

On Location

Montreal Le Party

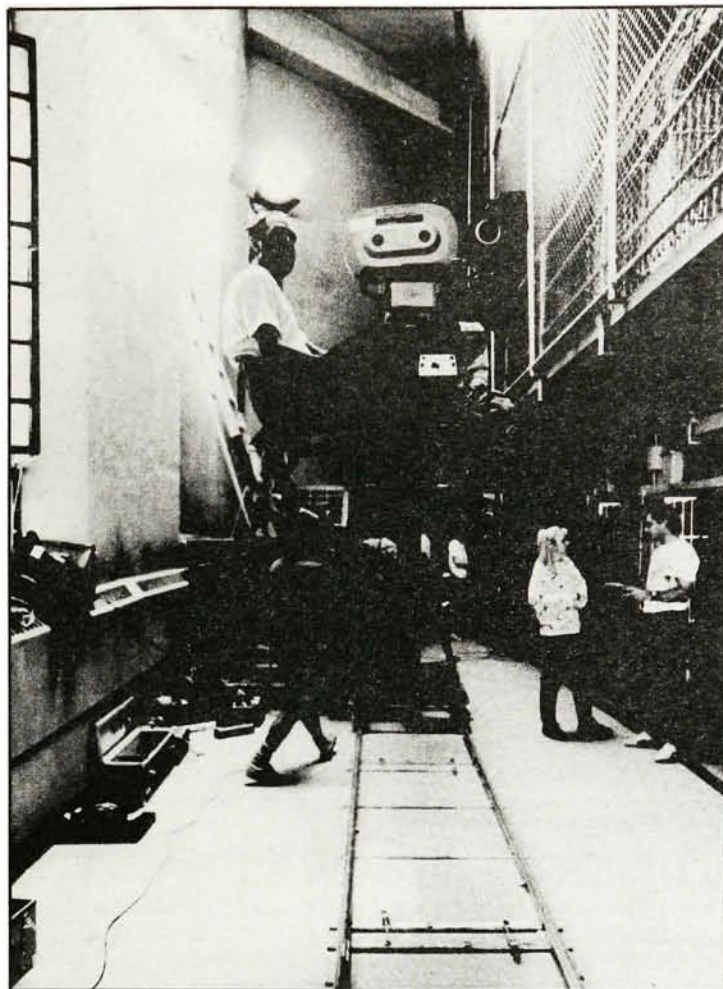
They're advertising for ex-convicts who want to return to the slammer. And the ex-cons are jumping at the chance. It's a question of film, however, not felony. The producers of the prison film *Le Party* need extras for the climactic scene in which a troupe of entertainers from the outside stage a show for the inmates (the party of the title). Apparently, the call for extras bearing tattoos and appropriate hairstyles has resulted in a deluge of interest on the part of former convicts.

The interest is understandable. After all, the film is coscripted by one of their own, Francis Simard, a former FLQ member who spent 11 years in penitentiary for his role in the October crisis. Simard also led the famous revolt of the "gars d'Archambault" to protest conditions at that prison in 1976. Simard and his "chum," director Pierre Falardeau, had developed scripts based on both the October crisis and the prison strike before they hit on the idea for *Le Party*. "It deals with the same themes," says Simard, "but from another angle. In *Le Party* there are a variety of elements; the outsiders, the party, the music, etc. We thought that was a better way to show prison life."

Simard has been on set throughout the 35-day shoot as a technical advisor, helping the filmmakers capture something they hope will be close to the reality of prison experience. "I'll basically only give advice when asked by Pierre," says Simard. "As for the actors, it's all him. If I have anything to say, I'll say it to him. There's only one guy in charge."

Filming this day is taking place in a warehouse in Montreal's St. Henri district. Within the warehouse (used for Yves Simoneau's *Pouvoir Intime*, among other pictures), the carpenters have been hard at work. On a raised, false floor sits a gigantic, wooden set; a re-creation of the gymnasium at the Laval penitentiary – the setting for the variety show. Filming has just moved to the warehouse after two weeks on location at the Laval Pen itself. Now abandoned, due to the construction of the new federal prison in Brian Mulroney's riding at Port Cartier, the "vieux pen" was a useful – if difficult to access – location. Producer Bernadette Payeur says arranging the shoot in the federal institution – even though it's no longer in use – tried her patience. The filmmakers finally received permission to use the location after "we brought in a television crew. Once the press got involved, the bureaucrats got moving," she says.

Le Party is being produced by Payeur for ACPAV (Association Cooperative de productions audio-visuelles). She says arranging financing for *Le Party* was a struggle as well. The roughly \$2.5 million budget includes participation by Telefilm and SOGIC. "They (Telefilm) were somewhat



Director Pierre Falardeau (seated, above) filming at the Vieux Pen

afraid of the film. They were afraid of Pierre, they didn't know him. However, they ended up getting on board because we really pushed it and we stressed that what's human is not ugly, even if it is sometimes gritty and harsh," says Payeur. Support also comes from the distributor, Cinepix Inc. of Montreal. It seems an unlikely alliance. ACPAV is the cooperatively-run production house responsible for the medium budget, prestigious, auteur films of filmmakers such as Léa Pool, Paul Tana, and Hubert-Yves Rose. Cinepix is the company responsible for *Snakeater* and (coming soon, unfortunately, *Snakeater Revenge's*). It does seem odd, admits Bernadette Payeur, "but they're trying to change their image. They don't impose anything on us, it's really ideal." Payeur adds that the support of Cinepix's André Link and Christian Larouche was crucial to getting the financing of the film in place.

"Unlikely" is also an apt word to describe Pierre Falardeau at the helm of a several-million-dollar production, with a cast and crew featuring some of the best-known names in the Quebec cinema world. After all, this is the director whose work,

except for one previous, extremely low-budget feature (*Peu Soup*, 1977), has consisted of short and medium length political documentaries. This is also the guy (along with partner Julien Poulin) who created the hilariously scathing, deadly-accurate satire of petit-bourgeois, Quebec suburbanites known as *Elvis Gratton*, which, although successful, was basically a half-hour sketch à la Second City with a stronger political bite and a tendency towards slapstick. (The success of the first installment inspired a second and eventually third episode. The three were packaged together as *Elvis Gratton, le King des Kings* and released theatrically in Quebec.) So what's happened to Quebec's baddest, crudest (and funniest) nationalist filmmaker? Is he aiming at bourgeois respectability? Is the director on the verge of becoming *Elvis Falardeau*?

On meeting Pierre Falardeau, it would appear not. Tall, rumped and extremely lean (hungry?), Falardeau is completely without pretense, and his language is that of the street, not the ivory tower or the "cultural milieu." He too seems a little bemused at working with the likes of art director

Jean-Baptiste Tard (*Un Zoo la nuit*) and d.o.p. Alain Dostie (*Dans le ventre du dragon*). "I'm having a hell of a lot of fun," says Falardeau. "As for the big budget and crew, when we did *Elvis Gratton*, I thought that was big and terrifying... People say 'Wow, it's really great being on a set,' and I say 'How can you like hell?' But this time I've gotten over that. I'm a lot less nervous."

Originally, Falardeau hadn't planned to have any "name" actors in the film. But there was pressure from the funding agencies to do so. "They asked 'Who's going to be in it? Are there stars?' I said no, no stars. I don't believe in that. So they said 'Maybe you should'... And then I realized as we were going along that it would make sense to have better-known actors play the roles of the performers in the variety show." Thus, Angèle Coutru (*Le Sourd dans la ville*) turns up as a magician, and Charlotte Laurier (*Les Bons débaras*) plays a stripper. In contrast, all the prisoners are unknowns, with the exception of Julien Poulin (*Elvis Gratton*). According to Falardeau, there was resistance to casting Poulin in the film. "Because of *Elvis Gratton*, he was always asked to play the same type of buffoon character. He plays big, or else everyone directs him to play big. But I knew what he could do. I didn't want him to look at all like *Elvis Gratton*. For example, there's a scene where he tries to cut his wrists. He was grimacing with an open mouth. I told him to do it with a closed mouth. If today I have the nerve to direct actors, it's because of what Poulin taught me about directing him. I never studied that. I even detested it, as a documentary-maker."

Falardeau says his documentary roots will still be in evidence in this, his first, true drama. "There are many levels to this film. There's a lot about the customs of prison life. How the inmates manufacture things like beer, weapons. That comes from my interest in anthropology. There's a subplot about an inmate who disguises himself as a woman and makes an escape attempt. I'm filming his process of transforming himself as if it were an NFB documentary about making snowshoes," laughs Falardeau.

Will *Le Party* be a political film? "I think it's just another way to approach the political," says Falardeau. "In this era of Yuppies and money, to talk about the prison population – which is basically lower class – is political. The film is going to start with a black screen with the sentence 'Liberty is not a brand of Yogourt'... For a long time in Quebec cinema we refused to deal with emotions in order to concentrate on political analysis. At a certain point, this guy I know who's a postman, said to me 'The last thing I want to do on a Saturday night is go see one of your goddamn political analysis films.' I've realized that to talk about the same issues, through the personal, is a lot more interesting. When you use the word liberty in the setting of a prison, it takes on a whole new resonance. For the prisoners, it's something damn important!"

Frank Rackow ●