Race For the Bomb

At the end of an arduous day of shooting Race For the Bomb, the Canada-France mini-series scheduled for early 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 one reason, Groves, though head of the Manhattan Project, has faded into obscurity. He never coped any of the glory. He had been worried 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, though he is the enigmatic director of the entire operation recently, so maybe it's not a good idea to touch the walls," Chaykin adds.

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 would the actors go on days they weren't shooting? Or even weeks? Certainly not back to Canada: shutting would be too expensive. So who picked up the tab while the Canadians, oiled 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 obvious."

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 (Frances, 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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