

WALLY GENTLEMAN CSC

'All Italians are inventors'. The truth of this observation by co-director Luciano Palermo, artist, raconteur, colleague and great friend, was often substantiated through the course of a recent Italian co-production in Rome and U.S.A. scheduled for release in the United States very soon. Luciano was my constant companion off and on set. His knowledge of film production and breadth of association with colleagues of the industry was an immense advantage as our film progressed on the basis of instant, rather than planned, effects. From practical stage mechanics progressing in apparently disorganized confusion to elegant engineering in progressive camera design, the Italians demonstrated at all times both endearing

NOTES ON AN ITALIAN VENTURE

charm and high practical aptitude in a warm and entirely hospitable climate.

There is much that Canadians could learn in the fun-filled aura of Italian film production that is immediately applicable to operations in this country. The exquisite Arriflex adaptations that encompass the coupling of high-speed Cooke lenses and manual gyro zoom drives in association with Mitchell type finders provided a reliable production tool. These conversions were manufactured by E.C.E. Camera Equipment whose workshop in Rome is staffed by dedicated technicians with a vast enthusiasm for their work under the direction of their amiable chief Sig. Coloiacomo.

The co-director, effectually doubling as director of photography, Sig. Roberto d'Ettore Piazzoli, made remarkable use of quartz light sources bouncing fill from styrofoam reflecting boards angularly adjusted through French flag couplings. Filming through a gauze diffuser the lighting took on a delicate nuance at an operative diaphragm setting of f2.8. This made for economical lighting set-ups since lights could be set with a minimum of effort and time and the rushes were superbly finished through the facilities of Technicolor Ltd.

An innovative method was used in exposure control by placing gelatin neutral densities and filters behind the plastic dome of the Spectra Photometer identical to those

placed before the lens of the camera. Having decided upon his foot-candle standard as a result of laboratory process testing, Roberto then worked purely on meter needle setting whether filming exterior or interior, thus never risking the problem of a faulty exposure by failure to change an ASA setting. Though this method contravenes theory it was nevertheless proven effective in practise, since it assured that when second unit photography was necessary compatible exposure meters ensured a unified lighting control to maintain production continuity. The continuous use of the gauze filter also lessened the contrast build-up in the release print. As a fastidious cinematographer I was nervous to find my assistants glueing gelatin filters to the back element of the Arriflex lenses but, though tremulous of the outcome, no difficulty was experienced through having the filter fanned off by the shutter.

All of the film was shot guide track and the atmosphere on set was somewhat akin to a television studio, only more so. Noise from the unblimped Arriflex was the only sure sign that someone was filming somewhere, in the absence of closed studio doors and warning red lights.

Out of all this haphazard development a film evolved from a script that was being constantly changed around a central theme and the wisdom of guide track shooting became clear as the filming progressed in a confused

medley of Italian and English dialogue. The Italian technicians have a world-wide reputation for the excellent quality of their post-sync operations and this can never be more true when it is proven that they can post-sync a completely re-written dialogue from a new script written after the production has been completely photographed.

In line with this seemingly random activity, the visual effects had to be applied on the basis of off-the-peg rather than planned. The initial script indicated certain activities but left a very great deal to chance. Elegant design considerations then had to go out of the window and exotica had to be finalised through the medium of the commonplace. A great aid to the success of the enterprise was assured by the enthusiastic personal intervention of the producer who, doubling as co-director with the director of photography, was always available for consultation, always ready to understand as to any difficulties that might require his assistance albeit on a financial, interpretative or artistic level. Conversations proceeded in Italian, English or French according to the numerical disposition

occasionally become 'furioso' and occasionally throw a fit then you just aren't one of the boys. With just the right blend of annoyance, a touch of arrogance combined with compassionate geniality then your acceptance is complete as a 'mafioso' of the first order.

Despite labour lines of demarcation often goodheartedly and sometimes wholeheartedly crossed, the studio shooting proceeded industriously. I played a d'Artagnan to the Three Musketeers of Luciano, Sergio and Alfio. Sergio was our burly 'machiniste' whose constant and re-assuring refrain was 'non problema' whether he was climbing up a near vertical cliff-face with a camera and tripod on his shoulder or asked to set a weighty camera in a precariously unorthodox position replete with deftly attached stay-wires and ropes. Alfio was our super gaffer, a select worker and happy friend who had the ability to anticipate a need long before it became apparent.

This was the in-group who were called upon to make a run of film effects that would follow the initiative of the *Exorcist* for a fraction of the cost of that film.



Wally Gentleman CSC, on location

of the participants and the few interpretive difficulties that were encountered were usually overcome with the natural good humour of Italian diplomacy.

Great use was made of the Elemak dolly with the Johnathan Jib attachment superbly controlled by the lusty first 'machiniste' or grip. This crane device was exceedingly well manipulated in confined areas of the set where a crab dolly might usually be expected. On one giddy mad day of improvisation the Jib was extended beyond the camera in the form of a roughly timbered platform to carry a foreground artiste, in this case Juliet Mills, as she began a levitated drift.

Juliet drew the admiration of all, not only for the excellence of her performance, but for her personal fortitude in enduring some situations that the action demanded of her. This included retaining an obnoxious amalgam of a vomit-like substance in her mouth while wearing yellow contact lenses that irritated her eyes and tolerating an excellent ageing and disease effect make-up that pinched and puckered her natural fresh complexion. Add to this the carriage of a pseudo-pregnant abdomen and a rich variety of physically contorted attitudes and you have, with lesser individuals, a highly explosive cause for temperamental outbursts.

There were surprisingly few; unfortunately there just have to be some. It seems that in Italy if one doesn't

We had a story that would involve the destruction of a car and record the last minute terror of its occupant, a satanic adept who would be re-incarnated into the body of a married woman who was once selected as his initiate. The results of this early indiscretion upon her family and the gradual destruction of its members involved effects of slow motion simulation, metamorphosis, levitation of bodies, wire-work, practical and optical effects.

Since the car crash sequences were to occur in San Francisco, it was thought that the use of Photosonic's high speed camera would arrest the motion required if operated at a speed range of three hundred frames per second while filming a car hurtling off a cliff edge in slow motion for a never-ending disaster effect.

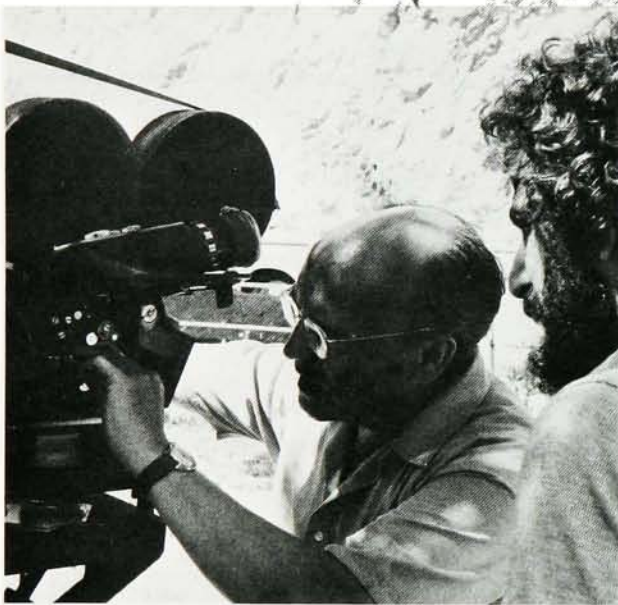
Production difficulties precluded this photography in the United States and rather than transport the unusual camera to Italy and to ensure that we got the footage required of the car interiors of the frantic driver, solidly enacted by Richard Johnson, a different method was established. This involved the erection of a hydraulic support constructed in the workshops of the amiable Armando Grilli, that would support the car with its occupant.

On parallels around this rig a semi-circular track for the omnipresent Elemak crane assembly was set up and by fielding the car against a natural sky the apparent twist of

a car coming off the top of a cliff was indicated by operating the camera in a special concentrically revolving mount on a Worrall head operated by Richard Ciupka. The camera was tracked along the side of the car to finally frame a wide-angle shot of the car in descent on its hydraulic jack out of frame from the full front position as the camera was jibbed over the car roof. This was shot at a 48 fps camera speed as were the cross cuts from inside the car of Richard Johnson's frantic attempts to exit the car window before the vehicle apparently hit the ocean's surface.

The factual descent into the sea was filmed at Anzio from a three camera set-up. At the sea coast one camera was set-up in a skiff at sea, the second aligned from the beach immediately below and the third immediately to the right of the car as it left the cliff edge. These shots became cut to an identical model of the car being dropped in the ocean at the conclusion of the film.

Though much of the film could have been produced
Gentleman with Maurizio - 1st Camera Assistant



using the travelling matte process the technique was used only for reasons of time schedule for main artiste availability for studio photography.

The majority of the effects were achieved through the use of front silvered mirrors which allowed the selective fusion of elements photographed simultaneously. Juliet's head was made to turn 360° on her body and the head of the nude body of a girl become substituted with the head of a man. The levitation sequence was not enacted with support wires but by building a set turned through 90° with Juliet conveyed along a horizontal trolley while standing on a slowly spinning disc.

Monofilament wire attachments were used to levitate smaller objects along with optically split-matted mechanics for the physical transition of actors and flying plates. Much merriment was occasioned through the stop-framed mechanics for a flying jello pudding. Those of the industry who are engaged in the production of commercials would be aware of the problems in attempting to elevate jello on an inclined plate while set lights heat the gelatin to a point where the pudding begins to slide off before the correct ascension point is reached!

The sequence wherein nursery dolls take on life was dramatized by the use of a set built on rockers with beds and set dressings animated with fishline. Added emphasis for the malignant glance of dolls was the insertion over

the glass eye of 3m material usually used on front projection screens. This high grain material was able to return to the camera incident light from a Carousel projector far in excess of normal light incident for the set and by modulating the colour intensity with filters over the Carousel lens an interesting effect was achieved.

Straight high speed shooting was used to good effect for the destruction of a tropical fish tank. Underwater pressure the fractured glass billowed outward in slow motion leaving a parade of pathetically sprawling fish to slide to the floor. These beautiful carp of some six inches in length fortunately went undamaged and there was no occasion for a re-take with tanks at five-hundred dollars each!

The highspeed shots were all shot with Mitchell cameras with the consistent reliability of those cameras. Camera tripods were rarely used. Whenever a static camera situation was merited a method I previously experienced in France was used. A Pedestal tower of interchangeable sections to adjust the height of the camera was handled in the selected station and the camera quickly levelled on a ball and socket head base. While this method is an excellent system in studio filming where flat surfaces are readily available it is no substitute for a tripod on location where surfaces are usually far from flat.

The rushes were edited with skill and great speed on a Prevost horizontal bed type editing machine that ran forward and reverse at an unusually high frame speed with little apparent wear and tear on the film. A husband and wife team made their editing selections winding off the trims with enviable dexterity for instant filing and a fast presentation of the rough cut quickly followed completion of studio shooting.

Their work became somewhat compounded when it became clear that the actual dialogue recorded was not the same as that indicated in the continuity sheets. Under normal circumstances this would have been a hindrance but when an Italian with but a slight understanding of English is trying to assemble a film in English with some Italian tracks, it becomes a little frustrating.

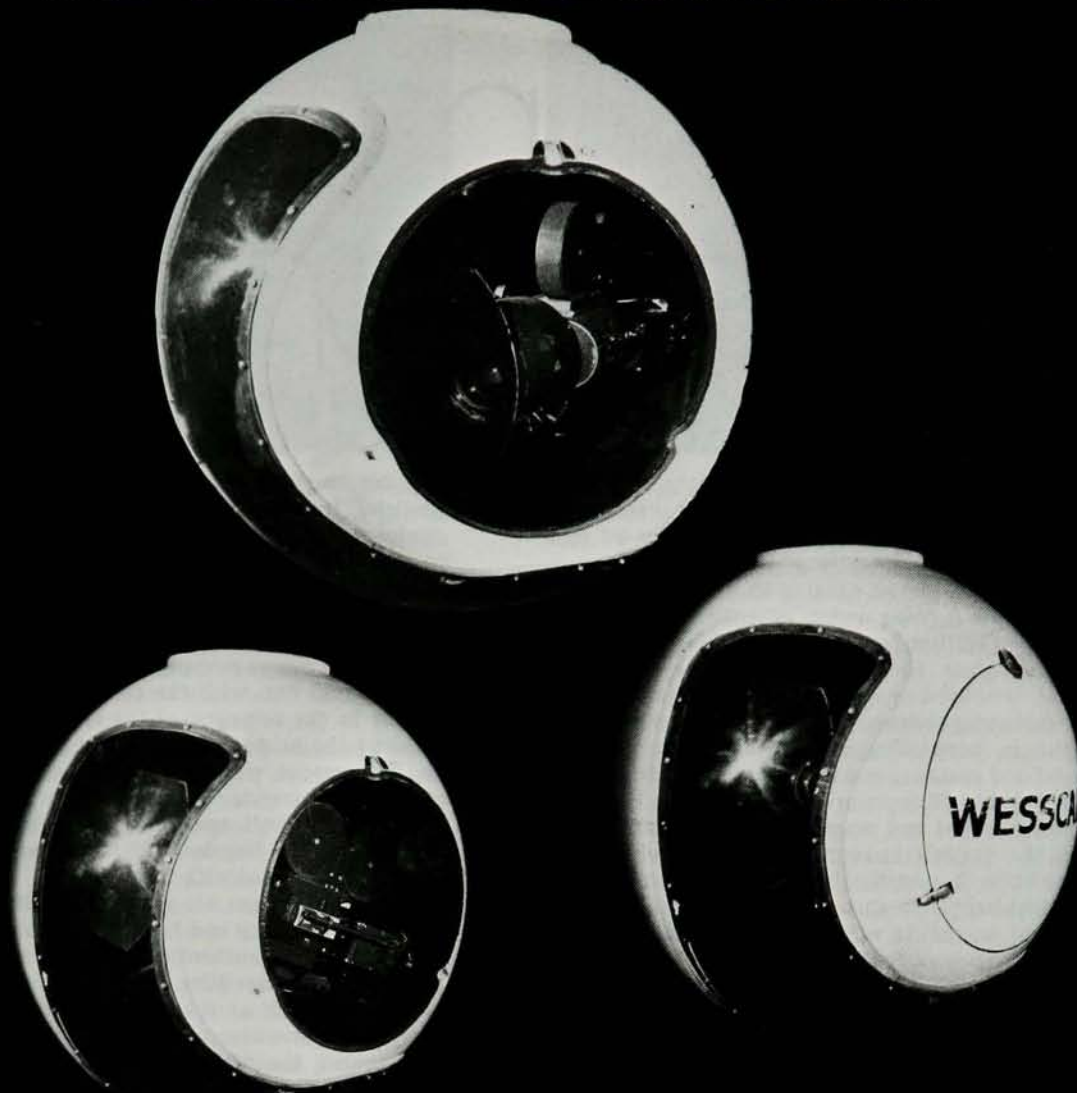
At one time we were searching for a location that would serve as an underground cavern and we were directed to the caves on the outskirts of Rome where Charlton Heston made an emotional rescue of his screen mother and sister in *Ben Hur*. We found the depression being filled by bulldozers while the caves themselves were bricked up and the repository of thousands of sacks of quiescent mushrooms. Whatever veneration the Italians nurse for their ancient monuments it obviously did not extend to film sets!

A placid and deadpan worker sat on a rock outside the cave and, in desperation, Luciano asked him where we could find some holes underground. He said 'yes' but warned us that it was dangerous as we could be kept down there a long time. . . . We found it to be a cemetery! Similarly on one assignment we sought advice since we couldn't find our way through a maze of streets over one of Rome's seven hills. We were told that the best way was to take an airplane! Such is the native humour, and what a joy it was to take life less seriously!

I returned home to Canada only to become instantly embroiled in committees and meetings on the disastrous state of our own industry. It is no consolation to know that the Italian industry is producing some two hundred and fifty feature films a year. Let's hope the nation's bankruptcy is not occasioned by this statistic. □

Wally Gentleman spent the better part of last year working in Italy after recovery from an extensive illness and disastrous accident. He lectured at York University in March on Special Effects, the field in which he has earned international recognition.

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