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 impresario 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 an - 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 Film Arts 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 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. Pakula's Come 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...
The Grey Fox


The idea for The Grey Fox has been in Borsos’ mind since 1974, all the while he was producing his award-winning documentary shorts — Cooperage, Spartree and Academy Award nominee Nails. After allying his company, Mercury Pictures Inc., with Canadian producer Peter O’Brien (Love At First Sight, Blood and Guts, Fast Company), John Hunter was added to the team to create a script that would “strike a balance between documentary and drama.” After eight rewrites Borsos and O’Brien were happy enough to set production wheels in motion. The documentary style of Borsos’ earlier work continues through The Grey Fox. The film is amazingly accurate in its recounting of the Bill Miner legend. Many of the scenes were filmed on or near the spots where they actually occurred; much of the dialogue is accurate, taken from actual court transcripts of Miner’s trial. The capture scene, where Miner and his sidekicks Shorty Dunn (Wayne Robson of Popeye, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Buffalo Bill and the Indians) and Louis Colquhoun (David Petersen of Skip Tracer) were arrested, was filmed within 300 meters of the actual site near Douglas Lake.

Despite the cliche, The Grey Fox has been a dream come true. Its release, slated for September 1981, will be the final test of reality.

Glenda Bartosh