The Neighbour
Dead dog leads to cat-and-mouse

Most recently Max Fischer directed The Lucky Star, which won solid reviews, a prize at Cannes, and a desirable U.S. distribution deal. Luckily, he's been able to keep up the momentum, while many in the industry are now out looking for work.

There he is on the streets of Montreal directing The Neighbour. He's got George Segal, Irene Cara (of Fame fame), a fine crew and $6 million to work with. The money is courtesy of producer Claude Leger, the CFDC, the Royal Bank, and a lot of little people who happen to be doctors, lawyers, and accountants.

The screenplay, written by Max Fischer and Leila Basen (whose credits include Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid), is based on a novel by Laird Koenig entitled "The Neighbor." The change in spelling is not the only confusing thing about this adaptation.

For one thing, there has already been a movie made from the novel: Louis Malle's Atlantic City.

For another, there is already a film out on the market called The Neighbors, starring Dan Ackroyd and John Belushi. It, thank goodness, is not based on "The Neighbor." But perhaps the confusion is more apparent than real. Even so, The Neighbour is due to be retitled, probably to The Neighbour From 5A.

Although Atlantic City was based on the same book, there appear to be few, if any, similarities between that film and the script Fischer and Basen have come up with. The occupation of the female lead, for instance, has been changed to that of a professional singer; The Neighbour will feature Irene Cara performing several numbers by Canadian composer Art Phillips, with choreography by Arthur Faria.

This is not to say that The Neighbour is a musical. Nor is it a comedy, or a drama. It's sort of a comedy-drama-musical, with emphasis on the drama. I was getting suspicious when I heard the film described differently by each person I talked to on the set. But Fischer made it all seem quite reasonable when he invoked the films of Vittorio de Sica (Umberto D in particular) to describe the spirit of his film. As he put it, "It's a mixture of comedy and tragedy, because, of course, life is like that."

In a nutshell, The Neighbour's plot is 'boy meets girl' - largely because the boy's dog is killed by the girl's friend, who the boy then kills. The boy and the girl then play a cat and mouse game; with the boy being the mouse, the girl being the cat, and the dog, no longer of importance, being dead.

In a slightly larger nutshell, the film is about the relationship that develops between a down-and-out Broadway stagehand, played by Segal, and an up-and-coming young singer, played by Cara. They happen to be neighbours, and one day the man's dog - who happens to be his best and only friend - is in fact overdosed by a drug-dealing friend of hers. An enraged Segal kills the dealer who, he discovers, has $5,000 on him, and then starts simultaneously throwing the police off his track and spending the money. Cara starts off hating him and wanting revenge for her friend, but ends up... well, they wouldn't tell me the ending, but you get the picture.

It's sort of the Broadway-life-isn't-a-bed-of-roses storyline than can warm your heart and make you feel good if it's done properly. As... er... Fame was. A lot depends on getting the atmosphere right, and on having the right actors. Irene Cara obviously has the credentials. One look at her on the police station set in Montreal demonstrated that Fame was no fluke. She had little to do in the scene, but sat outside the room where George Segal was talking with a police officer (played by Toronto actor Andy Thomson), and then react when they eyes met through the window. But she looked as much like a sympathetic young girl in the big city as Audrey Hepburn used to, and her reaction was as silent-movie-expressive as Charlie Chaplin's.

George Segal's credentials are vast. But his role as a broken-down old guy is a big switch from his usual parts, in which he plays middle-class professional types who are afraid of turning into exactly this person. (His role of Dick in Fun With Dick and Jane is an example.) Casting him was a coup, because he plays against his own movie persona and convincingly transforms himself. Bearded, dressed in a shabby corduroy jacket and an Irish fisherman's cap, on set Segal looked splendid.

The atmospherics I saw were fine.
The police station set was actually a fire hall, and during the shoot the firemen amused themselves by taking snapshots. They didn't seem to mind the connecting wall to their office being spayed with green paint and made as filthy as a real N.Y.C. police station. It all looked like the Big Apple to me. And Francine Freidel, a Montreal radio presenter, who was there with a small part in the movie, looked and spoke just like the bag ladies who give city its distinctive character, which we all know and love.

What I saw of the shoot is hardly enough to speculate on. And even then, there were four weeks and six weekends still to go before the film would be put into the hands of editor Marion Segal. But I did see Max Fischer at work, and he had the power. The firemen were in the middle of the fire-police station shoot I was quickly convinced that the new members were winners. Suddenly, there was a fire alarm. It was a fire alarm that had started racing around there was more than a little confusion. But the film crew was back to work in record time, leaving little doubt that it could handle the business of making 'Broadway' and its environs look real - even if all the interiors are being shot in Montreal.

If was a hitting man. I mean, if this film is going to work, if it does, it will give Cara's career another boost, although as she put it, "I've gone from being a black actress to being a white-rimmed actress" already. George Segal, I would think, is taking a chance in playing such a challenging role, considering his fans' expectations, -- and for that, and for his judgment in hitching his career to Max Fischer's rising star.

David Clarke

Death Bite

A mean appetite

In the basement of Stage Three, two different Al Waxman's teams with white special effects wizards work to make Death Bite as effective as Jaws and Alien. It's the last of four days of shooting in Toronto's Lakeshore Studiolo the second-to-last day in an eight-week schedule that began on August 24. Peter Fonda and Oliver Reed have already left, and the "piece de resistance" of one effect is being prepared.

The first Al Waxman holds his arm, while Carl Fullicker, make-up assistant from Altered States, carefully attaches a skin of foam rubber. "Last night we did a five-hour death scene. Waxman says, "and it was one of the high moments in my acting career. Everybody came together in one terrific scene. When I went home, I said to my wife, 'I've just been working with giants.'"

But after five hours, Waxman is not yet dead yet. Playing a petty villain, he's been bitten by the world's most dangerous snake - a Taipan from New Guinea. The venom in one bite from this real-life snake can kill 773 human beings, or, as tested, 173 mice. The bite of the 173.913th mouse was a bad night. Waxman has blood stains on his shirt and a photo taken the night before shows his face swollen grotesquely by bladders disguised as skin. Today, Death Bite will take a step towards innovation and finish him off.

The second Al Waxman says nothing - he is a mechanical man with eighteen assistants in the studio's main area, Upstairs in the studio's main area, director Bill Fruet oversees the preparation of a ship's hold where a young and dying man will be killed. Waxman has blood stains on his shirt and a photo taken the night before shows his face swollen grotesquely by bladders disguised as skin. Today, Death Bite will take a step towards innovation and finish him off.

Death Bite comes to the shock - and the end - of his career. Although as she put it, "I've gone from being a black actress to being a white-rimmed actress" already. George Segal, I would think, is taking a chance in playing such a challenging role, considering his fans' expectations, -- and for that, and for his judgment in hitching his career to Max Fischer's rising star.

David Sharpe