

Celluloid

Movies' unlikeliest new leading man

By MARK HEMETER

Yes, definitely.

To get the obvious question (and answer) out of the way first, John Belushi *would* very much like to play Ignatius J. Reilly in the film version of "A Confederacy of Dunces."

But the former "Saturday Night Live" regular of "Animal House" renown says he will only do the New Orleans-set story if Michael Apted directs. And the English director of "Coal Miner's Daughter," in staunch support, says he'll only do it if Belushi plays the part.

Belushi, in an interview conducted Monday in New York, said he's even had "cab drivers, people like that, ask me whether I'm going to play Ignatius. A guy last night asked me that question. A lot of people seem to know about it."

Apted, the director of Belushi's latest film effort, "Continental Divide" (opening today), thinks the posthumously published, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Orleanian John Kennedy Toole is a "brilliant book, full of genuine comic observation, but it's poorly structured. It'll be very, very tough to do.

"It's so difficult getting material in Hollywood," he added. "There's always a lot of people associated with it, and it's difficult ever to get the right people together. But I think John is the only person in the world who could play it, and that's the only way I'll do it. It's a question of whether we maneuver so we get within striking distance of it."

THE ACTOR AND his director were joined by Belushi's "Continental Divide" co-star, actress Blair Brown, in an interview session obviously intended to publicize the new Universal release, not the still-uncast film version of Toole's novel. But if there was a consistent tone to the afternoon's conversation, it was of genuine camaraderie and mutual trust among the three — a feeling that easily reinforced Belushi's and Apted's expressed desire to work together again on "Confederacy of Dunces."

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doesn't hurt — was that she came from the tradition of work that, I thought, would help John and me. She's very experienced, she's done a lot of work in theater, a lot of work in television, and I thought her attitude toward the work would be very helpful to John because this was the first time John was taking on this kind of (romantic lead) role."

What he didn't want, Apted went on, was "a comedienne, someone who was from the sort of world that John came from. I thought that would throw the whole project into a sort of disarray, so I needed someone from another part of the acting profession, the more conventional part . . . Both John and I leaned very heavily on Blair, because it was very difficult to find the right tone for John's character — what level of humor, how much of John could we use. Because we had to make John funny, we didn't want to squeeze all the humor out of him, and yet we wanted to make him very real.

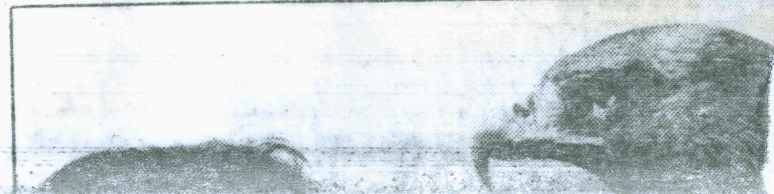
"Blair had to be very patient with that, because we had to find that right pitch. Blair was playing solid, real stuff, and John would be clowning around, so she had to have a wary eye out for what was going on. And that's what was so exciting about the project — to make it as funny as hell, to use that great comic talent, in a very real set of circumstances.

"We could have made John absolutely straight, but what's the point of that? On the other hand, we knew we had to do something other than 'Blues Brothers' and 'Animal House.' What was difficult for us was to get the essence of John, the essence of his great comic talent, and integrate it into making his character credible."

THIS DELICATE BALANCE, the romantic pairing of a serious actress with extensive credits in stage classics (the New York and Stratford, Ontario, Shakespeare festivals figure prominently in Brown's credentials) and an actor whose previous screen exposure has been entirely in the broadest sort of comedy, produced what Apted described as "a certain ripple of shock" when it was first announced. "A lot of people thought we were crazy, believe me," Apted claimed. "I never had any doubt, ever."



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"Continental Divide" is a romantic comedy whose setting is divided between the Colorado Rockies (where Brown's character, reclusive ornithologist Nell Porter, has devoted four years of her life to observing the endangered American bald eagle) and Chicago (where Belushi, as a muckraking Chicago Sun-Times columnist named Ernie Souchak, is a gregarious, thoroughly urban type). Souchak's hard-hitting expose of a corrupt Chicago politician puts him in the hospital when he's roughed up by the politico's hired thugs, so his editor decides to get him out of town until the heat's off. His assignment: to take to the mountains and interview Nell.

The project is one that first struck Belushi's fancy more than two years ago. "Steven Spielberg gave me the script while I was shooting '1941,'" he recalled. "I liked it, but there was no director for it. Then they brought in some directors I didn't like. Then, the script was given to Michael (Apted), and Michael read it and thought I'd be right for it, not knowing that I was (already involved)."

Apted continued: "I didn't know that John was interested in the script, or that he had even seen it. But he was the only person that I could see to make the movie because I thought the material was good, it was OK, but it wasn't anything really world-shaking. It needed a really audacious piece of casting . . . to bring it alive. And he was the only person I wanted to do the film. I couldn't see the point of doing it with a straight Hollywood leading man, an ordinary Hollywood thing."

The script in question was written by the currently very hot Lawrence Kasdan (see story on Page 4), whose screenplays include "The Empire Strikes Back" and "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and whose directorial debut, "Body Heat," also opens in New Orleans today.

BLAIR BROWN, on the other hand, didn't become involved in "Continental Divide" until some time later. "John was set, I was set and we were looking for a leading lady," Apted explained. "And Blair was someone we went to. I wanted someone like Blair. The particular thing about Blair — other than the fact that she was perfect for the part, which

we had to do something other than 'Blues Brothers' and 'Animal House.' What was difficult for us was to get the essence of John, the essence of his great comic talent, and integrate it into making his character credible."

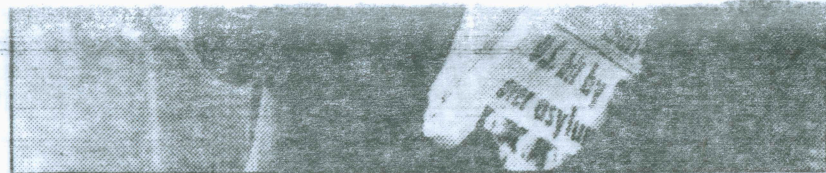
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Brown, who said she accepted the role opposite Belushi because "it looked like a good time, it sounded like a good idea to me," insisted she actually did have a good time filming the project, "which is certainly an experience I had not had before in making a movie. It was good for me, too, to work with John because my approach to acting is much more of a workhorse, eight-shows-a-week kind. It was good to have somebody sort of mix it up. And Michael was always there to hold everything together, so the feeling was always real secure."

Brown's preceding film role, as William Hurt's wife in director Ken Russell's "Altered States," she described as "one that cost me so much personally. It wreaked havoc with my life. One thing was the nature of the material. And the shoot was long — six months. And Ken is a very intense and obsessive person — a real perfectionist. It was good discipline, and I would work with Ken again, but you just have to prepare yourself. On 'Altered States,' since there were principally four actors, we gave ourselves numbers — Bill Hurt was Puppet No. 1 — and told Ken just to call us by these numbers, which he agreed to."

OFTEN, BROWN SAID, "movie directors either tend to be very tyrannical or else they haven't got a clue as to what they're doing. But with Michael (Apted), the thing is very relaxed and everyone — everyone — can offer suggestions. I mean, people in the crew would have ideas, and it's all accepted and there's no sort of ego problems that way. But there's always a controlling force."

And how does Belushi feel about his new, romantic-leading-man image? When that "ripple of shock" went through Hollywood after his "Continental Divide" casting announcement, the actor allowed, his attitude at the time was "I'll show those bastards!" But now, he said with a shrug and a half-comical sigh, "I don't want to be pegged as just a romantic. . . . I'm a lot more complex than that!"



He (John Belushi) is a muckraking Chicago newspaperman.



She (Blair Brown) studies American bald eagles in the Rockies.



They have nothing in common. . . . Put them together and what have you got? A new romantic comedy, 'Continental Divide.'