Pitt into a mystic spin, does not intimidate Rennie. He doesn't go into long prosaic descriptions of his craft, but on the other hand, he thankfully doesn't invoke the Muses. "It's never been a matter of roles. It's an experience. It's very hard to say, 'Oh that part would be good for me.' I used to see roles as whatever came around the corner and if I was available to do them, but now I can actually see what it is that I want to express at different times." As of late, life has been a matter of moving from set to set. A year ago, he finished his role as a detective in *Torso: The Evelyn Dick Story*, the CTV production about one of Canada's most lurid and infamous murder cases. It was supposed to air on September 11th, and a new date has yet to be announced. Travelling from Toronto to the Prairies, he shot the made-for-television movie *Trapped* with fellow Vancouver actors Martin Cummins and Ian Tracey, and then Bob Clark's *Now & Forever* with Adam Beach and Mia Kirshner. After that, he finished the trip west by working on *Slapshot II: Breaking the Ice* with Steven Baldwin, and he is about to begin production on *Flower & Garnet*, the first feature by Keith Behrman, who directed the Canadian Film Centre short *Ernest*. "I'm so excited about that one I can't stand it," Rennie says with unbridled enthusiasm.

"Acting is about my own landscape and the landscape of the world I get to participate in. I have to appreciate it. There's that Stanislavsky thing of loving the art in yourself, not yourself in the art, or the trappings of it, or the carrot dangled in front of you. That can really make it into something it's not. You start out with wanting to tell the truth. Then it gets divert-

ed and all of a sudden you want a bigger trailer to tell the truth in," he pauses for effect, but not so long that it's theatrical. "It becomes demented. It erodes. Like how big a studio do you need to paint in? How vast a landscape do you need to see? It's the same with this type of work. Acting is really grassroots. It comes from inside."

When all is said and done – and it never is around Rennie – there is always his new passion – golf. This pastime-turned-religion could potentially inflict enormous damage on his maverick image. Or perhaps not. "If you're an actor and you talk about golf in an interview, you come off sounding like a total fucking asshole," he explains as the calamari is whisked away and fresh coffee is poured. "You might as well say, 'I'm lounging around on a yacht.' Readers are seeing you in a golf cart with drinks in your hand. They're not seeing a hardcore, bag-carrying, no food, humping-around-the-course golfer. Maybe I'll shoot 36 holes a day or maybe I'll spend the entire day out in the hot sun of North Carolina where no one else is playing because it's way too painful."

The Tao of golf harmonizes nicely with the Tao of acting for Rennie. The introspection. The inner truth. The dialogue with self. "All I ever do in my mind is set up for a good thing. Let's use a golf analogy. I go to the range, I hit balls. The range is a bit different, like reading a scene in your apartment or hotel room. At the range, you are not hitting off the grass, you are hitting off a plastic mat. In the hotel room, you're by yourself. You're not really acting; you're working out stuff. Like on the range, you're working out stuff. When you get on the course or on the set, it's another world. All you can do is be prepared enough to let it all go, then stuff starts happening and hopefully, there is something good there. A good director guides that. Lynne is very good at that. So is Bruce. An actor needs a witness for the good and the bad." **TAKE ONE**

