

Comics

"My feet are freezing."

"I wish I was like Miles. He has electric socks."

"What?"

"Electric socks. Socks with an element wrapped around inside. Like an electric blanket."

It's past midnight on the set of **Comics**, and there are still four more hours to go. No one ever said night shooting in Mont-real during November was easy — especially when the story is set in Los Angeles. The former Pretzel Enchaîné on Clark Street has become The Funny Farm, a fictitious L.A. comedy club. Its interior is remarkable: wall-sized posters of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields and The Marx Brothers loom high above the small black tables, cluttered with Budweiser and Miller Lite bottles that surround the tiny, empty stage upon which the comics will later succeed or fail. But tonight the shooting takes place outside in the parking lot — where the temperature is -6° Celsius.

Standing in the middle of the set, wrapped in a thick blue parka and smoking a cigar, is Ron Clark, directing his first feature film. He appears unperturbed by the cold or by the lapses in concentration his cast and crew are experiencing during their first shot back after supper. The long

Comics

p.c. Filmpian International 1980 **exec. p.** Pierre David, Victor Solnicki **p.** Claude Héroux **d.** Ron Clark **d.o.p.** René Verzier **1st a.d.** John Fretz **p.man.** Roger Héroux **p.co-ord.** Danièle Rohrbach **unit man.** Jean Savard **2nd a.d.** Frank Ruszczyński **3rd a.d.** Michel Sarao **loc.man.** Christine Burke **sec. to p.** Monique Legaré **admin.asst.** Mei Chan **cont.** France Boudreau **art.d.** Carol Spier, Barbara Dunphy (1st asst.), Nikki Geoghegan (2nd asst.) **set dress.** Serge Bureau, Pierre Gros D'Aillon **props mas.** Gilles Aird **set props** Jean Bourret, Michel Comte **carp.** Dean Eilertson **hair** Constant Natale **make-up** Kathryn Casault **focus puller** Denis Gingras **2nd asst. cam.** Jean Jacques Gervais **stills** Pierre Dury **gaf.** Don Caulfield **elec.** Yves Tessier **key grip** François Dupéré **2nd grip** Michel Périard **sd.** Jos Champagne **boom** Yvon Benoit **ed.** Marcus Manton, Jean Marc Magnan (asst.) **cast.** Ginette D'Amico, Elo Gallant (asst.) **drivers** Claude Delorme, Charles Toupin, Murray Ostroff **pub.** Pierre Brousseau **i.p.** Jack Carter, Eileen Brenner, Miles Chapin, Tracy Bregman, Howie Mandel, Peter Aykroyd, Gene Clark, Maurice Lamarche, Alan Riven, Marjorie Gross, Mike McDonald, Tony Molesworth, Marty Galin, Lou Dinos, Howard Busgang, Alan Katz, Briane Nasimok, Arthur Corber



On the steps of The Funny Farm comedy club, they'll do anything for a laugh: here (left to right) **Comics'** Howie Mandel, Marjorie Gross, Eugene Clark and Peter Ackroyd.

cover shot calls for Howie Mandel, playing a hyper comic moonlighting as a pizza delivery driver, to pull up his car on the sidewalk in front of parking lot attendant Marty Balin. After shuffling frantically up and down the stairs trying to decide whether to go inside or to deliver the pizzas, Mandel finally goes in and Balin helps himself to a snack as he parks the car in the street.

"Is there a pizza we can rehearse with?" calls first assistant director John Fretz over the megaphone.

During the first dry run, Mandel forgets to shift the car into park. With one foot out the front door, both he and the vehicle suddenly lurch backwards toward the camera. The crew crack up. "Howie," Clark quietly suggests to his actor before the next run-through, "there's also an emergency brake."

During another rehearsal, Mandel goes inside, then comes right out during Balin's action. "Don't stop until someone yells 'cut,'" shouts Fretz. "I know," replies Mandel, "I just didn't want to get warm."

After several rehearsals, they're ready for the real thing. Take one is great, except, as script person France Boudreau points out, the parking sign is missing. "Someone must have forgot," says Clark calmly. After it's put back in place, they try again. This time, there is no pizza for Balin, who plays out the shot anyway with an invisible slice. Clark reacts with humor. "C'est le théâtre de l'avant-garde," he quips to the crew.

During take three, both parking sign

and pizza are in place. "Good. Not great," declares Clark. "Let's do it again." He confers with director of photography René Verzier: "There are still some shadows."

Take four is a winner. Mandel, Balin, the camera, the parking sign and the pizza are all great. Ron Clark, even though he wrote the script, even though he's seen the shot nearly ten times already, even though it's cold and conditions aren't great, still laughs at the funny parts.

"I find comics fascinating," says Clark, who has lived around them for the last twenty years, writing stand-up material for Jack Carter, Buddy Hackett, and Alan King; television shows for Steve Allen, Jackie Gleason, and The Smothers Brothers; hit plays for Broadway; and films for Mel Brooks and Blake Edwards. "A profession in which you make people laugh is half noble and half crazy. The difficulties and chances of failure are tremendous."

Comics is the story of Mark Chapman (played by Miles Chapin), a kid from Cleveland who drops out of college to try to make it as a stand-up in L.A. He meets a lot of other young comics at The Funny Farm, lands a job as the club's parking lot attendant, and falls in love with an actress moonlighting as a waitress (Tracy Bregman). Mark's debut as a comic is mediocre, he becomes discouraged and thinks of going home. Instead, he tries again and succeeds. He is offered a TV series, but on the verge of this overnight success the show's producers replace him with a

more experienced comic.

"If I had to categorize it, I'd say it was the **A Chorus Line** of comics," says Clark. "It's a film about a group of ambitious young people trying to make it big. The truth of it is, most of them don't." Adds Howie Mandel: "It's not a wacky comedy — it's a *real* comedy. There's nothing in this film that shouldn't or couldn't or hasn't *actually* happened."

Comics deals with some of stand-up comedy's harsher aspects, among them the comic's greatest fear: *bombing*, failing to make the audience laugh. "Approval is so much needed," says impressionist Maurice Lamarche. "If you bomb on stage, you've only got yourself to blame." To Howard Busgang, bombing is "an empty pit of loneliness, the most lonely feeling ever. You accept it, but you never get used to it."

Paramount originally bought the rights to **Comics**, but according to Clark, they wanted to soften the script and change the emphasis. "They wanted primarily a love story about a guy who was already an established comic, which of course changes everything." Paramount and Clark parted ways amicably over the project and **Comics** lay dormant until Pierre David arrived in L.A. earlier this year, in need of a script with which Filmplan could complete a previously negotiated three-picture deal. Of the dozens of scripts he read, David liked **Comics** best. Shooting began the first week of November; the eight-week schedule included seven weeks in Montreal and one in L.A., at a budget of \$3 million.

"There would have been no deal if I couldn't have directed," claims Clark. "I didn't want to explain the material to anyone else." Of his first try at directing, Clark says, "I like it. For **Silent Movie** I took the concept to Mel Brooks, and then he hired me as a production consultant. I followed that whole film through every stage — pre-production, post-production, and scoring. It was terrific training. If I hadn't done that I wouldn't dare direct."

Many of the film's young comics, Maurice Lamarche, Mike McDonald, Howard Busgang, Marjorie Gross and Tony Molesworth, were discovered at Yuk-Yuk's comedy club in Toronto. Lamarche and McDonald, along with Howie Mandel, perform original material for the film. A feature film role is a long-awaited break for many of the stand-ups. "It's like a dream come true," says Busgang. "It's something a lot of us have been waiting for."

Bruce Malloch

The Grey Fox

Director Phillip Borsos says he "just goes out and makes films."

Pretty humble words for a man who, by making **The Grey Fox**, is also turning a lot of dreams into reality. Some of them are his own — for six years, Borsos has wanted to bring to the screen the story of Bill Miner, a man with the dubious distinction of being Canada's first train robber. The fact that it's Borsos' feature film debut at age 27 is a bit incredible in itself.

On a larger scale, this \$3.48 million production embodies many peoples' dreams of actualizing a feature film, a good feature film, that's a born-and-bred west coast Canadian production.

The dream-come-true spirit has infected the entire production crew since shooting started in the Rocky Mountains on October 7. Now, on location in an old alley near the North Vancouver waterfront, Richard Farnsworth, who plays the lead role as Miner, summed it up: "The weather has been fantastic. The countryside... beautiful to shoot. And the crew is so very enthused. It's just been going awful smooth."

For Farnsworth, **The Grey Fox** is providing him with "the role of a lifetime." He's been riding horses and performing stunts for the likes of Henry Fonda, Montgomery Clift and Kirk Douglas in over 300 movies since 1937. Now at age 60 Farnsworth has finally been recognized as a competent and talented actor capable of handling major roles. He was recently featured in **Tom Horn** with Steve McQueen, and was nominated for Best Supporting Actor in Alan J. Pakulas's **Comes A Horseman**.

Farnsworth more than physically resembles his character. There is something in his gentle and gentlemanly ways that echoes the legendary Miner.

"Miner was a fantastic old man," Farnsworth said. "I identified with him the first time I read the script."

Bill Pinkerton of the famous detective agency described Miner as "the master criminal of the American West." He was a curious blend of hood and Robin Hood. Even in the heat of a robbery he never forgot his manners, apologizing to passengers for the delay while he robbed their train.

After serving 33 years in San Quentin prison for robbing stage coaches, Miner was released. He then realized that his old trade was obsolete. The 20th Century had arrived, and with it the steam engine.

Being a survivor, he turned his talents to train robbery. Eventually, two of his marks were Canadian Pacific trains that made their runs through the Fraser Valley in 1904 and 1906.

"His character attracted me," Borsos said. "He is out of time and out of place."

The Grey Fox picks up Bill Miner's story on June 17, 1901 — the day he was released from prison. Two exteriors centered around that day were shot in the North Vancouver alley that set designer Bill Brodie (**Superman**, **Barry Lyndon** and **Silence of the North**) had effectively turned into a 1901 San Francisco street. A 12-foot fence built at the bottom of the alley blocked out the 1980 traffic. Awnings, old barrels and a sign proclaiming "North Star Steam Beer" were added to existing buildings. A catwalk was built at the second-story level to block out a skyscraper that appeared in the camera's line of vision.

The first scene involved Miner walking into the shop where he bought his first gun after his release. The alley was filled

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