

## Pioneer filmmaker turned hard-hitting social issues into popular television

He returned from naval duty in the Second World War to pioneer such shows as *Wojeck*, writes Sandra Martin, and to set standards for 'what an archetypal Canadian drama series ought to be'

Globe and Mail - July 7, 2007  
SANDRA MARTIN

Forty years ago, when John Vernon as *Wojeck* and Gordon Pinsent as Quentin Jurgens, M.P., were upholding Canadian attributes of social justice on the country's black-and-white television sets, Ron Weyman was in his golden age at CBC Television drama. A visual artist and a navy veteran who had seen HMS Hood go down and landed at Omaha Beach in the D-Day invasion of Normandy, Mr. Weyman learned to make documentaries at the National Film Board and to shoot film on location by watching Italian directors Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini in action. That's the cultural baggage Mr. Weyman brought to CBC-TV in the mid-1950s. Within a decade, he had persuaded the corporation to shift from videotape to film and to send directors out of the studios and into the streets so that they could use real locations in home-grown stories that reflected contemporary social issues. And he had put *Wojeck*, a short-lived but stellar dramatic series, into the imaginations of viewers.

One early fan was Ivan Fecan, president and CEO of CTVglobemedia. Back in 1966, when *Wojeck* premiered, he was a 12-year-old boy. "In *Wojeck*, I saw performances and stories and images of Toronto in a way that I had never seen before and, frankly, rarely afterward. It made a huge impression on me," he said in a telephone interview this week. Of Mr. Weyman, he said, "I didn't know him well personally, but I was a huge fan of his work. He was the real deal, the real ground-breaker in Canadian drama, and I don't think he ever

got enough credit for what he proved could be done."

A little more than 20 years later, when Mr. Fecan was program chief at CBC, he hauled six *Wojeck* episodes out of the vaults and put them back on the air. Mr. Fecan still thinks that Mr. Weyman's work sets the standard for "what an archetypal Canadian drama series ought to be today."

Ronald Charles Tosh Weyman was the third son of four children of Margaret (Potts) and Joshua Weyman, a machinist. He was born in England in the middle of the First World War. The family immigrated to St. Catharines, Ont., in 1923 because Mr. Weyman's older brother Charles had settled there. Within a few years, the Weymans had moved to the Danforth area of Toronto, where Ron attended Danforth and East York Collegiates. When the Depression hit and Ron had to leave school to help out financially, he took on a variety of jobs, including working as a tea taster.

As soon as he had some money in his pockets, he bought a small boat and taught himself to sail. He was also very interested in painting and acting and, with his younger sister (broadcaster and sculptor Rita Greer Allen), became part of a local theatrical group that swirled around Dora Mavor Moore. Through these connections, Ron met University of Toronto undergraduates Alison (Ashy) Alford and her older sister Giovanna (Vanna), the daughters of John Alford, who was the founding chair of the university's fine arts department.

After the Second World War broke out in 1939, Mr. Weyman enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve. Despite his lack of formal education, he was in the first group of RCNVR recruits who were seconded to the Royal Navy for officer training. About the time that France was falling and Dunkirk was being evacuated, Sub-Lieutenant Weyman was qualifying as a specialist with anti-submarine detection equipment.

Among other ships, he was the only Canadian to serve on HMS Achates as part of the escort-destroyer group attending on the battlecruiser Hood when she was sunk in 10 minutes by the German capital ship Bismarck with the loss of all but three hands during the Battle of the Denmark Strait on May 24, 1941.

After Achates hit a mine on the Murmansk run, with the loss of half its company, SLt. Weyman joined HMCS St. Croix on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic during some of the most treacherous U-boat engagements of the war. He and Ashy were married in October, 1941, while he was home on leave. About 16 months later, when he was overseas again, she died in her sleep -- probably of an epileptic seizure.

As the balance finally shifted in the war, he was promoted to first lieutenant on a landing ship, tank (LST) and responsible for getting what he called a "floating radar palace" on Omaha Beach in June, 1944. Subsequently, he received a promotion to lieutenant commander and a new assignment: command of an LST bound for Southeast Asia, where he was to lead Indian troops onto the beaches of Malaya and Burma. Before he could see action, the Americans dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Japanese surrendered. In describing his war service, he said he "was mined once, torpedoed once and got sunk a third time."

Life was not all battle stations. He had continued to paint on his various vessels and while on leave in London contributed some canvasses to an exhibition of Canadian War

Art at The National Gallery in London. One of his paintings, U-Boat Attack, was purchased by The National Gallery in Ottawa. Another dozen works (five paintings and seven drawings) now belong to the Canadian War Museum.

After he was demobilized in Halifax, Mr. Weyman wanted to become a serious painter and headed to Ottawa to consult with a curator at The National Gallery. That same weekend, he encountered Sydney Newman of the fledgling National Film Board, who suggested he try film instead. By chance, Nick Reed had just come back from Greece with the film footage that would later be used in the film Out of the Ruins. He took Mr. Weyman on as an assistant, and when Mr. Reed returned to his home in South Carolina, he inherited the film. "I was hooked," he wrote later.

He was also becoming hooked on his sister-in-law, Vanna. Her husband, John Terrace, a bomber pilot in the U.S. Army Air Force, had been shot down over Magdeburg, Germany, in 1944 and was missing in action for two years until his death was finally confirmed. She and Mr. Weyman became close because of their bereavements and their mutual interest in the visual arts. They married on June 28, 1947, and eventually had five children: Cindy, Jenny, John (Tiki), Peter (Bay) and James.

Mr. Weyman worked for the NFB from 1946 to 1953. He made more than 20 films, including After Prison, What?, which won the prize for best theatrical film at the Canadian Film Festival in 1951, and The Safety Supervisor, which earned a first award at the Venice Film Festival in 1952. After seven years, he quit to freelance in Italy, the ancestral home of many in his wife's family. While they were abroad, he wrote and filmed eight documentaries in Italy and the Middle East for the NFB and the United Nations, learning how to shoot film on location rather than in studio, a skill that he brought back to Canada and to the CBC, where he began working in 1954 under Robert Allen, who was the head of television drama

and the scriptwriter/accountant who had married Mr. Weyman's younger sister Rita.

His lasting contribution began in the 1962-63 season with his invention of *The Serial*, a program that presented Canadian novels on film and tape and employed Canadian actors, directors, writers and producers. It was on *The Serial* that Mr. Weyman produced dramatizations of Thomas Raddall's *The Wings of the Night*, Morley Callaghan's *More Joy in Heaven* and the pilots that would become *Wojeck*, *Quentin Durgens, M.P.* and *Hatch's Mill*, working with such directors as Paul Almond, David Gardner and later Daryl Duke.

*Tell Them The Streets Are Dancing*, based on the files of Dr. Morton Shulman, was written by Philip Hersch and starred John Vernon (obituary Feb. 4, 2005), Bruno Gerussi and Patricia Collins. The plot pitted a crusading big-city coroner investigating the deaths of five Italian construction workers against their greedy bosses and corrupt government inspectors. Audiences loved it and Mr. Weyman quickly commissioned enough scripts from Mr. Hersch to run 10 episodes the next season, starring Mr. Vernon as *Wojeck*. As a model, *Wojeck* (which ran from 1966 to 1968) was the forerunner of NBC's *Quincy, M.E.*, and CBC's *Da Vinci's Inquest*.

The series, which used the Weymans' own home as the set for *Wojeck*'s house, attracted 2,900,000 viewers with an overall audience enjoyment of 80 and climbed into the top 10 of most popular shows when sold to Britain. Another pilot, *Mr. Member of Parliament*, starring Gordon Pinsent as a naive and conscientious politician, and directed by Mr. Gardner, became the hit series *Quentin Durgens, M.P.*

Both programs brought hard-hitting contemporary social issues (abortion, suicide, abuse of power) into dramatic stories played out in locations that Canadians recognized as part of their own worlds. But none of it lasted, for the same reasons that have beleaguered so many other "golden ages" in

Canada's cultural history: a lack of money, vision and commitment. The CBC couldn't commit to a third season of *Wojeck* or promise steady employment to the actors, directors and producers, so they all followed the jobs and the money to Los Angeles. Even Mr. Weyman toyed with moving to California.

In a brief to CBC management in April, 1970, a frustrated Mr. Weyman complained that a vacuum existed between the policy planners and the drama producers that "threatens the future of CBC drama" and "the survival of our community of talent." He insisted that "a given volume of production is essential on a continuing basis, if we hope to maintain a healthy climate in which talent can survive" and he outlined the various measures he thought should be taken, including training and letting people make mistakes in regional and local productions rather than on the network, where the new writer or new director "falls on his face in front of millions of people" while the public and the critics "quite properly" wonder "if we know what it is we are doing."

He continued to make drama at the CBC in the 1970s with shows such as *Corwin*, *The Manipulators*, *Welcome Stranger*, *The Albertans* and a dramatization of Margaret Laurence's novel *The Fire Dwellers*, but nothing exceeded the audience rapport he had achieved a decade earlier with *Wojeck*. "The tragedy is that he got sidetracked," Mr. Fecan said. "He could have gone on to do so much more, but he never got the chance and consequently he didn't get the credit he deserved for what he did."

After he retired from the CBC in 1980, Mr. Weyman turned back to painting and to writing screenplays and a new form: novels. He borrowed Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous fictional character Sherlock Holmes and created new adventures for him after his presumed death at the Reichenbach Falls in the Swiss Alps in *The Adventure of the Final Problem*. Instead of mouldering in his grave, the famous sleuth was flitting about Canada

from 1891 to 1894 at the behest of Queen Victoria's son, the Prince of Wales and later Edward VII. At least that was the story Mr. Weyman spun in his trilogy, *Sherlock Holmes & the Ultimate Disguise*, *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Mark of the Beast* and *Sherlock Holmes Travels in the Canadian West*. He also wrote *In Love and War: A Memoir*, a vivid account of his romantic and naval experiences in the Second World War. As well, he directed the occasional film, learned to play classical guitar and travelled.

About four years ago, Mr. Weyman suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on one side and unable to speak or to feed himself. Late last month, sensing the end was near, his family took him to a farmhouse northwest of Toronto that he and Vanna had bought in 1964, the fount of so many happy family occasions. "Every time we left the farm, he would say, 'Goodbye, this place,' " she said in an interview this week. That's where he died, two days before they would have celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary.

#### RON WEYMAN

Ronald Charles Tosh Weyman was born in Erdith, Kent, on Dec. 13, 1915. He died near Flesherton, Ont., on June 26, 2007. He was 91. He is survived by his wife Vanna, five children, 11 grandchildren, his sister Rita and extended family. A celebration of his life will be held tomorrow at the Arts and Letters Club, 14 Elm St., Toronto.