

A brief encounter at the Chateau



By Gord Atkinson

On a recent episode of the popular British TV mystery series, *Midsomer Murders*, an elderly actor, whom I met many years ago, had a supporting role. His appearance triggered two personal memories of his only visit to Ottawa during the movies' golden age.

Richard Todd, the handsome Irish-born actor of English parents, was a popular star of memorable British and American films. His career on the stage and the screen spanned eight decades. His father was a British army doctor in India where young Richard spent his early years. When he returned home with his family they settled in Devon. The veteran performer/dairy farmer was 90 years old when late last year he succumbed to cancer at his home in central England.

It was in 1949 that the critics and the public took note of the dour young actor in the screen version of John Patrick's World War II drama *The Hasty Heart*. Set in a field hospital in Burma it also featured Ronald Reagan and Patricia Neal. In the role of a dying Scottish soldier, Todd was nominated for an Academy Award. His resolute style of acting served him well in his early film career.

His popularity reached cinematic peaks in the 1954 action thriller *The Dam Busters* and in the star-studded 1962 epic of the allied invasion of Normandy, *The Longest Day*. As a real life British paratrooper during the historic event he was approached by producer Darryl F. Zanuck to play himself in the monumental film. He declined, however, and instead portrayed English Major John Howard, who was in charge of a critical glider assault during the allied landings. Todd also received good reviews as the Scottish-born American Senate chaplain Peter Marshall in the 1954 biographical film, *A Man Called Peter*. He was also cast as a dashing Sir Walter Raleigh opposite Bette Davis as the first Queen Elizabeth in *The Virgin Queen* (1955). By the late 1960s his film career was in decline and he returned to the London stage. Looking back on his movie making days he once said with humour, "My screen image was all daring deeds until my swash began to buckle a bit."

In the summer of 1954 Richard Todd embarked on a North American tour to promote his film *The Dam Busters*. It was the amazing wartime story of an

ingenious British plan to demolish Germany's Ruhr Dam. The Ottawa premiere took place at the opulent old Capitol Theatre on Bank Street. I had been working at CFRA for only a few months when I was given the pleasure of interviewing him on stage, just prior to the screening of his classic film.

Earlier that day arrangements were made for me to record a radio interview with him at his hotel. Upon my arrival I was approached by two high school students, who had hoped to meet and interview the visiting star for their respective student newspapers. They approached me outside the door of his suite and asked me if I could help them get their interviews.

Despite my intervention on their behalf Todd's road manager was adamant that they were too pressed for time to meet with them. Upon completion of my interview I apologized to the boys for my inability to get them into Todd's suite. After that initial encounter the two young men became regulars on my Saturday afternoon radio show The Campus Club. They proved themselves to be highly talented impressionists. Many years later, one of the young men became a Member of Parliament. In the 1950s he was attending Glebe Collegiate and was and is my old friend Geoff Scott. The other student reporter from Lisgar Collegiate was and is my close friend and a showbiz legend, Rich Little.

At the time of his early international success, Rich made a triumphant return to his home town for a sell-out engagement at the Chateau Laurier Hotel in the well remembered, elegant supper club The Canadian Grill. Upon his return to Ottawa he made a phone call to my home. He began our conversation with a question. "Do you remember, Gord, the suite at The Chateau where Geoff and I couldn't get in to meet Richard Todd?" I knew what was coming, when upon my affirmative reply, he said triumphantly with tongue-in-cheek, "well I'm calling you from inside that suite!" Over 50 years later he still reminds me of that misbegotten incident and my lack of showbiz clout.

Late last year in Las Vegas Rich and his wife Marie were honoured when she received a "companion star" to his "star" for her exemplary and tireless charitable works. It was the first time that a husband and wife have both been honoured on the Las Vegas "Walk of Fame". Congratulations Marie and Rich – from all your many friends in Ottawa.

[Note: I look forward to receiving your letters and e-mails with your own special memories (gorda@rogers.com)

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