

Troy Donahue battles back from alcohol with optimism

By YAREMA ARAR
Associated Press Writer

BURBANK, Calif. (AP) — Troy Donahue, the pouty-faced teen heartthrob of the Kennedy era, has been down the comeback trail before. But this time he's making the trip on the wagon.

"This is the first thing I've done sober," Donahue says matter-of-factly about his role as a sleazy, salon-tanned salesman in "Grandview, U.S.A."

"When you work and you drink and you use, there is this terror, this underlying terror that exists and more or less suffocates your performance," he said. "You may get through it, but it's not to the level or the pitch that has any quality."

By the end of the '60s, Donahue's life was a shambles. He lost his fancy home, and two marriages — one to actress Suzanne Pleshette — had failed. Two more would later end in divorce.

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It's also the first part of any consequence Donahue has played for some time now, and probably his biggest break since his cameo in 1974's "The Godfather, Part II." In that he appeared briefly as Talia Shire's spineless boyfriend, a character who bore Donahue's own real name — Merle Johnson.

It's been 25 years since "A Summer Place" made Donahue a hot commodity, a Warner Bros. contract player who was the studio's top fan-mail draw.

At 49, he's still tall, lean, blond and striking. But his hairline is receding, his tanned good looks are more rugged than smooth and he's all but unrecognizable as the golden boy of "Parrish," "Susan Slade," "Palm Springs Weekend" and the TV detective series, "Surfside 6."

Maybe it's just as well, for Donahue recalls those roles with distaste. He still is bitter at Warner Bros. for using him as "fodder" in a string of vacuous, pretty boy parts — a stereotype that left him high and dry when playboys went out and antiheroes came in during the late '60s.

"I think that to have a reputation as an actor, you have to have some decent roles," Donahue said over lunch at the Burbank Studios commissary. "I think I did a good job with what I had to do, but the roles to begin with were laughed at, so the person playing these roles sometimes is maligned."

Donahue's troubles didn't end there. Although he never made a fortune as a contract player, he lived the expensive life of a Hollywood star — "which is very easy to do, when you have a name."

He also was becoming an alcoholic and drug user, habits that did not help his acting.

He moved to New York and back again. There were periodic acting parts — as a drug addict on "The Secret Storm" soap opera, a Charles Manson figure in "Sweet Savour," the "Godfather II" part. But his earnings went for drugs and alcohol, and in between he bummed off friends or movie buffs.

Things came to a head after his fourth marriage ended in 1981. By then, pancreatitis stemming from his drinking was sending Donahue to hospitals an average of once a year.

"I realized that I was going to die, and I was dying — or worse than that, I might live the way I was living for the rest of my life," Donahue said. "I guess there was that light that some of us feel that we see — and I choose to think it's God — that said, 'You have a choice, you don't have to live this way for the rest of your life.'"

So he joined an alcoholics' self-help group, and hasn't had a drink for more than two years. He said he doesn't find it hard to talk about his alcoholism — "it's part of the catharsis and it helps in the recovery."

Donahue is cautiously optimistic that his work in "Grandview, U.S.A." will spark a professional recovery. The film, about people involved with a demolition derby in the Midwest, isn't one of the summer's blockbusters, but Donahue plays his supporting comic role with gusto.

"This shows that I'm a versatile actor, so maybe people will take a chance on me," he said. "I hope that this opens a lot of new doors for me. Possibly it will. There are no guarantees."



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