## DON MURRAY
UNSUNG HERO

Donald Patrick Murray was born in Hollywood in 1929 to a 20th-Century Fox dance director and a former Ziegfeld girl. He moved to New York when he was three years old and became an exceptional student-athlete at East Rockaway High School in Nassau County. Don played football and ran track, where he earned the nickname "Don Deer."

After graduation in 1947, Don declined several scholarship opportunities at universities in favor of enrolling in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. (To this day, Don retains a slight "Long Island" accent, but his three years at AADA helped him effectively shed this at will, and he easily mastered a series of speech patterns in his subsequent acting roles.)

When the Korean War broke out, Don filed for "conscientious objector" status, and spent two years in alternative service at refugee camps in Germany and Italy. (Don would later star in a self-penned screenplay for Playhouse 90 entitled *For I Have Loved Strangers* based on these experiences.)


Before his European adventures, however, Don had turned heads in his first substantial part in the Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*. He also made strides on early television, appearing on several highly-regarded programs, including *The Kraft Theater* and the psychological mystery series *Danger*.

Don then landed a role in the Broadway revival of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, playing Henry Antrobus, a character who demonstrated a pronounced change in temperament. (During the play's celebrated first run in 1942-43, Henry was played by Montgomery Clift.) Don's performance caught the eye of theatre and film director Joshua Logan, who quickly decided that Don was the perfect choice to play the raw, reckless Beauregard "Bo" Decker in his film version of William Inge's hit play, *Bus Stop*.

Despite a slew of second-guessing from theater "experts," Logan held firm with his casting decision. Don would subsequently receive an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Bus Stop*.

Don had been careful not to sign an exclusive contract with 20th Century Fox, so he was able to freelance. His first project after *Bus Stop* was *The Bachelor Party* (1957), from Burt Lancaster's production company, Hill-Hecht-Lancaster. The Paddy Chayevfsy script is a marvelous ensemble piece probing the anxieties of married life, and Don reveals a layer of sensitivity in his character that was simply not available in *Bus Stop's* Bo Decker.

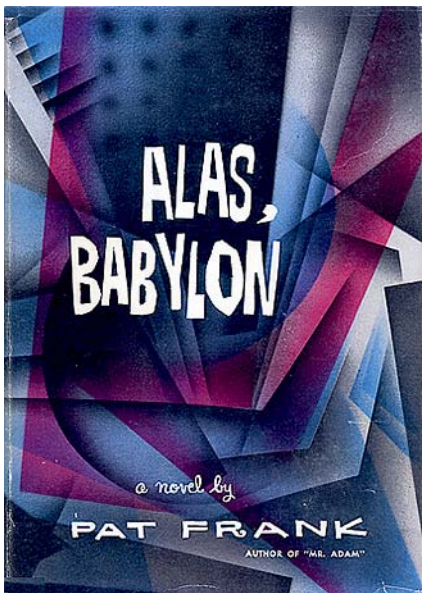

Don's next project was even more challenging—playing a drug addict who is keeping it a secret from his wife. Continuing his identification with the New York stage-to-film industry that was still thriving in the late 1950s, Don demonstrated his ability to underplay in *A Hatful of Rain* (1957), where the showy part belonged to Tony Franciosa, who gave an operatic (and Oscar-nominated) performance as Don's brother.

Don's scenes with Eva Marie Saint, who played his long-suffering wife, are perfectly etched slices of mid-century realism.

20th Century Fox, with the departure of Darryl Zanuck, was not especially sympathetic to Don's desire to remain on the cutting edge of realistic drama: they decided that his success as a comic cowboy and his desire to play serious roles meant that he should be groomed to be a Western star. Don was cautious, and waited for a script that projected the type of values that he wished to see portrayed in his character.

Tod Lohman, the character he plays in *From Hell to Texas* (1958), is a pacifist. He possesses virtuoso skills with a rifle, but he is dead-set against using that talent to kill. This reluctance is used to good effect throughout the film, as Don's character is constantly having these values tested. Master director Henry Hathaway supports Don with an interesting cast, including Diane Varsi and a very young Dennis Hopper, but two veteran character actors (Chill Wills and R.G. Armstrong) add heft in the very different ways that they relate to Don's character.

Don wasn't quite so fortunate with his next Fox western, *These Thousand Hills* (1959). Script inconsistencies plague what otherwise might have been a very interesting film, with a lead character possessing tantalizing potential for complexity. As a result, things don't quite jell, and Don's relationship with Fox continued to drift. In addition, Don's marriage to Hope Lange, which had produced a son (Christopher, who would become a high-regarded character actor) and a daughter (Patricia), was beginning to develop some strains.

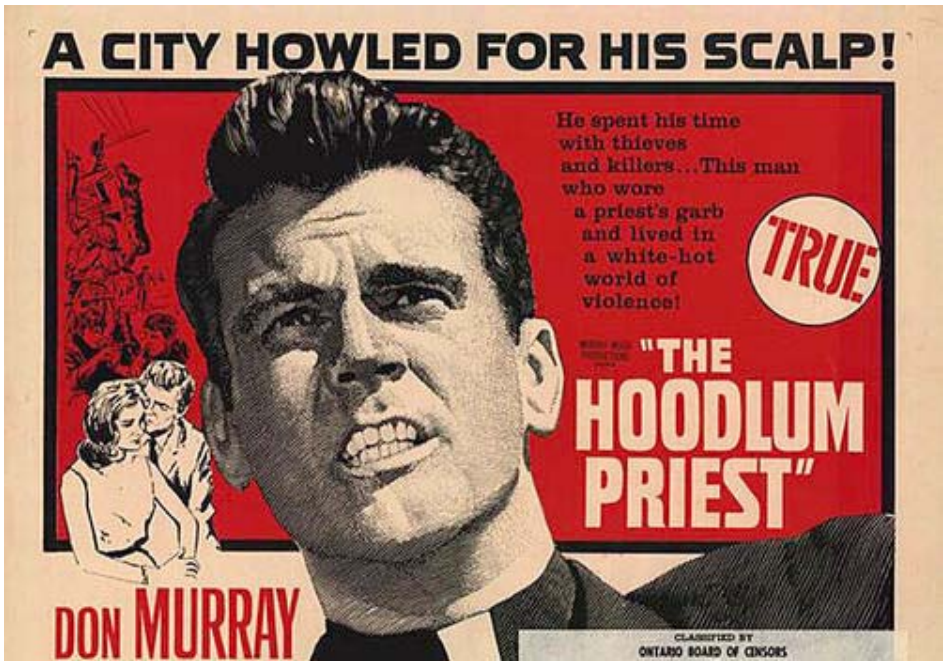



Don found his work in the "Golden Age of TV drama" more fulfilling. There he was given respect as a serious actor with developing writing and production skills. *For I Have Loved Strangers*, a self-penned story based on his European experiences, was produced for *Playhouse 90* and aired on December 19, 1957, and received

auspicious reviews. Don would appear in another notable *Playhouse 90* drama, *Alas Babylon*, one of the first post-holocaust dramas and one of the most harrowing, in early 1960.

His skills as a casting agent came into play when he appeared in the DuPont Playhouse's TV revival of *The Hasty Heart* in 1958. When the producers of the film *Shake Hands With The Devil* (1959) were looking for someone with "fire and brimstone" to play the part of an IRA thug, Don immediately recommended Richard Harris, who'd been in The Hasty Heart with him. When the producers expressed some reservations, Don grew more insistent, and Harris was auditioned. Today, *Shake Hands With The Devil* is known as Harris's breakout performance.

After fulfilling his Fox contract with (what else?) a Western, Don jumped full-tilt into the world of independent production with *The Hoodlum Priest* (1961). (For an excellent account of the making of this film, see the excellent *Riverfront Times* article by Dennis Brown.) Struggling to make the film with a lean budget, Don wrote the script himself (using his old high school nickname "Don Deer" as a *nom de plume*) when his original choice turned out to not be up to the task.




*The Hoodlum Priest* represents the beginning of Don's "priest phase"—in addition to his own beliefs, he had become fascinated with the religious elements in life as a result of the intensity of feeling he'd encountered during the filming of *Shake Hands With the Devil*, which stressed the religious conflicts that had been the driving force behind the enmity between the Irish and the British. Don found solace in the pursuit of such matters as he worked to achieve an amicable divorce from Hope Lange: the two would ultimately remain friends.

As Father Charles Dismas Clark, the St. Louis priest who fought for halfway houses to rehabilitate ex-convicts, Don is both cool and filled with fire. He and then-newcomer Keir Dullea are well-matched in their scenes together, each channeling the other's raw emotions as the priest and the troubled youth try to find common ground.

As successful as the film was, it marked something of a turning point in Don's career. With a taste of independent production under his belt, he longed to make more personal films, but the directions he wished to take would push the envelope of what studios and distributors felt were commercially viable.

He was a perfect choice for the role of Senator Brigham Anderson in Otto Preminger's political blockbuster, *Advise & Consent* (1962). The young Senator finds himself in a high-stakes game of political poker during the confirmation hearings for Secretary of State appointee Robert Leffingwell (Henry Fonda). A personal secret is surfaced that puts Anderson in a perilous situation. Don conveys the escalating anguish of the young Senator with an understated intensity that dominates the final third of Preminger's epic.


Don continued in a political vein with his performance as Kurt Schroder, reluctant tunnel builder, in Robert Siodmak's *Escape From East Berlin* (1962). As the Cold War heated up in Europe, Americans rallied to the cause of East Germans who were attempting to flee the totalitarian conditions imposed by the walling off of Berlin. Siodmak, who had returned to Germany after establishing himself as a master of film noir during his exile in America, returned to his old cinematographic tricks and crafted a nifty thriller.

While Kurt Schroder had been a reluctant hero, Don's next role—the expansive, upbeat Dr. Norman Vincent Peale—was a man bound for glory in one form or another. The *New York Times* suggested that Dr. Peale's appeal to Don was due to the thespian opportunities in the part: "…[the film] is at its best when Don Murray… mounts his pulpit, looks straight into the camera and speaks. These extended excerpts…make three tingling sermons. Young Mr. Murray, with his realist fervor (and this is true praise) should have been a preacher."

The film, entitled *One Man's Way* (1964) was a departure for both Don and director Dennis Sanders, who'd mostly specialized in crime films. It was part of a conscious effort to address social issues, an effort that would dominate Don's role choices for the rest of the decade. Though the film was well received, there was a bit of a backlash in Hollywood circles, and Don found lead roles harder to come by.

Seeking broader horizons, Don was introduced to the reclusive artist-illustrator Herbert Danska in 1965. Danska suggested that he play a key role in a film that would break boundaries by depicting the intimate life an interracial couple. The film, based on John A. Williams' novel *Night Song*, was in fact a reworked version of the last days of jazz giant Charlie Parker, and the efforts of his loose inner circle to save him. It was also a scathing indictment of race hatred in America, and the attendant difficulty for whites to overcome their own fears of ostracism within the dominant society in order to achieve change.

Danska was able to convince politically-charged comedian Dick Gregory to play the lead role. Don found the experience an eye-opening one: the sad resignation that resonated in Gregory's character was at odds with the more militant posture taken by his friend, played with a barely concealed rage by Robert Hooks. The original cut of the film moved like jazz, driven by a dark, lyrical score from pianist Mal Waldron, who'd provided the score for Shirley Clarke's edgy look at race in Harlem, *The Cool World* (1964).

The film was originally called *White Love-Black Love*, but a more poetic title replaced it: *Sweet Love, Bitter*. Its sad but shattering meditation on racial prejudice was undercut, however, just prior to its release, when the producer of the film wrested control from Danska and recut the film to emphasize the purported penchant for interracial liaisons that Gregory's character supposedly favored. This version, given the more salacious title *It Won't Rub Off, Baby!*, was released to the public in early 1967, promptly causing all of the artistic principals involved in the project to bid a hasty retreat from it.

On February 25, 1967, Don made TV history by starring in the first "made for TV movie," *The Borgia Stick*, about a young suburban couple whose marriage is a cover for syndicate activities and who make the mistake of actually falling in love. Don and co-star Inger Stevens were especially effective in capturing the contradictory emotions that their characters experienced as they discover the trap they are in.


It was Don's first effort as a modern-day anti-hero, and he proved to be a natural at it: *The Borgia Stick* resonated with its television audience, and was one of the highest-rated shows in the 1966-67 season.

But Don had not forgotten the message in the original *Sweet Love, Bitter* and he would soon find a new outlet for presenting the issue of race relations. In late 1967 he was offered a guaranteed slot for a television series, with three different program concepts to choose from. He chose *The Outcasts*, which depicted the life and times of Americans in the Old West during the years immediately following the Civil War, where a unique kind of anarchy held sway.

What gave the show its modern twist was that Don's character, Earl Corey, a Southern aristocrat estranged from his plantation due to the war and the machinations of his own family, would wind up working as a bounty hunter all across the Old West, teamed up with a former slave from his plantation.

The relationship of these two characters—ex-slave and ex-slave owner—was at best a "suspicious friendship." Through their interactions, and some careful interweaving of their memories of earlier times, the issues of trust, mutual respect, and the breaking of cultural stereotypes were sewn into the action. Co-star Otis Young, a virtual unknown when he won the role of ex-slave Jemal David, proved to be a superb choice, capturing the anger and suspicion of the character along with an expansive sense of humanity.

“We wanted to create a full-bodied, complex but ultimately positive role model for young African-American boys, who had no heroes of their own,” Don recalled. A re-screening of *The Outcasts* forty years later shows how ahead of its time the program was, and how it contributed to a difficult but necessary dialogue that ultimately transformed much of the nation’s viewpoint about race. The Outcasts only ran for one season (1968-69), but it remains a program ripe for rediscovery.

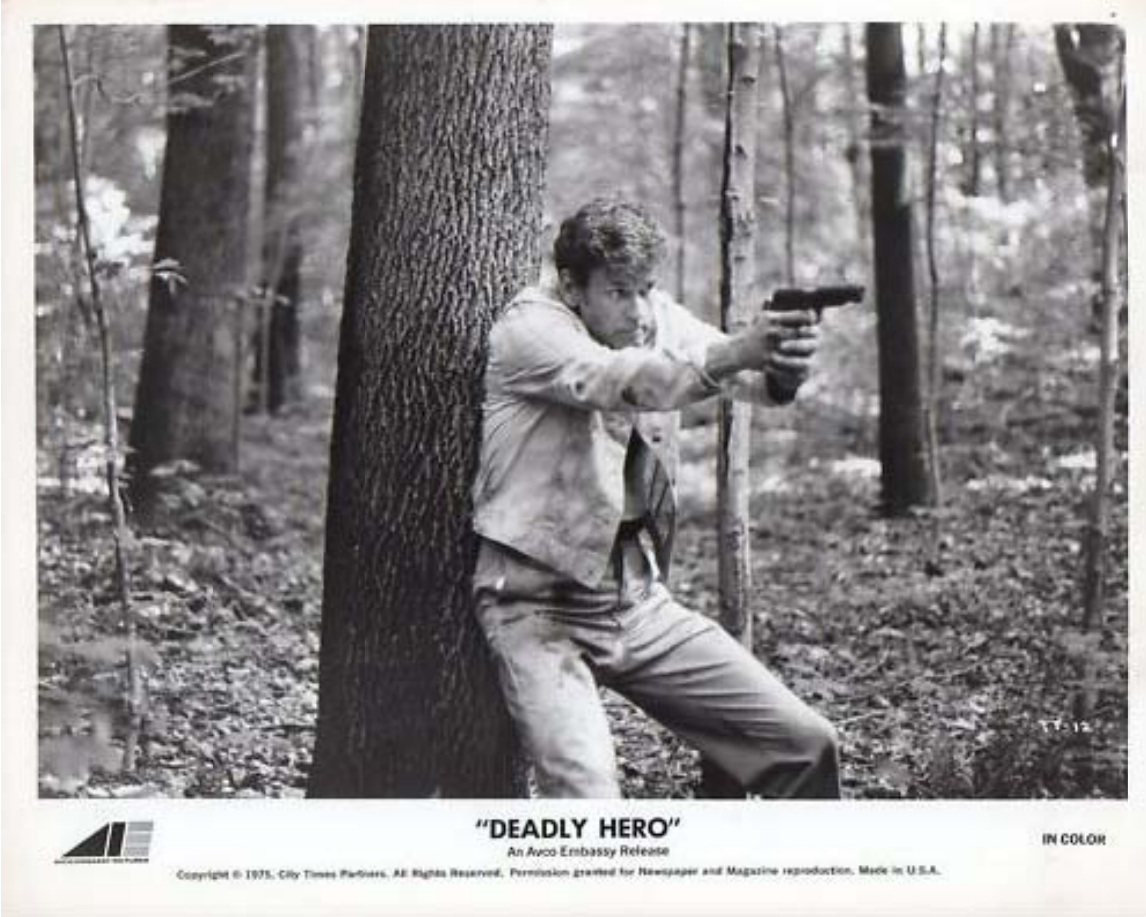
The burgeoning area of made-for-TV movies became a congenial venue for Don at this time, and he would make many films and TV pilots over the next five years. Particularly notable is his turn as a parapsychologist in *Daughter of the Mind* (1969), which co-stars Ray Milland as a man convinced that he is communicating with his dead daughter. He returned to the Western with fine success in *The Intruders* (1970), playing a sheriff who has lost his nerve just when a band of notorious outlaws comes to town. Supported by a cast of well-known actors “of a certain age” (read: the other side of forty), including Anne Francis, Gene Evans, and John Saxon, and with up-and-coming stars such as Harrison Ford and Harry Dean Stanton in small but showy parts, Don continued to demonstrate the unlikely ease with the ways of the West that an ex-Long Island boy had managed to attain.

But Don continued to look for off-beat roles to stretch his range. In the early seventies he found two such films: *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1971), a surreal comedy based on the Kurt Vonnegut novel, and *Cotter* (1973), where Don plays a Sioux Indian with alcohol problems who’s reduced to being a rodeo clown and undertakes a long, rocky road to redemption. (The search for redemption is a strong theme in the movies Don chose in the sixties and seventies: troubled by what he saw as a nationwide crisis of faith, he was particularly drawn to characters in crisis.)

One more pilot for a TV series that Don made in the mid-70s is worth noting. *The Girl On The Late, Late Show* (1974) was the template for a show featuring Don as an investigative reporter who was drawn to unsolvable mysteries. The mystery in the pilot episode revolved around an actress who had literally disappeared from view twenty years earlier—and the actress hired to play the actress was none other than noir icon Gloria Grahame, herself absent from the scene for nearly the same length of time! Of additional interest was the usage of clips from several of Grahame’s 50s noir classics—*In A Lonely Place* and *Human Desire*.

“It was too much of a pastiche,” Don recalled, “and as I made it, I wondered if they were going to be able to sharpen up the writing enough to make it viable. But the look back at noir—at what was so sharp and palpable in that approach to making films—certainly got my attention.”

The series was a no-go, but shortly thereafter Don received a script for a very dark tale—a film that would fall in line with the emerging vogue for “neo-noir”. It was titled *Deadly Hero* and scriptwriter George Wislocki had found a dark seam in what would soon be known as “the mean streets” of New York City.




There is a ticking time bomb inside Manhattan cop Ed Lacey. He wants to get ahead, to lift himself off the streets and into a world of politics and privilege. His efforts to do so are starting to pay off, but…

It’s a classic noir setup, portrayed with straight-ahead realism by director Ivan Nagy and shot with low-key panache by Andrzej Bartkowiak (who would go on to big things in the 80s, lensing films such as *Prizzi’s Honor*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Prince of the City*, and *Speed*). The cop makes a terrible mistake—he shoots an unarmed intruder. Slowly but surely, everything he’s worked for is slipping away from him. As film historian Foster Hirsch notes, this moment of crisis is pivotal, and Lacey lets himself

be seduced by what Hirsch aptly terms the “inner criminal” impulse. In this case, it is Lacey’s “inner psycopath.”

Don sensed that the role of Ed Lacey had the potential to regain his career momentum as a lead actor, and he brings all of his combined skills as an actor to the portrayal, digging deep into a dark inner world that inexorably points toward tragedy.

If anything, the film succeeded too well at what it set to do. Dark and disturbing, it didn’t possess the “retro” sheen of *Chinatown*; it didn’t traffic in the bizarre sexuality or theatrical psychopathology that would soon surface in *Taxi Driver*. It was just plain scary—the story of how one random event could send someone off the rails. Its realism cut too close to the bone.

And one of Don’s greatest performances slipped through the cracks as a result. It would be his last lead role on the big screen. While still admired and respected for his talent and versatility, Don would find the next arc of his career in character parts, remaining busy and in demand, occasionally landing a role where his talents could be used in a more fully-dimensional way (such as the 1986 ABC-TV production of *My Dad Can’t Be Crazy?*, where the always socially-conscious Don played an undiagnosed schizophrenic).

But Don’s creative efforts weren’t stilled. Just before his seventy-fifth birthday, Don had a tale told to him that was so incredible, so “truth is stranger than fiction,” so viscerally exciting that it prompted him to assemble a team to film the story despite all the technical obstacles that it contained. The story of divers trapped in an underwater cave with their air supply slowly but surely running out on them would be entitled—fittingly enough—*Breathe*. Over the next three years, Don would travel to various ocean settings around the world to bring the story to life. And with the help of marine cinematographer Tom Campbell, *Breathe* possesses breath-taking high-def visuals that only make the story that much more compelling.

As a director, Don proves he is clearly a late-bloomer, and perhaps there will be more in the offing for him once people see how “with it” he continues to remain. Never sitting still, still possessed with a searching, restless intellect, Don Murray is younger than most men half his age, and still awaits further adventures. The sun will never set on this singular man, and we celebrate him and the life example he’s given us.