

BROCK'S BANTER: Front Window

By Brock Weir

Late last month I crossed one of the more minor items off my bucket list ? namely, taking the opportunity to see Alfred Hitchcock's classic, *Rear Window*, up on the big screen.

The screening itself took place at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in Downtown Toronto as part of their month-long salute to the Technicolor process. As far as films selected to highlight the landmark technique, *Rear Window* is hard to beat.

It has always been a favourite of mine.

If you haven't seen it ? and, if you haven't, well? stop reading now, seek it out, and come back to this in 112 glorious minutes ? it follows the story of L.B. Jeffries, a photographer for several publications, including *Life Magazine*, played by James Stewart. Holed up in his apartment after breaking his leg on the job, he is confined to a wheelchair with only his wisecracking insurance company-issued nurse (Thelma Ritter), his glamorous on-again-off-again girlfriend (Grace Kelly) and his apartment's rear window as his only outlet to the outside world.

Armed with a pair of binoculars and his long-distance camera lens, he intently observes the lives of the people living in the goldfish bowl around him, including a pair of oversexed newlyweds, an undersexed singleton he comes to call ?Miss Lonelyhearts?, the regular writhing of a young dancer, ?Miss Torso?, and a host of other characters, including a bickering couple named Thorwald. Settling into my seat in the theatre, I listened as the older woman two seats over unspooled the plot for her younger female companion sitting between us. The older woman seemed passionate about what was to unfold, but the youngster wasn't buying it. She was sandwiched between two people who well-knew what was to come, so as soon as Jeffries began to suspect Mr. Thorwald (Raymond Burr) had done away with his wife while sleep drew a curtain down over the theatre of the living outside his window, she began leaning further and further into the action. I smiled to myself; there was no turning back for this young'un.

In the intervening decade-and-a-half since I first saw the film, I've come to realize we all have a bit of Jeffries in us, intent on observing the world around us with varying degrees of intensity. Some of us are paid to do so (guilty), for others it is a guilty pleasure, but it often raises the question of how you want to present yourself to the world around you, in case anybody happens to be looking, and what they might be able to find out from a casual glance.

Often in this profession, it is me doing the observing, whether I am covering an event live, looking at it through my own eyes or through the lens of a camera, watching a Council meeting unfold, or a Federal election progress.

Particularly with the latter, you can often tell when an interview subject is putting his or her best foot forward and the challenge is to then gently whittle away at the veneer until you find the real kernel of the person inside. Truth be told, it is very satisfying when you do so ? both for the interviewer and, at the end of the day, the interviewee as well. It's always nice to break down a barrier or two.

Saturday, however, it was me who was keen on putting my best foot forward, heading over to the Aurora Cultural Centre ahead of my call time at 10.30 a.m. to sit for a series of portraits for Local Colour Aurora. Having been told by Judy Sherman, co-founder of the group along with Eva Folks, to essentially ?come as you are? after meeting up at Hillary House the previous Saturday, as the days wore on, I decided it was probably best not to wear the old black t-shirt and grey shorts I happened to be wearing on that hot afternoon. So, to borrow a phrase from fellow columnist Alison Collins-Mrakas, who texted me early Saturday morning to ask if I had ?gussied up? for the main event, I did just that and put together something snappy ? well, snappy for me ? and headed out the door for what I anticipated would be a fun morning.

Upon arrival at the Cultural Centre, I soon met up with a regular reader of this column. She had read last week's piece mentioning the sitting in passing and she said she just had to come out to take a look ? not necessarily of the portrait painting, but to see this writer full-on after noticing the recent evolution of my headshot above. That put a bit of a spring in my step as I hopped on the stool much more gingerly than I would have been able to do a year ago at this time, looking forward to things to come. But, then it hit me. If this one lovely individual had a strong opinion, how would the seven artists in front of me interpret their own opinions on their canvas, paper, or media du jure?

Only really knowing two of the seven, and casually meeting a third just a few weeks ago, I wondered how the portraits done by those who know me a bit better would differ from the others. Would they pinpoint something in me ? a characteristic, a flaw, something positive I have overlooked, or a quirk ? I had been unconscious of? How would this be interpreted?

As I decided to take a leaf out of Jeffries' book by choosing a focal point outside the front window of the Meridian Gallery, fixing my eyes on the balcony of a nearby apartment building where a person was doing battle with a piece of temperamental patio furniture, I almost felt stripped bare as the seven sets of eyes stared intently, some putting me in the crosshairs of their thumb and

paintbrush, not knowing what to expect.

Sun beating through the Centre's irregular window panes illuminated many of the canvases from my perspective. Backlit (or front lit as the case might be from the other side of the easel) some of what I could see was interesting and mysterious.

With each brushstroke, the painting dead-centre to me took shape, illuminated by the sun. From my perspective, it started to have an alarming resemblance to Ecce Homo, the now infamous fresco of Jesus by Elias Garcia Martinez in a Spanish church, which came to global attention after Cecilia Gimenez, an octogenarian parishioner with an artistic bent decided to restore the artwork, resulting in something akin to a Messiah-Orangutan hybrid.

Oddly enough, however, from the other side of the canvas, it was actually a pretty impressive rendition of me, as were the other six paintings, each completely unique from one another. As the sitting was only two-and-a-half hours, the portraits remain works in process, but will be on display at the Centre from September 17 through November 14 in Local Colour Aurora: Paints the Town.

I look forward to seeing the seven finished versions of me ? and maybe learning a thing or two about myself in my process. Sitting still for that length of time provided plenty of food for thought.