
a hot time in the old town

by Lois Siegel

Montreal was ablaze with the news of the big fire
in the East End. And roving reporter Lois Siegel
was at the scene, camera at the ready...

photos by Lois Siegel



Everyone's rushing; the end is in sight



The firemen work overtime as Shelly Winters hustles off the smoldering victims and stuntwoman Céline Fournier doubles as a human torch

photo: Lois Siegel

photo: Attila Dory

If you like flaming buildings, hysteria, wet people, terror and confusion, then you will probably love *City on Fire*, an Astral-Bellevue Pathé/Sandy Howard Production.

Montreal's latest – and perhaps only 'disaster' film, as opposed to film disaster – has just finished shooting approximately 180,000 feet.

The \$5,300,000 picture starred Shelley Winters, Susan Clark, Henry Fonda, Barry Newman, Ava Gardner and Leslie Nielsen. It tells the story of a city that catches on fire.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is Prince Street, a street specifically constructed for the film. It cost \$400,000 to build. Located at Lafarge Canada Cement, Old

Plant No. 1 in Montreal East, the street required: 10,000 square feet of asbestos, 10,000 feet of wiring, 200 gallons of paint, 500 gallons of fireproofing. It was 500 feet in length and construction took 9 weeks, 7 days a week, 10 hours a day – 31,500 man-hours.

Some buildings were as high as 60 feet. Because the set had to last throughout the shoot, three coats of sodium silicate were applied to the buildings to prevent the framework from burning as flames poured from the windows.

Jeff Melamed was hired as a summer student to draft drawings from photographs for the construction. Then William McCraw came in as Production Designer. Romeo Turcotte, a Québécois film veteran, was in charge of the actual building.

The street included authentic-looking run-down houses, a restaurant, grocery, cinema, offices, a modern hospital, and even a dirty bookstore and topless bar.

Lois Siegel writes, photographs, teaches and makes experimental films in Montreal.



An empty street, ready for disaster

Diesel fuel was ejected from pipes and lit for the fire effect. Flames shot out of the windows. Asbestos boxes were built behind the window to contain the flames. Asbestos also coated the walls to prevent them from catching fire.

The action on Prince Street comprises the last 20 minutes of the film. On the street most of the shooting took place at night. Approximately 32 real off-duty firemen from Montreal East were hired to keep the fire under control and to act as extras in the film. **City on Fire** had to look elsewhere. They discovered a big fire truck building company right in Quebec – Thibault in Pierreville, which ships truck bodies to the United States. (Ford Motor Company supplies the engines.)

During the shooting, the set was set ablaze. Extra lights illuminated the area where the action was to take place. Three cameras rolled and the scene began in the middle of black clouds of smoke and darting flames. When the director, Alvin Rakoff, yelled “Cut,” the lights went out and the firemen rushed in to smother the fire. As the flames succumbed, the firemen, actors, extras, crew people and onlookers were left in total darkness – and one experienced what it might actually feel like to witness a real disaster.

Being an extra for a disaster film is not always as glamorous as one might think. In one scene, the bandaged extras were pushed from the hospital site down the burning, wet street on hospital beds. There was one small catch though. As they passed through the hospital doors, they were soaked down with water from a thoughtful city mayor, supposedly to keep them from catching on fire like the burning city.

One problem was that it became quite cold a few of those September nights, and freezing, sparsely clothed extras were soaked down and hauled off past the burning buildings among smoke and burning debris which became dangerous falling debris when the wind was up.

If you didn’t mind a mild case of pneumonia and some slightly singed clothes (some extras were told to wear their Sunday best) – you would have loved the job.

To supplement what was filmed on Prince Street, researchers hunted down stock shots of actual fires to be edited with the real fire footage. Apparently a New York City Fire Department has a special film team which records every fire. It became a major source for material.

Special effects were created by Cliff Wenger and his family, who also worked on the film **Hooper**. Grant Page, from Australia, directed the stunts. Page is best known for his “total burn.” He sets himself completely on fire without a face mask. Page merely uses a special gel on his face to prevent damage. Sounds like a pleasant leisure-time activity for someone who is looking for a little excitement in his life.

One interesting incident occurred when Page was doubling for an actor. After being set on fire, he ran across a street and was hit by a car driving 30 m.p.h. As he rolled on the car he smashed the windshield and put a dent in the roof. The only minor problem was that the car was brand new and scheduled to appear in a commercial the next morning at 9 a.m. The moral of this story is never loan your car to a film company, especially a film company making a disaster film, if you need it for a commercial the next morning. □

CinéMag

CinéMag is one year old. It was published for the first time last November, an offshoot of Cinema Canada, the monthly magazine.

In the beginning, it was called Trade News North. The tabloid format allowed swift publication of the latest news, and its physical divorce from the magazine got it through the mails quickly.

From the beginning, the publication has been independent, written by people who have no other stake in the film industry than to report on it well.

CinéMag has imposed itself, by monthly publication, by a strong presence at the Cannes Festival, by daily publication during the ten days of the Montreal Festival, as Canada's finest, best informed trade paper.

We take this opportunity to thank those who have supported us, both morally —by sharing your news with us— and financially —through your advertising dollars and your subscriptions.

We undertake our second year with renewed vigor. There are still many battles to be fought and won, not the least of which is inflation.

Due to rising costs, we can no longer include a subscription to CinéMag free with a subscription to Cinema Canada. If you are subscribed to the magazine presently, you will be asked to add a subscription to CinéMag upon expiration of your current sub. If you are only subscribed to CinéMag, you may add a subscription to Cinema Canada at a special rate.

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