

Paul Almond's Fate of a Hunter

From the sky, the brows of white hills roll out to endless limits, beautiful in their cold silence. In this part of the Laurentians, north by northwest of Montreal, somewhere between Morin Heights and Saint-Adolphe, the panorama is barren, snow-covered, and dotted by scrubby pines twisted in the agony of this December cold.

All except one particular hill where, nestled between ice-tipped poplars and broad-skirted evergreens, a village of wood huts seems to huddle against the north wind. These huts are odd, for they are strangely angled in some ancient, Asian-like style, and a '30s bicycle rests half buried in the snow against one of them. Drying in the sun, golden cobs of corn hang in neat rows on a wall of rough-cut boards.

There are people here. Some wear traditional Japanese dress: drab wool wraps, leg bindings, a conical hat, a fur waist-coat. It is, it seems, a northern Japanese village in a different time.

But it is an illusion. The other people who are there, those who seem so busy as they rush around the footpaths, wear different clothes altogether. They have the most modern and colorful of North-American parkas, Gortex knee-high boots, and heavy woolen tuques. Some carry walkie-talkies, and others operate strange and complicated looking equipment. They speak hurriedly in many different languages. There is French (accents are Hungarian-born, Parisian and Québécois), and English (recognizable as from Toronto, Montreal and Los Angeles) as well as snatches of Japanese from the 'peasants'.

The village is actually a front, nothing more than hollow shells of the real thing, specially designed to look authentic only from the outside. The pale smoke that rises from the chimneys is drawn from a convoluted crisscross of pipes channelling through the insides, and beside the smoke machine sits a young man, shivering. The houses, their back walls missing, open on to the windswept woods.

All of this is an exterior set for Paul Almond's latest film, *Fate of a Hunter*. Co-written by Pat Morita and its producer, John Kurri, and to be released by MGM sometime, the film stars a variety of actors from different nations. There is Morita (*Karate Kid*), Chris Makepeace (*My Bodyguard*), Michael Sarrazin (*Joshua Then and Now*), Japanese actress Mari Sato, as well as Seth Sakai and Denis Akiyama. It is described as a classic love story set amid the clash of two cultures during the Second World War.

The actual location is part of a Canadian armed-forces base, now abandoned and stripped of everything military, that has been taken over by the 60 or so people who form the entire crew of this particular film. The many squat, dull-looking buildings that crowd the

valley have been transformed for the occasion into a veritable little city dedicated to the making of this film — offices, a prop-making shop, wardrobe and make-up rooms, residences for the crew, interior sets, etc.

Now on the 22nd day of a 30-day shooting schedule, operations should be slowing down, but just slightly. Both Morita and Sarrazin have finished all of their scenes and have gone home. Yet the day is still almost as full and as long as ever for those who remain.

"Oh, it's been hard work," recalls one of the production assistants, Thom Richardson, "but we're feeling good. We're just happy it will be over soon." The outside shooting has been the most difficult part for the crew, since some periods of intense cold made their work difficult. During one episode, crew members had to stand on a frozen and windswept airport tarmac, in -40°C weather, while actors and camera crew were shooting on the inside of an authentic but narrow-bodied B-25 Bomber, circa 1940. The crew remained, uncomplaining, just in case they were called.

Today's work day began at 6:15 a.m. for the extras, who were brought in from Montreal's Japanese Cultural Center, and both they and the actors were in make-up before the sun had arisen. By sunrise, actors Makepeace and Akiyama were standing together by the coffee-machine, still trying out new inflections in the scene they were to do this morning. They laughed and enjoyed themselves as the morning seemed to dawn slowly.

In the early morning light, director Almond and the camera crew were already at the exterior set, in the bitter cold, shooting some establishing shots and other actorless scenes. It was still early when the remainder of the crew, extras and actors were bused up a steep hill, along a winding forest road, to the exterior set.

By the time everybody arrived, about 50 people occupied the little wooden village. Of these 50, one seemed to be controlling the ebb and flow of the day, and he accelerated the pace of the morning considerably.

From a distance, one might not distinguish Almond from the rest of such a large crew, as everyone is so thickly dressed: a sea of wool tuques, fur hats and heavy winter clothes. Yet there is one feature which would point him out in any crowd: the energy he radiates.

On the set, there is no one who moves more. When rehearsing a scene with the actors, he may grab a heavy prop, such as a door, and drag it around the space the scene requires, crisscrossing the space quickly as he leads the actors through his ideas, his mind searching aloud, leaping forward to a new concept. "Paul has a working style that is different from every director I've ever worked with," says assistant-director Doug Kruse. And his enthusiasm seems to be infectious. At one point during that morning, when some object was required from the equipment truck, the crew member who was sent did not rush at a brisk walk to get it — he ran. "He gets the job done," says Kruse.

This morning's shoot, in addition to several short connecting scenes that are quickly dealt with, involves a complicated choreography of movement, shot in wide angle, of some six different extras doing dissimilar things, and three actors acting a scene with several different actions.

Almond is painstaking in detail, conferring with each person involved, explaining exactly what he wants. Amazingly for someone who seems to be doing so much at one time, he seems to have the ability to focus totally on whatever task is at hand — blocking out all extraneous activity around him. At one point during the cold morning, some of the crew and some of the actors began to lob snowballs between each other

(and at visiting journalists) in a glad-handed effort to stay warm. Either Almond didn't notice or wasn't bothered by it, so intense was his focus on what he was doing.

As the actors finally begin the scene in run-throughs, he returns to each: commenting, requesting, adjusting, asking a question, even inserting a new movement and an extra line by an extra on the spur of the moment.

When every detail seems set, Almond calls for an actual take, and the hilltop resonates with assistant-director Kruse's voice calling for silence.

"Action," says Almond, just loud enough.

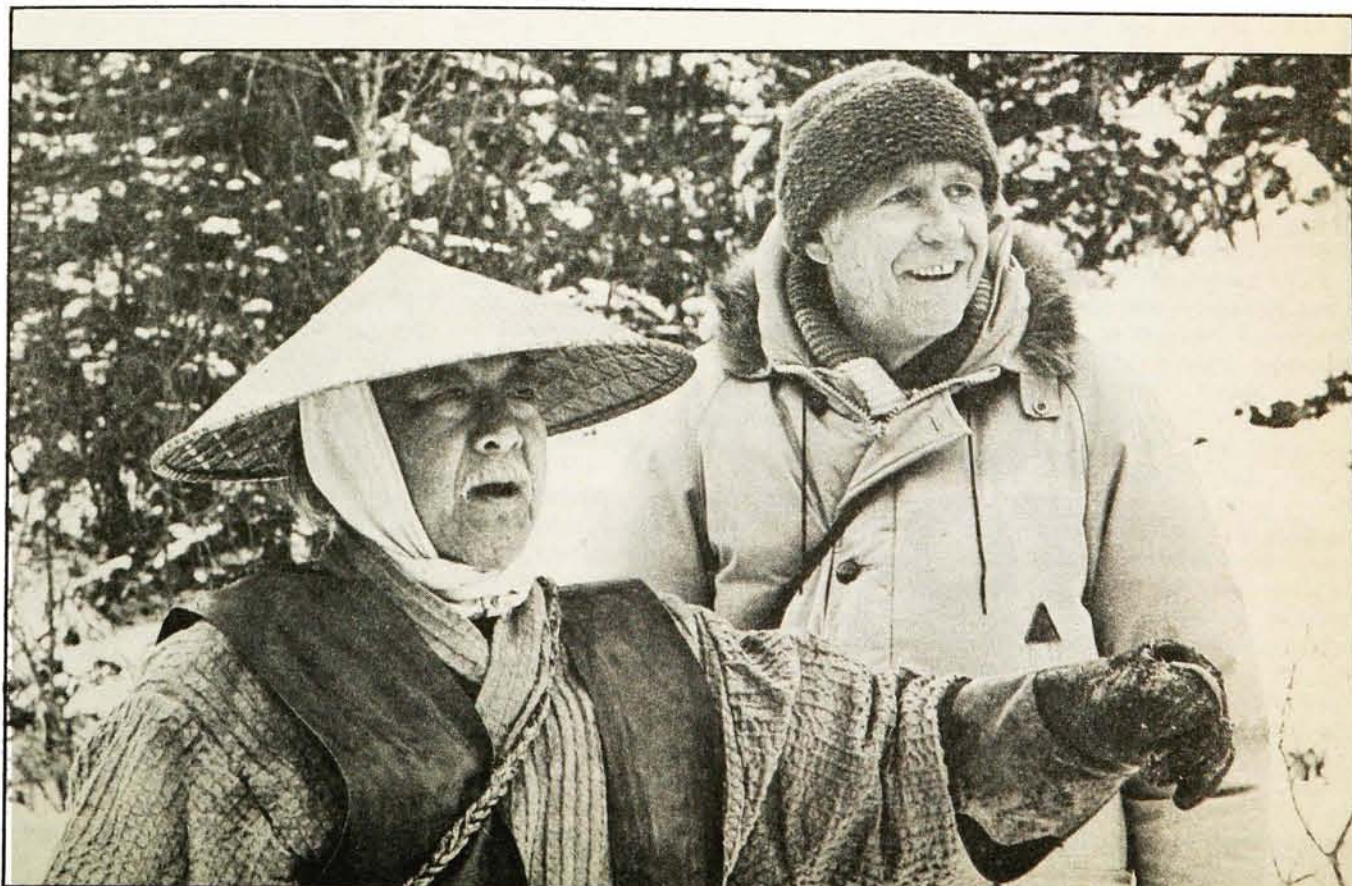
The extras go through their movements, criss-crossing the village in set patterns. As actors go through the scene, everyone on the hill is watching and listening intently.

When Akiyama, playing a benign village idiot, finally ends the scene, he accidentally drops a board. Almond does not yell "cut." Akiyama tries to pick it back up, but thereby knocks down the next board. The young actor looks befuddled in the exact same comic way anyone would. Except that this is totally natural, within character, and welcome comic relief at the same time.

When Almond finally calls out "Cut, and print!", he and the entire crew including the other actors break out into spontaneous applause, calling out to Akiyama their approval. Akiyama simply shrugs, smiling, as if to say "it was pure accident, I swear." But before the applause has even stopped echoing, Almond is already calling out instructions concerning the next scene. The crew bursts into a frenzy of activity.

Almond, pausing only long enough to watch the activity swirling around him, stops to pick up something from the ground. He sends a snowball sailing high over the treetops.

André Guy Arsenault •



• Pat Morita and Paul Almond turn Quebec into Japan for *Fate of a Hunter*

photo: J. Almond