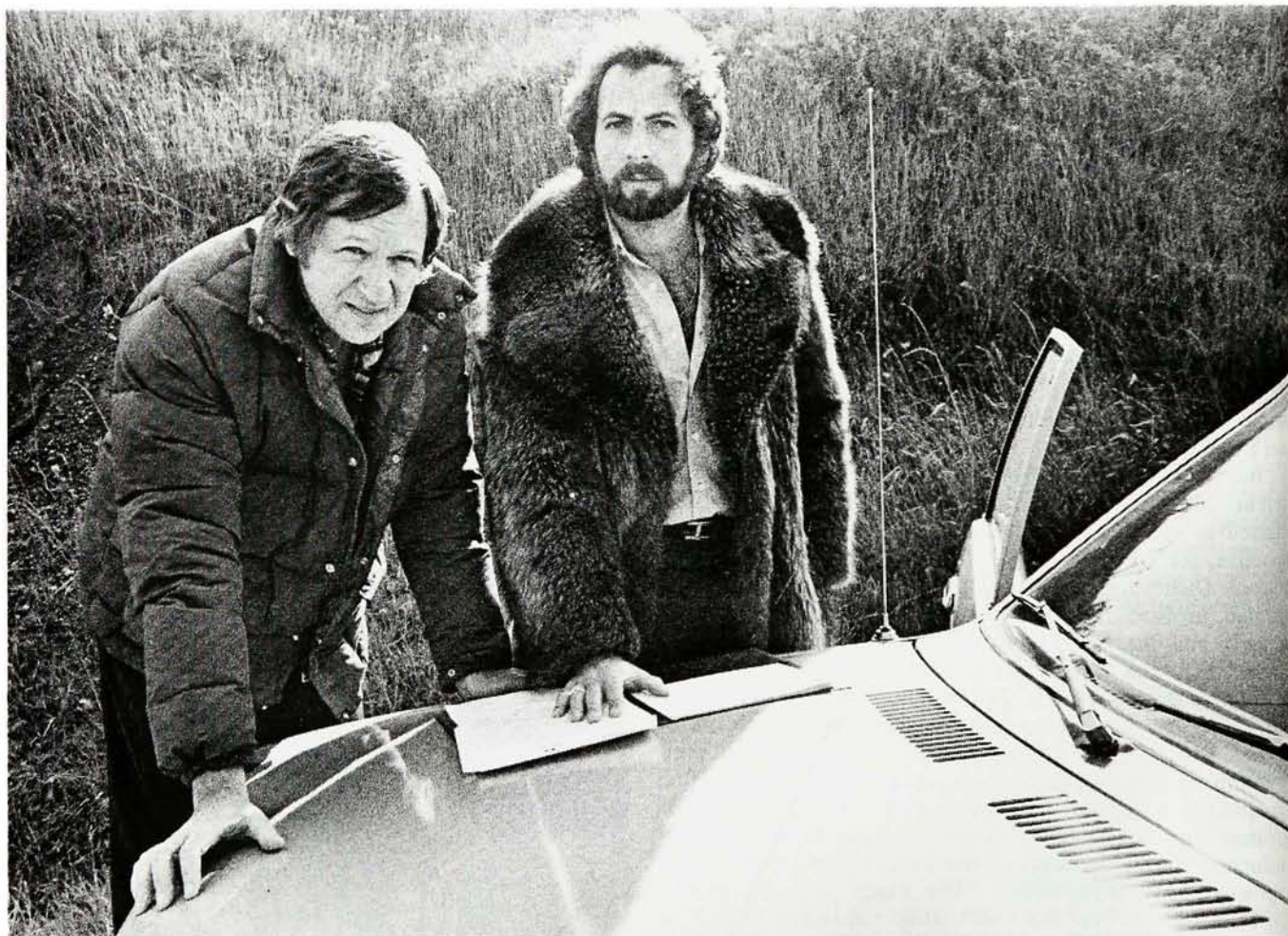

fish hawk

slan gets it together

Jon Slan has become one of the most prolific and commercially viable producers over the last year. He has also earned high praise from those who work with him. Susan Little visited the set of *Fish Hawk* and spoke with those working on the film.

by Susan Little



Stanley Chase (left) and Jon Slan going over details on location

photo: Ron Watts



Chris Wiggins and Mary Pirie down on the farm

"I'd rather talk about the production than talk about myself," Jon Slan says as he leans back in his chair. Slan is a Ph.D., a former professor of English literature, a writer, and a film and stage director prior to devoting his energy to full time film producing. Jon Slan is the producer of **Fish Hawk**, a \$2.5 million Edgar J. Scherick/Stanley Chase/Jon Slan Production starring Will Sampson and directed by Don Shebib. Actors in supporting roles are Charlie Fields, Don Franks, Geoffrey Bowes, Mary Pirie, and Chris Wiggins.

Jon Slan Enterprises was incorporated in 1974 with Jon Slan as president. In 1977, he produced his first feature film **'Highballin'** and in the spring of 1978 **Kavik: The Wolf Dog**. Both were directed by Peter Carter.

When asked how hard it was to put a feature together in Canada at this time, Slan was straightforward in pinning down what he felt to be the weak spot in the industry. "It's no problem... that's the problem. The Security Commission is legitimizing business transactions that in other businesses would be called swindles. We need standards and guidelines. Right now anyone can take a script, engage a name actor — usually over the hill and usually overpaid to attract some sophisticated investor — then go to a law firm to put in a prospectus. They don't go to a studio or a network for backing because the script and the budget would be scrutinized for their level of authenticity and professional standard. This business is in the hands of Commissions and brokerage firms. And what always happens is that when things get too outlandish, the investors squawk. The money dries up, the brokerage firms get out and the investors take their money back to their other businesses.

"It's 'take the money and run' time, when what we need is people who will stay and contribute," Slan states clearly. "The Security Commission is not a control. In the States the producers have years of experience behind them and act as their own control. They know what fair payment is. American studios would never pay the fees that are charged to our production units. The only reason people can do it here is because there is no control. At the Security Commission meetings

Susan Little is a free-lance writer living in Toronto and has experience in both broadcasting and theatre.



Will Sampson and Charlie Fields:
their relationship is at the heart of the tale

the investors are given the top sheet of a very thick budget report. Many movies are being budgeted way too high and this can't help but be a bad deal. Meanwhile there are some producers here who just want to make movies."

Slan's money goes back into production because, as he says, "Sometimes all the attempts don't work." **Fish Hawk** is presold to CBS to be aired one and a half years after the first theatrical release.

The script, which is adapted by Blanche Hannallis from Mitchell Jayne's novel, was going to be produced by Warner Bros. several years ago but the budget was too high. What pleases Slan is that he has been able to do it for a lot less.

When Slan asked Don Shebib to direct the picture, Shebib said it was the first time anyone had ever come to him to ask him to direct. Shebib gave recognition to and marked the beginnings of an English Canadian feature film industry with his **Goin' Down The Road** in 1970.

"Although **Fish Hawk** is a general audience picture about an Indian and a dog with lots of animals," Shebib points out, "the basic thrust of the picture is that of pretense, of being caught up in a sham. It is not a fast talking city film, it's **Star Wars**."

The picture focuses on Fish Hawk (Will Sampson), a man who has lost his dignity and his identity as an Indian. Befriended by a young boy (Charlie Fields), he rediscovers himself and regains his dignity by revenging the death of his best friend Towsack Charlie.

Shebib goes on to say that the film has a turn of the century, Appalachian feel to it — an early American quality. Nevertheless he points out that he is a Canadian and his sensibilities in directing would be so. What he doesn't like is the "phony patriotism" which is chauvinistic in its attitudes, and which colors some discussions about filming in Canada.

"North America is very regional — north and south as well as east and west," Shebib emphasizes. "In many ways Vancouver is closer to Los Angeles than it is to Newfoundland. Anyway, the film industry is international and I just try to make the best film I can.

"This film, if it works will have a symphonic structure," says Shebib on location at the Toronto International Studios at Kleinburg. "A lot of the feel of the movie — the structure,

the texture, and the performance — will come through the music. I like to make movies that are, in the older sense, very cinematic. I find that directing is simply running a war. The real directing takes place before and after the shoot.”

Both Slan and Shebib could not say enough about the calibre and quality of the Canadian actor. “But we still need the American stars for box-office appeal,” Slan says. “However,” he continues, “our Canadian performers have achieved a higher degree of excellence than we Canadian producers have, or even what we’ve been able to achieve technically.”

Mary Pirie, a Toronto actress who plays the role of Sarah Boggs, says that on stage she was never let down but in the movies she has got to wait for the larger roles. “Right now, all I can do is make my characters irresistible. The small roles I’ve had, I make them stand out. Slan is very realistic. If anyone can help improve things, it’s Slan.”



Jeff Bowes between takes

photo: Ron Watts

Pirie, who is a veteran of the Canadian stage, has been in the film business for one year. In that year she has been in **Two Solitudes**, **Highballin'**, and has played opposite Glenda Jackson and George C. Scott in **Lost and Found**. While working on **Fish Hawk** she says, “I watch the shooting and it is beautiful: the actors and the crew... it’s the best oiled machine.”

“Slan gets down to the fundamentals,” says Geoffrey Bowes, a Toronto actor who plays opposite Will Sampson as Towsack Charlie the village idiot. “He picks up good Canadian talent and knows how to manage people. This production is run like clockwork.”

Bowes’ first production was an American one about which he says, “People were so unhappy. There was a helluva lot of reshoots and on set there was a saccharine politeness in the air. The difference between that shoot and this one is like day and night. Here, there is a real interest and involvement. Everyone is so supportive.”

Pirie zeros in on the casting agents in this country. “They have a hurdle to overcome and that hurdle is making sense out of the talent we have. We are actors — it is so funny that they don’t know who we are — we are actors. We act. So often we have to fit into someone else’s preconceived idea of what we can do. Tone it down. Bump it up. Film is very much a man’s world. It is harder for women. I am not only an actress, I am a woman. I even had one director tell me to act like I was hooked on sperm!”

Mary Pirie is an extremely beautiful person who knows where she is and for what purpose. “I never wanted to do anything else,” she smiles with delight. “I have been given the gift to entertain and to make people forget their troubles. When people support me, it is an enormous joy.

“Actors are like sharks,” she goes on. “We are never satisfied. In making a picture you give a lot of yourself. It is as the Indians say... when you take a picture you take a part of the soul.”

Actor Chris Wiggins, playing opposite Pirie as her husband Marcus Boggs, has done over one thousand T.V. shows, over a thousand radio shows and is currently shooting three movies. “It is a technical medium and once you get past that, the talented ones are held down by the incompetent ones. We export our artists but not their talent. Our shortcomings are not knowing how to sell what we have got. Slan is the nearest thing to a New York entrepreneur we have here.”

While walking on set, one has the feeling that **Fish Hawk**, which will be released next spring, has the makings of something special. Jon Slan has the talent and the support of all involved in his production and they have his. □

FISH HAWK

d. Donald Shebib, asst. d. Martin Walters, Bob McCart, Don Mccutcheon, Erika Zborowsky, sc. adapted by Blanche Hannallis from a Mitchell Jayne novel, ph. René Verzier, ed. Ron Wiseman, asst. ed. Sharon Lackie, Catherine Lane, sd. ed. Ingrid Cusiel, a.d. Seamus Flannery, set dec. Bob Bowkett, l.p. Will Sampson, Charles Fields, Geoffrey Bowes, Mary Pirie, Don Francks, Chris Wiggins, Kay Hawtrey, dog trainer. Karl Miller, animal trainer. Steve Martin, exec. p. Stanley Chase, Dan Blatt, p. Jon Slan, asst. p. Robert Sax, p. manager. Gerry Arbeid, p.c. The Fish Hawk Company Ltd., 1978, col. 35 mm.