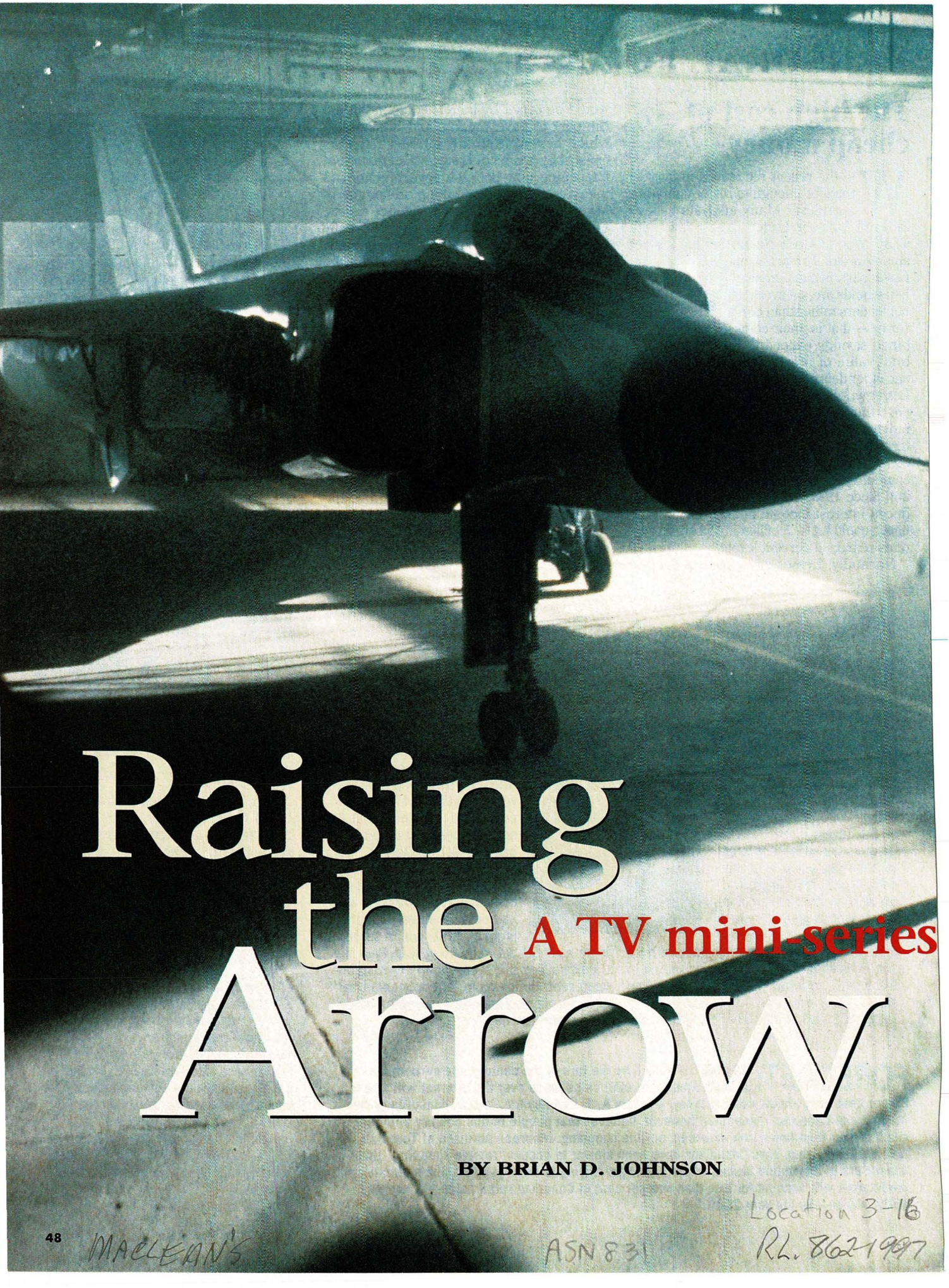


Raising the Arrow

A TV mini-series

BY BRIAN D. JOHNSON

SHARON STEPHENS

It is the the original cutbacks story. A prototype for downsizing the National Dream. Canada's Avro Arrow, the most advanced jet fighter of its day, was a Fifties dream, a warplane forged from the giddy paranoia of the Cold War. It was a time when anything seemed possible, when Canadians briefly dared to believe that they could create their own high technology, their own defence policy—and an all-Canadian fighter jet that would be faster, higher and stronger than any in the world. The dream came crashing down in 1959, when Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's newly elected, cost-cutting Tory government scrapped the $400-million Arrow program, deciding instead to buy a $200-million brace of Bomarc missiles from the Americans, missiles that would turn out to be pointless.

The decision to kill the Arrow—and to demolish every last aircraft—remains a subject of bitter controversy to this day. There is a dedicated cult of aviation fans known as "Arrowheads" who continue to venerate the memory of the plane. And there are still those who actively campaign to discredit it, insisting that it was a lemon. But while the aircraft's reputation remains in dispute, the saga of the Arrow—the subject of at least eight books, a stage play and now one of the most ambitious mini-series ever made for the CBC—has soared into the stratosphere of myth and legend.

The passion behind the story was strong enough to lure Ottawa-born actor Dan Aykroyd from Hollywood to star in his first Canadian production since the early 1970s (page 53). *The Arrow*—to be broadcast on the CBC on Jan. 12 and 13 at 8 p.m.—also marks the first time in two decades that Aykroyd has consented to appear in a TV drama. "I responded to it as a great Canadian story about what this country can accomplish," says the actor, who plays Crawford Gordon, the alcohol-challenged president of A. V. Roe Canada Ltd., whose Avro Aircraft division created the Arrow. "There is no reason we can't have as strong an industry as anywhere in the world." Aykroyd heads an impressive cast that includes Sara Botsford, Ron White and Christopher Plummer. But the real star of the four-hour mini-series is the plane itself.

Three hundred extras are gathered on the tarmac at Winnipeg International Airport, the men in Fifties suits and fedoras, the women in narrow skirts and seamed stockings. A brass band stands at the ready. And a stiff Prairie wind snaps at an expanse of blue and gold curtains draped across the mouth of an aircraft hangar. There are cameras everywhere. A prop newsreel camera is mounted on the roof of a vintage CBC van. A real CBC camera shoots footage for *The National*. A documentary crew is filming the filming. Then there are the movie cameras of the production itself.

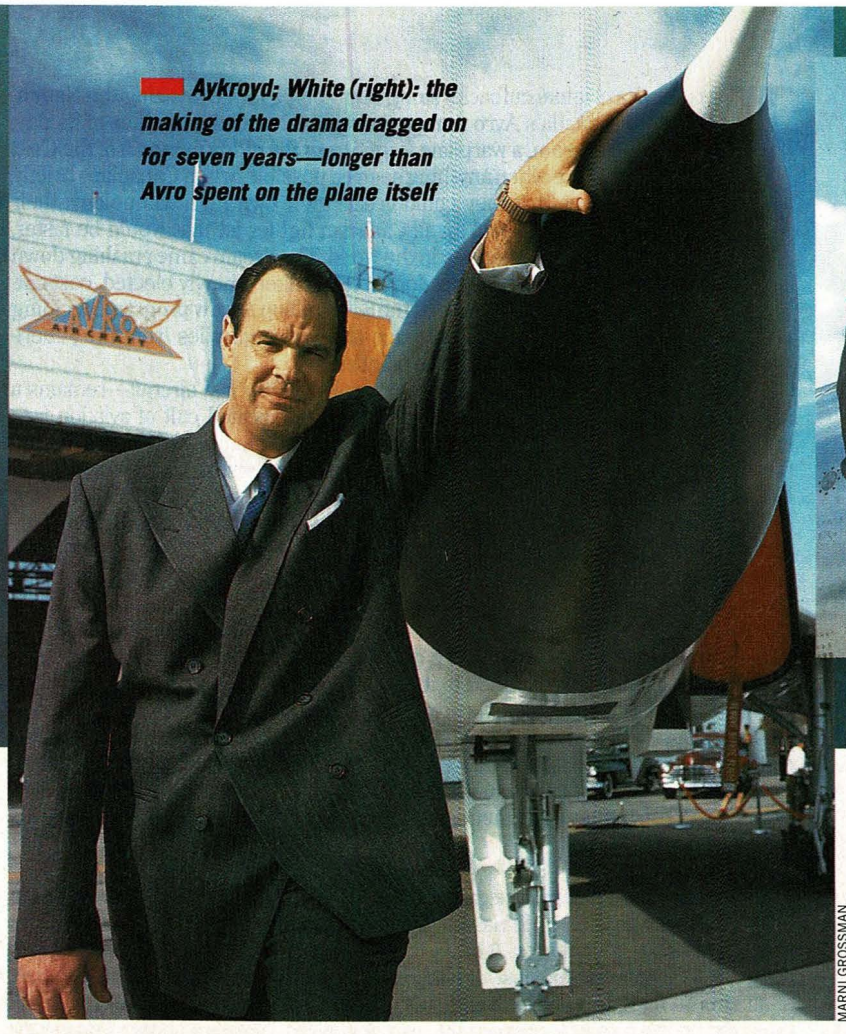
The event being re-enacted was originally staged as a publicity stunt on Oct. 4, 1957—the roll-out of the first Arrow, Canada's great white hope to shoot down Soviet bombers during the Cold War. (Ironically, the news was blown off the front pages by the Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite on the same day.) The restaging of the roll-out on a hot day last July has itself turned into a publicity stunt, a photo opportunity for media real and fake, as the film-makers prepare to unveil their full-scale replica of the fabled Arrow.

An assistant director barks instructions over a PA system. "Hold your applause to the end," he asks the crowd. "Then step over the ropes and swarm around the plane when it comes to a stop . . . Quiet please . . . Roll cameras . . . Action!" The band plays. The curtains open. And the aircraft rolls out of the hangar, its enormous delta wingspan gleaming white in the summer sun. It looks convincing enough to fly.

conjures up a stratospheric dream

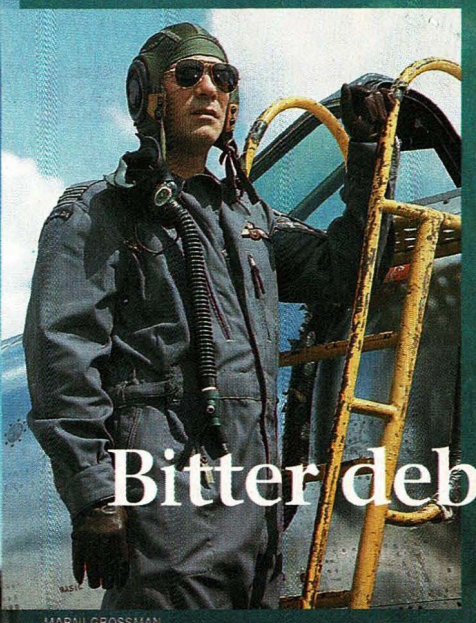
As the extras swarm on cue, Elwy Yost, the portly, avuncular host of TV Ontario's *Saturday Night at the Movies*, sits on the sidelines, watching in disbelief. Tears fill his eyes. Thirty-nine years ago at Toronto's old Malton Airport, Yost watched the real Arrow take off on its first test flight. He was then a personnel employee with A. V. Roe. And a year later, when the plane was scrapped, it was his job to conduct "exit interviews" with some of the 14,500 A. V. Roe employees who were fired. Yost was also on hand when the 11 existing Arrows—some incomplete, but at least five already test-flown—were destroyed, cut to pieces under the strict orders of Ottawa's Conservative government. "I will always remember the smell of the acetylene torches in the big hangars," he recalls, his voice choking. "The smell will live with me for the rest of my days. Seeing those beautiful planes being demolished—I'll never forgive them for that."

Aykroyd, interviewed in his trailer, expresses similar feelings. "I can see why the program was cancelled," he says. "Missiles were coming in. There was pressure



Aykroyd; White (right): the making of the drama dragged on for seven years—longer than Avro spent on the plane itself

MARNI GROSSMAN



MARNI GROSSMAN

Bitter debate

from the United States not to have an aerospace program in Canada. I can't blame old Devil Dief for that. But where I do blame him is in the vindictive and vengeful way the planes were destroyed. That one or two weren't saved is the real black horror of the story."

The decision to kill the Arrow has become a watershed in modern Canadian history. Just as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy served as a turning point for America—a fall from grace—the death of the Arrow, while far less traumatic, marks a symbolic end of innocence for Canadian nationhood. And like the Kennedy assassination, the event is shrouded in suspicions of conspiracy and coverup. Not only were the planes demolished, but Ottawa mysteriously ordered all models, blueprints and design specifications of the Arrow destroyed. Some say Diefenbaker wanted to bury any evidence of the plane's merits to avoid future embarrassment. Others say it was for security reasons. There has even been published speculation that the CIA, nervous about the prospect of a foreign aircraft outperforming its top-secret U2 spy plane, had a hand in terminating the Arrow and made sure that every last trace of it was erased.

COVER

Whatever the motives, by giving up the Arrow, Canada forfeited a leading role in the aerospace industry and suffered a dramatic brain drain. The chief engineer in charge of the Arrow, James Floyd, went to Britain to help develop the supersonic Concorde jetliner. His colleague Jim Chamberlin, along with 25 of his Avro colleagues, left the country to form the engineering backbone of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Gemini and Apollo space programs. Chamberlin, in fact, helped design the space shuttle. According to the 1969 book *Apollo: The Race to the Moon* by Charles Murray and Catherine Bly-Cox, by scrapping the Arrow "the Canadian government unintentionally gave the American space program its luckiest break since [German scientist] Wernher von Braun surrendered to the Americans."

But even if the Arrow had survived, it is still debatable whether Canada could have nurtured its own aerospace industry—especially in the climate of globalization that produced last month's merger of Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. Julius Lukasiewicz, a professor of aerospace engineering at Carleton University in Ottawa, argues that Canada was out of its league trying to manufacture its own jet fighter. And A. V. Roe, a subsidiary of Britain's Hawker Siddeley, milked the Canadian taxpayer "without really risking anything," he says. But even Lukasiewicz finds the demolition of the planes inexcusable—"the largest R and D development ever made by the government was wiped out overnight with no attempt to salvage any part of it."

For Avro veterans, the Arrow romance is rich with regret and nostalgia. Paul Stephens, one of three private co-producers of the mini-series, recalls going to reunions of Avro employees. "You sit there in a hotel room full of white-haired men and listen to their testimony," he says. "These are people who went on to land a man on the moon, but they said working on the Arrow was the best time of their lives. There was this spirit of enthusiasm and creativity at Avro that they never felt again. You could just tell it was like the Apple Corp. of the 1950s."

Now that government cutbacks are all the rage, the story of dismantling the Arrow has a painful resonance, especially for the film-makers. It is, after all, a drama about public spending, set at a time when Ottawa was just beginning its plunge into deficit financing. And the $7.8-million mini-series may well be the last project of its scale to be commissioned by a public broadcaster that—not unlike the Arrow—is being chopped on the grounds that it is obsolete and unaffordable. "The parallels with the CBC are absolutely stunning," says Stephens. "If we had a political agenda for starting the film in the first place, that was part of it. We have to tell our own stories, and the CBC is the only place we can tell them." Co-producer Mary Young Leckie concurs. "To us," she says, "the whole theme of this is that we have to protect our dreamers and our visionaries."

From the first script proposal to its completion, making *The Arrow* was a struggle that dragged on for seven years—longer than Avro spent actually designing and manufacturing the plane. Screenwriter Keith Ross Leckie (Mary's husband) began working on the script in 1989, just after his CBC drama *Where the Spirit Lives* was awarded the Gemini for best television movie. "The morning after we won," recalls Mary Leckie, "the CBC's first huge cuts were announced. It was devastating."

Originally, Keith Leckie wrote *The Arrow* as a TV movie, then as a feature film. Unable to get financing, the producers repackaged it as a mini-series. Even then, there were problems. "It was very demanding

ASN 831

continues over the aircraft

The actual Arrow; Diefenbaker: did a conspiracy lead to its demise?

EDDY METZ PHOTOGRAPHIC

GEDDES/CANADA WIDE

technically because there were no airplanes left," says Mary Leckie. "We had to find a way to make the Arrow fly, which meant using special-effects radio-controlled models and computer-generated graphics. That's all very well and good if you're doing *Top Gun*, which the whole world wants to see." But because the subject was so specifically Canadian, the producers were unable to sell rights to an American broadcaster. They had to find all their financing in Canada, relying mainly on the CBC, government funding agencies and the distributor.

With Aykroyd's name providing marquee value, the producers put together a budget. But last January, just months before filming, they themselves became victims of cutbacks. Ontario Premier Mike Harris's government froze funding to the Ontario Film Development Corp., one of the key investors. Scurrying to find an alternative, the producers got financing from the OFDC's counterpart in Manitoba, but that meant moving the location from Toronto to Winnipeg. They had planned to shoot at Toronto's mothballed Downsview Air Force Base, which has vacant hangars of just the right vintage. But instead, at much greater expense, they had to close down part of a working airport in Winnipeg.

"Everyone's cursing Mike Harris," muttered *Arrow* director Don McBrearty before filming the roll-out scene. "Downsview was sitting there with these wonderful hangars. We've been flying by the seat of our pants, trying to find buildings that are appropriate." For Mary Leckie, losing the Toronto location was a cruel blow. "It's an Ontario story," says the 41-year-old producer. "And I'm an Ontario girl. It was a story I grew up with. There's almost no one in Toronto who doesn't know the story of the Arrow, because they've had some family member or friend affected by it."

On the set in Winnipeg, the troubles escalated. Originally pegged at $7.1 million, the projected budget had gone almost $1 million over even before filming began. The guarantors (who insure the production) quickly moved in, threatening to take over the filming. Under the gun, the producers slashed costs, cutting some scenes and scaling down others. They also raised additional funds, expanding the budget to $7.8 million.

That sounds like a lot, but it is just a fraction of what Hollywood spends on movies requiring special effects. "We don't have enough money to make this film," said an exhausted-looked McBrearty during a break in filming last summer. "It's a movie about flying objects that don't fly. The time and technology was more than they [the producers] had planned on." Then he added: "It's all just a metaphor for the Arrow—they tried to achieve something well beyond their means."

But there was at least one lucky break. Several months before the shoot, the film-makers were desperately wondering how they could afford to build a full-scale model of the Arrow. Then, through an Arrowhead Web site on the Internet, they stumbled across a hobbyist who was already doing just that—Allan Jackson, a sales estimator for a steel grid manufacturer in Wetaskiwin, 40 km outside of Edmonton. Jackson had spent six years building an Arrow replica from scratch in his garage and backyard. The film-makers leased the unfinished model from him, finished it in Winnipeg, then returned it to him after the filming. There were some problems. The model's framework of pipe metal and wood made it so heavy that the wings sagged. But they were straightened in post-production with digital effects. Otherwise, the model was a breathtaking likeness, convincing from just inches away.

As a teenager, Jackson gave up his dream of studying aeronautics after the Arrow was cancelled. Then in 1990, a book about the plane inspired him to begin building his model. With a magnifying glass and a slide rule, Jackson, now 60, worked to reproduce the aircraft from small photographs, planning to finish it by the year 2000. After devoting some 3,000 hours to it, he had "mixed emotions" about handing it over to the film-makers, he says. "But I felt there would be more ex-Avro people who could see it in the movie, in 1997, than in the year 2000."

The passion surrounding the Arrow, and the mysterious circumstances of its death, make it hard to separate fact from myth. But screenwriter Keith Leckie, who based his script on Greig Stewart's 1988 book *Shutting Down the National Dream*, tapped into new evidence that has emerged in the past five years. For his 1992 book, *Storms of Controversy*, department of national defence official Palmiro Campagna unearthed documents pointing to a web of intrigue involving the U.S. military and the CIA. As the government scrapped the Arrow on the grounds that manned interceptors were obsolete, it suppressed reports to the contrary from the American military. And two years later, Ottawa quietly purchased 64 used Voodoo fighters from the United States for $260 million—planes barely capable of breaking the sound barrier.

Leckie says he became convinced that the Arrow was the target of a top-level smear campaign after former Conservative minister George Hees, now deceased, told him that a "secret report" was presented to cabinet stating that the Arrow could fly to only 25,000 feet and had major glitches. The same day Leckie spoke to former test pilot Peter Cope. "He himself had flown it to 50,000," says Leckie. "And he said, 'Hell, the thing would have flown to 75,000 with the new engines.' "

Much of the debate over the Arrow's capabilities revolves around the high-powered Iroquois engine, which was being built especially for the plane in Canada. Even with inferior U.S. engines, at least one test pilot took the Arrow to Mach 1.98 (nearly twice the speed of sound). An Iroquois engine was fitted into one Arrow, but Diefenbaker scrapped the program one month earlier than expected—before Avro had a chance to do test flights with the Iroquois. Journalist June Callwood, however,

swears to this day that she heard the roar of an Iroquois-powered Arrow thunder over her home after all the planes had allegedly been demolished (page 56).

The legend of the "phantom" Arrow—a plane that somehow escaped demolition and is still hidden away somewhere—provides a fanciful ending for the mini-series. "If the film had ended just with the cutting up of the planes," says Stephens, "it would have been overwhelmingly sad for the viewers." Screenwriter Leckie has taken a number of other liberties, darkening the shadows of conspiracy in the drama. He has U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower dictating policy to Diefenbaker on a fishing trip, although there is no record of what was said between the two leaders, or if they went fishing.

But a tempestuous scene between Diefenbaker and Gordon in the prime minister's office is based on direct quotations from a reporter eavesdropping outside the door: "You can't shut down the third largest employer in Canada!" yells the somewhat inebriated Gordon. "If you don't stop shouting and pounding my desk," replies Diefenbaker, "I'll call security and have you thrown out." Leckie stresses that "the important stuff is accurate, but I took some licence so it would be emotionally involving. What we're doing is building a legend."

Just as Oliver Stone became a target for taking poetic licence in the movie *JFK*, Leckie can expect some heavy flak for romancing the Arrow. Insists Lukasiewicz, one of the country's most vocal Arrow-bashers: "It is a myth that the cancellation of the Arrow was a disaster for Canada." The scientist, who ran the National Research Council's high-speed aerodynamics laboratory during the 1950s, maintains that the cost of the project had spiralled out of control, and the country was simply too small to sustain it—"it was not financially viable because there was no market for it." Another critic, Philip Pocock, analyzed the Arrow's design for the NRC during the 1950s. He argues that Avro's performance claims were wrong, "not by 10 per cent, but by 100 per cent—the numbers just didn't add up."

MARNI GROSSMAN

Botsford (left), Bennett: a dramatic brain drain

But former Avro engineer James Floyd, now retired in Toronto at 82, calls those allegations "absolute rubbish." He says that NRC officials have been engaged in a "vitriolic" campaign against the Arrow ever since predicting, falsely, that the plane would never achieve supersonic speed. "Once [test pilot] Jan Zurakowski flew it at supersonic speed, they must have felt pretty stupid." Adds Floyd: "I've spent so many years battling these bloody people from NRC, I'm sick to my stomach just talking about it."

Floyd has been engaged in an ongoing feud with historian Michael Bliss, who claims that the Arrow's reputation has been inflated. "A lot of the former Avro engineers defending their baby late in life have been quite successful in exploiting a naïve nationalist media in Canada," says Bliss. "The myth is, if only the government had stayed with the Arrow, it was on the high-tech frontier. The myth has functioned in the interests of the people who feel technology should have a first claim on the public purse."

Whether the historians like it or not, the Arrow has overflown the debate to become a durable icon. In fact, a Kingston jeweller, Kim Snyder, has created a line of Arrow pins and pendants in silver and gold. He calls the Arrow's image "a badge of resistance that reminds us of what we can achieve while cautioning against short-sighted bureaucrats and politicians."

In the same spirit, Mary Leckie says the producers did not want to make "a lament for a nation. We wanted to say, 'We did it. For one beautiful moment in history, we were the best in the world, and let's do it again really soon, whether it's with software or movies or music or whatever.' " Amid that kind of idealism, it is easy to forget that the icon in question, this nostalgic talisman of Canadian sovereignty, was a warplane. A weapon. It still is, but as the mythmakers propel it to new heights, the Arrow is now engaged in a different kind of defence—one that requires more attitude than altitude.

With JONATHAN HARRIS in Toronto

A slow launch for the white ghost

THE ARROW
(CBC, Jan. 12 and 13, 8 p.m.)

Viewers tuning into the first instalment of this two-part, four-hour mini-series may lose heart. It takes some time for *The Arrow* to get off the ground and achieve cruising altitude. Most of the opening two-hour episode is devoted to the planning and design of Canada's fabled supersonic jet fighter. Only towards the end of the first episode do we see the completed Arrow in all its glory—the love object in what amounts to a romantic tragedy about the rise and fall of a flying machine. In the second instalment, however, the plane gets airborne and the pace picks up. There are magnificent flying sequences. And, as a cabal of politicians plots to kill the Arrow, the drama finally soars. The last hour is extremely powerful, breaking that emotional barrier known as catharsis with a sonic boom.

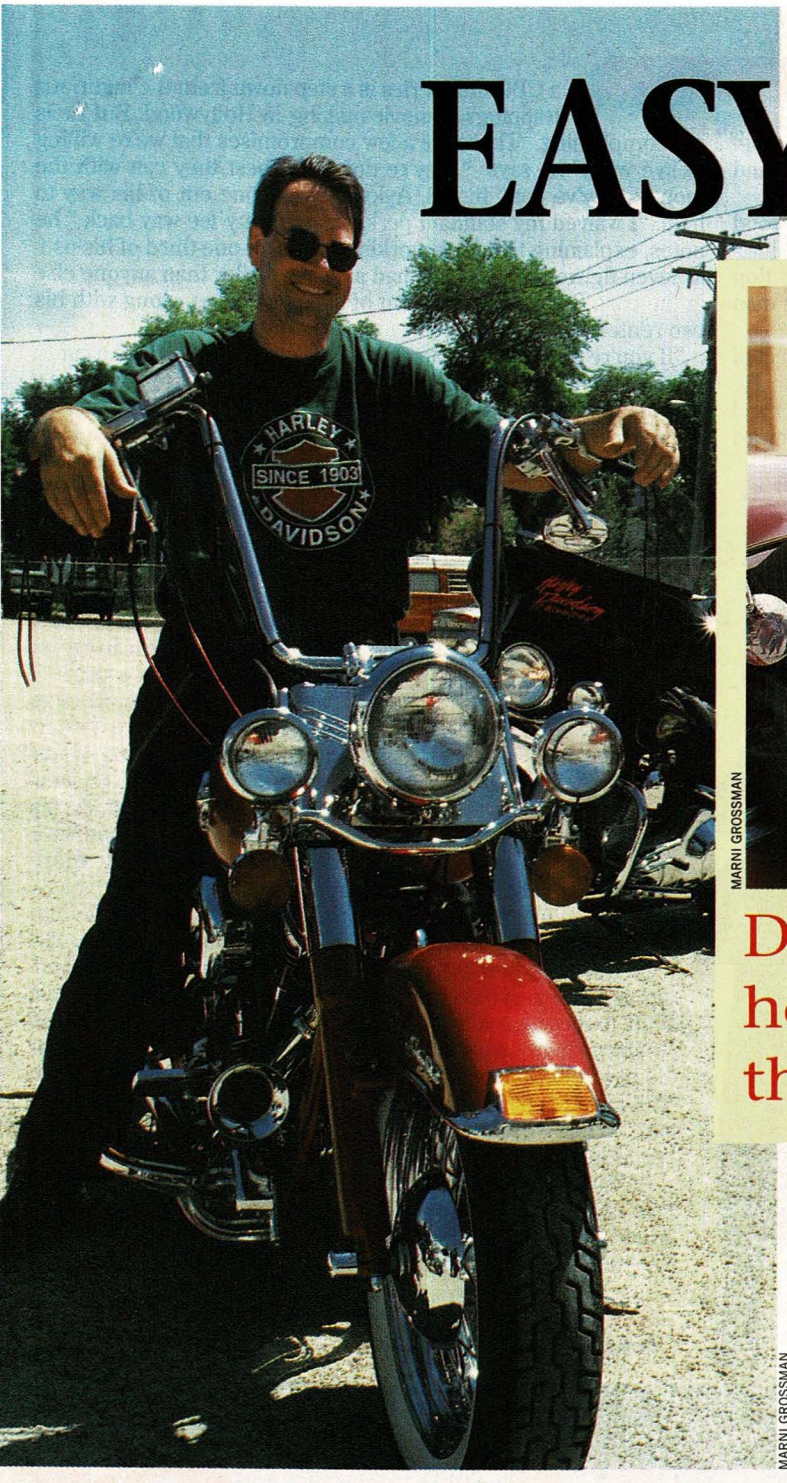
Like the film, Dan Aykroyd takes a while to come alive. Playing Crawford Gordon, the impetuous president of Arrow manufacturer A. V. Roe, he seems a little stiff at first. But as Gordon's flamboyant alcoholism sets in, the actor warms to the role. Despite his star billing, Aykroyd is just part of a talented ensemble cast. In fact, Sara Botsford (*E.N.G.*) and Ron White play the heroic leads—as strong-willed senior engineer Kate O'Hara (a fictional composite) and free-wheeling test pilot Jack Woodman. Both actors do a fine job of conveying the passion behind the plane. And Aidan Devine offers a sublimely eccentric portrayal of engineering genius Jim Chamberlin, with Nigel Bennett playing a counterpoint of sober intelligence as his colleague, James Floyd.

There are also a string of effective cameos, from Michael Moriarty's no-nonsense Dwight Eisenhower to Christopher Plummer's machiavellian transport minister George Hees. But casting actors as famous faces can bomb, especially when the resemblance is slight. Mauralea Austin makes a winning impression as journalist June Callwood. But Robert Haley is woefully unconvincing in the key role of John Diefenbaker.

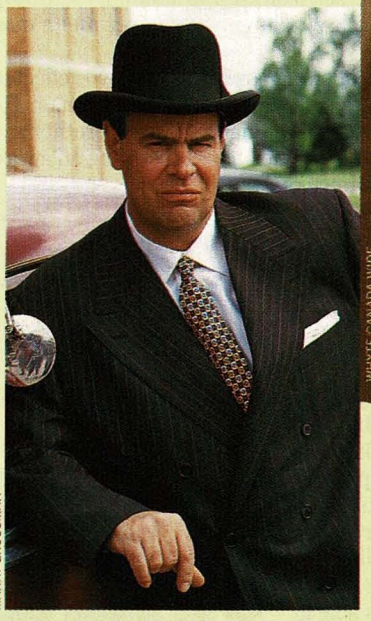
Keith Leckie's script, meanwhile, seems torn between a duty to instruct and a mission to inspire. He makes some frustrating choices. The sexual tension between his romantic leads, Botsford and White, is never pushed beyond subtext. The one smooching scene, involving Gordon and his mistress, is strangely off-putting and beside the point. Under Don McBrearty's quiet, cautious direction, the narrative also lacks urgency. But Rene Ohashi's cinematography has a deliciously rich lustre—essential considering that he is shooting a requiem to a thing of beauty. Black and white documentary clips help conjure a sense of history. And, no matter how many facts are fudged along the way, the truth and beauty of the Arrow itself—the white ghost of the national dream—casts a shattering spell.

B.D.J.

EASY RIDER



MARNI GROSSMAN



MARNI GROSSMAN

WHYTE, CANADA WIDE

Gordon, and Aykroyd playing him; relaxing off the set (left): loyal to his roots

Dan Aykroyd comes home to reignite the Arrow legend

BY BRIAN D. JOHNSON

It is July 4, 1996. On the sun-baked tarmac of Winnipeg International Airport, Dan Aykroyd holds a small, battery-powered fan up to his face, trying to keep the sweat from dissolving his makeup. Dressed in a dark suit, fedora and sunglasses, he looks strangely familiar. In fact, he could be a well-tailored version of Elwood Blues, his harmonica-blowing alter ego from The Blues Brothers. But he also bears a convincing resemblance to Crawford Gordon, the ebullient president of the company that built Canada's Avro Arrow jet fighter during the late 1950s. Aykroyd seems very much at home in the Fifties. There is something distinctively retro about his manner. It is ingrained in his straight-man formality, his boyish enthusiasm for the marvels of the machine age—brawny cars, jet planes and motorbikes—and in his nostalgic love for an uncomplicated Canada.

Aykroyd was born in the nation's capital on July 1, 1952, when it was still known as Dominion Day. And, despite his status as a Hollywood star, he remains stubbornly loyal to his roots. He lives on both sides of the border, splitting his time between homes in Los Angeles and Kingston, Ont. He has also remained loyal to the stuff of boyhood fantasy, like a basement hobbyist who has grown up and made the world his rec room.

As a comedian, screenwriter, Ghostbuster, Blues Brother, radio deejay, nightclub impresario, UFO aficionado—and even an Oscar-nominated character actor (*Driving Miss Daisy*)—Aykroyd has constructed the most eclectic career of any Canadian movie star. And now, with *The Arrow*, it takes yet another twist. The CBC mini-series is the first Canadian production that Aykroyd has worked on in 22 years—since the 1974 comedy *Love at First Sight*, which preceded his breakthrough on *Saturday Night Live*. He is also appearing in a television drama for the first time, against the advice of his Hollywood agent. "And I don't intend to do it again until I'm 60," he told *Maclean's*. "I have a feature film career as a character actor, and I don't want to compromise that."

Unable to get past his agent, *Arrow* co-producer Mary Young Leckie got to Aykroyd by sending a letter to him through a mutual friend. And with his name attached to it, the mini-series became much more attractive to investors. But the film's director, Don McBrearty, says that he was initially worried that the actor might not be up to the job. "Frankly, I was quite nervous," he told *Maclean's* during the shoot. "His comedies have obviously worked really well. But I hadn't seen anything apart from *Driving Miss Daisy*

where Dan was playing a dramatic character that was strong and believable." Added the director: "Crawford Gordon was not a particularly nice man. He's a very tragic figure. But Dan pulls it off. There's a darkness, a remoteness and bitterness, just in the way he sits. He's doing a great job."

And, despite his celebrity status, Aykroyd brought no Hollywood attitude to the set, according to his co-stars. "He's conducted himself just magnificently on the set, from top to bottom," said Ron White, who plays test pilot Jack Woodman. "I've never met a man more generous with his time."

During a lunch break on location in Winnipeg, Aykroyd reflected on his career during a wide-ranging interview in his trailer. He talked about his hopes to cast John Goodman as a Blues Brother and Jim Carrey as a Ghostbuster. He laughed about receiving an award from the California Funeral Directors Association for "most sympathetic portrayal of a funeral director" after starring in *My Girl* (1991). With a perfectly straight face, he told a story of an alien probe landing in Vietnam and incubating "fleas the size of chow dogs." And he talks about Crawford Gordon.

Gordon was a high-flying alcoholic who betrayed his wife for his secretary. His fortunes took the same Icarus-like trajectory as the plane he championed. And his life was a shambles by the time the Arrow was scrapped in 1959. Gordon died just eight years later, at 52, from cirrhosis of the liver. Aykroyd was able to get first-hand knowledge of the man from his mother, Lorraine Aykroyd, who worked as an executive secretary to C.D. Howe, the Liberal minister who put Gordon in charge of munitions supply during the Second World War. "She said he was a take-charge guy, pretty blustery," recalls the actor. "He had that cock-of-the-walk attitude. Definitely a man's man, an administrator of men and machines. He liked his plain-end cigarettes, his drink. And he had a weakness for women I guess."

As well as playing Gordon, Aykroyd immersed himself in the Arrow's history and served as consultant on the film. He has been an aviation buff ever since the summer of 1975, when he visited California's Mojave Air Show with The Beach Boys. "We saw B-51s racing around pylons, and got a ride in a B-25 bomber," he recalls. "I began to read all about planes. I've flown a DC-10 simulator. They let me take the stick on a T-38 trainer. And I've taken the yoke on a couple of Learjets."

There is a knock on the trailer door. Wally High, a crony from Kingston who serves as Aykroyd's assistant and bodyguard, steps in and hands him a plate stacked with greyish meat and pale vegetables.

"What's this piece of shoe leather?" asks Aykroyd, eyeing the meat as if it should come with a lab report.

"It's dead . . . beef," says Wally.

Aykroyd shrugs. Life on the set of a CBC mini-series is a step down from the luxurious trappings of movie-making in Hollywood. But he is not complaining. "There are a few compromises that we're willing to live with," he says. "They're doing the best they can with the money they've got." In fact, Aykroyd has gone out of his way to help. "I waived my standard perks, and cut my fee way back," he notes, explaining that he is working for about one-third of his usual seven-figure rate. Sure, he had a bigger trailer than anyone else in the cast. But he paid for it out of his own pocket, along with his two rented Fords.

"If you're on location," says the actor, "you've got to have a car to drive around at night to distract yourself. You've got to have an assistant. You've got to have top-of-the-line accommodation." He also got a good rental deal on two Harley Davidson bikes from a local dealer in exchange for some free promotion. "We've really been having fun with the bikes," he says, "riding around town hitting the blues bars."

He has the most eclectic career of any Canadian star

Jamming with local bands, and making himself highly visible during the shoot, Aykroyd was the biggest thing to hit Winnipeg since . . . well, since Keanu Reeves hung out for three weeks performing *Hamlet* in the winter of '95. "When you're on location away from the family, it's important to get out and have some fun and not sit there and be lonely," Aykroyd explains.

Before his plans to have his wife and two children join him in Winnipeg fell through, he had asked for "a house on the river with a swimming pool, a playground and five or six bedrooms." His assistant persuaded a local fashion stylist, Melanie Sifton, to move out of her luxury home and make it available. "He convinced her that it would be good for the Arrow, for Canada, for the Aykroyd state of mind, if I lived in her house," says the actor. "But lo and behold, she's become a friend." He turns to his assistant. "When we leave Melanie's house," he says, "I'd like to stock her fridge with champagne and white wine."

At home with his family, he tends to live a much quieter life than on location. There are exceptions, such as when he entertained Keith Richards and several of The Rolling Stones in Kingston for a weekend in 1994. "But usually it's, like, read to the

PETER BREGG/MACLEAN'S

Aykroyd in* Ghostbusters*; as a Blues Brother with Goodman (left) and Jim Belushi (right): boyish enthusiasm

PETER BREGG/MACLEAN'S

With Dixon: despite his status in Hollywood, he remains stubbornly loyal to his roots, maintaining a house in Kingston, Ont.

JEFF KRAVITZ/FILM MAGIC

kids and in bed at 9:30," he says. Aykroyd, now 44, and his wife, actress Donna Dixon, 39, have two girls, ages 6 and 3. "We got started late. And for a while I didn't think I'd want kids," he adds, explaining that after the 1982 death of Blues Brother-in-arms John Belushi, "I didn't want to get attached. I didn't even want a dog for a few years. I didn't want to feel love for any entity other than my wife. Well, we got a dog. We practised on the dog. Now, of course, once you have children it's a beautiful thing. Warren Beatty told me God has this veil that he doesn't let you see through until you have them, then it's opened up."

Aykroyd's wife has retired from acting to be a full-time mother. "She's very happily given it up," he says. "I'm the one who wants to see her work." Asked if they really need the extra money, he says, "A double income, man? C'mon. It's cash flow. It flows in and it flows out." Over the years, says Aykroyd, he has watched some of it go down the drain in "weird businesses," including a toxic-waste-busting scheme in the 1980s. "I had a piece of a beautiful product. It was a plastic over-pack for all the metal drums in the world that are rotting through with toxic chemicals. We were this close to getting nuclear regulatory approval in the States, and then the company went bankrupt." Adds Aykroyd: "I'm not a good businessman investment-wise. I provide for my family and don't have to worry too much, but by the time I'm dead it will all be gone."

He certainly lives comfortably enough. Aykroyd and his family own a house in the Hollywood hills that once belonged to Ringo Starr and before that to Cass Elliott of The Mamas and the Papas. "It was where they wrote *California Dreamin'*," says the actor, who moved in with Dixon after their marriage in 1983. Aykroyd, meanwhile, tries to spend summers in Kingston, in a lodge-like house that he constructed on a farm established by his family in 1880. "We built the house around the fireplace," he says. "I took four stones that were cut for the Kingston breakwater. Pink granite. I brought them home with a crane."

The house is furnished on the same *Citizen Kane* scale. "That's Donna," says Aykroyd. "My conception of furniture is a color TV and a milk crate for the albums and a Northern Electric cable spool for the coffee table. But we went kind of Gothic oversized. We've got overstuffed chairs, and big old acolyte candles from cathedrals that we've turned into lamps, and a huge couch that looks like two front seats of a '69 Lincoln put together."

Despite his binational residency, Aykroyd has decided that he will never dilute his Canadian identity by taking out dual citizenship. "The star-spangled banner brings a tear to my eye," he says. "I love the American flag. I love the American people. I have an American wife. But ultimately, if it came down to a cross-border conflict, you'd find me at the Vimy barracks operating a word processor. If it came to grabbing those power dams in Quebec, I'd be defending them. I'd work for peace first, but count on me to be that motorcycle messenger between Ottawa and Kingston. I'm also a pretty good shot."

Aykroyd owns two pistols, a shotgun and a rifle in Los Angeles. "I've always liked guns," he says. "I just detest the way they're used. But in L.A., you've got to have a gun in the home. It's essential."

Guns, cars, bikes, planes, harmonicas: Aykroyd likes his toys. But these days his favorite is the word processor. He has recently written scripts for a *Ghostbusters* sequel, a *Blues Brothers* sequel, a movie he wants to do with Chevy Chase called *Clumsy and Awkward*—"obviously cashing in on *Dumb and Dumber*," he says—and "I'm 30 pages into my Hollywood exposé novel." Adds Aykroyd: "If I had the time to do something exclusively, I would write for the screen. I like the pure process of it. Getting up at eight in the morning. And seeing at the end of the day that I actually have product there, from air."

Meanwhile, Aykroyd the song-and-dance man continues to front the Blues Brothers, a performing band born from the *Saturday Night Live* skit and the 1980 movie. Jim Belushi has replaced his deceased brother, John, as Aykroyd's partner onstage. And *Roseanne*'s John Goodman, "who has a better voice than either Jimmy or myself," says Aykroyd, has become a third member of the Blues Brotherhood. On radio, as the Chicago-accented Elwood Blues, he hosts a weekly syndicated blues show. And, although he does not own it, he promotes the ever-expanding House of Blues nightclub chain. "I serve as a mouthpiece," he says. "I'm a good salesman." And, as if the real world were not big enough to absorb his energies, he continues to play pitchman for the paranormal, most recently by hosting the TV show *Psi Factor*.

Get Aykroyd talking about close encounters of the spooky kind, and there is no stopping him. He believes in occurrences that "basically defy the four dimensions—time loops, time warps, apparitions, ghosts, people bi-locating (being in two places at once)." He also maintains that the U.S. government is hiding evidence of alien visitation. The giant fleas, for example. "In North Vietnam, it was reported that farmers in rice paddies were getting their limbs eaten and hacked to bits by a creature," he says. "They went in and found a nest of fleas the size of chow dogs, with full armor and mandibles. And they determined that these fleas bred out of an alien probe, a meteor-like capsule. They have one in a freezer somewhere."

Right.

Aykroyd looks dead serious. Is he? Hard to say. Either he has a mind so open that Forrest Gump could seem cynical by comparison—or he is a better actor than anyone gives him credit for. □

ASN 831