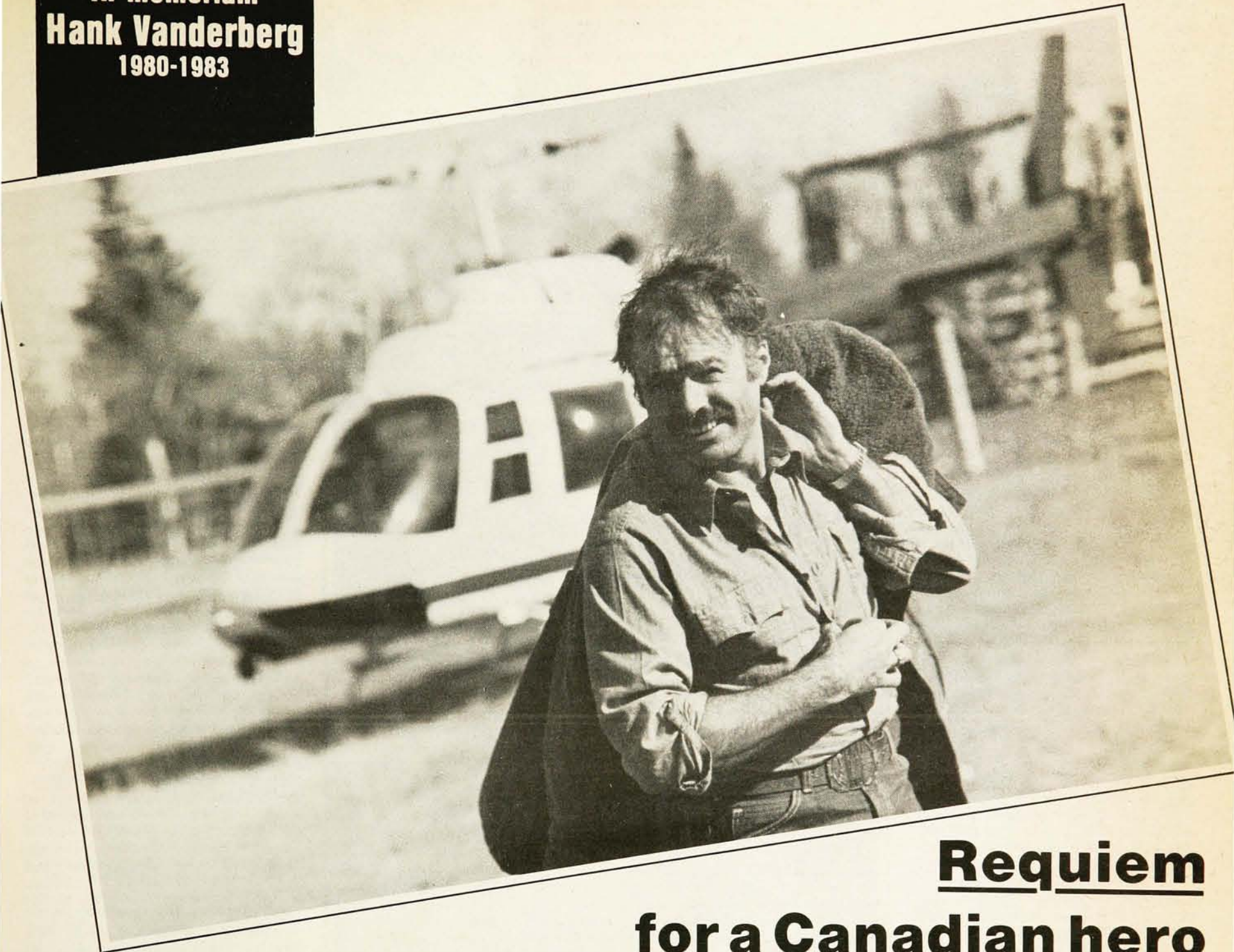


In memoriam
Hank Vanderberg
 1980-1983



Requiem for a Canadian hero

by Michael Dorland

The symptoms were clearly compulsive: at precisely 8 o'clock Sunday evenings, I'd rush to the TV, turn it to CBC, and eagerly wait for the *Vanderberg* theme and those marvelous opening shots of Calgary's corporate canyons. Eight came and went: no *Vanderberg*. Nine o'clock: still no *Vanderberg*. At 11 I'd turn off the set in disgust. This went on for a month of Sundays until, just before Christmas, the awful truth finally sank in. I had actually seen all the six episodes of *Vanderberg* (Oct. 9-Nov. 20) and, pine away as I might in front of the TV, there weren't going to be anymore. That's when I knew I had a bad case of *Vanderberg* withdrawal.

Today the pain is still there. A small part of me understands that only six episodes were promised and, as prom-

ised, were delivered. But another, larger part of me feels much like the lame child in "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" who heard the piper's enchanting music but couldn't walk fast enough to vanish into the magic mountain. For seeing *Vanderberg* was seeing the promised land.

Watching *Vanderberg* was a mainline hit into the national neo-cortex, an ecstatic plunge into the Canadian *mythos*, the transcendent revelation of contemporary Canadianity. I was totally, utterly, completely, addictively captivated by it: every second, every shot, every character, every line.

Vanderberg does for the Canadian present what *Empire Inc.* began to do so successfully for the Canadian past: namely, use the national dream-machine (CBC television) in order to unveil the corporate face of the national dream. The dream itself is so banal as to be unimportant; it is the dream of any self-respecting denizen of a modern capitalist society: the dream of monopolistic

acquisition. In our society what matters more than the dream itself is the actual process of acquisition (of raw materials and/or women) and the conversion of raw materials into commodities, some of which are tangible (cars, houses, wives) and some intangible (power, wealth, love). And it was precisely this productivist thrill, the tension between acquisition and commodification, that was at the heart of *Vanderberg*. For the series was the dramatic face of the corporate age; appropriately, a saga of relations of production.

As of the opening plunge through the skyline of Calgary - the series' strong regional elements only confirmed the homogeneity of Canada as a head-office from sea to sea - one is immediately aware that *Vanderberg* is a dramatic symbolization of the corporate version of the Good Life. *Vanderberg* was entirely shot with all the self-consciousness of a commercial, but more than a mere six-hour advertisement for posses-

sive individualism, *Vanderberg* is an astounding romp through the contemporary corporate unconscious.

Vanderberg is a late 20th century morality play, a "Pilgrim's Progress" for the modern manager. It is a cautionary tale about management styles and the fates of two companies, Creland Gas, a transcontinental pipeline venture, and Maggies, a chain of clothing stores, both part of the Vandoo conglomerate whose chairman of the board is Hank Vanderberg (Michael Hogan).

Creland is masculine and virile; Hank Vanderberg's brainchild. (Indeed one could take Creland as a symbol for a private Canadian entrepreneurial penis-fantasy of supplying New World energy to tired, old Europe). Maggies is a frivolous, female venture and is, of course, losing money in a hemorrhage of capital that endangers the very health of Vandoo itself. A strong, female manager is needed to stem the flow. She is Sandra Evans (Jennifer Dale), wife of

former Vandoo exec Ryan Evans (Allan Royal) who can't keep up the pace and is on his way out. Sandra, though, has the right stuff: "I'd change what I've got and sell things people want." For that attitude, she becomes Western manager of Maggies.

This, then, is the world of the image of total, corporate commitment: a world where nothing is personal and outside there is only emptiness. Vanderberg's wife Liz (Susan Hogan), in her futile struggle for autonomy, exemplifies the meaningless quest for personal significance outside relationships of ownership. As does, but to a lesser extent, Vanderberg's father (Jan Rubes) who foregoes retirement and buys himself a soccer franchise.

Here, then, is the New World: a restless universe where all is in a state of perpetual flux. And the secret is to keep a cool head as all about you others are losing theirs. The Vandoo fortune rises and falls; executives desert, shares plummet; the energy deal with the Belgians collapses; Calvin Richards (Stephen Markle), Vanderberg's on-again, off-again partner, can't be trusted. But throughout, Vanderberg keeps his cool. And seemingly so does Sandra Evans, at least long enough to have an affair with the boss.

But here the cautionary contrast in management style returns, with a sexist vengeance. Sandra's commitment is not utterly sincere; she is faking her cool; she's cut corners, cooked the books, skimmed the profits, and worst of all, got caught at it by Vandoo accountant-lawyer Pierre Sylvan (Yvon Ponton). Vanderberg, on the other hand, never lets emotion get the better of him. With his vision firmly fixed on the corporate bullseye, he takes the Belgian failure in stride and heads for Italy where he makes a deal with the Mafia (disregarding Pierre's moral revulsion), a deal that lets Vanderberg then undercut the Italian oil companies and create the "largest single energy deal ever put together by a single private corporation." As he makes the triumphant announcement in the nick of time to the Creeland board in the concluding episode, Creeland's fortune is successfully assured: Calvin Richard's natural gas will be tankered to Italy and Vandoo's campaign to "take Europe" has been consummated in the soft Italian underbelly.

Vanderberg did not get caught. He regretfully puts the relationship with Sandra on hold and returns to wife Liz who is with child. In the end, somewhat shaky but fundamentally wholesome family values prevail.

That is where the series abruptly stopped, having crashed into the real world of limited resources, the real world of audience ratings and harried newspaper TV critics, awash in the detritus of an imperialist culture where the alienation is so dense that Canadians couldn't recognize the real thing if they saw it with their very own eyes.

Because *Vanderberg* bombed - ratings-wise and critics-wise. And the CBC blinked once or twice, then killed the series, the only conceivable response in the face of what was perceived as a loser program. There is some evidence, however, that this decision not only threw out the baby with the bath-water, but was tantamount to killing the baby.

Vanderberg only lasted six weeks, not a long time in which to change the face of Canadian dramatic television, which is what *Vanderberg* in its all-too brief

lifespan achieved.

Vanderberg demonstrated conclusively that a quantum leap forward has occurred in the Canadian ability to attain precisely industrial standards of entertainment production. For *Vanderberg* marks a number of firsts that are clearly worth underlining: it is the first-ever *outwardly looking* Canadian dramatic series. *Vanderberg* is the first television inkling of a Canadian claim to globalism: a conquest of the territorial limits of the Canadian imaginary. For the first time, that anguishing, internal refusal-to-be that is so central to the Canadian self has been overcome. (Why Italy, of all places, has of late become the butt of so much Canadian animus need not preoccupy us here.)

Related to that, *Vanderberg* managed

to go about its business without once betraying the slightest awareness of any sort of preoccupation with the existence of the creature to the south. While that preoccupation may indeed be there in terms of a foreign sale, it is not in the series itself. And that is what is most striking about the series: its complete self-confidence.

Vanderberg reveals the face of 100% Canadian content. It's as though one were seeing oneself at last for the very first time. Or more accurately the image that some would like to have of us, not as you or I, but as a nation that views itself as a fully realized technological society, as Canada Inc. with limitless resources.

The *Vanderberg* nation is one where the state (which usually lurks spectrally

in the central Canadian imagination as the counter-point to ever-present foreign domination) has withered away, dwindling into a distant administrative body whose only function would seem to be to hand out licenses to business. The view from Calgary is thus tremendously effective: rather than snuff out regionalism in its presentation of Canadian content, *Vanderberg* builds on its regionalism to obtain an entirely fresh national perspective. (One may nonetheless reflect that all this private-enterprise mythologizing is being brought to you by the state broadcasting corporation, but perhaps all corporations share a common world-view.)

If some of the foreign scenes, particularly the Paris bits, seemed pretty unreal, that is a minor complaint - especially given the series' outstanding strengths. As with *Empire Inc.*, using co-directors - Peter Rowe for the first three episodes, William Fruet for the last three - worked beautifully. One would never know there was an eight month time-gap between the first three and the last three episodes.

The acting throughout was uniformly fine: Jennifer Dale has developed a wonderful velvetiness in her portrayals of the all-Canadian bitch; Michael Hogan as Vanderberg was the compleat corporate hero, embodying the technological will to power, but always comfortable in the humanizing garb of a blue-denim shirt; Susan Hogan as Liz sensitively conveyed some of the angst of the domestic commodity; and Stephen Markle's marvelously uncouth Calvin Richards was just grand as one of Western Canada's blue-eyed sheiks.

If immense credit goes to series head wordsman Rob Forsyth who wrote the first three episodes, it was no accident, finally, that the genius behind *Vanderberg* was executive producer Sam Levene, who, like his legendary namesake, has fully grasped the requirements of the time.

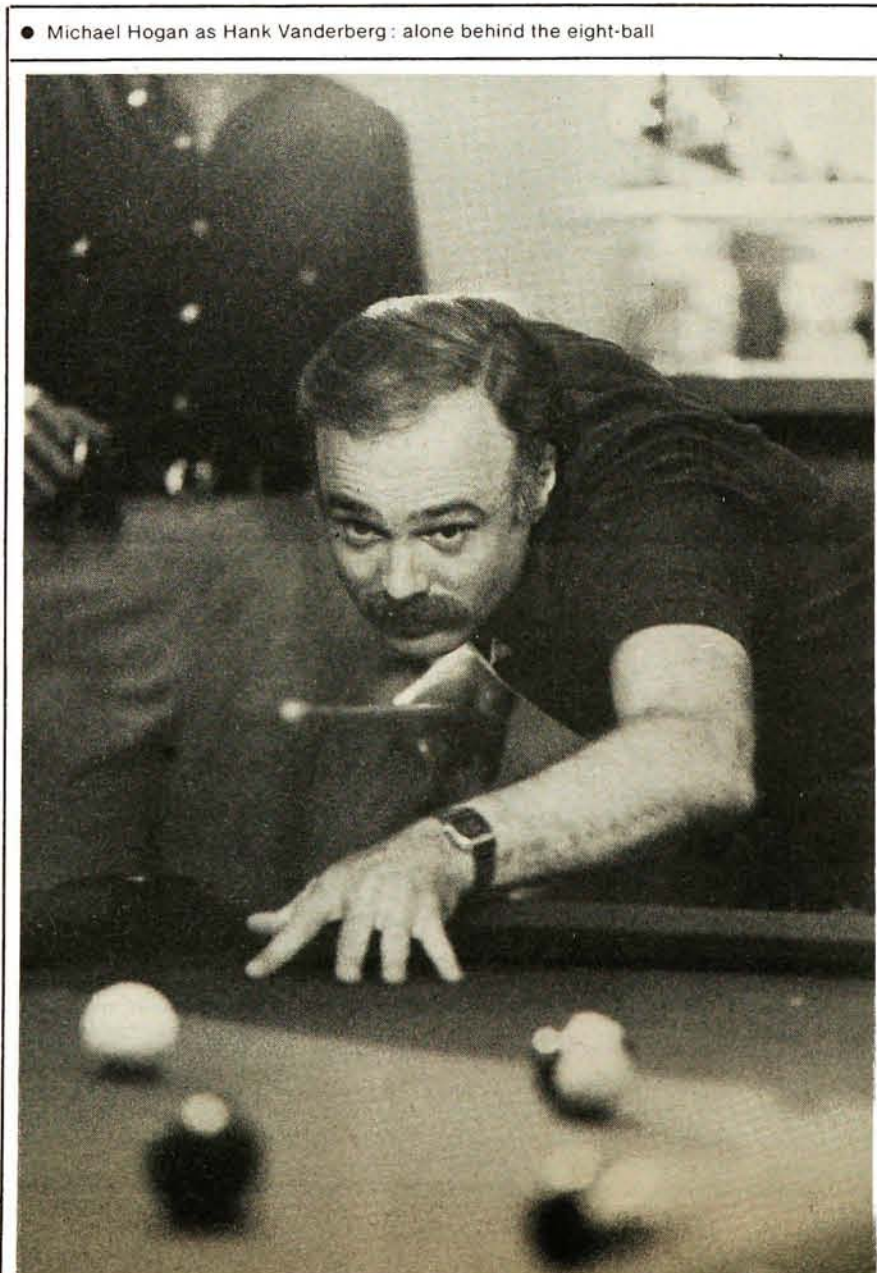
Like Creeland Gas, whose gamble if successful would "change the face of the industry in this country", *Vanderberg* gambled and changed the face of Canadian dramatic television.

Its reward for having done so was swift extermination. *Vanderberg's* fate is a stunning reminder of the life-and-death stakes at issue in the struggle for Canadian culture.

It was Brecht who once quipped that if you didn't agree with "the people", you could always dissolve them. Yet that is exactly the function of mass media. And if there is any doubt remaining as to the overwhelming ability of American programming's power to dissolve Canadians, look again at *Vanderberg*. That we won't be able to is the precise measure of Canadian cultural dissolution. ●



● *Vanderberg* co-director William Fruet (in white shirt) prepares one of the Italian scenes



● Michael Hogan as Hank Vanderberg: alone behind the eight-ball

VANDERBERG d. Peter Rowe, William Fruet p. Sam Levene sc. Rob Forsyth assoc. p. Neil Browne 1st a.d. Rob Malenfant 2nd a.d. John Rainey 3rd a.d. Wendy Ord cont. Carol Fisher unit man. Jeanne Stromberg p. coord. Harris Verge p. sec. Susan Procter cast. Don Shipley, Susan Skinner post p. Sheila Hendry unit. pub. David McCaughna d.o.p. Vic Sarin cam. assts. Dave Towers, Harold Mittel lighting Ian Gibson light. assts. Keith Jenkins, Dave Rowan sd. Dave Brown boom Chris Davies p. des. Arthur Herriott des. asst. Nancey Pankiw cost. des. Suzanne Mess cost. assts. Tulla Moe, Ken Druce make-up Patricia Harshaw-Wilson hair Reg LeBlanc des. coord. Bob Powers staging Ralph MacDonald, Doug Payne, Steve Lemberg set. dec. Peter Razmofsky, Michael Happy, Ki Chang graphics Bob Vanderluys film ed. Les Brown lp. Michael Hogan, Susan Hogan, Jan Rubes, Jennifer Dale, Tara Shields, Barry Flatman, Yvan Ponton, George Toulitos, Stephen Markle, Deborah Grover, Simon Reynolds, Allan Royal.