

Paper Marriage: A Working Marriage

It may seem like a strange union: Bo Ho Films, the largest subsidiary of Asia's mighty Golden Harvest Group, producing a film in association with Edmonton-based Kicking Horse Productions. The film is **Paper Marriage**, a \$2.5 million Neil Simon sort of King Fu movie. Star (Sammo Hung) is Asia's number one box-office draw and the film will be dubbed in Mandarin and Cantonese and subtitled in English. It is financed in Canada and qualifies as a Canadian production.

How did this marriage come about? Barney Wu, representative of Bo Ho Films, puts it simply: "The reason is Sammo." When Sammo, who's also an esteemed director, decided to move west, so did Bo Ho.

Sammo joins a long line of Hong Kong filmmakers who are moving before Hong Kong is reunited to mainland China in 1997. Sammo immigrated to Vancouver with his family, though he denies the political situation influenced his decision.

"I would like to set up a base in Edmonton for the following years. Next year we probably have two productions coming back," he says.

Canada has economic advantages for Hong Kong filmmakers. Locations can pass for the U.S. (a popular setting for Asian movies) but union and immigration regulations are more relaxed. And the exchange-rate favours Canada, says Arvi Liimatainen, Kicking Horse's production supervisor.

"The ratio between their dollar and the Canadian is about five to one, so every time they spend a million here the producers and accountants go berserk," Liimatainen said.

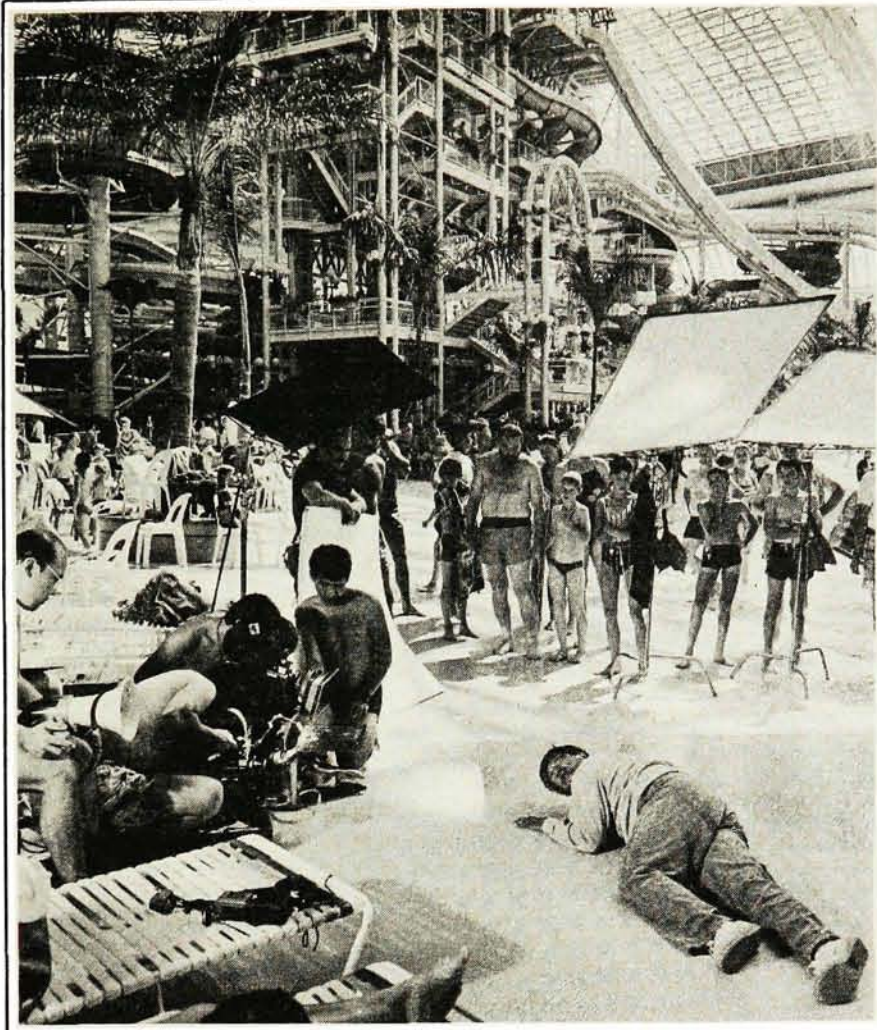
The Bo Ho people are very positive about working in Canada. "We're very satisfied. The people, the locations, the movie company. They're great," says Wu.

Western Canada is preferred because it is closer to Hong Kong than Toronto, though the producers were leery of shooting in Vancouver because of Expo.

"They originally contacted us last fall, when they were working on a movie called **Noble Express**, said Liimatainen. "They needed a location with a guarantee of snow, so we took them to Marmot Basin, near Jasper. Luckily, there was about six days of snowfall just before shooting."

Above all, Edmonton's size proved to be an advantage. Sammo and his associates like working in a smaller community: "In Vancouver and Toronto, they are already established... There is keen competition. In Edmonton, it's fantastic. The cooperation, the energy, everything's good," Sammo says.

Cooperation was necessary to over-



• In the water park at Edmonton's West Edmonton Mall

come the difficulties of language barriers and different working habits.

"Communication was the worst problem," said production manager Shirley Gill. "Sometimes you wouldn't know what was going on. But after a while you just sort of go along with things."

For their part, the Asians had to adjust to Canadian labour practices. As director Alfred Cheung explains: "In Hong Kong we mix our positions. Here a prop man is a prop man... We had a meeting and we told them this is the way we have been working for years but we understand this is your way of doing things. So we've got to compromise. After a few days, there was great spirit."

The spirit translated itself into the expression "Mo Mun Tai," (No problem), which became the company's motto. It stood in good stead as the crew worked its way around an unseasonably rainy July that pushed the five-week shoot into an extra week of early morning and late-night hours in production at Edmonton's mega-shopping centre, West Edmonton Mall.

About 20 per cent of the shooting took advantage of the mall's water-park — including a death-defying leap through a second-floor glass window; a race up the massive waterslide; chase scenes through the replica of a Spanish galleon, and a fight in front of the shark-tank.

A small portion of the shooting, including a few closeups, will be done back in Hong Kong. One of the sets, the junky interior of the hero's run-down home, had to be packed *en masse* back to Hong Kong. As Gill explains, "Some of the stuff that is junk here would be considered antique in Hong Kong, and

it would be too expensive to rebuild. So we just packed it up and shipped it off."

Now some local talent will also find themselves going to Hong Kong. David Hiscox, the Vancouver-based art director, will supervise rebuilding of the house set. Frank Lee, proprietor of a martial arts studio that served as a location, found a part in the movie, as did his protégé Billy Chau. Chau, a former world-champion kick-boxer, together with Lee will both be in Hong Kong for the final shots.

Forty-two of the 54 cast and crew members on **Paper Marriage** are Canadian, and although it is still cheaper to import Hong Kong crew members than to hire locals, Barney Wu would like to develop a base of Canadian talent.

"We tried to hire a lot of Canadians, according to our budget. But if we have more projects here I'd like to hire more people here."

Sammo and Bo Ho producers are already scouting locations in southern Alberta for the film Sammo wants to shoot after he finishes one this fall.

The present working arrangement would be positive for Canadian and Hong Kong crews. As Liimatainen points out, steady production work "would sure help the industry around here."

Alfred Cheung explained, "Directors here can direct a film and then rest for two years, a year. We want to keep working."

With 1997 looming on the horizon, Asian filmmakers are determined to keep busy.

Shooting West: The Haunting of Hamilton High

Simcom's Ray Sager has been shooting away from Toronto so much he's beginning to sound like an explorer — or maybe a Viking. "I keep coming out west to shoot...I like it where you take over a town."

The Haunting of Hamilton High, Simcom's \$3 1/2-million sequel to **Prom Night**, "took over" Edmonton last August. Sager also took over Edmonton last winter with **Mania**, and he took over Kimberly, B.C., with **Bullies**. Before that, he worked as line producer on the first season of **Danger Bay**.

Bullies and **Mania**, a four-part series, were packaged with **High Stakes**, a feature shot out of Vancouver last winter. Simcom recruited Edmonton-based Allarcom as partners. **The Haunting of Hamilton High** is part of a similar package. Although producers are hoping to repeat the success of **Prom Night**, they're hedging their bets with two other features: **Higher Education**, a comedy, and a psychological thriller called **Blind Side**. Both are to be filmed in Toronto.

Although **Hamilton High** was developed in the wake of **Prom Night's** success, everyone insists it isn't in the same genre. "It's not a slasher," says Ray Sager. Jim Doyle (**Nightmare on Elm Street**) was recruited to do special effects. Director Bruce Pittman tried to balance the effects with the characterization. "We had to be very careful with casting...We don't have big scenes to play out, develop character."

Hamilton High, **Mania**, **High Stakes** and **Bullies** were all shot out west because of Allarcom's participation. "(They) expect that you would shoot a certain percentage of the movies out west. They've put up the money and they want to keep an eye on production," Sager explained. Allarcom contributed facilities and some crew for local productions. That contribution, and Edmonton's lower prices, offset the cost of importing crew from Toronto. In fact, Sager criticizes Toronto's prices. "Toronto's a very difficult place to shoot right now. The prices are horrendous. Locations are way overpriced. Commodities, services, the union situation is much higher than it is anywhere else in the country."

Sager also prefers working with people in smaller centres. "They make themselves accessible to you and are extremely co-operative. They want you to have as good a movie as you want to have."

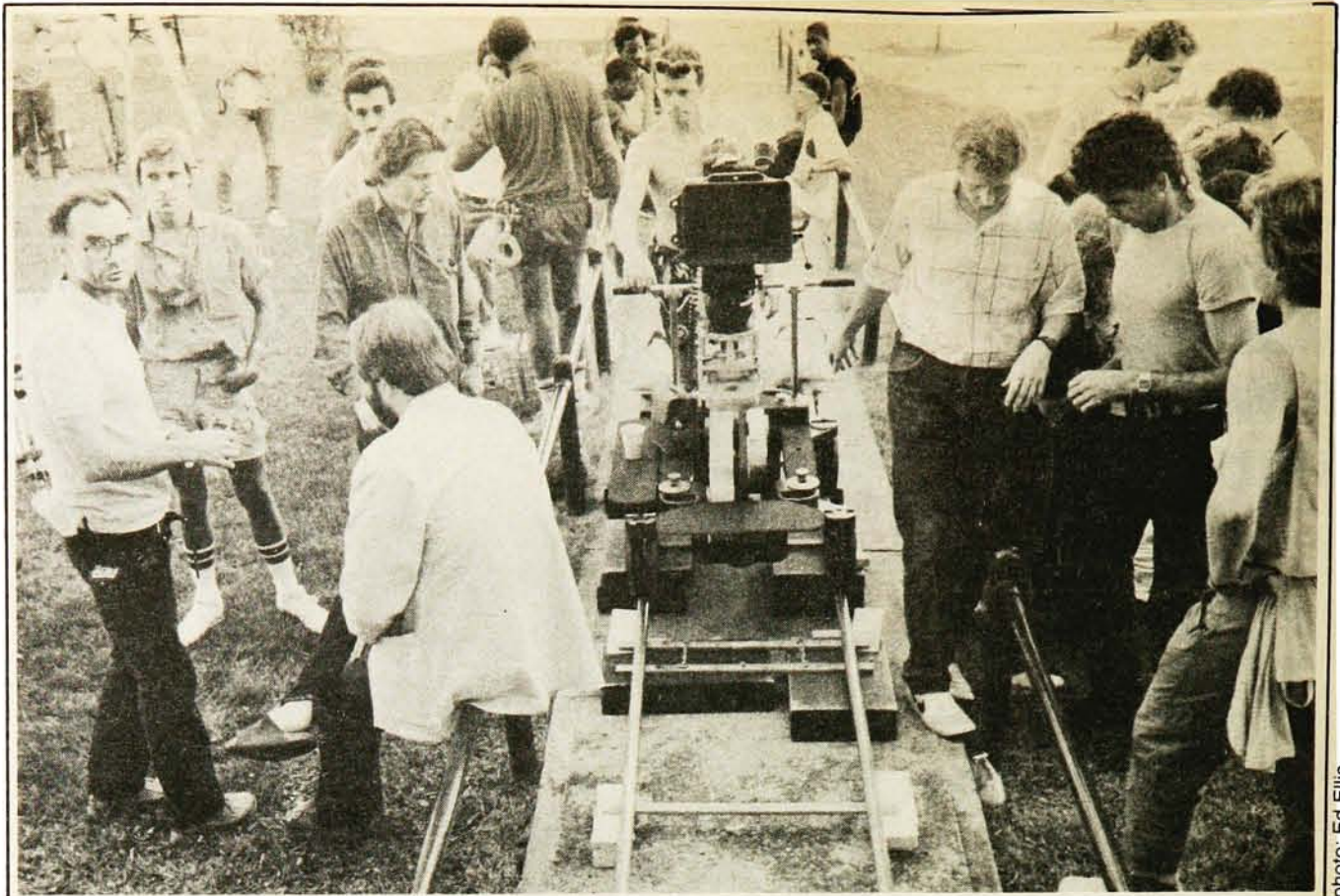
In the course of all this out-of-Toronto production, Sager has developed a core of staff that makes location shooting easier. "I've got a fundamental crew that I've been carrying with me for I don't know how long, so a lot of us are

photo: Douglas Curran

very much acquainted with each other. We know our strengths and weaknesses and we have a terrific relationship. Loyalty, and stuff like that, carries a picture." To earn that loyalty, Sager has given a few people better opportunities. **Haunting's** d.o.p., John Herzog, credits Sager for giving him a big break. "He gave me my first job as d.o.p. on **Mark of Cain.**" The two first worked together on Paul Lynch's **Humungous**, where Herzog was gaffer and Sager was 1st Assistant Director and Production Manager. Bruce Pittman, who directed both **Mark of Cain** and **Confidential**, suggested Herzog for d.o.p. on **Hamilton High**. Sager was so impressed with Herzog's development after seeing **Confidential**, he agreed. "I saw 100 per cent improvement on **Mark of Cain**, which wasn't bad."

Sager and his "fundamental crew" seem to mix well with crews from smaller centres. There isn't so much competition and that makes it easier to cooperate. "The Edmonton people are not insecure with us. They don't feel they have to prove anything, and we don't have to prove ourselves to them. It's a good trade-off."

The downside of that trade-off is Edmonton's geographic isolation. Sandy Kybartas, **Hamilton High's** art director, had a lot of trouble in pre-production. "We had to ship in things, simple things like floor tiles." Materials were imported from Toronto, Los Angeles, and even Michigan. In a film epitomizing what Pittman called the 'Canadian film syndrome' - "squeezing production values out of a tight budget and li-



• The first Canadian production to use Arriflex's new BL 4 camera

Photo: Ed Ellis

imited people" - the extra costs can make a significant difference. Some of Kybartas' problems were compounded by local crews, who she says are "excellent on set...but terrible in pre-production." Edmonton, she pointed out, "is not used to making movies."

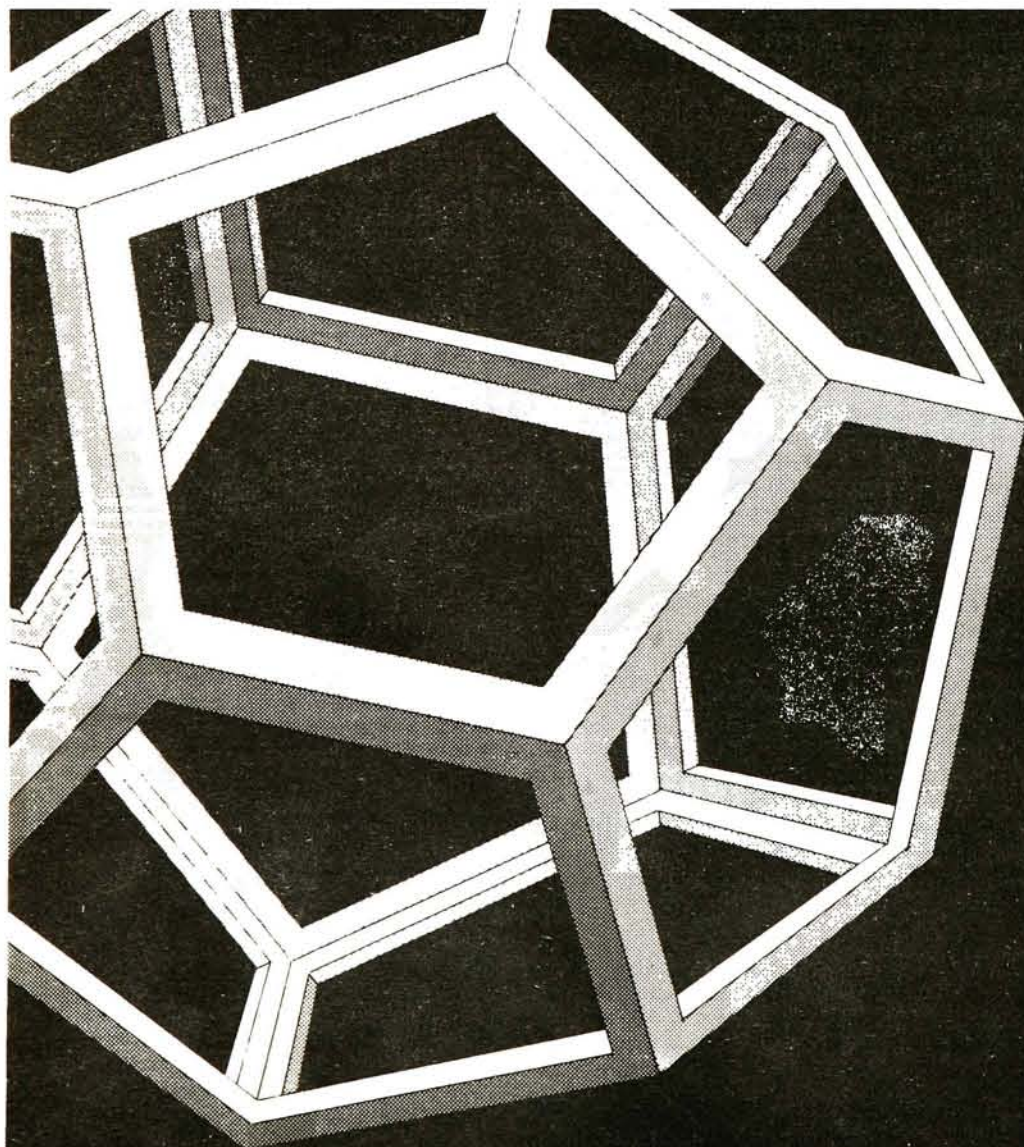
As far as the director and his d.o.p. were concerned, shooting in Edmonton didn't make much difference. "You always go away to shoot a movie,"

Pittman said. For his part, Herzog hated waiting to see rushes. Since Edmonton doesn't have a processing lab, film had to be shipped to Vancouver. The 2-3 day wait for rushes felt like "shooting blind," according to Herzog. And, since **Hamilton High** was the first Canadian production to use Arriflex's new BL4 cameras, Herzog said, "We felt a little deprived." Still, there was an unexpected benefit. "The (local) beer here is

really good."

Ray Sager admits there are some problems shooting out west, mostly because "Edmonton's not geared up for a film business." He thinks that's going to change. "Edmonton's a wonderful place. Edmonton's untouched. I expect that within five years crews will be fighting over each other to shoot here."

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