

# A Canadian dream flies high

BY GREG QUILL  
TELEVISION CRITIC

To every Canadian who lived through the late 1950s, and that would include about half the population, the Avro Arrow had special significance.

It still does, if the \$7.8 million made-for-CBC-TV miniseries, *The Arrow*, makes its point.

*The Arrow* is a marvel of filmmaking ingenuity and roots-level Canadian chutzpah.

Much like the famed phantom fighter-interceptor itself, this film flies on a wing and a prayer, and is borne aloft by the notion that only Canadians can tell their own stories, make their own myths, dream their own dreams. It airs in two two-hour parts tonight and tomorrow at 8 p.m. on Channel 5.

So much hype and hope has trumpeted the arrival of the miniseries, in newspapers and magazines, on TV and radio, that it's guaranteed a record-breaking audience. A critique seems redundant: We'll watch it anyway.

And so we should. The plane itself, a replica built from scratch by an Edmonton "Arrowhead" and reproduced in magnificent flight via computer graphics and model-based special effects, is the real star of the show. But what fuels *The Arrow* is writer Keith Ross Leckie's and director Don McBreaty's unswerving con-

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viction that the machine was a symbol of our collective and distinctive imagination and will.

Star Dan Aykroyd, who plays the alcoholic and womanizing A. V. Roe president Crawford Gordon, insists the Arrow project was dismantled by Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker out of pure political malice and fear of America's dominance of the aerospace industry, costing 14,000 jobs and as many as 35,000 more jobs in peripheral industries.

But Leckie takes pains to show that the Arrow was just as effectively sabotaged from within.

Its price ballooned from the original \$100 million grant to four times that size, after Roll Royce couldn't build an engine that would match the fighter's specifications, and Avro asked Liberal "minister of everything" C. D. Howe to finance an all-Canadian engine design program, the Iroquois.

That engine, never fitted, would have taken *The Arrow* to more than twice the speed of sound, even into space. The Arrow, Leckie suggests, could have launched a moon-landing module, and missiles, at the fraction of the cost of U.S. and Soviet rockets.

Alcohol fueled much of the preposterous dreams of the engineers, and



**EVERY CANADIAN'S PLANE:** For a moment, the Avro Arrow put Canada ahead of the world.

affected the behavior of Gordon. His drunken rant in Diefenbaker's office probably forced the vindictive response to his demands for more money.

Not only was the Arrow scrapped, but Diefenbaker ordered every single plane be ripped apart and dumped, every plan, blueprint, and performance report destroyed. But in the end, it was Gordon, in a snit, who shut Avro down overnight, as well as programs involving the construction of airliners, urban monorails, a "flying car," and missile guidance systems.

All of that is made clear in the miniseries, which takes off slowly, and, in the second part, becomes a piece of truly electrifying drama, bordering

on outright mythology. One Arrow, supposedly the ghost that got away, actually makes it into space, "proving" all the test pilots' assertions that the thing, even without the Iroquois engine, could go faster and farther than any plane built before the 1990s.

It's such a complex story, Leckie barely has time to tell it in four hours, let alone make room for character development and dramatic plot twists. Performances are adequate, not spectacular. Aidan Devine as semi-articulate designer Jim Chamberlin, excels (he uses a paper dart and a pop bottle to demonstrate his air-flow theories).

Aykroyd, in his first TV performance in some 20 years, and his last, he says, for at least another 10 years,

makes Crawford Gordon a tragic, lost, soulless figure.

Sara Botsford, playing a composite member of the engineering team, gives her cipher as much passion as she can muster, without actually making us care for her. Ron White as test pilot Jack Woodman turns in the most memorable performance as the cynic converted to the Arrow's potential, who becomes its most vigorous defender.

What lingers after the movie's apocryphal, magical conclusion, is the sense that, above all, the Avro Arrow was every Canadian's plane. It signified a time when we dared dream bigger than the Brits and Americans and Soviets who looked down on us as a colonial nation.

**A.V.Roe Canada Aviation Museum Association**

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Avro Reference \_\_\_\_\_

Accession No. 758

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