

Child of Fortune

Chris Makepeace, says one director, is "the best natural reactive actor I've ever worked with." And he's only 16 By Winston Collins

He told him to get the 4 o'clock bus," says Doreen Makepeace apologetically. It's 4:30, and the no. 82 bus takes only 10 minutes to get from Toronto's Rosedale subway station. Her 16-year-old son, Chris, still isn't back from his regular Saturday afternoon search of memorabilia shops for bubble gum cards and Marvel comic books. Just then Chris arrives, wearing a plaid shirt, Levis and a pair of running shoes which he sheds at the door. He offers a tentative smile and a hesitant handshake.

Chris Makepeace is better known as Rudy, the shy camper in *Meatballs* who is befriended by Tripper, the counsellor (*Saturday Night Live's* Bill Murray). Soon he will be well known by his own name. This summer he stars in *My Bodyguard* as a rich kid who hires protection to endure the trials of attending public school for the first time. In the winter he co-stars with Lee Majors and Burgess Meredith in *The Last Chase* as a boy genius who runs away from school and is caught up in a supreme adventure.

"I haven't done anything so far from my own character that I'm conscious of going into another role," Chris says, settling into a rocking chair. He is neither a rich kid nor a boy genius (he's an "average," "bored" student at Jarvis Collegiate, and his father, Harry, is vice-president of sales for Cutler-Hammer, an electronics company); but he does resemble the characters he plays. Like them, he's breaking out of shy and reserved boyhood into open and gregarious adolescence. The charming looks of a photogenic child have already given way to the interesting presence of a young man.

In conversation, Makepeace at times tries to approximate adult expression. "It was doing *My Bodyguard* that solidified the fact that it was more feasible for me to become a professional actor," he says. Usually, however, he speaks like a congenial teenager who just happens to be one of the busiest actors in the movie business.

"Doing a film is the complete opposite of going to school," he says. "It's really hard because I have to get up early and work long hours. Sometimes I have trouble saying my lines, but I'm always very comfortable in front of the camera."

Chris began performing on camera at age 9. He and his older brothers, Tony and David, told their mother they wanted to



Chris in Memory Lane, one of the Toronto memorabilia shops he frequents. "No one can teach you how to act," he says. "Either you have it or you don't"

do television commercials. With her help, all three got jobs. Chris's first assignment was trying to feed Kraft toffees to an English sheep dog. Within three years he had eight more to his credit. Then, suddenly, the blue-eyed boy with wavy brown hair stopped being asked to plug candy or cereal or garbage bags. His mother explains why Chris had a "lean year" at 13: "He was no longer in demand for kiddies and looked too young for teens."

But Chris was just right for 12-year-old Rudy, a role he won over 1,200 aspiring actors. His mother is still stunned by the *Meatballs* explosion ("Who would have guessed it would be so big? Who would have dreamed it would bloom into this?").

After seeing *Meatballs*, the director Tony Bill flew Chris to Hollywood to audition him for *My Bodyguard*. Again he won the role by beating out a host of hopefuls. The film, which co-stars Martin Mull and Ruth Gordon, is an American production, and so Bill had to justify

the choice of a Canadian to U.S. authorities. He made sure Chris was in every scene of the film. "Chris is a natural actor," he says. "He's interesting to watch even when he's not doing or saying anything."

In September Chris took a weekend off from shooting *My Bodyguard* in Chicago to audition for *The Last Chase* in Toronto. The director, Martyn Burke, had already seen "dozens and dozens" of actors; he had also seen Makepeace in *Meatballs* and wasn't impressed ("All he did was run a lot"). But after Chris read for the part Burke hired him on the spot.

"Chris is the best natural reactive actor I've ever worked with," says Burke. "He can do things with his looks alone that actors twice his age haven't mastered. I worried at first that he might be swayed by the glitz and glamor of the movie trade. But Chris is interested in the craft, not the glitter. If he stays that way, and I think he will, he's got a great future."

Chris says he squirms when he watches himself on the screen. "That

looks fake," he will moan. "I should have done that differently." Though his role in *Meatballs* earned him a 1979 Genie nomination, he dismisses the performance with an embarrassed shrug. "I didn't know what I was doing!" he exclaims. Experience has made him a better actor and something of a philosopher as well: "Learning from your mistakes — that's what it's all about," he observes.

Testimony to Chris's talent are the film scripts now arriving at the Makepeace house. On a typical evening Chris builds model airplanes in his bedroom while his mother screens scripts at the dining room table. "I read all of them first," Doreen Makepeace says. "There's so much violence, sex and bad language, and I know Chris wouldn't be interested in those." She's right. Directors have to coax him to utter any four-letter word more scurrilous than "dam."

His mother accompanied Chris on all his professional trips last year. In California they toured the Paramount studios so he could see the *Star Trek* set; she cut short an evening at what she calls a "Hollywood party." "You hear such stories about child actors, and I didn't want anything to happen to him." On location or at home, Mrs. Makepeace prepares her son a daily, late-afternoon cup of tea. She's aware, though, that her little boy is growing up. When he started filming *The Last Chase* in October, the bashful lad was hesitant to go near Lee Majors; a month later, on location in the Arizona desert, Chris was striding to the motor home of the former \$6 Million Man, banging on the door and hollering, "How ya doin', ol' buddy?"

Because of his film commitments, Chris missed the first term of grade 10 last year. "I was afraid that the teachers and students might think of me differently when I went back." They didn't, probably because he hadn't changed except in ways 15-year-old boys do — his voice was deeper, and he shaved more often.

Chris Makepeace hopes for a long career as an actor and, eventually, as a director. "I'd like to stay in Toronto," he says. "But if the film industry doesn't grow any bigger than it is, I might be short of work." Would he move to New York? "Never." California? His blue eyes light up, and for an answer his eyebrows wiggle. Come September, however, Chris will be going back to school, catching the no. 82 bus on the corner.

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