

THE RESURRECTION OF CALL ME BY MY RIGHTFUL NAME

AN EXCERPT FROM DON MURRAY'S UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS

PART ONE

FROM OUT OF THE TRUNK AND INTO PRODUCTION

On June 5th, 1972, I received a very surprising and disturbing letter from the young man who'd committed himself to half the \$600,000 financing for THE STORY OF A BAD BOY, which we were about to put into production in New England.

"Dear Don,

I don't know how to begin this letter, it is one of the hardest things I've ever done.

I would like to tell you this in person, but I guess I'm weak because I don't have the courage to face you.

When I first met you I knew I didn't have the capital to invest in a film, but I lied because it was exciting to be involved in the motion picture business and be associated with the stars and famous people. Although I inherited a fairly large sum on my twenty-first birthday it was nearly enough to cover half the cost of a film production.

I cannot express how truly sorry I am for what I did. I have let down and disappointed almost all the people that I really loved and admired. Every time I think about it I wish I had never lived.

Tom [Harris] and Pat treated me just like a member of their family, and let me make their home my home. In many ways I feel closer to them than my own family. Tom was especially wonderful because he filled in for the father I grew up without...

I pray to God that he will forgive me what I have done and that you will understand how much I regret what I have done. I am so sorry."

I can't say that I was deeply shocked or surprised. I didn't expect this, but I'd come to expect all kinds of surprises—mostly unpleasant ones—in making movies.

I was hit with the image of the Hollywood producer. He calls the young man and says, "Don't worry about it, kid. You say you don't have \$300,000. That's OK, very few of us do. How much do you have?Send it."

But what I actually did was call Tom, telling him to tell the young man that it was okay, that I understood and forgave him. His "I wish I had never lived" line bothered me.

I then called Harry [Sherda]. Harry's reaction was to laugh. He was less surprised than I. Then he surprised me.

"Can you make the movie for \$300,000?"

"No. The sets, costumes, locations and special effects make that unfeasible."

"Do you have another film you can make for \$300,000?"

I thought for a moment.

"I have a screenplay that could be made for \$300,000 with deferments for the actors, director, writer, and producer. It's called CALL ME BY MY RIGHTFUL NAME."

"Is it good?"

"The play it comes from is one of the best I've ever seen. The first time I saw it, I went back the next night to see it again. But I don't know if it has the box office potential of STORY OF A BAD BOY."

"Why not?"

"BOY is universal, a story everyone the whole world over can identify with. CALL ME is about inter-racial relationships. It won't be for everyone."

"Can we have it finished by the end of the year?"

"I think so...if we start today."

"Let's do it."

We began immediately. The first task was to write a shooting script of the screenplay that the playwright, Michael Shurtleff, and I had been working on over the years. Eager to take the film out of the claustrophobic four walls of Doug's apartment and make it a true visual experience for the viewer, we made a lot of changes. Paul was a sculptor now, rather than a singer. We see a disturbing scene with a neurotic white girl that makes him hostile to his white friend when we first see them alone together. We see Paul taking a trip with his black lover, instead of just hearing about it. We see them at a black separatist rally.

Because of time and budget restrictions, we were forced to simplify all that. But we still managed to open up the film with scenes in several of Doug's rooms, the exterior of his house, a bar sequence, street scenes including ones that featured the boardwalk and the beach, Doug's parents' home, their yard, an airport, the interior of an airplane—even a jail scene.

The major change in content and character, however, came when we decided to hire Otis Young, my OUTCASTS co-star, as Paul. We borrowed my relationship with Otis for the one between Doug and Paul: they were co-stars on a flop TV series. Paul can't get a decent acting job, so he takes honky-tonk singing gigs. Doug, divorced and living in a big house he'd bought for his wife and kids—a

house sitting precariously on an oceanside cliff being eroded daily by rain and threatened with destruction by earthquakes—has quit acting in disgust and is studying to be a teacher (albeit one that talks like a street kid).

From there we restructured the action from the original play to match the new relationship between Doug and Paul. As Michael Shurtleff and I completed the script, we also searched for a director. Milton Katselas, who'd directed the play on Broadway, had just directed a film and was now in the Director's Guild—which meant that he could not do a film not registered with the Guild even if he wanted to. My old friend and acting coach Paton Price was in the same position.

I thought of John Astin, who'd been so good as the husband on *The Addams Family* TV series. He'd made an intriguing short film, a love story set in a supermarket, which was highly accomplished technically and featured some excellent acting from British actress Victoria Shaw (Roger Smith's ex-wife).

I phoned him.

"How did you get this number?"

I was taken aback by this curious initial response, as if from a fugitive or a tax evader. Setting aside that impression, I pressed forward, telling him I was doing a movie and wanted to talk to him about directing.

"We have to be very careful," he replied. "Everybody's after us all the time."

"After whom?"

"Patty and me."

I then remembered that he and Patty Duke were going together. He seemed obsessed with the idea that everyone was pursuing him and Patty in order to spy on their lives. I couldn't get John to let go of this fixation, and I finally got fed up with it.

"Look I don't know about your private life. And I don't care about it. I'm making a movie and all I care about is what's on the screen, not what's in some gossip column."

I was literally scratching my head when I replaced the phone in its cradle. Then it hit me: if I wanted a sensible, feet-on-the-ground, head-on-his-shoulders director, who better than David Nelson (who'd been so helpful on the TOM HARRIS retakes)?

David agreed to co-direct with Michael Shurtleff. I called Otis Young, who signed on to play Paul. We then auditioned several dozen young actresses for the female lead—the “golden girl” who inadvertently comes between Doug and Paul. It came down to two: our family friend Kathryn Hays and a newcomer who I’d never seen before: Catherine Crosby (who would soon be better known by her family nickname—Cathy Lee). Feeling that I wasn’t totally objective about the choice due to Kathy’s relationship with the family, I permitted Michael to make the choice. He chose Cathy Lee.

I picked two fine character actors—Edith Atwater and Kent Smith—to play Doug’s parents. Kent had remained in my consciousness ever since I’d seen him as a young boy in “Cat People.” He and Edith were another acting couple, having been married for more than twenty years, which made it all the better. Gary Clarke proved ideal for the role of my kid brother, and comedian Roy Stewart—who’d been an usher with me at CBS when I was 17 years old—was just right for my agent.

For our cinematographer, I chose Flemming Olsen, a man who’d done beautiful work in commercials. Continuing with me, as always, was Tom Harris, who’d be both associate producer and assistant director. His sons Tom Jr. and John handled casting and supported their dad in assistant director tasks. His wife Pat took care of wardrobe. Skip Trautman, jack of all trades, would cover all of our needs for art direction.

And my old friend, Margo Anderson, who’d diligently typed the shooting script for THE HOODLUM PRIEST—then gave me a spelling dictionary with the inscription “Give us a break!”—would shake that all off and be our script girl.