

AVENUE

Arts, Culture & Society

TRUE NORTH STRONG AND GEEKY

Dweeb, nerd, overly polite dork — why do Canadian movie stars have to leave the country before they get to play sexy, funny, strong characters? By Antony Anderson

The Italian male was once embodied by the angst-ridden but debonair existentialist Marcello Mastroianni. For a generation of French men, chic gangster Jean-Paul Belmondo was the perfect expression of their testosterone gloire. Depending on private gun fantasies, American men saw themselves in either Woody Allen or Clint Eastwood. So who embodies the Canadian man onscreen?

The answer came to me one recent grisly Friday afternoon as I watched a short film on the CBC. Directed by James Flaherty and starring Andrew Davis, *Monument* tells the story of a bumbling middle-aged paperboy who discovers he has a lethal brain tumour. In a bid for immortality, he builds a huge papier mâché replica of his head, but then two thugs burn it down.

We've seen this guy before. He is the all-Canadian dweeb, the geek, the meta-nerd. Single if not asexual, devoid of charisma, hopelessly insecure, thoroughly polite, often non-verbal, always on the verge of a flinch — the dweeb geek is everywhere.

Typical of the genre is Chad, the bizarre tugboat captain played by Ottawa native Tom Green in *Charlie's Angels*. The Angels get to kick butt. The polite, charisma-free dweeb gets to, uh, drive them to their cool adventure and beg for sexual favours from a sweetly mocking Dylan, played by his real-life girlfriend Drew Barrymore.

The geek dweeb has been honed to perfection throughout the canon of CanCon celluloid, lovingly brought to life over and over again by our top directors — including Atom Egoyan, Guy Maddin, Thom Fitzgerald, Bruce MacDonald, Mina Shum.

You can find him in John Paizs' wonderful feature *Crime Wave*. The Winnipeg director cast himself as the consummate dweeb — a mute, passive, solitary would-be filmmaker residing in a small room above a garage, living his life vicariously through a 12-year-old girl.

In Patricia Rozema's *White Room*, Norman (Maurice Godin) is a bland, middle-class geek aspiring to great writing and real-life adventures. One night, while spying on a woman, he passively watches someone break into her house and kill her. It inspires him to try to reinvent his suburban wallflower soul — without success.

The dweeb is back in Rozema's next feature, *When Night Is Falling*. Here the main male character is a feeble, lifeless professor played by Henry Czerny, who loses his passionate wife to another woman. Who can blame her?

The dweeb is celebrated in Yves Simoneau's *Perfectly*

Normal as Lorenzo (Michael Riley), a timid, small-town brewery worker who lives with his mother, dreaming, in the words of one character, "tinny, fizzy little dreams." Upon his mother's death, Lorenzo is suddenly at the mercy of a larger-than-life chef from Florida (Robbie Coltrane), who moves in and drags Lorenzo into making his dream of singing in an opera come true.

The geek roams the screen in full force in John Pozer's dark, low-budget epic, *The Grocer's Wife*. Pozer's meta-nerd, Tim (Simon Webb), is a cringing, non-verbal factory worker who lives in virginal isolation with his mother until her death opens up his world to a bizarre intruder. I know, I know — you've heard this already.

The dweebiest geek of all may be the boyfriend in Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed*. Played by Peter Outerbridge, Matt is a medical student who falls in love with a necrophiliac undertaker (Molly Parker). He decides that the only way to win her sexual favours is to commit suicide. He's right.

The list goes on and on — with a strange twist. Judging by successful Canadian male actors, it seems that dweebs who manage to unleash their inner hyperactive clown are bound for success — as long as they're willing to leave the country. Merry jesters in exile include Mike Myers, Jim Carrey, various Kids in the Hall, Second City alumni, Leslie Nielsen and Michael J. Fox.

And rising every now and then above the dweebs and jesters is the more heroic Canadian archetype, the wise patriarch — Captain Kink and Ben Cartwright, who selflessly dispense wisdom throughout the universe and the Wild West. OK, so William Shatner and Lorne Greene play Americans, but we know where they come from and whom they really speak to. A milder offshoot of this strand are the news anchors both here (Lloyd and Peter) and south of the border (Peter Jennings and John Roberts), not to mention *Jeopardy* master Alex Trebek.

Mercifully, every week we Canadian men are reminded that there is a potential gladiator in every one of us. Who needs silver-screen fantasies and special effects when we have *Hockey Night in Canada*?

Admittedly, the players of our national game aren't always the cleverest, most handsome or charismatic role models in the world. But until Canadian movies start substituting real men for geeks, looks like we'll have to look for our domestic action heroes in the penalty box on a Saturday night.

National Post



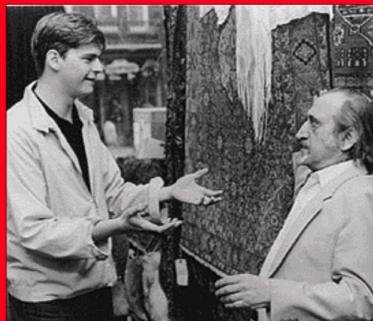
Kissed: Jay Brazeau, left, as Mr. Wallis, Molly Parker as Sandra and Peter Outerbridge as her loser boyfriend Matt.



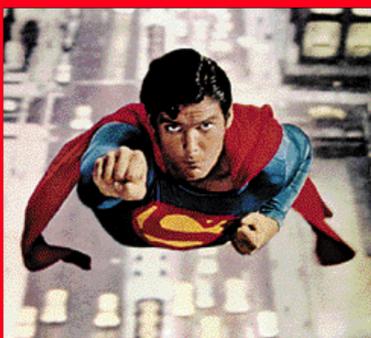
Double Happiness: Sandra Oh plays a strong, interesting woman. Callum Keith Rennie plays her loser boyfriend.



Last Night: Callum Keith Rennie (left) proposes that Don McKellar join his list of sexual conquests.



Next of Kin: Patrick Tierney (left), with Berge Fazlian, tries to break out of his bland dweeb existence by pretending to be a long-lost son.



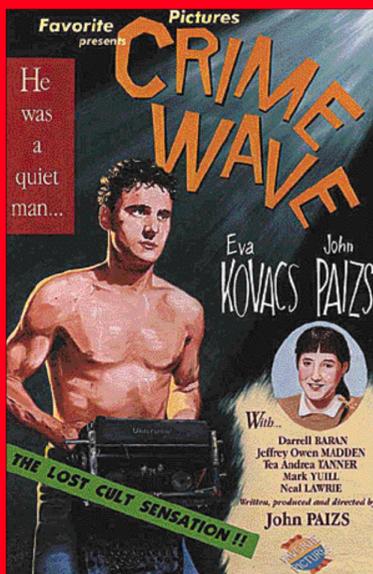
Superman: Christopher Reeve played the superhero, who was created by a Canadian — who else could have come up with such a milquetoast as the bespectacled, Lois Lane-fearing Clark Kent?



The Hanging Garden: Chris Leavins plays a young man who finally comes to terms with a painful past — but he has to commit a figurative suicide and flee town to do it.



Twitch City: Molly Parker and Daniel MacIvor play hapless losers who live in closets, play paralyzed couch potatoes and attract looney roommates.



Crime Wave: Don't be fooled by the poster art — John Paizs plays a mega-nerd writer who lives above a garage in Winnipeg.

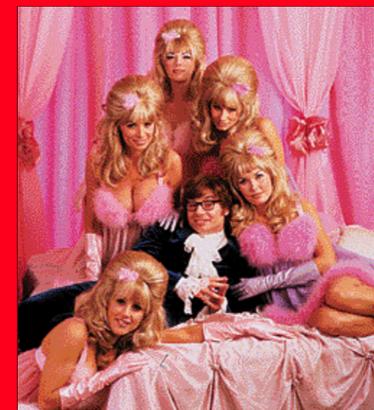


Tom Green plays wimpy Chad to Drew Barrymore's sexy adventure heroine Dylan in *Charlie's Angels*.

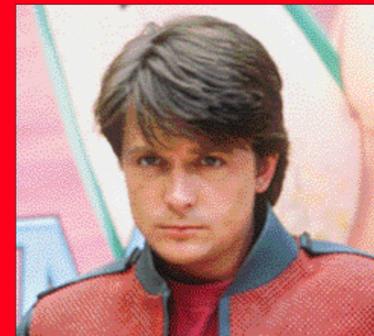
Domestic goods



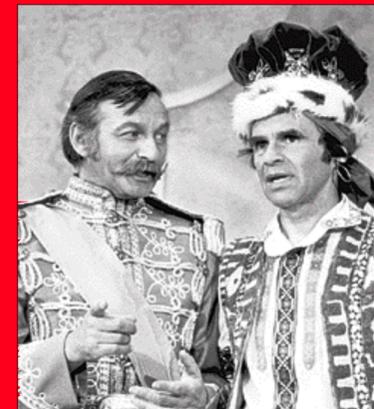
The Naked Gun: Leslie Nielsen gets big laughs — and the girl — as the action hero of this American movie.



Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery: Mike Myers gets to play an action hero — and all the chicks he can handle.



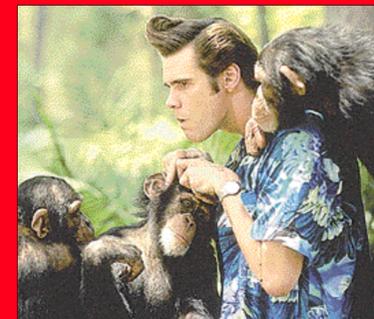
Back to the Future: Michael J. Fox became an adventure hero with a beautiful girlfriend — even though his Marty remained unfailingly polite.



The Gypsy Dropout: Frank Shuster and Johnny Wayne were superstar merry jesters, making a record number of appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show.



Kids in the Hall: Funny Canadian nerds became sexy American superstars when their show appeared on American TV.



Ace Ventura (above and below): Jim Carrey, primo Canadian jester export.



Mission: Impossible: Henry Czerny went from a betrayed husband in the Canadian feature *When Night Is Falling* to this powerful, sexy spy chief out to catch rogue agent Tom Cruise.



The Matrix: Keanu Reeves is an action hero who can also play funny, as he did in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*.

