

On Location : Swiss Family Robinson

Harris Kirshenbaum

Anything is likely to be happening at Kleinburg's Toronto International Film Studio but for the past three months, a major shooting facility has been occupied by the many and varied species involved in the Anglo-Canadian co-production TV Series, *Swiss Family Robinson*.

The challenge has been to present an action-adventure live-action TV show for kids and one that their parents wouldn't choke on at the same time. Fremantle of Canada entered a co-production arrangement with Trident Television of England, and hired Gerry Mayer as producer. Mayer is a Canadian who has been working in TV in the States, and is glad to return. "The whole production cast and crew are Canadians except for one representative of Trident in England. They wanted someone here to keep an eye on their money," said Mayer.

Downstairs on the sound stage, Director Stan Olsen is kept occupied with a pen full of llamas and goats continually munching on the supporting parts of their corral, and a couple of kids, (human) intent on playing with water guns and props while they're off camera. Stan reports being more than happy with the whole operation, and that they've done five day schedules in four during a couple of weeks. "Never make a film with kids and animals," he advises while standing on a concrete floor which has been covered over with sawdust and a spongy material to simulate the jungle floor. There are hundreds of growing plants, pots well

hidden, covering the area, looking like each has its own backlight (almost) and Olsen relates that the most demanding part of the production is matching what goes on here in the studio with the material they are shooting in Jamaica. For information on that we turn to D.O.P. Harry Makin and operator Jackson Samuels.

As D.O.P., Makin has had to come up with a studio lighting set-up to match the brilliant sunlight of the Caribbean exteriors. He lowered the colour temperature by filtering all overhead lights with light blue Roscoflex medium, and running all other lights at 3200K. Also on the stage is the interior of the tree house that the family has built and filled with flotsam from their ship. Operator Samuels and Makin's regular crew, Doug Connell and Paul Birkett move quickly and set-ups happen with startling speed, changing camera and lighting positions around Jack McAdam's convincing set.

Problems with animals have slowed the production somewhat, like when two cougars appear in one segment, and they refuse to be anywhere near each other. This becomes a problem as they are supposed to be mother and cub, but the real problem has been that Jamaican regulations prohibit importation of animals unless they are quarantined for six months. As that's impossible with rented animals, all footage with them, either interior or exterior has to be shot in the studio. Since they are 'tame but not trained', they cannot be made to do specific things, and much time is

taken getting their reaction shots.

Chris Wiggins plays a strong-handed Johann Robinson, with Diana LeBlanc as Elizabeth and Ricky O'Neill, Michael Duhig, and Heather Graham as the offspring. All performances are up to standards required for international television sales, and dialogue delivery by even the youngest member of the cast is much better than some we've seen in home-made features. Weak link in the cast is probably Duhig, as the oldest son.

A screening of one half-hour segment, *Attack of the Cat*, reveals that the footage of the set and location scenes cuts together very well, and only a very discerning eye will see which scenes are artificially lit. The Jamaican locations look beautiful, and with the competent direction of Olsen, Gerry Mayer and Don Haldane, who are rotating through the schedule, the series has enough dramatic appeal to make it. Contracts are in with C.T.V. and West German television for the fall season, and 26 shows will be completed by that time. The production moved back to Jamaica in May to spend eight weeks or so shooting exteriors for the last 16 shows.

"It's a rotten time to go to Jamaica," said Makin. "Too hot and all the bugs are out."

With tigers, cougars, rattlesnakes and little kids on the set, Harry may find the great outdoors to be a relief.

But it seems most likely that *Swiss Family* will be a successful TV series, and even with the hardships, that should make it all work out. □



Jackson Samuels CSC behind camera, with DOP Harry Makin CSC and, director Stan Olsen on set.

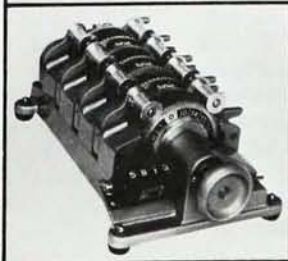
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