

BROCK'S BANTER: Redialing the Hotline

By Brock Weir

'It's one more thing to check off my bucket list,' said a British woman of a certain age as she was looking for her husband in the crowd at the Toronto International Film Festival on Sunday night.

As I was waiting to meet a friend, the sea of people seemed to grow exponentially with each passing minute. Apparently Reese Witherspoon was due to arrive any moment and the volunteers and event staff around Roy Thomson Hall took the opportunity to become something of a warm-up act, making sure the crowd knew how to give Ms. Witherspoon and her co-stars the warm ovation they presumably deserved.

My mission was slightly different. I wasn't there to catch a glimpse, get an autograph, or take a selfie with the woman who brought June Carter to life on screen, or got to live out one of my fantasies of being zapped into a certain 1950s television show, at least for a few minutes, but as I waited for my own objective, the woman in question came up alongside to ask me what was going on.

As I was in the dark about it as she was, the subject was quickly changed.

She and her husband were visiting from Yorkshire, she told me through her unmistakable accent. They came to Toronto not knowing TIFF would be in full swing by the time they got here, but they were loving the energy and excitement it brought to their vacation.

So, why Toronto? It was that bucket list thing.

To people who live within a stone's throw of Toronto, having The Six on one's bucket list of places to visit might seem like a strange life goal, but I guess if you're on the outside looking in, Toronto is a pretty interesting place to visit. But, Toronto alone wasn't enough to fill up their respective buckets. They wanted the full Canadian experience.

Arriving via Montreal, they had already taken in the city, saturated themselves in Ottawa and, after departing Toronto this week they were set to work their way west.

Her enthusiasm for the 'experience' intrigued me. She had a fascination with Canada from a young girl. Being a woman who was decidedly over the age of 70, however, I thought it interesting that this fascination-cum-dream stayed with her in the intervening decades.

The Canada of the 1940s is a very different place from the Canada of the aughts and the aughteens; nevertheless, it still conjured up romantic images in this woman's mind, not the least of which was the perception of Canada being a multicultural mecca where people regardless of cultural background or religious affiliation can live in peace and harmony.

The veracity of that international perception is something that can 'and is' often debated, but having a chance encounter like this, particularly this past weekend, seemed especially fortuitous.

It was little more than 24 hours after the first in what is hoped to be an annual re-boot of the Aurora Multicultural Festival at Ada Johnson Park.

Some cultures find rain on the day of a big celebration to be a good omen of things to come, so hopefully what unfolds in years to come proves this to be true.

But a lasting image of the day, for me, is when the skies opened up with a torrential downpour, everybody took shelter under the nearest tent. As cheesy as it sounds, it was heartwarming to see this live tableau of the American allegory of the 'huddled masses' born to fruition 'even north of the border.

South of the border, however, seems increasingly a different story with the politics of hate and division becoming the inexplicably popular default setting for many politicians looking to win the trust of the American public who ultimately hold the keys to power. Too many column inches have been wasted in newspapers around the world on the U.S. presidential campaign that I am wary of exacerbating that pandemic in this particular space, but it is something we should keep an eye on because it is creeping north like mildew on a fresh shower curtain.

Less than a year ago, Simcoe-Grey MP Dr. Kellie Leach tearfully went on TV to express her regret for participating in the Conservative Party's announcement that a re-instated Tory government would introduce a hotline for Canadians to call in equally hot tips about individuals apparently performing 'barbaric cultural practices.'

It was a mistake, she said, in the full glare of the studio cameras when the former cabinet minister was left with her seat in a party that was soundly trounced at the polls.

Taking her apology at face value, it was somewhat surprising (not really) that in her effort to take the reins of the tattered Official Opposition by polling

her potential supporters on this very question: 'Should the Canadian government screen potential immigrants for anti-Canadian

values as part of its normal screening for refugees and landed immigrants??

'Anti-Canadian' is a phrase designed to tug at our heart strings, but you might as well say that you want to 'Make Canada great again.' This time, potentially seeing how this rhetoric is taking hold in the United States, there are no tearful apologies, and the campaign ' and the poll ' forges on, for better or worse.

Those individuals considering supporting Dr. Leitch in her bid are offered no context on what she means by 'anti-Canadian' much less the values that would fall under pro. In the United States, such context and being informed does not seem to be a pre-requisite to have an opinion.

It is not a pre-requisite here, of course, but perhaps we should all consider what it means to be Canadian and emphasize the values that unite us rather than what divides us.