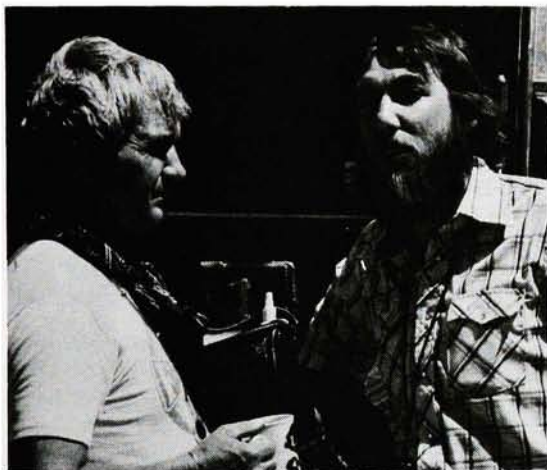


# on hand at f.i.s.t.

Pen Densham and Leonard Yakir were sent to apprentice with Norman Jewison on the shoot of *F.I.S.T.* For Densham, the experience was an important one, and led eventually to the filming of a documentary on Sylvester Stallone. But that's another story, to be told another time. Below, Densham's view of the shooting of *F.I.S.T.* and his role as observant Canadian filmmaker.

by Pen Densham



Norman Jewison and Pen Densham during a break

It was a little like the plot for a Frank Capra movie, "Mr. Densham goes to Hollywood". A character from the sticks, a Canadian filmmaker, is hustled off to the entertainment mecca of the world.

The kindly people from a string of organizations – CCFM, CFDC, NFB, OAC, Canada Council\* – had collected all those initials in one room and had decided to experiment with artistic crossfertilization, and I was to be their first specimen. Also corralled was Leonard Yakir who joined the project later. The concept was simple; to place a Canadian Filmmaker as an observer on the set with Canada's most successful Producer/Director Norman Jewison.

\* The Council of Canadian Filmmakers, the Canadian Development Corp., The National Film Board of Canada and the Ontario Arts Council.

Jewison is often referred to as the film industry's most bankable director. His films seem to defy formulas – *The Russians are Coming*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Rollerball*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, etc. – yet all have been box office successes, and have won a total of nine Oscars. The hope was that through the process of watching Jewison film *F.I.S.T.*, an eight million dollar picture with Sylvester Stallone, some of his midas touch would rub off onto a younger generation of Canadians.

For me, the decision to become involved in the Jewison Project was a difficult one. For the past eight years, my work as a filmmaker has always been a creative partnership with John Watson. We have run "Insight Productions" on the basis of mutually taking responsibility for the direction of our films. We have shared everything equally, from the knocks to the successes. The Jewison Project appeared to select me to be whisked off to Hollywood, leaving him at the bottom end of the seesaw, wrestling with the day to day grind of running our company. John made the choice for me... he pushed me out the door and onto the plane. I left with a lump in my throat.

So there I was, a Pilgrim, clutching my little bag of possessions and an enormous bag of misconceptions.

Through the years the Hollywood machine has done a tremendous job of creating a myth – the magic camelot of movie making, the place where great sorcerers of the art are served by minor Gods so stupendous in their powers, that anything is possible. "You want an earthquake? OK! ready by

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Thursday!" It would be fair to admit that I felt a little like a yokel when I first stepped through the gates of Century City and asked to be directed to the studio where "the Norman" Jewison was conducting make-up tests.

In the centre of a vast grid-strewn hangar was a tiny little cluster of lights and people, dwarfed by the vastness of the building that surrounded them. To my eye, the skeleton staff for the tests looked just like a documentary crew — a warming thought.

It was here that I met the cast of characters who were to appear "behind" the camera: Laszlo Kovaks, the DOP on "F.I.S.T.", whose work goes from *Easy Rider* to *New York, New York* and includes most of the Bogdanovitch movies, as well as *Shampoo* and *Five Easy Pieces*; Mike Westmore, the make-up man for *Rocky*, who was experimenting with ageing Stallone, an effect crucial to the plot of *F.I.S.T.*, which spans 30 years in the life of Johnny Kovak, the character Stallone was to play; Anthea Sylbert, the costume designer, with such films under her belt as *Julia*, *Chinatown*, *Shampoo*, *Carnal Knowledge* and *Rosemary's Baby*, her job being to impart the feeling of the depression years to the look of the cast; Richard MacDonald, the production designer, who has escaped from teaching at an English Art College and has imprinted his look on such films as *Marathon Man*, *Day of the Locusts*, *Far From The Madding Crowd* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*; John Rothwell, the publicity and public relations man for the production, who handled the uncredited task of diplomatically fending off the hords of press demanding Stallone (John and I became good friends, he had seen it all before — "Same thing with David McAllum when he was in the *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*; sometimes you chase the press and sometimes they chase you."); Pat Palmer and Larry De Waay, who were, respectively, associate producer and production manager, both men working with Jewison as a team. They helped him keep his sanity, looking out for potential problems and trying to solve them before they happened. *F.I.S.T.*, an eight-million dollar production, was brought in on time and on budget, despite a shooting schedule almost five months long. Much of the credit goes to their efforts.

The first thing I noted about these movie luminaries was that they didn't shine in the dark. In fact, they all looked reassuringly human.

*F.I.S.T.*, the title of the movie, stands for The Federation of Interstate Truckers, a union. They story of *F.I.S.T.* follows the rise to power of Johnny Kovak, played by Stallone — a role vastly different from *Rocky*. Kovak is a young idealist who sets about organizing truckers in a strike against a large company, "Consolidated". He starts by confronting goons and company guards, and eventually climbs to prominence in the union. The film follows him through three decades. The union becomes the most powerful in America, and Stallone's character becomes corrupted by the power he wields as its leader.

Being an observer with no particular responsibility is a delightful position to the curious-minded, such as myself. Jewison and his crew were open and willing to allow me to quietly plant myself in the

centre of any situation that was going down, and listen in. I was privy to their problems, their delights, their politics and their plans.

I quickly learned that the success of Hollywood lies not in its talent, which I believe could evolve anywhere, but in its flow of finances, its experience, and its organization. These people have played their roles many times (the props men alone seemed to have been around the business for a zillion years). The planning is free-form to some degree; ideas are integrated and rejected as the production evolves, but always there's a quick way to a solution within grasp, and enough funds to deliver it.

As my days with the *F.I.S.T.* production unfolded, I experienced many interesting comparisons between their process and the way John and I had developed the workings of *Insight*.

Jewison, Pat Palmer, and Larry DeWaay headed up the project, each facet of the process was carefully monitored by their overview. They took the responsibility for negotiating their deals, talking the town of Dubuque into allowing them to film on their streets, communicating with United Artists, casting, publicity, department budgets, etc. — all of it was centred through Jewison's three man team. They knew what was happening, and how and where to juggle.

I assimilated as I roved, sometimes very casually, and made notes of my random observations. On Jewison's desk I noticed Barbara Frum's book "As It Happened". Ross Tambllyn tried out for a part and wasn't chosen. The first draft of the script was very similar to the final version, only much longer. Credits are sometimes more important to an actor than money. One thespian was willing to sacrifice a substantial amount and not play in the film if his billing request wasn't met. In other cases, the reverse is true — some actors give free weeks in their contract, which means they're payed for eight weeks, but actually work twelve. In this way, they can inflate their weekly rates for their next job.

The make-up tests didn't work the first time; the successful look was much more subtle. Jewison watched *They Drive by Night*, a Raoul Walsh-Bogart movie on truckers.

I learned that a company working outside the state of its incorporation, such as a film company on location, can, under certain circumstances, be hit up for income taxes from both states. Jewison drives an unpretentious Ford Pinto, yet the costume designer will have custom-made clothes ordered for dozens of actors, right down to their shirts, and in some cases, two or three copies of these clothes will be required in case they need quick changes — no cheap proposition.

Twelve weeks of the film is on location in Dubuque, Iowa. This town had been left behind by time and now, for a while, its faded face was to be appreciated. Before initiating shooting, the whole film had been plotted out and its schedule planned, but this plan was changed quickly and frequently, as production requirements demanded it. The production process was one of applied finances and logic. Problems were tackled with the attitude that they could all be solved.



Sylvester Stallone with Bob New, John Watson and Pen Densham

The script called for a whole fleet of rare period trucks from the thirties, all looking new. So, you advertise, track down and repair twenty or so classic vehicles rescued from old barns across America, and assemble your collection in Dubuque. Two thousand miles away from Hollywood's facilities, the production company takes over a large empty factory, touches up the outside to enhance its thirties look, uses it as a set, and utilizes the inside for all the specialty trades, creating areas for production offices, wardrobes, paintshop, props, carpentry, special effects, etc.

A scene requiring several hundred actors is to be shot against a background which includes a three-story building, looking very white and new. It won't work for the era, so the building is painted a smoke-stained brown, while production goes on around it.

The film includes riot sequences where hundreds of inexperienced extras battle each other; the props department devises and manufactures hundreds of realistic-looking weapons — axe handles, tire irons, rocks, rifles, tree branches as clubs, etc., made of foam rubber and balsawood.

The crew who worked with Laszlo Kovacs, the DOP, had worked with him on many previous movies, and the value of this was proven in time saved. Lighting changes and camera setups were always accomplished with minimum fuss and direction, but not everything worked smoothly. When Norman was working with a large group of extras he was fitted with a wireless mike, patched into a loud speaker system. The plan went well until the pressure of shooting sent a few private and less-than-complimentary observations about the intelligence of a certain stuntman ringing around the set. The plug was pulled. At one point, when the shooting was on a rooftop, an electric generator caught fire. Instantly, the crew had extinguishers in action, seemingly pulled from nowhere.

Jewison and Stallone, who co-wrote the script, worked well together. Jewison would have his vision of a scene, but he would allow Stallone to explore its potentials. It was fascinating to watch Stallone

improve the effect of a scene. From take to take, he would push for more emotion from his character, finding new ways of showing the feelings of Johnny Kovak.

Jewison controlled his set fairly tightly. You were always aware of his presence, and a voice which could float from a whisper to a whipcrack. He is very much of an actor himself — he played every part in the movie through his own mind before committing the real thing to film.

Undertaking the combined roles of producer and director required Jewison to view the filmmaking process both creatively and financially. This control enabled him to fine-tune his vision far more effectively than if he had been a director working for a producer. At lunch he would be catching up on the latest on his budget position, and at the same time worrying if anyone had taught his actress to operate an industrial sewing machine, for scenes to be shot later in the week.

Stallone was very committed to the concept of F.I.S.T. This was to be his first movie since *Rocky*. He told me he felt the story had bones, a solid foundation. I discussed scriptwriting with him; his theory for a film is that it should begin at a high point in the life of its character, a moment which will hold the audience and propel them into the film. In *Rocky*, it was a boxing fight where Rocky gets mad and wins his fight. In F.I.S.T., Johnny Kovak quickly becomes involved in the injustice of a man who is fired on the whim of a belligerent foreman. Stallone also likes his films to come to an emotional peak, to leave the audience with a strong impact. *Rocky* is a prime example again.

It is very difficult to assess or total the input received from the F.I.S.T. process. I was delighted to find that I understood and communicated well with the Hollywood filmmakers. Their problems were the same as my own when producing, only on a far more massive scale. That scale was much less difficult to comprehend as I saw it peeled back like an onion. Day by day, layer by layer, I was able to follow the structure of the production from its initiation right the way through to a screening for "Time" magazine reviewers in New York, a procedure no less nerve-racking for Jewison than for any other artist when facing the unpredictable reaction of the critics.

The process gave me confidence in dealing with scale. I saw people working on this sweeping drama who were similar to myself in their outlook and philosophy of film.

I discovered that there is no such thing as Hollywood magic, just people who have trained themselves to work to the highest standards of their profession and who have explored the financial strength that a larger market gives.

I saw mistakes and successful experiments, anger and laughter. I saw time wasted and time gambled with, and won when the weather cooperated. I was also reinforced with the reality of the film game — a large budget is no guarantee of success. The best bet is a confident belief in high quality standards, and a commitment to entertain the audience with every essence of the movie's potential.

....All the stuff we do here. □

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