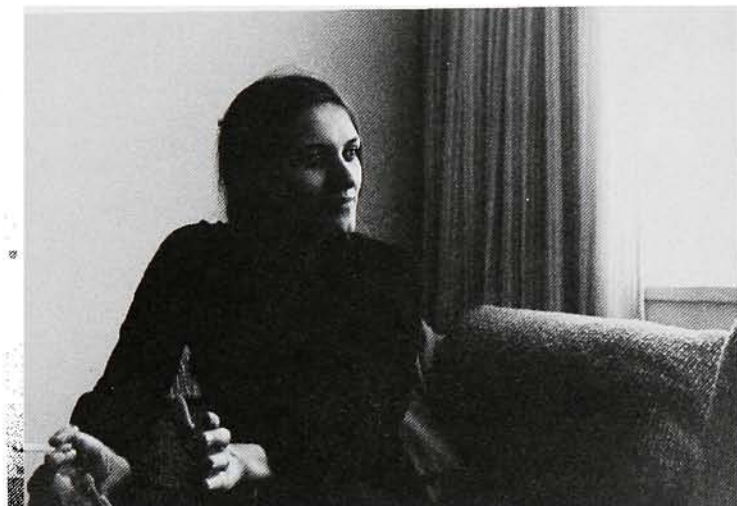


Donald Pleasence

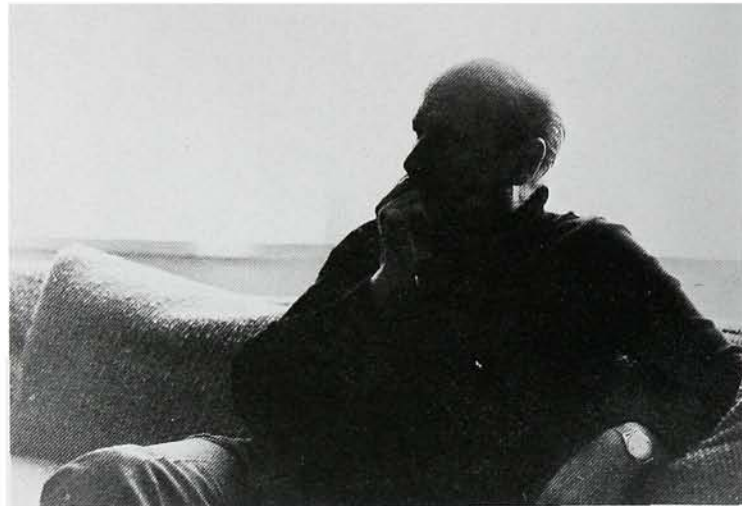
Interview

by Laurinda Hartt

photo: Baltazar/Koller



interview by Kiss/Koller



It's been a busy year for Donald Pleasence, a British actor deemed one of the world's most accomplished actors of both stage and screen. In the past twelve months Pleasence has added a remarkable six new film roles to his ever-expanding list of acting credits — a list which extends from the stage and screen success of *The Caretaker*, through roles in such diverse films as *The Great Escape*, *Will Penny*, *The Madwoman of Chaillot* and *Cul-de-Sac*, to a tour de force stage performance as *The Man in the Glass Booth*.

Significantly, two of the six are major roles in two Canadian features: Bill Fruet's excellent, introspective *Wedding in White* and Gerald Potterton's fascinating and exciting adventure film, *The Rainbow Boys*. Pleasence's performances as the stolid, blustering father in *Wedding in White*, and as Logan the eccentric gold miner in *The Rainbow Boys*, are two of his finest characterizations to date — a fact which not only enhances his own stature as an actor but also one which can only serve to increase the international stature of the Canadian feature film.

Wedding in White's critical reception in Canada and in the United States, where it premiered this past spring, has been generally excellent, with the performances of Pleasence, Doris Petrie (as the mother) and Carol Kane (as the daughter) being singled out for their exceptional power and eloquence. The film itself won the Canadian Film Award, for Best Film, 1972.

By contrast, the critical reception of *The Rainbow Boys* has been remarkably uneven and generally poor. After its simultaneous premières in Vancouver, Toronto and Montréal late in March, critical response ranged from an over-zealous dissection in "The Vancouver Sun", through the generally cool response of most reviewers, to the congenial enthusiasm of "Maclean's" critic, John Hofess, who declared the film one of the best Canadian films of 1973. But the box office response was poor and the film's future already seems bleak.

Whether *The Rainbow Boys* deserves such a fate, whether its considerable merits were unjustly obscured by an overly aggressive critical reaction, and whether these merits will re-emerge with the cooling of tempers and the passage of time, are matters worthy of thoughtful and serious consideration.

Donald Pleasence, in an interview with "Cinema Canada" at the time of the film's release, responded to many of the criticisms then already levelled at the film, discussed the care and devotion that went into the making of it and commented briefly on his work with Bill Fruet in *Wedding in White*, and on the peculiar attitudes he has sometimes encountered in Canada concerning his active participation in Canadian films.

Early in the interview, the subject of *The Rainbow Boys'*

critical reception emerged with Pleasence's queries, "Have you seen *The Rainbow Boys*? Do you like it?" When the answers were "Yes", Pleasence responded:

You really do! Oh good. I'm glad of that because some people don't, you know. Like in Vancouver. We've had a very rich time there . . . The review we had for the picture was the worst I've ever read for anything. That writer is seeing another film! I don't understand it! I really think *The Rainbow Boys* is splendid — a very interesting, very funny film which is not meant to be complicated. There are five principal actors: one is a motorbike, another is the scenery, and the other three are the actors. That's what it's about. It's not probing any great depths; it's a very simple story.

But it works on many levels.

Yes, I think it does. First of all I would classify this as a "primitive" picture — it has the essence of child-like primitivism in the same way that certain artists paint. If you can't grasp that, if it's outside all your concepts, then you won't like the picture. But the public will like it because they will understand immediately; they won't be critical. They'll see a very simple story of three people, their funny search for gold, and the tragedy of finding it and then losing it.

Secondly, I see the film as a simple story with very complicated and subtle undertones which are traceable to the careful writing and direction of Gerald Potterton and to our contributions as the three principal actors. Each character is quite real and moulded with a lot of care. The characters are very deeply thought out. Don Calfa (who plays Mazella in the film) is a brilliant actor — a very intelligent, articulate man — but he has been very tightly criticized for what I can only describe as *not* being a hippie. If Calfa had kept his hair down to his shoulders, as it was when I first saw a picture of him and if he had worn beads and things, then some people — not mentioning any names — would have said, "Ah! Now I understand that character!"

The fact is, Calfa is *not* playing a hippie, he is playing a *weekend* hippie, the type of person who lives in the Bronx and who, on Friday night, maybe puts on a wig, goes down to the Village and pretends to be "Way out, man!". You know he's got all the stuff and yet it's spurious. Mazella's a spurious person from the beginning of the film to the end. Kate Reid and I — Gladys and Logan — are real people in the sense that they are not deeply involved in the loss of the gold, whereas Mazella is after the money. When the money goes, we laugh and he *cries*.

With Mazella there was nothing he could do BUT cry. There

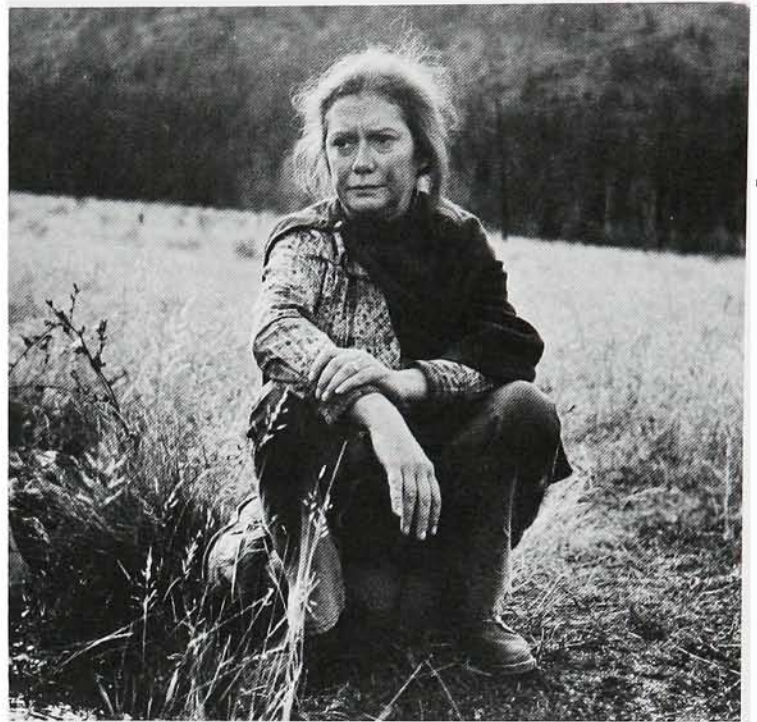


photo: Bruno Engler

Kate Reid

it was — he had the gold and then it was gone. It's a tragedy.

To most members of the human race it *is* a tragedy. It's only to eccentrics like Gladys and Logan that it's not tragic because their realities are deeper — or shallower, whatever you like. They're not so involved with everyday survival as Mazella, who is really deeply rooted in a quest for gold.

Isn't Calfa's portrayal deeper than a weekend hippie?

Oh yes, because he knows all about it and he's going into subtleties which many people don't understand. That's why I think it's a very important piece of acting.

In a sense he's a street kid from New York who has had to learn the game of survival. For him money means survival — this is very deep in the film and comes across beautifully.

Well, Mazella is a many-faceted character: he's also a man who is escaping from his environment. I mean, he gets on an eccentric three-wheeled motorcycle and drives 3,000 miles to the west coast. That's a big thing to do — to have made that journey. It means that he's neither a hippie nor is he an ordinary bourgeois guy from New York. His line, "I'm not a draft dodger, you know", has been quoted out of context in criticism by one of the reviewers. I think that the line is perfectly legitimate. It's an important statement which is actually unimportant but it *is* important to Mazella. With his Mickey Mouse T-shirt, he doesn't want to be taken for one of those guys who just don't care, who go to live in communes and all that. It's very important to the picture and a lot of love and care were spent on that character by Calfa.

Somebody wrote, "Why does he wear a Mickey Mouse T-shirt?" We have some extraordinary criticism! How can a serious critic say, "Why does he wear a Mickey Mouse T-shirt?" He wears a Mickey Mouse T-shirt because he wears a Mickey-Mouse T-shirt! *Millions* of people around the world are wearing Mickey Mouse T-shirts! And apart from that fact, it plays an important part in the film which is a good enough reason for anybody's sake. At the end of the picture the Indian is wearing a Mickey-Mouse T-shirt and it's essential to have something identifiable. But it's a perfectly legitimate thing for him to wear because he is like the Friday-night hippie.

Do you still pay attention to the criticisms?

No, I don't personally, but if you're involved in a commercial venture — which after all every movie is — you have to pay attention because they mean something. They don't mean as much as they do in theatre because word of mouth means much more in cinema than brilliant reviews. Unless they get on to some kind of bandwagon like with *The Last Tango in Paris* or something like that. Then of course the public will be

going along with brilliant reviews and some poorer reviews too, perhaps — but mostly brilliant — and it's going to be nothing but good for you. But in general, with your everyday picture, press is not as important as it is in the theatre. The film will be there to stay, and if the people go away having seen it, and tell their work mates and colleagues that they saw a very funny, very pretty film with fabulous scenery etc., they will go and take their kids to see it and so on.

One common theme evident in all three of the characters is the theme of survival — all three, in their own way, are surviving. They are up against tremendous odds but they are surviving. It borders on pathos.

Yes, I think it is an important part of the picture . . . The fact that it is funny is in a sense coincidental. One of the things we tried deeply to avoid — the director and the three principal actors — was ever being consciously funny. We were all trying to do something very serious which we hoped eventually would be funny, but we never *tried* to be funny.

I think it was John Hofsess who said, in a very nice review, that the characterizations, for the purpose of what he called "bawdy farce", were fairly slight. I beg to believe that's not true; they are all characterizations in a great deal of depth. If we don't succeed, well we don't succeed. But that was the intention.

One of the interesting things about shooting the film was that we were always in a race against time. We didn't have the money to spend another two weeks on the picture and of course you always have to cut corners. That's one problem. We had intended to end the picture with a spectacular wide-angle zoom-back shot showing the existence of a highway up on the mountain, but we needed a helicopter to do it. We couldn't do it with a static camera. But we had already gotten rid of the helicopter and the rain was closing in.

In my opinion we should have had that helicopter shot because of the idea that these people went all these weeks on a motorbike up a mountain and lost the gold and everything and then they discover that there was a *highway* they could have used! The end shot that we did shoot and which is not in the film (because it didn't work in the editing), was a shot of Gladys and Logan running and saying, "Look! There's a road up there!" And they were laughing and screaming their heads off and dancing down the beach. They cross the river, climb up and there's the road! They'd made this devious route all over the mountain in agony when they could have come along a divided highway! I love that idea. But maybe it's better the way it is. It's quite tragic the way it is because when the film ends you don't know how these people are going to survive.

There's one fellow crying and there are these two people madly laughing at the humour of the situation. What are they going to do? They'll probably die. But it's up to the viewer to decide.

It's tragic but it's more like life this way. The highway would have been a good twist, though.

Yes, it would have been but maybe it's better this way. It's one of those accidental things in filmmaking – sometimes you emerge with a solution which was dictated by circumstances and economics or whatever and it turns out to be a better solution to your problem than you might have found if you had a \$2 million budget.

How much of Logan was yours and how much was contributed by Gerry Potterton?

Most of the script is precisely as Gerry wrote it. But there are certain scenes between Calfa and myself which were improvised to a certain degree. There really is a Logan, you see. There's a fellow named Anton Loken but everyone calls him Logan and that's really his house in the film. He built it himself. And many of the lines in that long, slightly improvised scene between Calfa and myself in front of the shack are his lines. We prepared a scene and we threw quite a lot of things into it and just let it go. We had a basic script which was quite strong by itself but we just let it run and we did it in one master take. I hope it works. I mean, I *know* it works but it depends on which way you see the film. But it's real, it's all real: this young guy talking to this old guy who is mad, you know, he's extraordinary – he plays the fiddle; he spends his evenings carving fiddles, making Chinese puzzles, dreaming about the guys in the boxcars and banging away about "snipers". We got the idea of using "snipers" from a pamphlet about gold-digging. "Snipers" are people who keep coming back and working the same face of bedrock year after year until they wear out the mine. It's a nonsense line to the audience if they don't know anything about gold mining, but it's a great line. Really, Logan is getting at those "snipers" all the way through the picture because they were working away at the bedrock destroying his living.

It was a beautiful paranoia built up when Logan was saying "Oh these bastards! Bastards!" Was that your build-up?

Oh, I think it was a bit of everybody's.

Pleasence's views on Wedding in White and its writer-director, Bill Fruet:

Wedding in White is a totally realistic type of film, and I think it is very good. I like it enormously and I like Bill Fruet very much. It is an entirely different type of film from **The Rainbow Boys**. In **Wedding in White** the people are really saying precisely what they mean, God help us all.

They're regular, straightforward fellas and ladies, whatever that means. They're the worst kind of human being, really: never thinking, never inquiring; accepting what they're *told* is evil and what they're told is good. Harold Pinter is interested in people like that. They're very dramatic; many of the great characters in dramatic literature work like that.

It's true to life really. There's a fatality about the relationships that's only too apparent – dreadfully apparent. Just as long as the world is run by these kind of people, or they contribute to the vote or whatever, we're going on a downhill spiral. Wherever they are in the world, they will conform to whatever image is the conformist image and the values of the society around them and they'll go on letting the earth perish – destroying the seas and forests and over-populating the world.

None of them in that film are deeply religious. I mean, they're religious people in the sense that they've been brought up in some kind of religion; that's what they accept. They go to church for weddings, funerals, maybe Christmas and that's it.

Pinter is able to tune into that reality in a sympathetic way. For example, in Pinter's **People** the "All Night Bus" sketch with the two women in the bus station. Those are the kind of people who accept this kind of apathy because they are creatures of habit. But somehow there's a great deal of sympathy in the way he treats them and I find that true for **Wedding in White** too. I don't think it's unsympathetic.

Oh, do you find that? I'm not sure I would agree with you. I think these two writers are quite disparate. They have something in common in that I think both tend not to like the characters they are writing about. I would say that, as much as I know of Harold Pinter's present work, he very rarely sympathizes. So anything I say to you is out of my own critical faculty, whatever I have. But I would say that Pinter mostly despises his characters and I think that Bill Fruet in **Wedding in White** does the same. I don't think there's anyone in **Wedding in White** with whom you can sympathize. Maybe the girl.

Maybe I'm putting too much of my own compassion into it.

Well, I think there is a little compassion . . . Both Pinter and Fruet are writing pretty critically in a real life situation. I mean, in both their cases they are writing about something they have experienced.

Maybe what they're doing is holding these people up and then the audience can either look at them with the same kind of detached objectivity or with compassion – they have the choice.

Oh, yes.

Some of Pleasence's comments concerning certain attitudes he has observed in relation to Canada's film industry:

The average Canadian is not particularly interested in going to see Canadian movies. On the other hand, the Canadian film industry is not very interested in bringing in outside talent and this is another problem. People will say to a producer or director, "You want *that* editor for the film? But he's English! Why do you have to bring in an editor? We've got editors here." So the director says, "Because I want that editor. That's the editor I want to work with." And they say, "Oh, well . . ." Well, that's stupid! You know, the last time I was here I was asked the most outrageous question when I was on a talk show. A man asked me, "Don't you feel ashamed to be coming here and taking bread out of the mouths of Canadian actors?" So I answered his question with some relish: "Christopher Plummer has been taking bread out of my mouth for years." He sort of took the point. He said, "There's no need to get angry, you know." And I thought there was every reason to be angry. But he said, "You see, if we make a tire here we make it with Canadian rubber, so we figure that celluloid should be Canadian celluloid." That was the spoken opinion of someone who is supposed to be in the public eye.

Canadians should feel honoured to have you.

Well, that's very nice of you to say that. I can't say I agree with you. The point is, never mind me. I mean, you should be making Canadian films with big international stars in mind. Then you'll get big international distribution. I *believe* it's changing. I greatly applaud the Canadian film industry particularly because of government participation in raising funds to make films – sponsoring pictures and all that. It's very healthy and very good. But of course the unhealthy side of it always becomes the bureaucratic side of it – in *any* country; it's a problem anywhere. It's even a problem with Britain's National Theatre's bureaucratic set-up, although I applaud national theatres – there should be many of them all over the place. But I never work with those kind of theatres anymore because I don't like the bureaucratic side of it. That's why if I do something in the theatre I'll go and produce it myself or with a friend of mine.

What are your future plans? Is there a chance you might be working in a film version of "The Man in the Glass Booth"?

I hope so. It's still on but they haven't set a director yet. They're running out of time to get the film going. I hope to do it maybe this winter, perhaps with Irvin Kershner who's a director I admire very much. He wants to do it and they're happy about it. It's a question of timing. And I've got lots of irons in the fire – I'll probably make a film with Don Siegel. But as for my immediate plans, I'm not sure. Nowadays things happen very quickly. People don't have the money and then suddenly they do have the money. I'm sitting by the phone and then the next minute I'm off to Spain or somewhere. It's peculiar.