

On Location

Winnipeg Mob Story

So anyways, I'm sitting on the can in the public washrooms of the Winnipeg International Airport. I'm wearing a huge parka and this goofy fur hat with ear flaps. My pants and longjohns are pulled down to my ankles. Needless to say, I'm hot and sweaty, not only because I'm fully outfitted in my winter's finest, but strangely enough, there are these huge lights beaming over me. Outside the oven-like confines of my stall, I can hear the hustle and bustle of a film crew, a myriad of voices bouncing off the tile walls. For awhile, I begin to feel safe, almost cocoon-like. But soon, panic sets in and all I can think about is the strategically-placed roll of toilet paper in front of my ever-so-modest manhood; strategically-placed, because the movie I'm in - *Mob Story* - is supposed to be for all ages.

You see, yours truly has been cast in a two-million-dollar motion picture which is being produced by Tony Kramreither and features the directorial debut of Canada's very own version of the Taviani brothers, Gabriel and Jancarlo Markiw. My role, however, isn't huge. In fact, it wouldn't even qualify as a supporting stint. I'm playing a guy called "The Canadian", and in my big moment, I'm supposed to be taking a leisurely dump when John Vernon kicks down the door and robs me of my airplane tickets. Of course, the running gag on the set is whether or not I'm a method actor. Ha. Ha.

My previous movie roles have included such plums as the Kansas dog breeder in John Paiz's *Crimewave* and the Emil-Jannings-like gravedigger in Guy Maddin's *Tales From The Gimli Hospital*, so it's safe to assume that my career as an actor has hardly been distinguished. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the utter degradation of my role in *Mob Story*.

What the hell, though; money is money, and for my little bit part, I'm pulling in some fairly substantial scratch. As well, it gives me an opportunity to play a scene on the big screen with one of my all-time Canadian movie idols - John Vernon, the man who hot-tubbed with several amply endowed nubile in the trash-classic, *Chained Heat*, the man who helmed the far-from-prestigious college in *National Lampoon's Animal House*, the man who gets the job done - no matter what it is - John Vernon.

So, I might also add that I'm a big fan of this country's finest character actor, a man who's paid his bills by doing superlative work in utter garbage, as well as doing truly brilliant work in such films as Hitchcock's *Topaz* and Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.

I'd hoped that my scene with Vernon went well, but I wasn't too sure until a few days later



PHOTO: MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

John Vernon (Luce) hands over the tools of the family trade to Angelo Pedari (Tom)

when I ran into him again. The setting was the old Canadian Pacific Railway yards, superbly dressed-up to resemble the docks of New York. Vernon had just finished sopping-up some Chicken à la King with the crew and was getting ready for his next scene. The pic's unit publicist, Sharon Singer, informed me that I'd be lucky to get five minutes with the guy. Boy, was she wrong.

Upon introducing me to Vernon, it became apparent that introductions would not be necessary. Vernon's face lit-up with a broad smile and he bellowed, "Say, the last time I saw you was a couple of days ago in the toilet!" Vernon let out a couple of belly laughs and informed me that he'd seen the rushes of our scene together. "You've gotta catch it," he said. "It's terrific. It's my favorite scene."

Vernon's obviously having a great time playing the hero of this film, a character by the name of Luce, a New York mobster who's escaping a hit put out on him by rival mob-boss Al Waxman. Luce, looking for a safe place to hide, seeks solace with some Old-World relatives in Winnipeg.

"This guy I'm playing is a benevolent old fart," says Vernon. "He's a mafioso, he's a little tired, he's going back to his roots and he's looking for his son, who incidentally, turns out to be a real nebbish."

As well as working with such pros as Waxman on this film, Vernon is also happy with the job that Gabriel and Jancarlo Markiw are doing. *Mob Story* is their first feature and when Vernon initially heard that they would both be directing, he was "a little bit leery."

"I've never been in this kind of situation before, but actually I think it's kind of neat. One brother covers one thing, another covers another. Things appear to be moving quicker than usual." As well, Vernon commends the Markiw brothers with "knowing what they want. We're certainly not hampered by two men directing, because they're working as one unit."

Vernon also claimed he was happy to be working on a project that he really believed in. "I really like the script for *Mob Story* and I can't say that for a lot of them." He acknowledged that an actor's "gotta eat."

"Besides," he added, "it's good for an actor to say 'I'm going to do this pile of shit' and to work in bad things because 85 per cent of what we do is crap anyway. It sharpens you. It really does. I think everybody has to do television for four or five years."

At this point, I informed Vernon that my favorite B-movie was the women's prison picture *Chained Heat* in which he co-starred with scream-queen Linda Blair.

"My wife almost divorced me over that one," said Vernon, "but where else can a 50-year-old man hot-tub with six or seven naked women?"

Then Vernon informed me that one of his favorite B-movie roles was in a picture called *Jungle Warriors* in which "12 beautiful models are in this plane which gets shot down over Brazil by the Mafia and they wandered around for six weeks in absolute tatters in their high-heeled shoes. Everyone got the shits on that one, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It was a terrible picture."

Alas, Vernon must go back to work. He's

about to play a scene with Al Waxman. His parting words are these: "This guy's (Waxman) supposed to be a villain, but he's gonna have everyone in stitches."

That, of course, is what everyone in the Manitoba film industry is hoping. *Mob Story* is an important film for the indigenous industry in the regions. But, as Al Waxman told me himself, "It doesn't matter where this picture is shot; it's a good script and it's going to make a good picture. That's the bottom line. I don't think of this picture as just furthering the Manitoba film industry, I'm interested in furthering the Canadian film industry. I don't think we should be thinking about furthering any given regions, I think we should be furthering the total industry. And forgive me, if most it has to take place in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, - Tough! That's the way it has to be. Like in the States, if you're from Minneapolis or St. Louis and you wanna be in the film industry, you go to where it is; to New York or Los Angeles. *Mob Story* is going to be a good picture and it's very nice that it's being shot in Winnipeg, but we're not making the picture here because someone is pointing a gun to our head for the sake of regionalism. It's being made here, because it's set here."

The film co-stars Margot Kidder and Kate Vernon. Executive producers are Tony Kramreither and Don Haig. Funding sources include Telefilm Canada and the Canada Manitoba Cultural Industries Development Office (CIDO). Pic, as if you hadn't already guessed by now, is a comedy.

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