

THE RESURRECTION OF

CALL ME BY MY RIGHTFUL NAME

AN EXCERPT FROM DON MURRAY'S UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS

PART TWO

THE FILM COMES TO LIFE IN FITS AND STARTS

Michael Shurtleff and I began handling the rehearsals together (David Nelson was still working on a Volkswagen commercial and could not join us). Michael became more and more adept at the process as the days proceeded, however, and I was able to turn the task over to him and focus on my own role as Doug.

At the end of the rehearsal period it became clear that David Nelson was not going to be available. I asked Michael go solo as the director. To my surprise, he was not completely enthusiastic about the idea. He wrote me a note to explain:

I'm starting to feel like the ultimate version of THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER. I came for three weeks and now it will stretch out into months... I'll have to cancel my acting classes, curtail most of my fall casting jobs.

But he didn't want to give up on seeing his most famous creative work reach the screen, particularly when he'd have the chance to shape it himself. So he decided to stay on—but he voiced another concern:

[A director needs]...the respect of all the others on the project and the absolute loyalty and willingness to work with you. Where is that going to come from for me on this?

These concerns centered mostly around Otis Young. Otis had been the understudy to Alvin Ailey in the Broadway stage production of CALL ME BY MY RIGHTFUL NAME a decade earlier. Ailey was not a strong actor, but played Paul with a pulled-back style that had worked; Otis had been vocal about how such an interpretation didn't bring out the full potential of the role. His relationship with Michael had been strained as a result.

I told Michael that I knew how to be the go-between based on my work with Otis on THE OUTCASTS. And Otis would know that he was a star with equal footing, so that past feelings about having been slighted would be minimized.

But Michael raised another point that we'd have to reckon with. Otis was an immensely strong, magnetic personality. He made an impact just standing around. Michael captured the effect wonderfully in the continuation of his note to me:

OTIS: not only the problems you've already defined, but the effect his overwhelming presence has on me. After spending a day with him I come home talking like him and walking like him and THINKING like him: no one in my house recognizes me. It takes all evening for it to wear off, barely in time for a new day. By the end of shooting, there will be nothing left of Michael Shurtleff, only a bad blond imitation of Otis Young.

This was true. Otis had a similar effect on me. But that was exactly why I'd chosen him as the best actor to play Jemal David on THE OUTCASTS, and why I'd urged Michael to rewrite Paul's character to be more like Otis—even to the point of incorporating many real-life incidents that Otis had related to me. One of these was lifted almost verbatim from an exchange he'd had with his agent:

"You didn't read the script. It's a great part!"
"What is it...a shoeshine boy??"
"I thought you said you didn't read the script!"

And then there was Otis's response to me for my chiding him about being a married man who always ogled the girls, which we transposed so that he would be saying it about me:

"[You're] like an old buzzard. [You] don't want to kill anything, but if [you] see something lying around dead, [you're] gonna pounce on it!!"

What finally convinced Michael to direct the film is what he eloquently expressed in response to the completion of our rehearsal process:

It seems that we think alike on how to treat actors. I think, as you do, that one should ask questions, not answer them; provide the atmosphere where the actor is free to feel and think, and never told what to do.

He then elaborated on several points that had formed the core of his own teaching philosophy while coaching actors:

That consistency is the death of good acting.
That the moment before the scene is as important to the actor as any moment he has in the scene.

That the more extreme the opposites in an actor or in a scene, the more lifelike.
That the only source to draw upon is the observation of life, not other movies or plays or books.
That every scene is a love scene and the actor's job is to find where it is and is not.

While the acting processes seemed to be shaping up well, Michael was also aware that the overall effort needed greater efficiency. We were trying to make a film on a shoestring budget with virtually no preparation time and a contractual need to have a finished full-length film in theatres within five months.

And we had to agree up and serve the visual approach by which the film would come to life. Despite the harshness of the race-related conflict that swirled through the film, Michael was the first to understand that the film would still play out through the lens of romance. He wrote:

...the real appeal of this picture is romantic. Romantic is what people long for and hardly ever get anymore. I honestly believe that you don't quite get what I'm talking about when I say this is a romance. I am working for a romantic look and feeling for this film: as far as I can tell everyone else is working for a grubby, realistic look.

I was surprised by this, but it suddenly made sense. I had retained memories of the stage production, which was grubby and realistic because it was set in a low-rent apartment with matchstick furniture. Moving the action to California gave us more leeway to capture the visual range that went along with the economic differences between the privileged and impoverished sections of Los Angeles. But even those less affluent areas had more visual appeal: it's easier to be poor but not grubby in LA as opposed to New York City. I also wanted a "California girl" look for Chris to carry that romantic ideal across the film.

We took the setting out of run-down Venice and put it in a house in upscale Pacific Palisades. We found a house that added some valuable psychological undercurrent—it was perched on an eroding cliff where it was in peril of slipping into the sea (and, in fact, was torn down shortly after filming was completed in order to prevent it from doing so). It mirrored the instability in Doug's life and his passionate but precipitous friendship with Paul.

Skip Trautman was told to follow Michael's lead on décor. The result was a wonderful combination of slapdash austerity and quirky but inspired mismatches that come from lives being lived by whim and impulse. I applied the lessons I'd learned from watching John Derek and suggested long lenses, particularly for the nighttime romantic scenes: this would foreshorten things and bring the

backgrounds closer with a softer focus. This, combined with Flemming Olsen's affinity for pastel colors, would add to the feeling of romance that Michael wanted to achieve.

But one scene seemed to go against that feeling; in fact, to me it seemed the opposite of romantic. Michael placed Doug and Chris in bed, where they are intertwined after making love. Chris finds that her arm is stuck underneath Doug, wakes him and asks for help:

"I can't get my arm out. [kidding] I think it's broken."

"Good [also kidding]. Then no one else will want you and I'll have you all to myself."

Though I didn't like the scene, I did it. But when I viewed the rushes—softly, romantically, beautifully shot by Flemming Olsen, humorfully directed by Michael and played with a light edge by Cathy—I saw that he was right.

He demonstrated his skill in observing actors on more than one occasion, but I was struck by a set of observations he sent me in a note about halfway through shooting:

There is another area where I have more faith in you than you have in you. That is in your ability to think and feel and fill the screen with it. I suspect you feel more secure when you have words (when we do scenes without words, you rush to indicate, when you don't need to; you've got unexplored wells of feelings, if you'll trust them) ...Trust your feelings, communicate them without words and we'll have something very fine.

He was right about that. I'd always thought that actors like Brando, Clift, Newman, McQueen (and James Dean) were interesting in repose, when not saying or seeming to do anything—but that I wasn't. I tried to do as he asked.

As the picture progressed, Otis became increasingly difficult—first for Michael and then for me. The problem was well illustrated in one brief note from Michael to me:

Here is the new page 87. Of course I am willing to discuss it with you, but I'm not willing to argue with Otis...if he wants to argue about it, he should argue about it with you. I haven't got time. Or the patience to be slaughtered senselessly.

I gave Otis the new page and he accepted it without argument; but, later, with about two weeks of shooting left, he told me:

“I signed on to this picture with you directing, not Michael. If you want him to direct your scenes, okay, but I don’t want him directing me.”

I tried to reason with him, but that only made him more agitated and angry. I told Michael about our conversation and asked his advice.

“Go ahead and direct him.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Mind? I’m relieved.”

After consulting with Michael on how he thought it should be staged, I directed the reunion scene between Chris and Paul, where she convinces him to meet with Doug. Otis was very upbeat all day long and did excellent work, as did Cathy. I was pleased and so was Michael. I directed an intimate love scene between him and his black girlfriend which came out equally well, but a scene in a bar where he mistakes a blonde white girl for Chris and is accosted by a group of white men—the scene that opens the film—suffered from my lack of preparation.

And the scene where he escapes, only to be accosted by white cops wand told that “Watts is the other way” suffered the same fate. The staging was unimaginative and the lighting too bright and bland. Switching horses in midstream seemed to be taking us under the surface of the river.

The last week of the film was extremely rough going. It was not quite the pure hell that I considered it to be at the time, but it seemed interminable. We stumbled over the finish line.

And there was an unpleasant surprise upon finishing the film: Michael objected to sharing screenplay credit with me as we’d agreed at the outset. I didn’t want to have a row about it, so I just left it up to the Writers’ Guild, of which we were both members. I sent them the two complete versions of the script along with a page indicating who wrote what—ascribing most of it to Michael. I wrote:

As producer my intention is to list the writing credit as follows: Screenplay by Michael Shurtleff and Don Murray. If your judgment offers a more fair and accurate alternative, that’s fine.

They concurred that it should be as I suggested. The writing credits were:

**From the Broadway play by Michael Shurtleff.
Screenplay by Michael Shurtleff and Don Murray.**

We had to work at a frantic pace in order to complete the editing, music, sound effects, dubbing and color correction in time for a December opening. I was fortunate to have Martin Dreffke and his assistant Gary Kemper to work with. Martin was precise, orderly, creative, and a joy. We met our initial screening deadline, but we found that distributors felt that interracial strife, even in a film that wore romance on its sleeve, was not a subject that audiences were going to want to see.

As I'd said, it wasn't for everyone. But I was dismayed and disappointed to discover that the so-called "experts" were certain that it wasn't for anyone.