

**John Sweet on
'The making of *A Canterbury Tale*'
London 1943 - 44**

As a clerk in Eisenhower's HQ at Grosvenor Square in London in the spring of 1943 I tried out for a part in Maxwell Anderson's war play *The Eve Of Saint Mark* ... the part of Pvt Francis Marion who was patterned after the young maverick journalist, Pvt Marion Hargrove.

Anderson had met Hargrove and been charmed by him during a trip to a southern camp. Apparently I had the good fortune to look and act like Hargrove, with the result that I got the part. The play opened in July at the Scala Theater near Tottenham Court tube station and ran for six weeks; troop entertainment sponsored by the Red Cross and cast entirely from personnel from troops stationed in London at that time.

I had acted in high school plays, skipped theater at Ohio State, largely from lack of confidence, and now in London quite by accident, at the age of 27, I achieved a sudden success as the poetic soldier wise guy, actually a part of secondary importance in the play.

At that very time Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (makers of *The Red Shoes*, *Colonel Blimp*, *One of our Aircraft is Missing*) [had] a new film ready to go called *A Canterbury Tale*. They sought American stars then in the ; Burgess Meredith for one, Tyrone Power for another. Army policy was opposed to their use while they were in service. The result was that they would allow an amateur actor to be used by the British. I was cast in the part of a sort of Jimmy Stewart American from Oregon, a country boy from the west.

There were three other principals in the film: a land-girl from Britain, a British soldier organist and a country squire. The plot was simple: the four of us were to meet on a train on the way to Canterbury, at which place just like the Canterbury Pilgrims of old, we were each to do penance or receive a blessing.

Having been looked at, sniffed over, inspected, interviewed, introduced to Ralph Richardson, etc, etc, I was released by the for 6 months and assigned to work for Michael Powell, director, at Denham Studio at the western edge of London, reachable from Marylebone Station, which was but a ten minute walk from our Green Street barracks in Mayfair.

The first stop was to the location shooting in Canterbury itself. The unit was put up at a small inn across from the cathedral [The County Hotel]. The place looked very like the scene of *Separate Tables*. We were not allowed to shoot in the cathedral. That effect or fakery was to be produced by 'special effects' cameramen. We spent our days on a beautiful grassy hill outside Canterbury ... a good part of which days were spent waiting for sun.

Make-up went on at 5:30 in the morning, then we took a bus out to the location where the camera crew had set up tracks for a dolly shot (allowing the camera to move with moving actors without shaking or bumping) The grips (electricians) stood near the camera holding aluminum sheets which reflected on to the faces of the actors.

Besides watching for the sparse sun, we had to be alert to airplanes overhead lest their sound be included in the soundtrack of the recorded voices. I did a great deal of reading, of standing 'bout in those days. Once I remember Mr Powell took me aside and explained to me that the expert takes recorded by our star, Eric Portman, were in part due the fact that he had played so many roles that he had a sort of emotional card file of memory of responses ready to be slipped into as called for.

Film acting has very much to do with the eyes. In tight moments of high feeling the camera comes in close to the face where it records, not so much 'acting', as the feeling behind the eyes as they are photographed.

I was not used much in Canterbury (we might have been there a month) but such time as was used in a scene, my clear sense was that the director was disappointed. I found concentrating difficult. Green, I was too titillated by the unusual circumstance in which I found myself to be able to comfortably settle down to work. Besides that, I knew literally nothing 'bout acting ... patience was called for by my superiors. Sometimes I got it and sometimes I didn't.

I did a scene with children playing (later cut from film), a scene in a woodshop talking to an old wheelwright about wood ('you can't hurry an oak!') and a scene sitting in a farm cart lamenting the lack of letters from my girlfriend back home. Now it just so happens that I myself was in a no-mail-from-my-wife slump and when I talked about my loneliness it came out on the film quite real and life like. Where, said director, did you find this sudden mastery ... despite the edge of sarcasm, I needed and welcomed the compliment.

Director Powell was an interesting man. Balding, maybe 40, of enormous energy, like a gadfly he kept after everybody. His face looked like the standard bust of Shakespeare, a fact of which I am sure Mickey was aware. What impressed me immediately was how much a director had to know about film, about lighting, about actors, about how to handle people generally.

It seemed to me that Mickey had an overwhelming power-drive (he had to have that to keep a unit of 40 persons jumping). He often sat and chewed a grass stem. He was a head-scratcher, he thought & chewed his

tongue and looked at you with great intensity. He seemed to rule people by fear. That system worked well apparently tho' not too comfortable for a green young actor.

The three other principals were: Eric Portman, 50, rich in emotional resonance, tweedy, a veteran of 10 films before this one, along with numerous stage productions. He played the part of a squire who loved the English countryside and its early history going right back to the Romans ... loved it so much that he gave lectures in Canterbury to the troops about that history. In our plot he is frustrated because the soldiers would rather go out with girls.

To counter this dating of the soldiers, he went about at night and put glue in the girls' hair. Too bizarre you say? That is what the audience thought when the film was released. They could not quite believe that eccentric behaviour.

The second man, about my age, was Dennis Price, a sort of classic drawing room comedy kind of English actor. His character was that of a young cinema organist who had always dreamed of one day playing a proper cathedral organ ... and of course he did get to play one, right in the cathedral.

The third principal was Sheila Sim, the land-girl or wartime farm worker. Later she became the wife of Richard Attenborough. She was standard pretty. Her goal in the film was to regain possession of a stolen camping van. The plot required the three of us younger persons to join hands as detectives and catch the glue man. We did. Sheila found her camping van. I finally got a packet of letters from home. The glueman was finally exposed (his penance).

Denham studio has four great sound stages. One of the excitements for me there was to see Laurence Olivier daily striding along the corridors between takes for *Henry V*. He was both director and star of that film. Denham had a commissary, dressing rooms and production offices attached. At Denham they finally got to the shooting of the scenes in which I appeared; got to more of them, I should say. One involved me being wakened in a country inn in a giant four-poster bed about 10 feet square; one interviewing the squire and seeing the Domesday Book in a very old English town hall; one meeting soldiers in a bar; one trying to make sense of the British telephone with its A and B buttons (23 takes it took for me to get it right), and one at a RR station when the three of us were hot on the tracks of the glueman ... and there were three or four more scenes.

Joining us at this time were half a dozen expert bit players from the British theater. These actors are so accomplished at playing maids, or bar tenders, or policemen, or gardeners that they play the same character over and over again in an endless number of British films. And are very nicely paid for their work too. One of the more interesting supporting players was Esmond Knight, a fine actor who had been blinded in the war. His friends saw that he was kept busy working and he learned to handle his and the blindness and his movements that a screen audience would not be aware of his affliction.

Almost every day at Denham we took time out to see the results of the previous day's shooting. At each session the director would indicate which of 5 takes of the same scene he liked best ... then they were all sent to the film editor who, when the final shooting was done, would assemble the whole. We shot a total of about 9 hours of film. The final version would be cut down to a little over two hours. In effect, 5 minutes a day was a lot of shooting. You can easily imagine how much sitting and waiting that involved.

For each scene, the director would rehearse its sense with the actors. Then the actors would walk through the set saying their lines for the benefit of the lighting crew and camera crew. When those two groups were satisfied, the director would say OK let's go; the clack board would be arranged, recording in print the number of the take and the scene; it would be held before the camera, and the director would say 'roll em'. That is what we did over and over again.

So. A location month at Canterbury in September: 3 or 4 months of shooting at Denham. Then 8 or 10 weeks for the film editor to do his job, and for the musical soundtrack to be dubbed in. Then press interviews and a sneak showing of the finished film in a small country town (Friars Cinema in Canterbury). Finally, the opening in May at the Odeon theater in Leicester Square to which the Queen came. Reviews were moderately accepting. The critics liked the idea of the film ... the concept that we moderns too are pilgrims ... but they had a hard time with the glueman particularly. Almost without exception they were generous to me, the newcomer, the American. And on the strength of my notices, American film companies began to invite me to lunch for inspection. 20th Cent. Fox and David Selznick offered contracts ... the 7-year kind which can be dropped at any time the studio wishes.

Such contracts tend to be offered simply to keep a young actor out of the hands of competing studios. They do not guarantee that the actor will be used by the studio. Perhaps the London agent was greedy or waited too long. Whatever the reason, no contract actually came and 3 years later Harold Clarman told me I had been foolish not to go to Hollywood, where I would have had, for free, classes in ballet, fencing, acting, voice.

Such is life. Because of the big film, the then loaned me to two different British film units who were making documentaries - the first about rugby and football, the second about combat fatigue. In 1945 I was discharged and went to New York City to begin a three-year stint as a Broadway actor hopeful.

While there, a few hundred extra feet were filmed in order to introduce my "wife" in the film ... rather, to add her to the film before the American release, because it was felt that a 'love interest' was an important lack in the original. That was the last of *A Canterbury Tale*.

I did have a full-page picture in *LIFE* magazine [26 June 1944]. The film was shown in a few art theatres around the country and then wound up on late night TV in the days before Hollywood released its old films to TV. And that ends the tale of John Sweet and ACT.

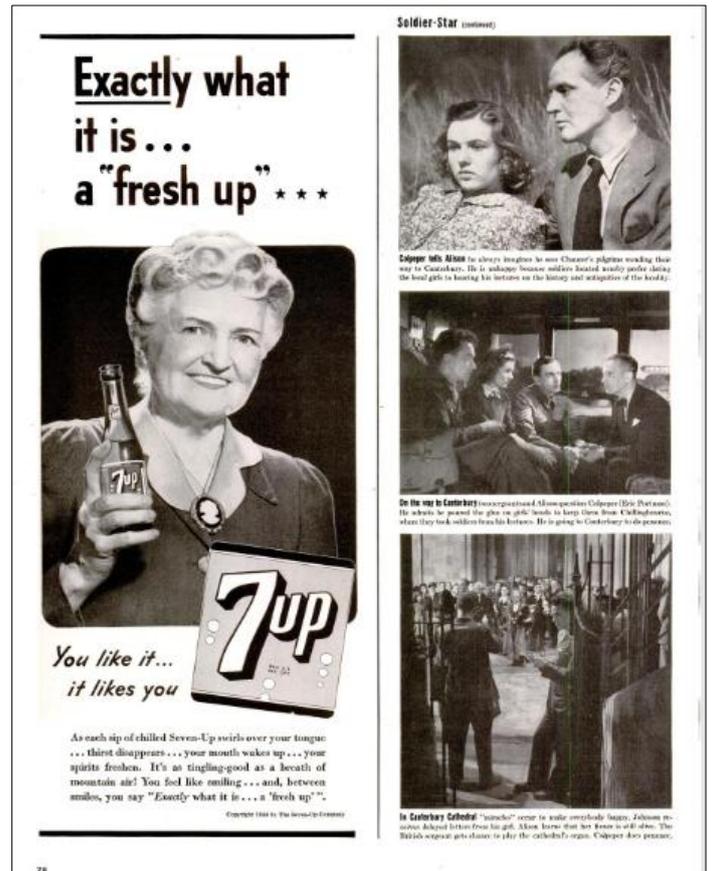
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SOLDIER-STAR
John Sweet, U.S. Army sergeant, is sudden film success in London

The man of the moment in London's entertainment world is John Sweet, a 36-year-old schoolteacher from Great Dix, Ohio, now a sergeant in U. S. Army. His performance in new British film, *A Canterbury Tale*, has brought him sudden fame. Last summer Sgt. Sweet, who had never acted in anything but high school plays, was chosen to play the pacifist sergeant in the Special Forces' propaganda film *The Zoo of St. Mort*. On the strength of that performance the Army gave him leave to play in *A Canterbury Tale*. His performance of a U. S. sergeant in this film brought praise from London's critics. Miss Mavis Raymond of the *Daily Mail* said: "I prefer him to Gary Cooper. He has less better than I like James Stewart."
Sweet was embarrassed by praise: "No 147 got me with gold watch chains have driven up in thousands in after my Hollywood premiere," he admitted. If they should Sweet would probably have them then. After the war he will study for a master's degree. For scenes showing him in *A Canterbury Tale*, turn page.

LIFE magazine 26 June 1944



Exactly what it is... a "fresh up" ***

You like it... it likes you

As each sip of chilled Seven-Up swirls over your tongue... thirst disappears... your mouth wakes up... your spirits freshen. It's as tingling-good as a breath of mountain air! You feel like smiling... and, between smiles, you say "Exactly what it is... a 'fresh up'".

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Soldier-Star (cont.)

Cooper tells Allen he always imagines he sees Cooper's pilgrim seeking their way to Canterbury. He is unhappy because soldiers treated really poorly during the last gift in having his letters on the history and adaptation of the book.

On the way to Canterbury were questioned Miss question Cooper's life that was. He admits he wanted the gift on gift funds to keep them from Cambridge, when they took soldiers from his letters. He is going to Canterbury to get papers.

In Canterbury Cathedral "insects" come to walk over the pages. Johnson receives a letter from his girl. Allen knows that her letter is all about. The British women get close to the cathedral's organ. Cooper does praise.

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Clockwise from top left:

1, 2 With Sheila Sim ('standard pretty') on location at Wickhambreaux and on Chartham Downs.

3 With Sheila Sim (far right) and extras in the wheelwrights' yard at Shottenden.

4 Picking blackberries on a 'beautiful grassy hill outside Canterbury' with Dennis Price ('a sort of classic drawing room comedy kind of English actor'). At least six barrage balloons hover above Canterbury.

Screen captures courtesy reelstreets.com