

Roger Cross plays "a complicated man" on CBC's 'Coroner'

[Sabrina Furminger](#) Feb 10

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, Roger Cross received priceless advice from Lando Calrissian.

Okay, so it wasn't exactly a long time ago, etc. It was 1990, in Vancouver, on the set of the final episode of *Wiseguy*.

And it wasn't Lando who dished out the advice to the younger actor, but it was close: Lando's portrayer, Billy Dee Williams.

It was the early days of Cross' acting career. The Vancouver actor had been hired to play a bad guy on that particular episode, and Lando – erm, Williams, who was a featured guest star – gave the Padawan actor some advice on how to approach his role.

"I was a tough kid trying to be all mean, and Billy Dee was like, 'When bad guys say things, they just say it. They don't have to force it.'" Cross chuckles at the memory. "I'm like, 'Ooh, he's got a point there.'"

Cross happily took Williams' advice to heart, and in the years that followed, he's heeded it on numerous occasions – most notably on the locally shot time travel procedural *Continuum*, where he played Liber8 terrorist Travis Verta – but he didn't need to heed it much for his latest role: that of the good-hearted homicide detective Donovan "Mac" McAvoy on *Coroner*, which premiered last month on CBC Television.

Coroner is based on a popular series of books by British novelist M.R. Hall. It follows the [professional and personal exploits of Dr. Jenny Cooper \(Serinda Swan\)](#), an ER doctor turned coroner whose husband recently died, leaving her a single mom with a mountain of debt, PTSD, and an ex-soldier lover who lives in a tree house.

Coroner also stars Ehren Kassam (*Degrassi: Next Class*) as Jenny's teenaged son, and Quebec actor Éric Bruneau as Jenny's lover. Morwyn Brebner is creator, executive producer, and showrunner, and Adrienne Mitchell (*Durham County, Bellevue*) is lead director and executive producer for Back Alley Films.

Coroner is a smash hit: the Toronto-shot series is CBC's highest-rated launch in four years.

Mac works with the new coroner to solve homicides, and he's "a complicated man," according to Cross. "He has to work on his relationships.

He's got some skeletons, particularly in the romance department, that we're discovering. He's gone on a journey and he's become jaded."



Roger Cross as Detective McAvoy in *Coroner*.
Photo courtesy of CBC

But the jaded cop doesn't stand a chance when confronted with Jenny's fresh energy. "I think what's great about the Jenny Cooper character is this is what Mac used to be when he came in: so gung-ho and do everything right, trying to save the world and solve the crime and get that bad guy no matter what. He learned later in life that it's not so

black and white, and he's gotten comfortable in the grey area, and maybe he's gotten too comfortable in the grey area."

Mac isn't a bad guy, but he does have some skeletons rattling around his closet. "His past will come back to him, and he will have to deal with some of the skeletons from his past and he will have to deal with some of the people from his past," says Cross, whose lengthy list of credits includes *Arrow*, *Orphan Black*, *Motive*, *Dark Matter*, and *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. "He's very intuitive. He reads people very well, and part of what we get to learn is that he cared too much at one point."

(YVR Screen Scene is a spoiler-free zone, but we urge readers to catch up – and keep up – with 'Coroner' on the CBC Gem app. –Ed.)

Cross spent most of his childhood in Jamaica. He participated in church plays, geeked out over *Star Trek* and *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, and, when, he was old enough, he spent a lot of time in movie theatres ("My grandmother was very strict and she didn't like us going to the movie theatre in town. She didn't like the guys that hung out there. It wasn't until later on that we were allowed to go to the movie theatre, but we were allowed to watch things on TV").

Despite Cross' passion for screen stories, an acting career wasn't on his radar: not in Jamaica, and not after he'd moved to British Columbia and was graduating from Burnaby Central. "There was something there that I knew I loved, but coming from the background I did, I saw it as pipe-dream stuff," he says. "It wasn't a real job. That's how I thought of it at the time. I needed a real job."

And so Cross pursued aviation ("The first time I got on a large airplane in 1980, I was so fascinated by all the things up there, and that was back when they let kids go into the cockpit. I got my little wings. You can't do that now. It's such a shame, because that's what sparked my interest"). He became a pilot, and he was working for a small airline when one of his friends – who happened to be a professional actor – suggested he audition for a film that was shooting in China.

Cross auditioned, got the job, and flew to China. The experience changed his life – but not before he almost lost it.

Cross' near-death experience occurred during a break in shooting, when he decided to cross a river by hopping from rock to rock instead of using the available footbridge.

"I hit a moss-covered rock, and my legs go out, and I'm being pulled downstream," he says. "I grab this rock, and my friends pull me out. If I hadn't grabbed onto that rock, there was nothing else to grab onto before I fell over a 450-foot waterfall."



Roger Cross. Photo courtesy of CBC

“You’re 20. You’re feeling bulletproof, and all of the sudden you’re faced with your own mortality,” he continues. “Literally four days later, I was doing my death scene in the movie. Acting instructors always talk about letting your character take life and tell a story, and having it be so close [to almost going over the waterfall] I was sitting there loading the clip into my gun in the scene and I’m saying, ‘I’ll hold these guys off for you guys, you get out of here’ – this big hero thing and tears are coming down, and it was a really powerful moment for me, and I loved that feeling. It felt so alive. It was an amazing moment.”

That amazing moment represented a turning point. After the movie wrapped and Cross returned to Canada, he decided to pursue acting full-time. He gave himself one year to make it (“If it didn’t work out, I’d go back to flying”). That was nearly three decades ago. He’s been a working actor ever since.

Cross’ first job following his China trip was *Wiseguy*, where Lando Calrissian – original pilot of the Millennium Falcon – gifted him with that aforementioned priceless advice.

Speaking of priceless advice from a legendary pilot, here’s some from Cross:

“Try things in life. If you don’t try it, you won’t know it. What do you have to lose? You learn and you grow from experience.”

Coroner airs Mondays at 9pm on CBC Television. Stream **Coroner** anytime on CBC Gem. <https://www.cbc.ca/coroner/>

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