

Race For the Bomb

At the end of an arduous day of shooting *Race For the Bomb*, the Canada-France mini-series scheduled for January telecast on CBC, the lobby of the only "A" hotel in Zadar, Yugoslavia, fills up with weary Canadian actors.

They have come in for a cool one after 14 hours of filming in the Dalmatian countryside, near the Adriatic Sea, a locale handpicked to recreate Los Alamos, New Mexico, 1945, where the scientists of the Manhattan Project secretly tested the first atomic bomb.

The Canadians are a long way from home. They were brought to Yugoslavia by Montreal's Astral Film Enterprises, which financed and packaged the Canadian side of this ambitious, expensive co-production, sharing costs with TF1 from France.

At the hotel bar, actor Maury Chaykin, who starred in CBC/NFB's award-winning *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks* as the Capone-like racketeer, talks about playing American General Leslie Groves in *Race For the Bomb*: "For some reason, Groves, though head of the Manhattan Project, has faded into obscurity. He never copped any of the glory. He had wanted to be an overseas commander of troops in the Second World War, but he never did it: so he turned his frustration into immense energy to do the job of building the bomb."

Groves had no patience, Chaykin explains, with the scientists who faced the ethical issues surrounding the Manhattan Project, scientists who were moral philosophers and even, quite paradoxically, semi-pacifists. "He was very much for dropping the A-bomb on Japan, thinking it would save millions of lives. That was his mandate," says Chaykin.

Before coming to Yugoslavia, Chaykin, reading his part, had found Gen. Groves' little-known autobiography, *Now the Story Can Be Told*, in the University of Toronto library "There was a paranoid streak in Groves," Chaykin concludes from his close scrutiny of the late general's life. "He was really security-conscious and nervous."

That afternoon before the camera, Chaykin, in full military regalia, had driven past American soldiers (actually Yugoslavian extras) in a jeep, making a last-minute inspection before detonating the A-bomb. "I've been shooting in factories and warehouses, everywhere, wearing this officer's uniform," Chaykin says. "I wonder if people think I'm in the Yugoslavian army, or the American army, or whether they know the difference. Or care." Chaykin laughs.

His only tense moment of shooting occurred in a scene for which Groves and atomic scientist Robert Oppenheimer (played by Montreal actor Tom Rack) were supposed to create a uranium pile. The scene was shot at an



• Maury Chaykin's plays a nervous Gen. Groves in *Race For the Bomb*

actual atomic reactor, in the days before Chernobyl, near the Yugoslavian city of Zagreb.

"They told us casually, 'Oh, don't touch the walls.' Why not? 'Well, because the atomic reactor has been in operation recently, so maybe it's not a good idea to touch the walls,'" Chaykin recalls. "So, when I did the scene, I wore plastic gloves!"

Earlier that day on the set, the filming had shut down for several minutes to applaud and give a send-off to Denis Forest, the Canadian television and stage actor who had completed his assignment in the mini-series. Forest plays Klaus Fuchs, a German scientist (and double-agent for the Russians) employed at Los Alamos. In the 1950s, Fuchs was implicated in the famous Ethel and Julius Rosenberg case, and served 9 1/2 years in an American prison.

"When Fuchs got out," Forest says, "he denounced the West. He's still living today in Leipzig in East Germany, where the government provided him with a house and two cars."

Fuchs is one of the villains in *Race For the Bomb*, so Forest explains, "I wanted to bring out his stubbornness and arrogance, though he could be friendly and affable. Nobody at Los Alamos suspected him of spying, even if he was an odd duck." Forest also investigated the biography of his character, and decided that Fuchs was "a bit of a schizophrenic. He drank a lot but never lost control. He went to university in England, drove an MG. He loved to let the car skid because he could control the skid. He was an anarchist who went for control."

One reason why the Canadian actors in *Race For the Bomb* knew their characters so well, inside and out, was that they had plenty of opportunity to think. Where could the actors go on days they weren't shooting? Or even weeks? Certainly not back to Canada: shuttling would be too expensive. So who picked up the tab while the Canadians, olled about in Europe?

Predictably, there is a difference of opinion on this question between

ACTRA the union, and the representatives of Astral.

Actor Geza Kovacs spent three months of Yugoslavia making *Race For the Bomb*, playing nuclear physicist Otto Frisch. He has no complaints about his salary, or the large amount of overtime that he accumulated. He seems less happy about three weeks off in the middle of the shoot without any pay. He says, "Holdover days are being debated with ACTRA at this very minute."

The *Race For the Bomb's* able executive producer Ron Cohen, representing Astral, feels that it is imperative for ACTRA to relax their rules abroad. Otherwise, Canadian productions will hire locals rather than cart abroad prohibitively expensive union actors.

As Cohen explains, "We employed a substantial Canadian cast for *Race For the Bomb*. But when we have a schedule of 14 weeks, and an actor appears only in weeks 2, 9, and 12, we are spending huge amounts of money. ACTRA's rules are very detrimental to the use of actors in an overseas situation in which flexibility is required. We have had problems with ACTRA about what constitutes travel time, holding days, or weekend time for days when even the crew doesn't work. The last to me is obscene."

Race For the Bomb, which will hit the airwaves as a six-hour mini-series, was made on a \$7.5 million budget, with France supplying slightly more than half the money and \$1.2 million coming from Telefilm Canada. Astral has worldwide distribution rights outside of TF1 territories (France, Italy, and some smaller European countries).

Other Canadian actors in the cast include Rosemary Dunsmore, Peter Dvorsky, Denis Bouchard, Michael Ironside, and veteran Leslie Nielsen, all of whom logged time in Yugoslavia.

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Lip Gloss

Her first feature was *A Twentieth Century Chocolate Cake*; now she's filming gay history at The Bellevue. Lois Siegel seems to be making a career of capturing local camp on celluloid. Her forthcoming film is a documentary on transvestites to be called *Lip Gloss*, with The Bellevue, one of the oldest gay taverns in Montreal, as an essential location. Too bad she didn't shoot there last year. She could have preserved a couple of hundred flashing neon penises for posterity. But renovators wait for no one.

The Bellevue, home to many gay libbers and the headquarters in which many a march was hatched, is a historic sight that couldn't be completely overhauled. What was once the epitome of 'québécois' has given way to a more streamlined tackiness.

So Siegel has set up her tripod in the middle of the oblong tavern facing the small stage. Behind the camera, surrounded by framed photos of regulars and staff, a sign says 'coin des vedettes' (celebrities' corner). On the left is the requisite pool-table. To the right are a couple of video-machines and the bar. The rest of the room overflows with tables, each with a glass vase full of plastic flowers as a centerpiece. Siegel's cinematographer ("His name is Jean-Yves Dion. He's from Ottawa and he's excellent," says Siegel, "But he's moving to Denmark because he can't make a living here") has but to pan to have access to the entire room.

Siegel has also brought a crew of five with her. "My crews change from day to day," she says, "I'm working without grants. Friends are always willing to help but sometimes they'll get a job in the middle of a shoot and I have to find someone else." Siegel, who teaches at Sir John Abbott College and Concordia University, adds that "A lot of students work on my films. I like having them with me. They're very useful and they love coming on my shoots because they learn a lot."

"I'd thought about making a film on transvestites for a long time," Siegel tells me, "But I first began working on it after talking to my friend Derek MacKinnon, who was in *Outrageous!* I mentioned my idea to him and he was very enthusiastic. Next thing I know, he's put me in touch with Armand and everything got rolling."

Armand Monroe, MC of the transvestite shows at P.J.'s for the past 29 years, is production manager and special consultant on the project. "The film would have been impossible to make without him," says Siegel.

"I've been offered many offers to do films. I'm not an easy person to get," says Monroe, "But when Lois asked me, I said yes immediately because of *Chocolate Cake*."

Often referred to as the king of transvestite shows in Montreal, he