

# Flights of fact and fantasy

BY CHRISTOPHER HARRIS  
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**H**E's played the cranially expansive Beldar Conehead in *Coneheads*, the paranormal prober Raymond Stantz in *Ghostbusters*, and manic soul brother Elwood Blues in *The Blues Brothers*.

But in *The Arrow*, Dan Aykroyd plays a man named Crawford Gordon, and he plays it absolutely straight.

Although this four-hour CBC mini-series has its lighter moments, there is nothing funny about its non-fictional narrative — the story of the briefly soaring life of the Avro Arrow, a supersonic Canadian fighter-interceptor jet so far ahead of its time in 1959 that its abrupt nose-dive into the dustbin of history looks almost inevitable in hindsight.

And if there's nothing funny about the fate of the Arrow, there's certainly nothing funny about the life of Crawford Gordon, the visionary and charismatic executive who, as president of A. V. Roe Canada, oversaw the creation of the company's Avro Arrow, but whose life ended bitterly, only eight years after the project's cancellation, in self-imposed exile from Canada.

*The Arrow* begins Sunday night on CBC and concludes on Monday. It has been a long time coming. Writer Keith Ross Leckie (*Journey into Darkness: The Bruce Curtis Story*) and the team of independent producers he worked with spent more than seven years getting the Avro Arrow story off the ground, even after signing up Aykroyd — both a patriotic Canadian and an eminently bankable Hollywood movie star.

It's the second television role this year for the notoriously TV-shy Aykroyd, who also hosts the syndicated, Canadian-made drama series *Psi Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal* (weekly on CanWest/Global).

*Movie star Dan Aykroyd is notoriously TV shy. But when asked to star in a CBC mini-series about the brilliant rise — and tragic demise — of the Avro Arrow, he did his patriotic duty with pride.*



Dan Aykroyd, left, as Crawford Gordon, president of A. V. Roe Canada; the Arrow, above, rolled out from a

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The Arrow was actually a struggle for my agent to accept, because once feature film people make the transition to mini-series in the States, there's the perception that their film days are over. And I think that's right in a sense. ... The lines are being increasingly blurred, but I'm not about to go into the mini-series business in the States," he said.

"The reason I did *The Arrow* is because it's a great aviation story, a great Canadian story, a great part, a good dramatic piece, and it was for Canadian television. The *Psi Factor* thing is for the syndicated market, and I'm just a Robert Stack-sort of host on it. My brother happens to be one of the producers and I have a passion for this material — I just put myself in there to help sell it faster."

Aykroyd — born and raised in Ottawa, long-time resident of Los Angeles — was in Toronto last month to talk about *The Arrow*. Angled into the corner of a well-stuffed sofa in the CBC's broadcasting centre, he wore customary movie-star attire: black blazer, black shirt, black denim pants and a black-and-tan patterned tie. The only divergent note was light-blue, Canadian-as-all-get-out, thick woolen socks rising out of scruffy black cowboy boots. On his lapel was a small pin of the Arrow.

Now 44, Aykroyd remembers seeing the plane fly on television as a young boy, and had an Arrow model as a kid, but he said he had never been obsessed by the airplane or its demise.

"My interest was only revived when I read Keith's script about four years ago. It revived the anger that I think all of us are going to feel when we see what was done to the Arrow program."

The Arrow program was the brainchild of C. D. Howe, the Liberal government's legendary "Minister of Everything" during the Second World War. After the war ended and the Cold War began, the government wanted a high-performance jet fighter to defend the Arctic against possible nuclear bombing raids from the Soviet Union. The contract went to A. V. Roe, whose crack team of engineers developed a revolutionary, delta-winged airplane that was able to fly faster than anything on Earth at the time. According to its defend-

ers, the sleek-looking Arrow was the most sophisticated aircraft ever made.

The Liberal government was defeated in 1957, replaced by John Diefenbaker's budget-conscious Conservatives. On Feb. 20, 1959, Diefenbaker cancelled the \$400-million program — in part because of its huge cost overruns, but also because of political antagonism toward the Liberal project, pressures from Washington and the U.S. military-industrial complex, and a fundamental clash of personalities between Diefenbaker and Crawford Gordon.

In an act that amounted to pettiness, the prime minister not only killed the program — laying off 14,000 people — but ordered in the army to oversee the scrapping of all six completed Arrows, along with every unfinished jet on the assembly line, and every blueprint, model or design sketch of the plane.

The Arrow and its abrupt annihilation continue to stir strong debates. One side argues that the jet would have put Canada at the forefront of the world's aviation industry, and that its dissolution ended Canada's aspirations for true nation status. The other says that even if the Tories overreacted, Diefenbaker was fundamentally right since a small nation like Canada had no right pursuing such expensive dreams.

Director Don McBready (*Butterbox Babies*) shot *The Arrow* last summer in Winnipeg — standing in for Southern Ontario — with a cast that includes Sara Botsford, Ron White, Aidan Devine, Christopher Plummer and Michael Moriarty.

"What I think gets everybody, and what seems to be unforgivable, is the total destruction of the program, the effort to even erase the memory of it," McBready said. "There had to be some way to salvage what was a world-class aerospace industry here."

Leckie's script romanticizes the Arrow story, especially in the triumphantly liberating ending, but in general he follows the details laid out in the book that inspired him — Greig Stewart's 1988 chronicle *Shutting Down the National Dream: A. V. Roe and the Tragedy of the Avro Arrow*. (The mini-series' impressive footage of the Arrow is achieved through a combination of archival material, a full-scale model, radio-controlled flying models and computer-generated images.)

Aykroyd, who spends about four months of the year in Canada with his family (he is married to American actress Donna Dixon, and they have two children), described himself as "a patriot who will never become an American citizen because I don't feel it's something that I need to do." He sees the fate of the Avro Arrow as an object lesson for Canadian entrepreneurs.

"If you have a product in mind, and you want to go for it, don't let anybody stand in your way. Fight government policy, get capital, get labour and build that product, put it on the line and get it out there where the world can see that it's a great Canadian accomplishment."

And with a mischievous gleam in his eye, he added: "I feel sorry for Jean Charest, because here's a very intelligent politician, a bright man, but he better become a Commie or something because he hasn't got a hope if he wants to maintain the Progressive Conservative line. Once people see that scene where Diefenbaker kills the program and kills the whole Avro industry, is responsible for throwing 14,000 people out of work and killing this beautiful Canadian seed, I think it will take the cement and put it over the Mulroney years once and for all."

Many of A. V. Roe's aeronautical engineers became instrumental in

the U.S. manned space program; others helped Britain develop the Concorde supersonic jetliner. Aykroyd's Crawford Gordon moved to New York, where he died from complications of alcoholism in 1967, at 52.

Aykroyd described Gordon as a larger-than-life, Shakespearean sort of hero — flawed in some ways but immensely gifted. To acquire a sense of the man — the first real character he has portrayed — he talked to Gordon's son, studied film footage, and got tips from his own mother, who worked for C. D. Howe during the war and was acquainted with Gordon.

Aykroyd said *The Arrow* was a dream job, "one of those jobs, like *Driving Miss Daisy*, where you just want to show up for work each day." *Driving Miss Daisy* (which brought him a supporting-actor Oscar nomination in 1990) was a breakthrough for Aykroyd: his first serious dramatic role. (He's currently appearing in *My Fellow Americans* with Jack Lemmon and James Garner, and has co-written *Blues Brothers 2000*, a sequel to *The Blues Brothers*).

"Dan is a wonderful comedian, and I'd seen him in *Driving Miss Daisy*, which is a fine performance, but I hadn't seen a lot else that gave me confidence he could do Crawford Gordon," McBready said. "So I must admit I was a little trepidatious at times. But in the end, I was thrilled. I think Dan gives a great performance."

Aykroyd said good dramatic roles are few and far between, but he finds drama easier than comedy. "Oh, comedy's tough. It's like being on a unicycle on a hot plate and pedalling to make sure the tire doesn't pop. ... For drama, you have to live in the truth of the words and truth of the moment and let them roll off your tongue without forcing it or thinking about it too much."

*The Legend of the Arrow* (documentary) airs tonight on CBC at 7 p.m. *Too Good To Be True* (documentary) airs tonight on TVO at 7:30 p.m. *The Arrow* (mini-series) airs Sunday and Monday on CBC at 8 p.m.

## Elwy Yost remembers the end of the Arrow

Even at 7 a.m., speaking from his house in the mountains of West Vancouver, TVO's signature personality, 71-year-old Elwy Yost, has a voice with a distinctive spring in its step. And never more so than when discussing two things near to his heart: the movies and the Avro Arrow, two elements that combine this weekend in the CBC mini-series *The Arrow*.

Long before *Magic Shadows* or *Saturday Night At The Movies*, Yost spent nearly six years at A. V. Roe Canada in Malton, Ont. His stint culminated with the federal government's cancellation of the Arrow jet project, on Friday, Feb. 20, 1959.

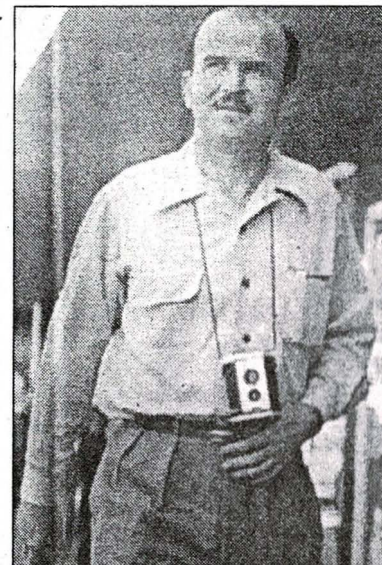
Yost, who'd made his mark in the employee services department, was retained for a month or so to conduct exit interviews. For Yost, that final assignment was ironic. "For several months in 1957 the company sent me to England to hire engineers for the Arrow project. I was attached to the Ontario immigration office on New Burlington street. I hired a lot of people. And again in '58, I was sent

over to hire in the spring through the summer and fall. The idea was to go out to places very near to aircraft plants. ... You might say, 'My God, Elwy, you were stealing engineers away from England.' Yes, of course I was.

"In the fall of '58 I was set to make a trip to Dublin when I got a call from my boss, a fellow named Tom Shaw, calling me back to Canada. I asked why and he said, 'We're getting some very dark news, Elwy, very dark feelings about the future of Avro.'"

Yost remembers the devastation of Black Friday and the aftermath. "It was all shock. There was foreboding, but part of you would feel they're not going to destroy this incredible machine that was really the pinnacle of its art. People behaved as though their closest friend had just died.

"I'll never forget one thing, the smell of acetylene torches that were being used to cut up the Arrows that had been completed. Word came through to us that Diefenbaker and his team didn't want so much as a set of blueprints left. I'll never in my life



Yost in 1955, on holiday from his job at A.V. Roe.

forget that acrid smell. To me it was just like the Romans in Carthage where they not only defeated the

Carthaginians, but, by God, before they left they sowed their farm fields with salt so they couldn't plant a goddamn thing. And this is what was happening here. They were sowing our bays with salt. It was the absolute height of villainy."

Yost, who appears in the documentary, *The Legend of the Arrow*, about the making of the mini-series, praises the authenticity — for the most part — of the latter. "I was thrilled at the approach. It's a little romantic at times. It may be a flight of imagination near the end when one of the key pilots takes off after the shutdown for one last run because he was never allowed to hit the speed that he wanted to. But still I loved it."

"There's a great sense of identification with this country in the picture. It asks a great deal of the public to stick with its technical emphasis. Still it builds and builds to a great climax. For me the film captures the great spirit of idealism in this country that has prevailed and can prevail." — Douglas Bell