

# Who Said Rome Wasn't Built in a Day

While most of us would travel south in search of a Philadelphia slum, or across the sea for a European cathedral, a film location scout defies geography to find these places in his own backyard. What does he care that Westmount is really nowhere near West Germany, and Osgoode Hall is actually York University's Law School and not the palatial estate of minor royalty? For, as if by magic, a film scout can transform the identity, the location, even the history of a site into something new and completely different.

Although he's an illusionist by trade, a scout does not, like his stage counterpart, conjure up visions out of thin air; instead, he uses the real world to create fantasies. And finding and securing real locations that will double as movie sets is 99 percent professional know-how, with only a touch of hocus-pocus.

Even the standard illusions of disguising Toronto or Montreal to look like 'Anycity U.S.A.' are becoming old hat. According to location manager Keith Large, there is a new and more positive attitude toward using Canadian cities in films. "Toronto especially is beginning to have a reputation as a world capital," he says. "Instead of spending money to make the city look like somewhere else, writers are now actually setting scripts in Toronto."

The film Large scouted for this summer is a good example of the changing situation. In *Misdeal*, Quadrant's \$5 million thriller about narcotics smuggling, Toronto was cast as itself, but Large had to find Spanish sites to stand in for Moroccan locations because local authorities weren't too eager to cooperate in the making of a film about their dope industry.

Even without having to circumvent balking foreign governments, and simulate locales, the job of tracking down anywhere from a dozen to a hundred sites in a city with literally thousands of potential locations is a challenge few can rise to. In fact, the Directors Guild of Canada has only seventeen full-time location managers (also known as unit managers) on its membership list. Considering that there were no registered location managers in Canada fifteen years ago, that figure does signify a healthy growth in the profession.

While this new breed is fast becoming indispensable, many people — even within the film industry — are unaware of the particulars of location management. Like the tip of an iceberg, the conspicuous parts of a unit manager's job are only one aspect of a larger, unperceived labour.

Weeks or even months before a film is shot the location manager is brought in to go over the script, to get a sense of what and where the locations will be. Phyllis Wilson, location manager for *Ticket to Heaven*, a Stalkers film which was shot in late July — says she doesn't even begin to scout until she's talked to all the people who are involved with the total look of the picture. After brain-

storming with the production designer, the art director and the assistant directors she has a visual conception of the sites she's looking for — the size and feel of a city intersection say, or a night club interior.

When it comes down to the actual scouting there is one easy way to find locations, and that is through location services which offer catalogue-style shopping for sites. Unfortunately, while take-out locations may be the ultimate in convenience, they rarely meet the gourmet standards of feature film scouts. Ray Kruszynski who owns the Toronto firm, Locations, confirms that his company caters mainly to TV companies and commercial photographers. He says that there are times though when a film scout will not spend days looking for a minor site. "We help the location manager spot a location which might only amount to a minute's worth of film."

Long term sites can have a grail-like

elusiveness, and Keith Large says he spends hours, even days driving up and down streets in painstaking search of a choice of location. "I am not looking for any suburban living room," he explains. "The atmosphere must be right; the colour is important; even the exterior of the house matters." Thus, while many locations are checked, few are chosen. A room with a perfect shape and superb ambience may have too low a ceiling or too weak a floor for the film equipment. It may have ideal lighting and a wonderful view, but the wrong door for camera passage. The ultimate interior — a location manager's pin-up of the month — may never be immortalized on film because it is on the fifth floor of a walk-up building, and an inaccessible location is no location at all.

While a site may or may not work for physical reasons, the whole look and feel of the place cannot be judged by a simple formula, and sometimes a scout will react to a location's less tangible, but more affecting properties. Large says, "You can never know exactly what you're looking for, but sometimes the moment you see a location you know it's right. It's a gut feeling." In cases like that scouting is more than simply eliminating possibilities to find a workable site.

Location managers agree that interiors are harder to find than exteriors because they can't be spotted from the street. The toughest of the tough though is tracking down a dwelling place for the film's leading character. The house not only has to have a strong visual appeal and good accessibility, but it must also reflect the character's personality. "A location is not simply background for the characters in the film," explains Large. "It is integral to them." For *Proper Channels*, Wilson said she personally checked out fifty houses, and the art department another fifty before they found a location to complement Alan Arkín's character.

Once a site looks promising and checks out for accessibility, the location manager will photograph it and several back up sites. For a hospital interior, for example, the scout might come up with three different possibilities: a modern, big city hospital; a medium sized, older building; and a small, antiquated structure. One of those locations might be eliminated at the photograph stage; the others will be looked over by the art director and finally by the director. When the location is okayed, the location manager arranges to rent the site from its owner.

Unlike most business transactions, Large says that renting your home to a film company "is a traumatic situation even at the best of times." He also points out that the location manager is a liaison between the owner and the film company, and has a responsibility to both parties. Large takes that responsibility seriously and tries to deal with owners with the sensitivity, not to mention the philosophy, of a saint. "I follow the golden rules with property owners," he says. "I treat them the way I would like to be treated. After all, I'm leading an invasion of fifty strangers into their home, their castle."

Few people realize how big and bothersome that invasion will be. Wilson says it's best to give property owners the whole truth straight away. "I always tell owners, 'Whatever you think is going to happen is nothing. Take that image and multiply it by ten. And that's what will be happening in your house.'"

If the onslaught may be traumatic, it's also fairly lucrative. Rental fees vary enormously from site to site, but a standard figure is around \$500 per day of shooting. But averages aside, Large confesses that "You pay what you have to." A two-day location for *Misdeal* cost Quadrant Films \$3000. That fee was especially high because the owners (one of whom was David Rothberg, the film's writer), had to be put up in a hotel for two days. Large was also willing to pay that kind of money because the location was the leading character's apartment, and there wasn't enough time left before the shoot to find another equally good spot. Eventually it all managed to work out though. Another *Misdeal* location in an empty carpet factory was used for three weeks of shooting, and only cost \$2000.

**With an eye for improvisation and an ear for the right price, the location scout goes hunting for the perfect place to shoot.**

Some locations can even be had for nothing. Parks and streets are usually free; major corporations sometimes can't be bothered with the contracts and releases, so they let production companies shoot in their offices without charge. Location shooting in Canada is not, fortunately, as difficult or as expensive as it is in Los Angeles, where production companies are often forced to pay off whole neighbourhoods so they won't disrupt filming.

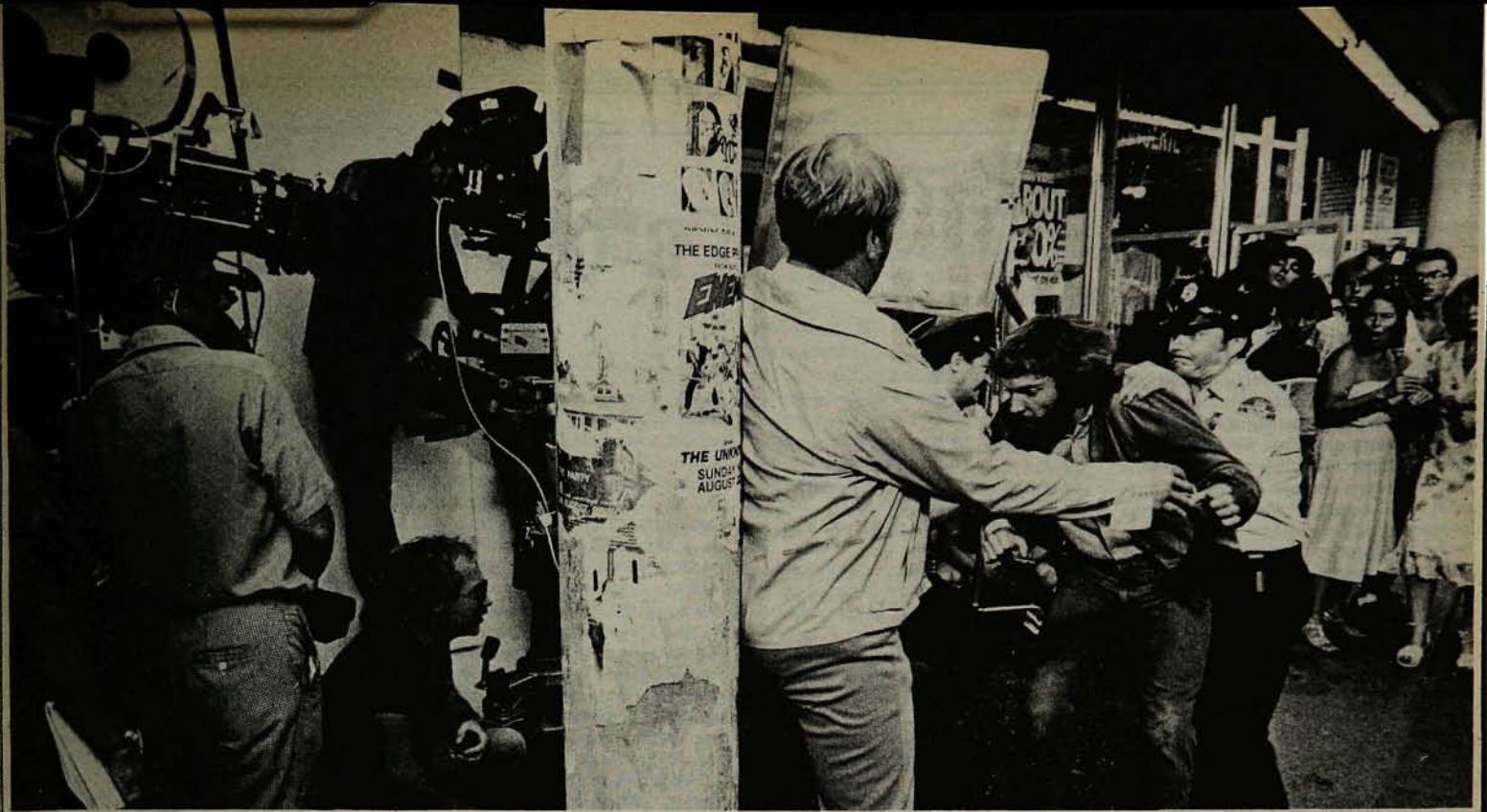
The locations portion of a film's budget is, in fact, very small. *Misdeal*, for example, cost \$5 million to make, but the locations budget was a mere \$35,000 — less than 1% of the total expense. That \$35,000 is deceptively low, however, because it only included rental fees, not miscellaneous location expenses like salaries for policemen. At \$150 per day, times two policemen, the cost of crowd control on location can add significant padding to an otherwise tiny budget.

There are still other law enforcement agencies to be reckoned with on location. Sites usually have to be cleared with municipal or provincial authorities, and often it's a simple matter of obtaining a permit to shoot on city streets. But

Thérèse Beaupré, former assistant editor of the Canadian Theatre Review, has written feature film, book, and theatre reviews for several Canadian magazines.

by Thérèse Beaupré





● N.Y.C. ? L.A. ? T.O. ? Richard Chamberlain battles the cops during the shooting of *Bells*

other times, the government bureaucracy is strangling. For those godless filmmakers who insist on shooting on Sundays, for example, there's a sticky little law called the Lord's Day Alliance Act that has to be considered. Fortunately, many provincial and municipal governments have set up film liaison offices to help location managers get past the red tape and onto the celluloid. In Toronto, Naish McHugh handles the various film permits through City Hall, while similar duties are performed by Maurice St-Pierre in Montreal and George Madden in Vancouver. British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Nova Scotia and Ontario also have government film consultants who offer a variety of location services for free.

Despite all the government help, location management is still fraught with its

share of occupational hazards. Many of them crop up during shooting because the unit manager is in charge of all problems related to the actual site once the cast and crew move onto it. Exterior locations are especially hard to handle says Large, "because you do not have the control of four walls."

Out of necessity Large has learned to build his own walls because he, more than most, knows just how thin the line is between disaster and control. Several years ago he was handed the toughest location assignment of his career. The film was *Titleshot*. The scene was a bank robbery and high speed police chase which ended in a spectacular car crash. The setting was the corner of Dundas Street and Spadina Avenue — Toronto's busiest, most frantic intersection.

The logistics of controlling traffic and crowds, not to mention the chase and accident, were staggering and it took Large three months to set up the location. Filming had to be cleared with the transit commission, the police, Metro roads, and the city public works department. At first, the request to film there was flatly denied; the authorities thought the stunt promoted dangerous driving and would of itself be dangerous to the public. One by one Large convinced the powers that were, that all possible safety precautions would be taken (including ambulances and firetrucks on standby), and that with the intersection closed, the stunt could be done safely.

At the eleventh hour final permission came through; the streets were to be closed the following day, first for a three-minute rehearsal, and then again

for three minutes of filming. Everything that was humanly possible was done to control the shoot. But then, something happened that not even a location manager could prevent: the worst blizzard of the winter paralyzed the city — and control slid into disaster like an avalanche down a mountain side. Luckily, the disaster was of the melting sort, and two weeks later the scene was shot without a hitch.

Like a roller coaster ride without seat belts, the location manager's job is filled with ups and downs — and no guarantees; except perhaps, that nothing ever happens the way it is planned. For some, there are challenges and rewards on the hairpin curves and steepening slopes. For others, there are better rides in the midway of illusions — better and safer rides.

● Naish McHugh serves as liaison for cinematographer Michael Molloy and producer George Mendeluk as they pick locations for *Kidnapping of the President*

