

Scenes from Richard Squires' *Crazy Like a Fox* filmed at Welbourne, in Middleburg



# The Call of the Old

Film Set in Loudoun County Sounds Call to Senses By Bill Wine

**"My daughter was taught kindergarten by Robert E. Lee's great-granddaughter, one of her classmates is a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson, and another lives in James Monroe's old home. The Old Virginians provide a direct link to the first days of this country, which were the last days of monarchic rule in the world." Richard Squires, Director**

The city has a face, somebody once said, but the country has a soul.

That may or may not be the trumpeted theme of Richard Squires' first movie, but some aspect of that sentiment spills over into nearly every frame.

So until his second movie emerges—and he's got one up his cinematic sleeve—forget this Richard stuff.



He's Country Squires.

Oh, sure, Richard has lived in Virginia for fifty years, and knows and embraces its history, its beauty, and its values.

But *Country Squires* has just surfaced as the debuting writer/director/executive producer/co-composer of *Crazy Like a Fox*, the labor-of-love project that he's, um, squiring to the marketplace. So he's aiming at our collective consciousness with the same kind of relentless, idiosyncratic passion and stubborn drive as the protagonist of his dramedy about history and values which, once lost, are difficult to get back.



"The film is a study of one particular member of those lost-in-time Virginians," says Squires, "whose simplicity, naivete, genteel poverty, and love of learning seem so out of place, indeed irrelevant, to the contemporary world. Nature and the natural order of life are under assault right now."

If, in other words, the film were to be location-shot in Oz instead of Virginia, the emerging catchphrase might be "lawyers and realtors and yuppies, oh, my."

*Crazy Like a Fox* has already screened at the D.C. International, Wood's Hole, Savannah, California Independent, Santa Fe, D.C. Independent, and Newport Beach Film Festivals, and still isn't finished making the festival rounds. It's also headed for a commercial theatrical release, initially in Washington, D.C., in the spring.

Then we'll see what happens, and whether or not the film's title also applies to its creator.

*CLAF* stars Royal Shakespeare Company veteran and Tony Award winner Roger Rees and two-time Oscar nominee Mary McDonnell as a married couple whose farm is manipulated out from under them by unscrupulous big-city speculators.

Rees plays genially eccentric Virginian and principled gentleman farmer Nathaniel Banks, who can no longer make a living working the farm, but cannot bring himself to lose or leave his ancestral home.

So he resists aggressively when a couple of predatory land speculators from Washington employ letter-of-the-law maneuvers and unapologetic misrepresentation—otherwise known, in some parts

of the universe, as lying—to take possession of the ramshackle mansion with the ultimate intent to develop and subdivide Nat's beloved property.

He is understandably enraged that he's been swindled by a couple of carpetbaggers, who have, in his eyes, left common decency behind, exploited local Virginians' long-standing belief that a handshake represents a binding commitment, and conducted a legal but hostile takeover of his home.

Now officially homeless, he leaves his family and, seeking underground shelter in fox-like fashion, sets up a new home in a cave on the creek that runs through the property he no longer owns.

McDonnell plays Nat's wife, Amy, who shares many of her husband's feelings, but also remains grounded in her need to live somewhere and provide for her two kids.

That means that she sees his anger as justified but the manifestation of it as completely bizarre. His idiosyncratic version of guerilla warfare seems proof that he has gone ape, especially when she notices that Nat has taken to dressing in his grandfather's Civil War uniform and starring in a one-man production of *Shiverin' in the Rain*. Without the music.

But the new owners, unaware of Nat's activities or proximity, head for Palm Springs for the winter, sounding a cue for Nat to reclaim the family home. Which he does and, with a little help from his old-guard-of-Virginia friends, triggers a community-wide rebellion and celebration.

Whoops, I've said too much. Rewind.

Initially called "Creek Man" (uh oh,



sounds like a horror flick), then “Goose Creek Story” (too “soft” a marquee listing, said the Left Coast guys in suits), the movie got its ultimate title after the first complete post-production screening.

*Crazy Like a Fox* is a modestly proportioned movie, with a budget somewhere in the vicinity of \$2-million. Theme-, plot-, and character-driven, it's blessedly free of empty pyrotechnics. Which makes its road to a wide audience, in today's movie landscape, an uphill battle.

Squires is aware of this, of course, which is why he is also the director of the Delphi Film Foundation, the only tax-exempt, non-profit, independent feature film production company in the United States. Private donors supplied half of the funding, loans the rest. The one-month-long shoot preceded a much longer editing effort, while the search for a distributor took four years.

“Film distribution is a difficult field to understand and master,” says Squires, “but nothing is impossible if people honestly like your movie.”

The more you come to know about Squires' unique attempt at an end-run around the Hollywood highway, the more he reminds you of Banks on the banks of Goose Creek.

“In city after city,” he says, “some two-hundred screens show the same ten Hollywood marketing products, with two or three screens left over for the dozens of independent films that can't get a showing for lack of an audience. A revolution could be due, to be led by non-profit film

producers, with a renaissance of culture in their sights.”

Led, perhaps, by, the Nat Banks-like Richard Squires.

He sees the independent film movement as following the lead of the regional theater movement, which has struggled in recent decades to keep the artistic and cultural motives and components as vital and evident as the obvious commercial necessities of Broadway. The twin tendencies of entertainment and enlightenment, in other words, do not have to be estranged.

“No one doubts that film is an art form, certainly among the most powerful of all time,” says the first-time producer-director. “If it ends up being bad art, producing bad culture, that's really the fault of the producers of the art and the motives behind their production.”

The 57-year-old rookie hyphenate attended Columbia University, and studied philosophy at St. John's College Annapolis. His extensive theater background includes work not only as an actor, technician, and composer, but as a director and playwright for, among others, La Mama Amsterdam, The Bread and Puppet Theatre, The Players Theater of England, and Brecht West Theatre.

He was also the co-creator of the environmental performance theater, Soft Gallery; the founding director of the Museum of Temporary Art; and a founding board member of District Curators. And he has had his share of essays, reviews, and interviews published in various arts publications.

So, did all of these impressive resume items help prepare him for the buck-stops-here, broad-shouldered undertaking of directing a movie? Yes and no.

“As a director, I was surprised, as all first-time directors must be, by the hundreds of people it takes to make a film, not to mention the incredible amount of work. As a novice, I relied on two adages: ‘Casting is eighty percent of directing’ and ‘Well-written scenes play themselves.’”

“I was also very surprised by the way that the experience transformed the inner compass of my life, which I think is comparable in some way to mountaineering triumphs.

“Finally, I remain surprised that directing—independent directing, at least—is considered a young man's game. It's sometimes compared to professions like field general, orchestra conductor, or supervising architect, that no one would get a shot at until they were at least forty. That's an age when multi-million-dollar budgets, sensitive artists, Teamsters, deadlines, rain, and loneliness don't seem as daunting as they might to a younger person.”

Said like someone who has just been put through the directorial ringer. And so he has.

The completion of *Crazy Like a Fox* was, in Squires' words, “marked by continual crisis and chaos in the production office, and a kind of euphoric enthusiasm on the set.”

For openers, the IRS froze the funding a week before production was scheduled to begin. Next, the Teamsters descended from New York to explain the need for “protection” from vandalism that only they could provide. Then the 2001 start date had to be pushed back from September to October because of casting and production problems, and the 9/11 tragedy.

Once they did get underway, however—the shoot called for twelve-hour days five days a week for six weeks—they worked under brilliant sunshine in Virginia's famously beautiful horse country from first

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day to “We began filming with the creek scenes,” recalls Squires, “in perfect fall weather. It was as though we'd been spirited away to paradise while the rest of the world was in flames.”

All the creek scenes—and there are more than a few—and most of the nature

scenes were shot at Francis Mill, a farm that Squires owns in Middleburg. Many of the other scenes were shot at a well-known, nearby 520-acre horse farm and Bed-and-Breakfast called Welbourne.

"I felt from the beginning," he says, "that having control of the locations would give us a key logistical advantage to help balance out our relative inexperience."

Welbourne's owner, Nat Morison, is a member of the sixth generation of his family, and is a friend of the writer-director.

## "Cinematographer Gary Grieg delivers a strikingly handsome and lush visual feast."

He not only inspired the story but provided the model for protagonist Nat Banks.

Squires knew of Morison's struggle to maintain Welbourne, with its decaying plantation house, roomful after roomful of family heirlooms, and its "shabby genteel" ambiance, all of which has long enchanted Squires and informs the film's look and feel.

"Houses like Welbourne," says Squires, "which have remained in the same family hands for hundreds of years, through many significant people and events, have an obvious life to them that cannot be found in the history books or in the unfortunate family-houses-turned-into museums that seems to be the ruling trend with living history these days."

The film's take on living history offers two gifted leads—Rees gets to play lots and lots of notes in his showy role, and McDonnell is Rock-of-Gibraltar steady and genuine—and a varied ensemble in support. They include experienced cast and crew members from Washington, D.C.—the nation's third largest film production market—and several first-timers, including Squires' real-life daughter, Chloe, who plays Nat's daughter, Claudia.

And cinematographer Gary Grieg delivers a strikingly handsome and lush visual feast, with shots of rolling Virginia farmland and countryside holding the eye regardless of where the narrative might be strolling.

For Squires, his movie stands as an entertainment, yes, but also as a reminder that Virginia's past isn't just in danger of being forgotten, but *obliterated* by runaway suburbanization; that what's legal doesn't always jive with what's right; that perhaps the times are changing a bit too

fast in the cradle of American democracy; that it sometimes feels as if the two civilizations—let's call them city folk and country folk—fear each other and remain in counter-productive conflict; and that, yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia.

"My daughter was taught kindergarten by Robert E. Lee's great-granddaughter, one of her classmates is a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson, and another lives in James Monroe's old home," explains Squires. "The Old Virginians provide a direct link to the first days of this country, which were the last days of monarchic rule in the world. Many of them remain on their family farms after hundreds of years. It seems to me that what they stand for has come to be so different from the country that they founded, that

it makes sense to show the two forces together before the new one completely devours the other."

Whatever dramatic limitations the movie might have for some viewers, there's no denying the man-with-a-story-to-tell mission that fuels it. So what are the auteur's ultimate hopes for his first film?

"If we think of culture as a library, I just hope that this movie can be one of its books."

Next up for Richard Squires, if things go swimmingly with this enterprise, is a movie from his script, *The Big Dreamer*. He describes it as being about a man in the midst of a film production who loses the ability to tell the difference between his dreams and his life.

Hmmm, I wonder whom *that's* about. [NV](#)

