

Actor feels self-promotion a 'must' to make it in Canadian film business

By Victor Stanton



MICHAEL KIRBY

KITCHENER (CP) — Getting to know the right people and being aggressive in promoting yourself are what's needed to develop as an actor in Canada's fledgling film industry.

That's the formula that's working for Kitchener native Michael Kirby, who was given the choice of any co-starring role he wanted in the movie Agency filmed in Montreal.

The picture, an espionage thriller budgeted at more than \$4 million, stars Americans Robert Mitchum, Lee Majors and Valerie Perrine and is directed by Hungarian-Canadian George Kaczender.

Kirby, interviewed during a recent visit here, chose for himself the role of a Harvard-graduate assassin.

"This is the third film I've done for George Kaczender — the others were U-Turn (1973) and In Praise Of Older Women (1978) — and over the years we've become very good friends. So, when he was getting ready to do Agency he phoned me.

"He said the three starring roles were cast but that he was sending me the script and I could pick any other role that I wanted.

"My reason for choosing the part of the assassin was because it requires me to work more days and I'll

have more of an opportunity to learn more about film-making.

"There was another part I was really interested in but it would have meant only four days work. As the assassin I get to chase Lee Majors and Valerie Perrine all the way through the movie."

Kirby's last movie role was in the yet-to-be-released Summer Camp, shot in Northern Ontario as a follow-up to Canadian producer-director Ivan Reitman's highly successful National Lampoon's Animal House.

Again, Kirby had worked in other films produced by Reitman, including Foxy Lady (1971) and Death Weekend (1976).

"He (Reitman) called me and asked if I'd like to play Eddie Wintermeyer, a 33-year-old camp counselor who's a very patient, gentle, tolerant, big, lovable, bumbling guy who takes care of the six-year-old campers. Ivan said there wasn't much to the character but that I'd get a couple months' work out of it.

"I said that was fine and I read the script once and found the scenes I was in. Then I read the script again and found the scenes I could be in.

"I went to Ivan and sat down with him and producer Dan Goldberg and I said: 'All right now, could I be a referee in this scene? Could I be a folksinger in this scene?'

"And when they saw that I was genuinely interested

in their film they started throwing bits at me here and there and all of a sudden Eddie Wintermeyer came to life."

This kind of "aggressiveness" is "absolutely necessary in Canada," says Kirby who's been working regularly as an actor in this country since 1970.

Kirby, 33, grew up playing basketball and intending to be a physical education teacher.

"I had always been interested in theatre though, and as a very young child I used to write little plays and get other kids to take part in them."

After high school in Kitchener, he went to Springfield College in Illinois on a sports scholarship.

"In my second year I hurt myself pretty badly and had to stop playing basketball. And by this time I was getting pretty bored with my studies. I found out the subjects involved with physical education just didn't agree with me so I transferred to dramatic arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill."

He left that university to join a children's theatre touring group which travelled for eight months "performing in underprivileged Negro schools throughout the southern U.S."

This was followed by four months of summer stock, further drama study in New York and roles in a couple of off-Broadway productions before returning to Canada in 1970.

"I always wanted to come back to Canada, first of all because it is my home and secondly because I felt I would have a better chance at developing my craft here."

Kirby credits having a good agent for getting him stage roles at Montreal's Saidye Bronfman Centre Theatre and Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. He has also performed at Theatre London as Pat Garrett in Billy The Kid.

Although he likes to return to the stage "once or twice a year," film is the acting medium which fascinates him most.

He considers himself particularly lucky to have had roles in two of 1978's major Canadian Film Award winners, In Praise Of Older Women and The Silent Partner. In the latter picture, selected as the best Canadian movie of the year, Kirby plays a key supporting role — a bank manager — sharing scenes with international stars Elliott Gould and Susannah York.

Being in a movie which wins an Etrog — the name of the statuette given to Canadian Film Award winners — can make all the difference in the world to an actor in this country, says Kirby.

"Suddenly everybody in the industry from coast to coast knows who you are and they see your work."