

Dunsworth Story for Progress HFX
By Carsten Knox

The man doesn't introduce himself to the women at the registration desk, though they seem to know who he is. He doesn't look like he belongs here in the over-lit, slightly gaudy mezzanine of the Halifax Westin Hotel. It's noon on a Friday, the various conference rooms are disgorging suits with plastic name-tags hanging around their necks.

The man's wearing a wrinkled, cream-coloured shirt and pants with brown boots and a brown overcoat. Coming in from the bright, chilly January day he hasn't taken off his ill-fitting aviator sunglasses, also brown. He asks one of the women to hold his jacket. She asks, "Is there anything valuable in this coat?" Without hesitation, he replies, "No, just the coat. It was \$10."

The women giggle, and slurring his words, he adds, "It's the best coat I've ever had, canvas with fleece lining. The other night I slept in it with two women."

As he proceeds into the Atlantic Ballroom where delegates to the Nova Scotia Homebuilders' Association annual convention are waiting for their guest speaker to arrive, anyone would say that Jim Lahey is drunk.

Jim Lahey is John Dunsworth. Underneath the brown aviators and false inebriation is an actor, director and an all-around Halifax fixture. John's daughter, Sarah, is also an actor and has seen her father's process in preparing for a role. He rehearses for the world, trying on characters in public.

"I realized it the other day. My dad is an artist. If he wants to do something he'll just pick it up and try to do it. He can do almost anything."

John and Sarah are both performers on the Dartmouth-shot comedy show and national television hit Trailer Park Boys. Jim Lahey is the park supervisor, perpetually sloshed, who drives a '77 Chrysler New Yorker, cream-coloured, the same shade as his wrinkled pants and shirt. He has an odd, somewhat closeted sexual relationship with his assistant Randy, a manboy who never wears a shirt.

In person, John doesn't really look like Mr. Lahey, he's a bit taller. He does have the same sharp brown eyes, unruly eyebrows, devious squint, and somewhat rumped demeanour.

John just can't keep still. His hands are always moving. His fingers aren't the delicate, expressive tools you'd expect to find on an actor's hands. They're rough, wide, full of crevasses. The thumbnails are dirty, and one nail is unnaturally ridged, as if it has been jammed in a door and healed badly.

“I’m a rough guy, compared to the smooth metrosexuals of the theatre,” he says. “I did study drama, but my ability at make believe and to pull a character off is very shocking to people. I don’t fit the mould of an actor.”

Mike Clattenburg created Trailer Park Boys by hiring a cast and crew of friends and acquaintances. John was the most experienced actor among them.

“John Dunsworth is the most passionate actor in the province, maybe the country,” says Clattenburg. “He likes to work with text, but I tend to change the script on set. He’ll go with that. He’s prepared but likes to play around. He’s unaware of his performance, it’s how he rings so true.”

Pat Roach plays Randy. He says working with John has been hugely beneficial.

“I would say that everyone has learned something from John. Me most of all because we’re a team. I’m getting free coaching from the master.”

Roach adds, “John paid me five bucks to say all this about him.”

Trailer Park Boys season five is airing now on Showcase, and a feature film is in the works to begin shooting June 20th, executive produced by Ivan Reitman, Hollywood big-wig and director of comedy classics Ghostbusters and Stripes. Trailer Park Boys, now well known to many Canadians and a growing number of Americans, will soon be an international concern.

This kind of celebrity is the brass ring for most Canadian actors. Mr. Lahey is on the verge of being an icon. Though John Dunsworth considers himself very lucky to be part of the cast of a homegrown cultural phenomenon, becoming a star isn’t what he’s been looking for.

“It doesn’t seem like it is a supernatural occurrence, it doesn’t seem like winning the lottery. The fact that maybe a million people know who Jim Lahey is, it hasn’t really affected me in any real way.”

He pauses to reconsider, and notes one way his life has changed.

“My bills are paid. I was chronically five thousand dollars behind for years, and I’m going to be again, don’t get me wrong.”

As John dodges and weaves through life, his philosophy of acting, striving for diversity and originality, also applies to what he chooses to do with his days.

He is a married father of four, an actor and a director. He was a casting agent for a dozen years until ACTRA, the actors union, told him that it was a conflict of interest with his work as a performer. He still keeps his eyes open for talent. If you recognize him in

Halifax, you'll notice someone is always touching John's arm, saying or waving hello. In his 58 years he's made many friends and acquaintances.

He enjoys helping young actors and filmmakers with their work, and often won't take money for his time. He's enormously generous and tireless in his volunteer efforts to raise funds for causes he believes in. He teaches acting skills to youth with special needs, helping them channel and control their emotions. At one time or another John has been an auctioneer, a taxi driver, a laundry truck driver, a porter on the railroad, and, ironically, given his distaste for authority, an acting teacher at Dalhousie University and a political candidate for the NDP.

John loves Volvos. In fact, all the Dunsworths swear by them. John's brother Jeff is a mechanic, and his shop is a Volvo laboratory, with half a dozen of the boxy, Swedish cars in various states of disrepair. John bought his 740 model three years ago. It has 500,000 kilometres on it. He says it runs like a dream.

John plays bridge, scrabble, and word games for fun. He likes to bowl. He builds beautiful, ornate miniature ships, sculpts, and writes poetry. He loves sailing, and owns a couple of boats. He enjoys shining his shoes and has a whole shoe-shine kit. Most days he's up from 6:30 a.m. to midnight.

He calls himself a dilettante, though on better days, he might consider the compliment of "renaissance man."

"I should have myself tested for ADD, then I'd have an excuse," he says.

What satisfaction John gets is in the getting things done. The twist being that things are never done, there's always another task to fill his day. That unquenchable restlessness and love of action has its downside. John has struggled with an addiction to gambling, particularly Video Lottery Terminal machines. He says he's lost thousands of dollars on them, though it never got so bad that it endangered his family or his work. He recently spoke to the press about it, hoping to use his public profile to pressure the Nova Scotia government to do something about the machines. Thus far they've committed to removing over 1,000 of them, no doubt due to John's passionate crusade.

"I want to be a match to set things on fire. It's not about my addiction because I never really hurt myself. I'm trying to do it now because in another year or two, Jim Lahey is going to be passé."

Dictism is a philosophy John's invented. He has a cloth dictionary in his car that he uses to foresee his day. He refers to it by asking himself a question then randomly opening to a page and pointing to a word before looking at it.

"Tomorrow I need to be...?" He opens the book and points. "Open-ended."

He shows me the page. The word is indeed on the page under his thick finger.

“That’s perfect for tomorrow, because I’ll be working.”

What if he gets a word he doesn’t recognize?

“If it’s a word I don’t know, it expands my knowledge of the universe.”

Now he looks for fresh, open-ended inspiration.

“What do I do with my life...?”

He opens to another page and points. The word is, “Guess.”

“That’s exactly what it is I do.”

John Francis Dunsworth was born in 1946 to Frank and Frances Dunsworth. He was the second of 10 children, and the eldest son. He grew up in a house on Young Avenue in the south end of Halifax near Point Pleasant Park. John’s father graduated from Dalhousie medical school and became a psychiatrist. At home Dr. Frank Dunsworth was a strict disciplinarian. Perhaps it was Dr. Dunsworth’s countenance, perhaps it was the expectation that often falls on the shoulders of the first-born son, but John’s childhood was not a particularly happy time. He was very anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment. He still is.

“John was an angry young man for a lot of years,” says Joanne, John’s sister. “It seemed like nothing he could do was good enough for dad because he didn’t become a professional.”

John found acting while supporting himself and studying at the University of Guelph. Upon his return to Halifax in 1970, John started a short-lived but influential drama company called Pier One Theatre.

“When I started it I said to myself, ‘I don’t care if I’m poor all my life, I’m going to be an actor.’ It was the first time in my life I’d found something I could do that I had some approbation for.”

The transience of the actor’s life is something that weighs on John as he looks back on his achievements on stage and in film. Since the early days of Pier One he’s directed 10 Gilbert and Sullivan plays, starred in a number of CBC radio dramas, over 25 Neptune Theatre productions and had parts in Hollywood movies such as *The Shipping News*, as well as many other TV movies and independent films.

“I used to feel the theatre was such a sad thing because when it was over it was nothing tangible left,” he says. “You have the memories, but my memory is so bad, that, what’s that? You have the reviews, but the reviews are usually so bad, what’s that? Even when you get a good review sometimes it’s not really reflective of what went on. Sometimes

you get a bad review and the person missed the point entirely. I know myself, I really enjoy doing the theatre while I'm doing it."

Down off St. Margaret's Bay there's a road called Dunsworth, though John is quick to point out it was the municipality that chose the name without consulting his family. Volvos parked and driving by seem to make up fully 50 per cent of all the vehicles on the road, many belonging to other children of Frank Dunsworth.

John lives in a house he built on property his father purchased here four decades ago. His father apportioned out chunks of it to John and his siblings, many of whom still live within shouting distance of each other. It's there that John finds the calm centre of his frenetic life, with his wife Elizabeth and two of his four children who still live at home, and the on-going creation of many, many rock sculptures and walls.

The house is impressive. A tall grey box made of vertical pine, spotted with windows on three levels, it towers over a swimming pool and the ocean.

Here are the rocks, the rocks that Sarah says to know her father, you must see. John considers that thought.

"Well, if you want to see something that took an awful long time, but just took one stone at a time, and none of it seemed like a labour. I get excited when I go to the quarry and handpick rocks. I get a good feeling when I work from seven in the morning until 10 in the morning cementing rocks, but then I have to go to town. Just before I go I look at the rocks... I feel like I accomplished something."

Though the February snow hides things, the result of decades of work on the property around John's house is obvious. Set in concrete by John years ago, the rocky steps descending towards the pool get icy from salt-water spray that reaches up 30 or 40ft from the shore. The pool looks as if it might have formed naturally, an illusion completed by the thick sheath of ice encasing its walls like frosted glass. In the summer salt water is pumped in until it fills and overflows back into the sea. Just beside it is a stone wharf that John built to replace one lost in Hurricane Juan. Above is a stone platform that took him a summer to complete, and more steps, more walls, and more rocks.

It's an on-going project, these structures and plateaus and the gardens beyond, and John has plans for many more. Along with his children, this journeyman actor's legacy is here, jaggedly sticking out the earth.

John's mother has moved back to town as she felt the winters here too remote, but the Dunsworth homestead where he'd spend his summers as a child still stands a short drive from the house he built. It's a large, yellow house up on a hill. In the garden is an oblong stone monument that John made in remembrance of his father. At its base is brass plaque that reads "Frank Dunsworth, Patriarch, Southwest Cove."

Here, John's fractured memory is more complete, and his stories come quickly.

“My brother Jeff said this morning, “The thing about being a good mechanic is I want people to be pleased with my work,””

John stares into the middle distance, knowing it’s true of him as well.

“It’s a constant thing I’m looking for. Too much I would like people to say, ‘Hey John, good job!’ That’s my whole *raison d’etre*! It’s because I was looking for it from my father all the time. And when you do get it, you shrug it off, but you go, ‘Ah, I could have done better.’”

Shortly before he died, Frank Dunsworth gave John a gift that went a long way to bridging the chasm that existed between them for so many years. He and John went sailing together, and he remarked upon one of John’s performances. He said, “John you did a good job on that, but you don’t need me to be telling you, you know you do a good job on everything you really try to do.”

For the first time in John’s life he realized his father could see him as somebody who had done something with his life, somebody who was worthwhile.

It’s Friday at the Westin and Jim Lahey is in the Atlantic Ballroom, at the podium before the Nova Scotia Home Builders’ Association, a group of solid, beefy men who very clearly work with their hands.

Lahey is damn funny. He claims he’s there to promote investment in mobile homes, of course. A waiter keeps bringing more drinks and Lahey gets progressively more plastered as he goes on, stumbling over his words.

“It’s a distinct pressure to be up here, today,” says Lahey. “I’m aware of the high standards in your profession and I respect the fact that builders, renovators and officials on job sites seldom if ever use profane language, therefore I will not personally be employing any bad language, shit-talk, in my address here today.”

As he goes on, the contents of his speech became sharper in direct contrast to his enunciation. He references the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Charles Darwin and “Buttmaster Filler” and his Geodesic Domes. The audience pauses, not knowing what next to expect, their laughter cut with a nervous edge. Perhaps he is a little too sharp.

“Let’s get down to brass tacks,” Lahey continues, reading a brochure. “‘Expanding customer base.’ Yeah. That’s true. People’s asses are a lot bigger nowadays— for various reasons. Mostly because of increased nutrition from the fast-food industry, and the incredible variety of television programming. It is, of course, reflected in increased weight bearing specifications of building construction, as you know. Twenty-six inch door jambs just don’t make it anymore.”

His lessons for the industry before him seem pointed. In quoting “Marsha” McLuhan he says, “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us.” It’s part of a joke about an

overweight woman who died and had to be buried in her trailer because they couldn't get her out. Along with the off-colour sentiment is a clear message about the environments in which we live, and responsibilities of those who build them.

John does everything required of him as the luncheon guest, the words and character flow with an ease that comes from 40 years of dedication, but there's something about a room full of experts, he can't let them get away without thinking a little. In his faux drunken haze, he can't help but give them a shot or two.