

Acting. . .the thrill of it all . . .and some of its pains

by Charlene Sabath

When I was a little girl I wanted to be in the movies. Last week I got my chance.

I was thrilled when I got the call telling me I was going to be an extra in the made-for-TV movie, "Skokie." I quickly enlisted members of my family into helping me choose my wardrobe. The casting director informed me that I was to dress as if it were spring and, therefore, the ensemble for my premier performance as an actress included thermal underwear. Not exactly a touch of class by Hollywood's standards, but when the temperature outside is 30 degrees and the casting director says to dress warm, who am I to argue?

Other official instructions included arriving on the set promptly at 7 a.m.; being on call all day if needed; listening to the director's instructions carefully; and not asking the director or principal actors for autographs or pictures so as not to disrupt their concentration.

Commentary

WHEN THE DIRECTOR, Herbert Wise (he directed *The Sound of Music*) walked into the room I was impressed. His assistant director explained that the scenes to be shot would probably take about four to five hours, all outdoors, and we would be given breaks in between to come inside and warm up. I was very anxious to begin and to find out more about this business of making movies.

During the morning the words film, action and cut all took on new meaning for me as I was part of the action for the first time in my life. The words cold and frostbite also took on new meaning as I began tapping my shoes against the pavement to get feeling back into my frozen toes.

After about an hour's shooting, complaints about the cold from the other extras began getting louder. A scene in which we were all to yell "never again" in anticipation of the Nazis arriving in Skokie began to take on aspects of reality as demonstrators began to demand a break. After more shooting of the same scene, several extras began to lead the crowds toward village hall for an unofficial break to warm up, and what had been a staged demonstration nearly turned into a real mob scene. Pleas from the crew for us to come back on the set for just a couple of minutes longer turned the crowd around, but this time the words "never again" were shouted in earnest. Comments such as "There has to be an easier way to earn \$30" and "I'll never do this again" could be heard. One man yelled, "They're probably going to shoot the winter scenes in July."

I ARRIVED PROMPTLY at 7 a.m. (quite an accomplishment since my body doesn't usually function as a unit until at least noon) and found about 200 extras quickly filling the inside of Skokie's Village hall. The scene in which we would be used was an anti-Nazi demonstration filmed outside of village hall. All of the extras were separated into spectators, Holocaust survivors, members of the Jewish Defense League and newspaper people.

The spectators (I was one) were asked to sit in the council chambers while awaiting further directions. We also were given pay vouchers to fill out with which we would receive \$30 in cash at the end of the day's shooting.

As I looked around the room I noticed familiar faces, some of whom I knew when I lived in Skokie. I wondered what motivated all these people to get up early in the morning and come to village hall to be an extra in a movie. I wondered if some of them had dreams of being actors and actresses when they were younger and if finally, here was a way to make those dreams come true. Throughout the day, I heard many reasons. A few were professional extras who had been in movies before; others just wanted to see what making a movie was all about; still others wanted to be seen on camera; and some were out for a day of fun and a new experience.

AFTERWARDS, I hurried into village hall along with the other extras for hot coffee and an extra pair of socks, which I brought along "just in case."

Aside from the shooting out of doors and the cold weather, neither of which the crew had any control over, everyone was very polite and amiable throughout the day. Coffee, tea, hot chocolate and rolls were provided for all the extras and the directors thanked everyone for following instructions and doing a good job.

The rest of the morning went quickly with more shots of the demonstration scenes. One skirmish between the police and JDL members seemed real enough as one extra got poked in the stomach with a club and another came flying out of a group of bodies and landed on the pavement in front of me.

WHEN THE TWO casting directors announced that most of the extras would be released after lunch, I felt disappointed. I didn't want to leave the land of make believe just yet.

A box lunch was served to us at St. Paul's Lutheran School across the street from village hall, and afterwards only about 25 extras remained to do a scene on Oakton and Lincoln. Somewhat tired and still cold I went along just to watch and to

observe. As I stood on the corner watching the cameraman trying to shoot what appeared to be a difficult scene because of all the traffic and pedestrians, I caught a glimpse of Eli Wallach (one of my favorite actors).

Then it was back to village hall to pick up my belongings. I had started the day with anticipation and now even though my toes were still numb from the cold, I was even more thrilled. I had been in a movie with Danny Kaye and stood right next to him. I watched a talented and famous director at work and saw how cameramen and soundmen operate their equipment.

I felt very special to be part of this day when the film-makers turned the village hall parking lot into a set and hundreds of ordinary people into actors and actresses. I look forward to seeing the movie when it airs on CBS-TV this spring and I will watch the anti-Nazi demonstration scenes to see if I recognize any of the extras I worked with. Maybe I'll even see myself.