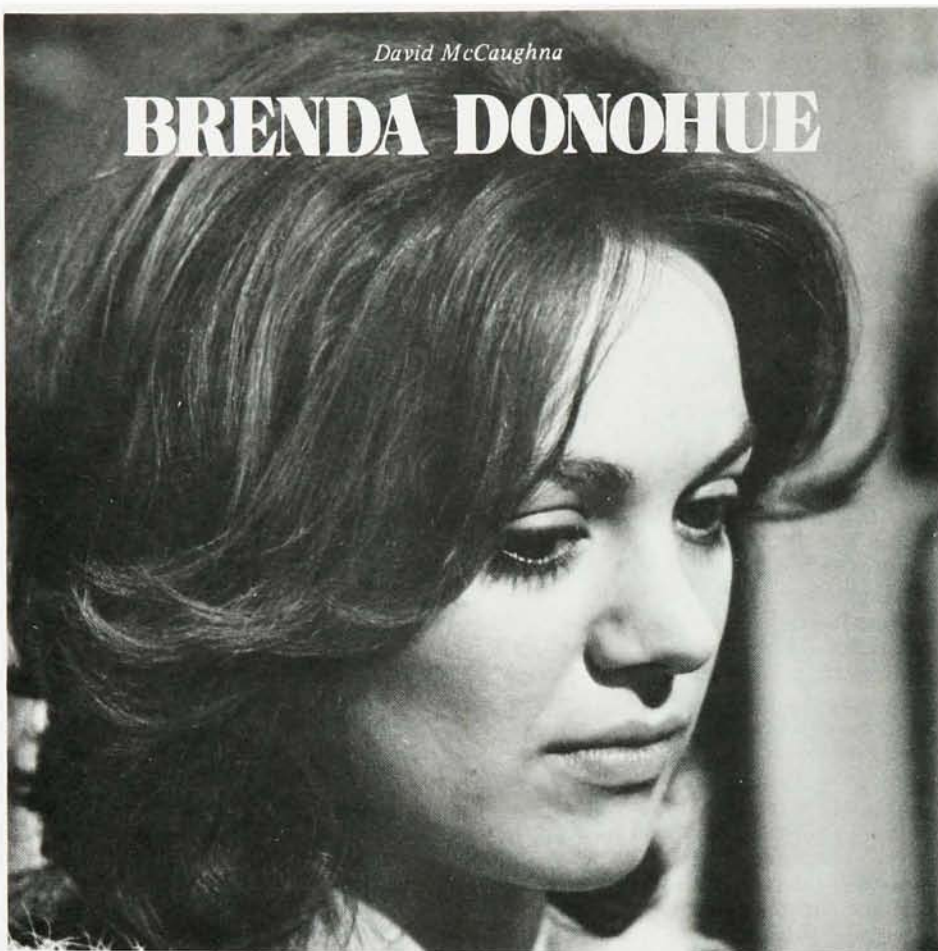


David McCaughna

BRENDA DONOHUE



Critics and Toronto theatre-goers have been saying for quite awhile that Brenda Donohue has star quality. She has the marvelous, undefinable aura onstage that keeps audiences riveted on her. But, unfortunately, having outstanding acting powers still doesn't mean much in Canada. To possess star potential here means that one will probably wind up going to the United States or Britain if one wishes to have it realized, especially on film. At twenty-five, with two recently made Canadian films under her belt and a string of superbly created stage roles, Brenda may try her luck in other places soon.

Neither of Brenda's films has been released to date. *Me?* was filmed a year ago and its fate remains unknown although rumours circulate from time to time that the film will be given a public showing. The producers will give it a test run at Cannes this year. *The Mourning Suit* may be released next fall, but knowing the precarious state of Canadian films and their high disappearance rate, one remains dubious until the film is actually showing in a theatre.

"On both of my films," says brassy voiced Brenda, "I kept telling myself that films aren't really shot this way. It's because it's low-budget, I kept saying." Each film was made in a hurry and Brenda found the frenzy disconcerting. "I'd like to do a small part in one of the American films being done here — they allow you to linger on things longer, they have the budget that allows time to rehearse and plan and that would really make a difference. Low-budget films don't give you enough time to work or prepare for a part and that would make such a difference. You have to worry about too many little details, like

doing your own hair, so that you can't concentrate on the role." She tells about an actor friend who recently worked on an American movie where they were given a luxurious three weeks for rehearsals.

Brenda is a product of Toronto's underground theatre world. She grew up in the placid Beaches area and started acting professionally at age nineteen. Although she had no professional training, she's not the product of an acting school — she was noticed from the beginning. Within a year or so of her debut she was playing major roles. Brenda is a natural actress and her roles have gone from the kooky sexpot in a Joe Orton black comedy to a flamboyant neurotic in plays by young Canadian writers.

When I spoke to her last summer, Brenda had just completed her first film, *Me?*, and was still shaking from the experience. "I was scared stiff making the film" she said then. "It was so different from working on the stage and there were so many things to learn. It was a fantastic opportunity for me but I don't feel so hot about it now. I'm not a very technical actress. I rely so much on my spontaneous reaction to a character and when I go on stage I'm a blank and somehow it just comes to me. But making a film you really don't do that and there are so many technical aspects to working in a film that I just didn't know about." It sounded as though Brenda would never want to make another film. She found the camera very intimidating; a relentless eye that she didn't know how to cope with. "I was just too speedy," she added.

In *Me?* — a film adaption of Martin Kinch's stage play — Brenda played the part of Chloe, a role modeled after

one-time pop singer and Toronto personality Gale Garnett. Terry, the central character played by Stephen Markle, is a writer whose life has become so complicated that it has stymied his novel-writing career. Separated from his wife, Terry lives with the very demonstrative Chloe. The pressure bears down on Terry as his wife returns along with a homosexual friend from university. The demands they all make upon Terry force him to consider some decisive action.

Last summer Brenda was despondent about her screen debut and said that should she win the Olympic Lottery top prize she'd make *Me?* over again. "I'd like to do that just because I learned so much from making it that I would like to try over again. I wish I'd known about camera technique and how a camera works when I started the film. For instance I found it very hard to do reaction shots for the camera, they seemed so phony to me." Brenda says that she also found it difficult keeping up the energy level for the role and that it was very hard to keep it consistent from day to day. "I couldn't keep it up. There were so many things to concentrate on: the blocking, which I was always forgetting at first, and the lights blinded me. You have to be so careful about your movements and how fast you talk in a film. But I was especially nervous at first because they had me driving a jeep in the film and I don't drive at all so that really bothered me and I had some close calls."

Then along came *The Mourning Suit* last fall. Directed by Leonard Yakir and filmed in Winnipeg, it proved to be a much better film experience for Brenda and she's altered her opinion about film work now. In short, the film concerns a young music student and his relationships with a few women and his disillusionment with music school. In the film Brenda plays a nurse who's had a child by the student. Her role took a week to shoot.

"I've really changed my mind about film after doing *The Mourning Suit*," she says now. "After such a horrible experience on *Me?* and the episode of *Collaborators* that I did, I've learned now. There's such a vast difference between stage and film and now I'm learning about it and how to deal with it. The camera is so close. I think I didn't know how small to be at first. Film acting is much more subtle. While making *The Mourning Suit* I was much more relaxed and I gave a better performance, I feel. I have learned to relax my face. And I concentrated on keeping my eyebrows down." On stage Brenda uses her eyebrows very effectively, often accentuating her emotions. "But it isn't a good thing on film; it's too broad. It's good to learn something and get better and now I'd love to do more films."

In *Mourning Suit* Brenda played what she describes as a stereotyped part. And she contends that nearly all of the film roles available to women in Canadian movies are stereotyped characters. "I accepted the part because I thought it would be an exercise in relaxation and in the rushes I didn't look as tense as I felt, so I think it was a successful experience." But she'd like to take on a really exciting film role, one that would expand her.

In the meanwhile, Brenda Donohue isn't waiting around, moping for film roles. She's realistic enough to know that they aren't going to come pouring in, no matter how excellent she is on film. She'll continue to work on the stage, and perhaps go to the U.S. to see what opportunities are there. But should a real Canadian film industry ever evolve, there's no doubt that actors like Brenda Donohue will be its stars. The acting talent, the future bright lights of our possible screen culture, are being nurtured on the stages of live theatres across this country. Brenda Donohue and other actors of the same calibre in this country may someday be our very own household names. □

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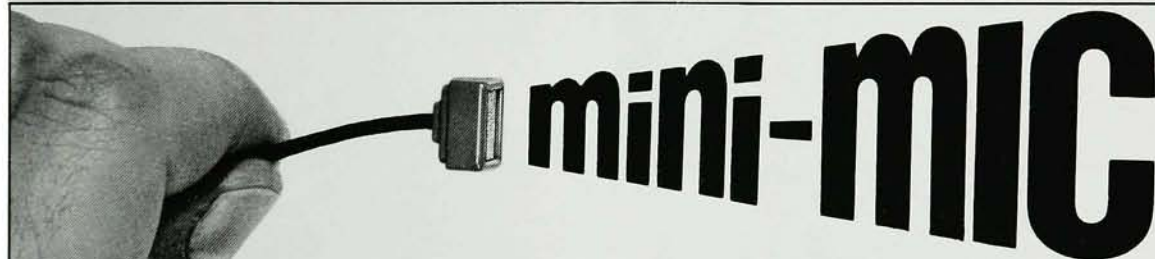
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