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Unfiltered

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Canadian Theatre Review, Issue 141, January 2010, pp. 38-42 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.0.0006>

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Unfiltered

by Michael Greyeyes

I am an actor. I have played everything from a cop to a serial killer, a homeless man to a wealthy corporate lawyer, a soldier to a proverbial Indian Chief—supporting characters and lead characters. Interestingly, when I informed my wife of being asked to contribute an article that examines celebrity, she turned to me with genuine concern and asked, “What do you know about celebrity?”

It was a good question that made me ponder what, in fact, I would write about. Perhaps I should have indicated that I would be writing about my brush with fame in that *Hollywood* sense of the word—name recognition, seeing my picture on the side of a bus in New York City or on a billboard along the Sunset Strip in L.A.—or even reaching a critical mass of public interest that would require having a fan club.

For the record, I do get fan mail. My fans have created webpages dedicated to my work and me—and I recently got 200 birthday wishes on my Facebook profile from my “friends” base of 1,458 (most of whom I don’t know). But does that make me a celebrity? To be truthful, I can’t possibly answer that question because the person in the limelight can’t determine such a thing; it remains in the domain of the masses, so I discovered several years ago.

I lived in Lakewood, Ohio for most of my acting career—a western suburb of Cleveland. I had an apartment in L.A. where I lived for part of the year, but Lakewood was my real home. Back when we still rented movies on VHS, I frequented a local video rental store where everyone knew my name. The clerks would ask me what I was filming and I usually offered one of the following answers: a guest starring role on *Charmed* or *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* or a role in a television Movie-of-the Week (MOW). But at age thirty, I went back to university to get a Master’s degree, and gave up my apartment in L.A., and the life of a Hollywood actor. Time passed and my studies progressed. Then one

day when I was at the video rental store renting video, a clerk recognized my name from discussions I suppose, with other staff. He looked at me and said, “Hey, aren’t you that former movie star?”

It was a good question.

He stumbled over himself to qualify his gaffe, but the damage to my ego was already done. But I learned something valuable: I can control the roles I take and the activities I pursue, but I can’t control how people frame or define what I do. It’s entirely in their purview to determine who’s a movie star and who’s not, or in my case, who’s washed up and renting movies (that he wished he was in) at the neighbourhood strip mall. LOL.

LOL (laughing out loud) is an acronym many of you have likely used, born of text messaging and e-mail grammar like :(when you’re sharing something sad about yourself or :) when the sun is out. There is also TTYL (talk to you later), OMG (oh my God) or its cousin, OMG! (omigawd!), LMAO (laughing my ass off), WTF? (what the f**k?) as well as emoticons.¹ The language of bloggers, user-review authors, and texters is easy

Michael Greyeyes replaces Clark Gable in this parody of the iconic *Gone With the Wind* poster for the 2007 imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival.

Courtesy Imaginenative Film + Media Arts Festival

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to adopt, which makes it insidious. It relates to a shift in our social consciousness that equates availability or ease of use with knowledge or even expertise. Think of *Guitar Hero*, for example; spending hours mastering that game doesn’t mean you can play one chord on a real guitar. But it is easy. The same holds true for e-mail and social networking programs that make it possible to establish contact with almost anybody. If I wanted to, I could e-mail US President Barack Obama. There’s something about e-mail that makes the actual space—metaphorical, physical, personal—disappear. If he wrote me back, I’d fall out of my chair—stunned by the appearance of his e-mail in my inbox, as if he had knocked on my door. The space between us is disappearing, and this is what has happened to me and people who have seen my films (or more specifically those who have seen *Stolen Women: Captured Hearts*).

Stolen Women: Captured Hearts is a MOW directed by Jerry London that aired on CBS Television March 16, 1997. In it, I played Tokalah, a Lakota warrior. It is without question, my most famous role. Hal Erickson provides a brief description:

Based on a true story, the made-for-TV *Stolen Women, Captured Hearts* [sic] takes place in Kansas in 1868. In retribution for the genocidal attacks of General George Armstrong Custer, a band of Lakota Sioux kidnap a pair of white women, Anna Brewster Morgan (Janine Turner) and Sarah White (Jean Louisa Kelly). At first terrified of her captors, Anna eventually falls in love with the noble, honorable Sioux warrior Tokalah (Michael Greyeyes). After a year’s captivity, Sarah is returned to her own people—and now she must choose between her new life with Tokalah and her previous existence as the wife of farmer Daniel Morgan (Patrick Bergin), a man she hardly knows (*All Movie Guide*).

From this terse synopsis, one might guess that the film is a western, a period romance, a historical drama, and a good old-fashioned bodice ripper. What one might not guess is that hundreds (or thousands?) of women think it’s absolutely sublime.

The film was an unprecedented success. Some 12.4 million viewers watched *Stolen Women: Captured Hearts* when

it first aired on CBS (Wikipedia). It was the most highly-rated program of the night. After the initial airing, the network called my agents telling them that CBS had never received so many calls from a single airing of a movie. The audience response was convincing and it led the network to re-air the film a year later—a rare occurrence in the MOW world. The critical reaction, however, was mixed. From Carole Horst, of *Variety*:

Great use of locations and camerawork by Frank Prinzi, and snappy direction by Jerry London gloss over some more troublesome aspects of “Women,” but the main focus of Richard Fielder’s script is the romance of Anna and Tokalah.

And an old-fashioned caveman-type romance it is: She is kidnapped by a half-naked hardbody who, as Tokalah tells Anna, had seen her in a vision and knew that she was his destiny.

Oh, be still my heart!

Like “Dances With Wolves, which raised popular awareness of the Native American plight in the late 1800s,” “Women” is sensitive to the Lakotas, using the Lakota language (with subtitles) and Native American actors. Story is couched in the emotional context of racism, with the tangled politics of manifest destiny left back at the ranch.

Turner and Greyeyes are fine, but rest of cast, ... skim through the telepic, barely making an impression (*Variety*).

Tom Shales, for *The Washington Post*, wrote, “Greyeyes makes his character’s combination of strength and tenderness believable and attractive” (H01). General consensus among the critics was that the movie was serviceable at best, maudlin at worst, with compelling performances by Janine Turner (of *Northern Exposure* fame) and myself.

Neither the synopsis nor the reviews address the central idea of the film: that many people find themselves living unfulfilled lives, but in magical circumstances they might get another chance at happiness or love. This is what seems to have drawn in many of the women who have written to me or posted comments online.

Before the advent of Facebook, I used to receive letters from people all over the world, care of my agent in Burbank. Most asked for my autographed picture. My agent formed a convenient filter between me and those who wished to connect with me. How many of those letters did I actually receive? A couple hundred or so. A modest level of interest, by most standards. Eric Schweig, another noted aboriginal actor, received garbage bag after garbage bag of fan letters after he appeared in the blockbuster *Last of the Mohicans* with

Daniel Day-Lewis. And mega-celebrity George Clooney has staff whose sole responsibility is to send autographed photos to people who request them. NTK (nice to know). Before Facebook, writing a fan letter took some initiative; since one had to track down an address, a stamp, and spend time actually writing down a request on paper before walking it to the mailbox. That may seem positively daunting in today’s climate of Googling a name and clicking “Next” until their email address pops up.

Stolen Women: Captured Hearts was licensed for worldwide television distribution—and over the course of the last twelve years, it has slowly aired its way across five continents. The vast majority of letters I’ve received compliment me on my performance and wish me continued success. Many pose questions about my cultural background as a “Native American Indian” (or some variation thereof) (Various). Invariably, the next question asked is about where can they find a copy of the movie. The film was never released on VHS or DVD, but it re-aired on the Lifetime Television network around 2000, where new audiences of women viewed it for the first time.

In the late 1990s, two fans created a website for me. It reflected their artistic aesthetic and their desire to give other fans access to information and photographs not yet widely available on the web. It was really quite lovely. Eventually the burden of maintaining the webpage became too much for the original creators, and Jan Molina took over as webmaster. Together, we redesigned the page to reflect my own aesthetic and updated information (www.michael-greyeyes.com). The revamped website included a Guest Book, which people could sign either privately or allow for public sharing.

Here is a typical public post from a woman in Colchester, England:

I have just had the most wonderful afternoon watching you in *Stolen Women Captured Hearts* [sic]. What a very thought provoking film. It is refreshing to see Native Americans portrayed as the ‘Goodies’ for a change.

Michael Greyeyes performs the title role in *Tecumseh’s Vision*, part of the PBS American Experience documentary/ live action series *We Shall Remain*.

Photo by Lauren Prestileo/WGBH Boston

...Thank you once again for making my afternoon of ironing, go by, being lost in another time. (Bull)

Once the website was up, I would get another rush of posts each time the MOW aired. In fact, I could track which country the movie had aired last, as there would be fifteen to twenty messages from the same country: Poland, Argentina, France, England, Portugal, Switzerland, and Japan. The tone of these messages was consistent; equal parts restraint and curiosity, with questions about where they could get a copy of the film.

A letter from a woman in South Africa continues to haunt me when I think about this film's reach (Various). In her post, the woman explained that she was originally from northern Europe, but found herself in the insular world of a South African Muslim community after falling in love with a man and converting. She had experienced tremendous personal family conflict when she left her home, but was insistent about pursuing her new love interest. Yet after many years of trying to adjust her world-view and become a good Muslim wife, she realized that she was lost and desperately unhappy. Then she saw *Stolen Women: Captured Hearts*, about a woman whose circumstances strikingly echoed her own. In the film, Anna chooses to walk away from her life as a frontier wife and travels alone into Indian territory to reclaim her love. The woman from South Africa went on to explain that, like Anna, she realized that she retained agency in her life; she decided to leave her husband and return home. She wrote that this modest film had saved her life—and that she had once again found happiness. HBB (but in this instance *humbled* beyond belief).

Then on October 4, 2004, Facebook launched and significantly changed the way fans and their favourite actors connected. And thanks to YouTube, another Internet phenomenon, *Stolen Women: Captured Hearts* could now be accessed by anyone, anywhere. A tribute video, created by Lafie Rose, set to music by British trip-hop band Massive Attack, premiered on YouTube two years ago and has received over 20,000 hits (Lafie Rose). Many viewers comment on how much they love this movie!!!!!!! (note the # of !!!s). Others choose to say a little more:

Rockchickbabe wrote:

me and my mum are obsessed with this film, we've had it on VHS for a few years now. It is such a beautiful film and Michael Greyeyes is gorgeous.

GymGirlColorado added:

he is so fine dam he is on fire

Milkypigeon wrote:

this film was on tv yesterady [sic]. I watched it thinking it would be rubbish but I loved it!! made me cry.. god, i'm a pussy. He's so hot in a savage kind of way..

To which RabiaB responded:

Best way to be hot in.

Hmngbrd implored:

Santa, I want HIM for Xmas.

While Ferngully101 summed it up best for a number of female viewers:

Michael Grey Eyes [sic] can capture me any day (YouTube, All Comments).

Such comments are flattering and well intended, but the space between me, the subject of such remarks, and the writers has diminished significantly—even if they are unaware that I might be reading their comments. They have moved into that space and claim the right to speak as they see fit.

A number of years ago, I joined Facebook as a means of staying in touch with my students. When I was just starting to use it, I had about twenty-five “friends.” Soon the number of colleagues and friends on my list grew; and so did the number of friendship requests from people I didn't know. It was a predicament since I didn't know ANY of them. How was I to choose? What criteria should I use? Only admit the attractive ones? Only the ones who didn't look like stalkers?

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In the end I took a surprising route—if the person looked aboriginal I accepted their friendship request. Why? Although I rarely received letters from aboriginal women or men, I knew from my travels that my community was very proud of my work and looked to me as a role model. If saying yes to friendship ensured that my image within my community was strengthened, I would allow that filter of privacy to fall away. SLAP. That grew me fast. I may not be a major celebrity, but I'm big in NDN country! Of course, with the move to accept strangers into my circle of Facebook “friends,” the cat was definitely out of the bag. Men and women, young and old, from various different cultures and from many foreign countries requested this connection. I had to add another layer of reasoning to accommodate these offers, so I decided to accept a request if the person knew anyone on my existing “friends” list. Then I decided to drop the concept of filtering altogether and say yes to anyone who wished to

join my Facebook fraternity. And that's how I got to 1,458 "friends." For 90 per cent of these people, my acceptance of their request was the beginning and the end of our contact. Having me—a celebrity—as a friend was all they required. They certainly don't write to me or "poke" me. On my "wall," a few graciously posted comments along the lines of, "Thanx for the add!!!! Take care!!!" But for the most part, they are silent members of my cyber community.

The other 10 per cent include my actual friends and others who escape simple definition. Some of them want to talk. A lot. The instant messaging window would pop up so much while I was online, that for a period of four or five weeks, I'd go online for only two or three minutes, hoping none of these total strangers would notice me there. I was scared of my own Facebook page, NALOPKT. Of course, it didn't occur to me that I could just refuse to "chat" with those people. That struck me as terribly rude! Of course, the "Chatty Cathy" that I am, I went back to Facebook, but now I've "gone Hollywood" and mostly ignore those chat invitations.

NTIMM, but I think Facebook is great. The space between us hasn't reappeared magically, but the communication people observe when sending me a message or posting is moving back toward the dignified, reflecting my aesthetic (or it could be my age). People are self-filtering in actual conversation.

Many people now have cell phone cameras, which I've been photographed by all over the place and [Facebook] "tagged" accordingly. The hope of filtering in this context has gone completely out the window. *Globe and Mail* columnist Russell Smith cautions those still vainly hoping for privacy in the very public world of YouTube and Facebook:

Before you post anything, ask yourself, would I be totally happy with this blown up on the front page of the *Mail On Sunday*? Because that, if anything good ever happens to you, is where it will be (R: 1, 3).

In my "real" circle of friends, no one actually craves celebrity. And my circle, admittedly, is comprised of artists who, no matter how wealthy or successful, could always use a bit more publicity! But why would anyone want to be hounded all the way to the local Starbucks by a gang of no-good-niks with cameras? It comes down to the choice an artist makes to keep filters in place between the work and our need for public attention—an uneasy mix, not unlike tickling the tail of a dragon. And dragons, to be sure, look better from a distance.

B4N,

Michael Greyyes

Michael Greyyes is an actor, director, choreographer, and educator. He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre at York University. He appeared most recently in the PBS American Experience documentary/ live action film Tecumseh's Vision, in the title role, as part of the series We Shall Remain.

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Notes

1 Glossary of texting terms used in "Unfiltered"

B4N = bye for now

HBB = hip beyond belief

LMAO = laughing my ass off

OMG = omigawd

NALOPKT = not a lot of people know that

NDN = Indian

NTIMM = not that it matters much

NTK = nice to know

TTYL = talk to you later

WTF = what the F**k?

For additional translations of texting terminology visit: <http://www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php>.