

JOHN
AUSTIN

ON THE HOLLYWOOD SET

● IT has often been claimed in Hollywood that Faoud Said is the man who sounded the death knell of the large Hollywood motion picture studios as an entity.

He invented and owns the Cinemobile, that ubiquitous silver - and - blue portable studio which carries enough equipment to shoot a complete motion picture without returning to its home base (London, Los Angeles, New York or Mexico City) until completion. Some are double-decker huge vans with bus-type seating on the second deck for cast and crew; others are even larger, self-contained vans twenty-five to thirty-five feet in length and carry everything from script cases to klieg lights.

It follows then that Faoud Said is now producing his own films, through a company called Cine Films. *Hickey And Boggs*, starring Bill Cosby and Robert Culp, and Anthony Quinn's *Across 110th Street*, both moderate successes, were his first two.

His third picture, *The Deadly Trackers*, "... is the best to-date," Said told us. The film stars Richard Harris and Rod Taylor.

We talked to Richard Harris, Rod Taylor, Said and director Barry Shear in Durango, Mexico on the final day of shooting and five days before the earthquake hit central Mexico.

"It is a great role," said Rod Taylor. "Frank Brand is the meanest, dirtiest SOB I have ever portrayed, or anyone else for that matter. I didn't have to pull any punches and could look dirty, act dirty, and say and do what I pleased, within reason.

"The chemistry between Richard, myself, Barry Shear and the script is simply marvellous. We have spent ten weeks down here and other ports o'call in Mexico and had a ball.

"When Richard and I were announced for the picture, people cluck-clucked and said it would be one long brawl. But it wasn't. We enjoyed making the film together and are now working on two other projects."

Richard Harris plays the role of Sheriff Kilpatrick who has spent his entire life upholding law and order but, as a result of a personal tragedy he finds he must go outside the law to seek justice.

"The role of Sheriff Kilpatrick was emotionally gruelling and I earned my pesos as a stunt man as well," said Harris.

"Once I was left with rope burns on my neck and gasping for air when I was accidentally 'hung' before the safety harness could be rigged. Another time I was thrown to the ground as my horse tripped going full speed for glory and his evening oats."

The basic theme of *The Deadly Trackers* has Brand (Taylor) and his outlaw gang of Neville Brand, Bill Bryant and

Paul Benjamin ride into town and rob a bank.

As Kilpatrick and his deputy, Reed Morgan, attempt to apprehend them, the outlaws find themselves boxed in an alley. With three of the outlaws at bay, Brand seeks refuge in the school house and takes Kilpatrick's son hostage. In a violent escape scene, the boy is trampled to death and his mother is brutally shot as she tries in vain to rescue her son.

The bandits escape across the Mexican border and knowing that he has no legal jurisdiction across the Rio Grande, and disregarding Mexican Sheriff Gutierrez' advice and admonitions to return to the United States, Kilpatrick, now enraged over his personal loss, pushes into the hinterlands of Mexico encountering the savage counter-strategy of the outlaws.

He narrowly escapes death by lynching and suffers temporary blindness. But Kilpatrick, with the eventual help of Gutierrez and a girl, Maria, played by well-known Mexican actress Isela Vega,

tracks Brand to a nunnery where he is finally captured at the expense of many lives.

The final scene in the film, which we witnessed being shot, is one of the most brutal and savage encounters in recent screen memory, but the outcome will not be given away here.

"But," said Taylor, thoughtfully, "... it was the most brutal scene I've ever been involved in in any of my pictures, or ever will be again.

"In fact, Kilpatrick and I only meet face to face at the beginning of the picture and in the large confrontation at the end. However, Kilpatrick's tracking of Brand is so relentless, during the picture you begin to build up sympathy for Brand and hope he does escape the wrath of Kilpatrick for whom you have sympathy."

Faoud Said selected Shear to direct *The Deadly Trackers* even though he has never directed a Western before. He has directed hundreds of television shows and specials as well as a few feature films.

Once dubbed "the boy genius," Shear

This month John Austin goes on the trail of

The Deadly

with Richard Harris



Mexican actress Isela Vega plays Maria



Kilpatrick (Richard Harris) watches a man sink into quicksand without aiding him



Kilpatrick and Gutierrez (Al Lettieri) track through swamp and jungle



Trackers

and Rod Taylor



directed Said's *Across 110th Street* with Anthony Quinn, and, by his own admission, Shear is more comfortable on the streets of New York than in the wilds of Mexico. "After all, I was born and raised in New York City, not on a ranch," he laughed.

"The reason everyone got along so well making *Trackers* is that everyone shared that marvellous sense of involvement," he said over a cold bottle of strong Mexican beer in the local *cantina* which has been used in hundreds of previous Westerns.

"For instance, I discussed with Taylor, Al Lettieri (Gutierrez) and Neville Brand that I was not out to make a John Wayne Western where all the badmen were bad, nor was I going to alibi their actions.

"Going with these circumstances, we came to a sequence where the gangster . . . er, outlaws . . . (he calls them gangsters) were to raid a hut, steal some food, and have a conversation while eating. It was at this point that Rod Taylor literally wrote the scene based on our previous talks."

Shear, however, was quick to point out that ". . . not everyone is capable of writing a scene like Taylor, but all actors are able to verbalise their characters which, often times, will bring something out in the script that was never recognised before.

"The original screenplay, for instance, also called for Neville Brand to have an iron foot. But I felt, and so did Neville, it had absolutely no creative value to the actor.

"All he'd be doing is dragging it in the dirt," he pointed out. "We changed it to an iron hand made from a railroad tie which automatically gave rise to new

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explanations and story lines."

Learning to live with this new encumbrance, Neville Brand used his prop to full advantage. "In one scene," Shear explained, "... he was eating some watermelon and quite naturally wiped his mouth with his hand. This is the kind of creativeness that builds a film."

Another experienced character actor symbolising the strong cast assembled by Said, is Pedro Armendariz, Jr. one of Mexico's leading architects — believe it or not — and the head of the firm of Villela and Armendariz. Playing the role of the blacksmith, Herrero, he has appeared in some 30 American films.

Kelly Jean Peters, in the role of Katherine, Kilpatrick's ill-fated wife, comes to the movie after appearing in many television shows and several features including *Little Big Man* with Dustin Hoffman.

To maintain the flavour of the Mexican locale, Said and Shear decided to go with Isela Vega in the role of Maria, outlaw Brand's woman and mother of his only child. Her part is the catalyst of the story when she is forced to accompany Kilpatrick in his manhunt, acting as his eyes after he is temporarily blinded.

Faoud Said has three of his thirty-two Cinemobile units based in Mexico City. Born in Cairo, Egypt on January 21, 1935, he was brought to Hollywood by cameraman Robert Surtees in 1952 when he was working for his uncle, an Egyptian film studio operator.

Graduating from the University of Southern California School of Cinematography, Said rapidly rose to the rank of chief cameraman for Sheldon Leonard's "I Spy" television series.

Because Leonard employed a wide variety of locations around the world, he found Said's imaginative inventiveness saving him thousands of dollars in labour costs. Said consolidated all of the equipment needed into one Volkswagen bus which was air freighted from Hollywood to such diverse locations as Hong Kong and Casablanca.

Faoud Said and Cinemobile were in business. He was awarded a Special Oscar in 1964 for his contributions to the industry.

With his production know-how, it was only natural that Said would make his next move into production. And that he has done with another probable hit on his hands with his third film, *The Deadly Trackers* ... but, then, Westerns have always paid the bills in Hollywood, even those of Cinemobile. □ END