

Post 5/23/79

'Guyana, Crime of the Century': Acting Out the Jonestown Horrors

By Bob Thomas

HOLLYWOOD (AP)—"It was a strange and disturbing experience; I'm still getting over it," says Gene Barry, returned from playing the role of Rep. Leo Ryan in a Mexican-made movie about the Jonestown massacre.

Barry, veteran of four television series and scores of Hollywood movies, admitted that he had some misgivings about accepting the role in "Guyana, Crime of the Century." When he joined Stuart Whitman, Joseph Cotton, John Ireland and Brad Dillman in the cast, a Hollywood columnist called Barry and berated him for it. Her reason: she hated what happened at Jonestown.

"Who doesn't?" Barry replied. "But you're confusing your horror of the situation with your dislike for the movie project. Give it a chance. Maybe the world can learn something from it. Maybe it will provide a visual lesson in the danger of false leadership."

Barry said that was part of his reasoning in accepting "Guyana." He also admitted he was "attracted by an extremely good role."

The film, which was produced by Alfonso Lopez Negrete and directed by Rene Cardona Jr., avoids real names. Rev. Jim Jones becomes James Johnson, and his enclave is called Johnsonstown. The slain congressman is portrayed as Lee O'Brien.

"I did some research on Ryan's life and found him a fascinating man," said Barry. "He was dedicated to fulfilling his obligation to the Constitu-

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tion, and that prompted him to do unusual things. Earlier in his career he wanted to learn about the penal system, and he masqueraded as a convict in a prison, at danger to his own life.

"He was considered a grandstander by his worthy opponents, but the more I read about him, the more impressed I became. I'm convinced he had the leadership to aim at national office. And I approached the role from that attitude."

Barry recalled his eerie introduction to the "Guyana" set. He arrived in Mexico City after the film had been in production for a week. He was taken immediately to the Churubusco studios, where Jonestown had been reconstructed.

"Armed guards searched everyone who came on the set," said the actor. "Nine hundred extras were milling around, and there was Stu Whitman (as Jones) peering through dark glasses, the image of Jones. I had the strange feeling that I had seen all this before."

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Barry learned that director Cardona had been shooting a film in Puerto Rico when the Jonestown news broke. He sent a camera crew to Guyana, and filming was done on the day that authorities discovered 900 people had died, not 300 as had been reported earlier.

"Guyana" had a budget of \$2.3 million, immense by Mexican standards, and is aimed at the American market, said Barry. The movie was shot in English and will be dubbed in Spanish for Latin America audiences. The U.S. release is expected this summer.

Barry's final scenes were filmed at a landing strip in Acapulco, doubling for the Guyana strip where Ryan was slain.

"When the man came around the plane and pointed his gun at me, I can't tell you how fearful I was," said Barry. "One hour later I was on the Western Air Lines flight back to Los Angeles. I'm still trying to recover."