

CRIME DRAMA FILMING AT BAHIA MAR

No Sunshine For 'Darker Than Amber'

By BOB FREUND  
(Amusement Editor)

The sky was leaden. The water was grey and choppy.

The rain came down in furtive, slanting sheets, not obliterating the tropical surroundings, but reminding all that tropics doesn't always mean bright sunshine. This day, Bahia-Mar looked sad.

The big yacht, Midas Touch, rocked gently at the dock. The fictional houseboat, Busted Flush, made several passes at the side of the Midas Touch, renamed the Alabama Tiger for the occasion.

The occasion was the filming of John D. MacDonald's suspense crime novel, "Darker than Amber." On the Alabama Tiger was buxom Jane Russell. On the Busted Flush was husky Rod Taylor. It was a foregone conclusion their paths would cross—after all, it was in the script.

"Hi, Alabama," yelled Taylor from atop his houseboat. The actor was tanned, his hair sun-streaked, his stocky frame in a blue T-shirt and orange shorts.

"Hi, baby," returned La Russell from the Alabama Tiger (which is also her name in the film). "I just heard someone wants to borrow \$30,000 to buy a movie studio." Miss Russell ran down the side deck with a cocktail glass in hand, her ample figure in purple and white sport pajamas. The director yelled, "Cut!"

"That's \$30 million, Janey, not \$30,000. Let's try it again."

GRIM WEATHER

And so it went, so went the drizzle. Those touted on the idea of Florida's glorious weather for movie-making must have been grinding their teeth, and checking their budgets.

One who sat calm amid the crowd of extras and the almost-storm was the author, John D. MacDonald, who has nothing whatever to do with the filming.

MacDonald has a ruddy complexion and white sideburns. His head sported a cap, and he wore lemon yellow trousers and a white striped shirt. He's a Floridian, but not a Lauderdalean. On the rear deck of the Midas Touch, he told us about his work.

"Did I do the screenplay? No, and I don't want to do any. I'm still learning to do my own thing, which is writing novels."

As we talked, Miss Russell did her thing—running up and down the slanted deck, brushing Hollywood's most celebrated cantilever construction against delighted males.

Was Rod Taylor MacDonald's choice for Travis McGee?

"I had nothing to do with it," said the author. "But for years actors and agents have been suggesting themselves and others for the part of Travis. Jack Lord was in-

terested, and at one time I think Robert Culp was all set. I know Steve McQueen also expressed interest.

"But I'm very happy with Rod."

John MacDonald is part of the writers' colony in Sarasota, and was visiting Bahia-Mar at the invitation of 'Darker Than Amber's' producers Walter Seltzer and Jack Reeves.

"You know, I was sort of apprehensive about McGee becoming a success. I didn't know whether I wanted that sort of popular adulation or not. So, I put him here in Ft. Lauderdale instead of Sarasota so if he became a hit, I wouldn't be surrounded by him."

KEY TO CITY

"Incidentally, I have a key to Ft. Lauderdale. I was here several years ago pushing a picture called 'Cape Fear,' which they made from my book, 'The Executioners.' They couldn't get Bob Mitchum to come, nor could they persuade Gregory Peck or Polly Bergen. So, they set-

tled for me and Barrie Chase, a supporting actress.

"All the rushing around, meeting the press and officials made me feel like a Mexican general. I did meet two fine men, though, Bill Russell (with Florida State Theaters) and his son, John, who was the mayor at that time."

FOUR MOVIES

Strange that MacDonald, who has written so many books, has had only four of them made into films, particularly when the Travis McGee character seems so right for transference to film. When he does sell one to movies, that is the end of his participation.

"I feel that if it costs these film-makers as much as it does to acquire my property, then that is artistic control in itself. I know nothing about making movies, and other than 'Cape Fear,' I'm not too happy about what has happened to some of my other books as films."

While MacDonald talked, the extras and Miss Russell

continued to repeat the same scene. The rain spattered lightly. A nearby yacht and its activity caused a bit of caustic comment because its owner—female, and sporting one of the world's tiniest bikinis—made frequent appearances on deck to wash down the boat's windows. These appearances coincided quite accurately with the frequent passage of the camera boat. What price discovery?

ONLY AT DRIVE-INS

MacDonald's less-than-excited feeling about his filmed novels embraced "Cry Hard, Cry Fast," and one that turned into something called "Man-Trap."

"I never saw it," he confessed with a wry smile. "I think it only played at drive-ins in Tennessee. Richard Boone also took one of my properties for a television series, but turned it into a film called 'Kona Coast,' and I don't think anyone saw that, either."

"McGee will never see the

light of the television tube, though. I escrowed the rights and it will never turn up as a series. I couldn't do that to him.

"But I do hope for a feature film series on McGee. The producers bought 'Darker Than Amber,' which, by the way, is No. 6 in the series, and at release time, they can exercise their option for another book. I'm working on the 12th McGee book now."

FILMS EFFECTIVE

While professing no knowledge of film-making, MacDonald is interested in it. He feels that the visual can do so much that the printed word cannot.

"Most films would run six or seven hours if they followed a book literally, word for word. Travis McGee is an iconoclast who speaks out on current cultures. So much more can be done effectively with a look or a quick shot than can be written."

The rain continued and so did the filming. The lady in the bikini was destined to

have the cleanest, rain-stained windows in the marina. Rod Taylor kept guiding his houseboat past Jane Russell, and "Darker Than Amber" struggled valiantly to keep its production schedule under skies that were quite a bit "darker than usual."



JOHN MACDONALD ... calm amid crowd



JANE RUSSELL (C) BRAVES DRIZZLE FOR 'DARKER THAN AMBER' FILM scene was aboard the 'Alabama Tiger' moored at Bahia Mar