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Film's Theme: Can A Dog Trained To Attack Only Blacks Be 'Cured'?

By TODD McCARTHY

Hollywood, June 30.

"You're going to see a dog slowly go insane and then come back to sanity in front of you. You have a demented, insane animal which is fighting to hold onto its sanity. We are dealing with a legitimate thriller. All that other stuff, with aliens and creatures and monsters, is make-believe, it's never happened in the history of the world. This is a thriller, and it's also a complete metaphor."

Thus spoke Samuel Fuller in describing "White Dog," one of the more unusual and challenging pictures currently before the cameras and the veteran director's first Hollywood-based production in 16 years. Shooting since April 21, first is due to wrap shortly. Release by Paramount is tentatively skedded for early next year.

Project has a complicated, fumbled history and there was long a feeling both inside the studio and among industry watchers that it would never be produced due to allegedly touchy, even inflammatory subject matter. But a perusal of the script and conversations with key personnel involved indicates that the tale, which concerns an attack dog which has been trained to victimize blacks, is strongly anti-racist in approach and could only be construed as wrong-minded by those who don't bother to evaluate the evidence.

Based on a story by the late Romain Gary of France which appeared in Life magazine (rather than upon his novelistic memoir of the same name which included the dog material but largely dealt with his relationship with late wife Jean Seberg), film resisted realization for years. Nick Vanoff, who will share exec producer credit with Edgar J. Scherick, originally bought the Gary material and took it to Robert Evans, who five years ago commissioned a Curtis Hanson screenplay and set Roman Polanski to direct. Latter's flight from U.S. sex charges ended that plan, and later rewrites by Thomas Baum and Nick Kazan came to naught, as did Scherick's intention to proceed with director Tony Scott.

Early this year, Par executives decided to activate "White Dog" once again as one of the several films company would make quickly before the possible mid-year Directors Guild strike. Not even in possession of an acceptable script, Par hired "Airplane" producer John Davison for the project, leaving it to him to come up with a director and get the cameras rolling by April.

The Ideal Choice?

It was well known in the trade that many directors, as well as actresses, had turned thumbs down on the film as being potentially too disputatious, but Davison, a life-long film buff who was familiar with Fuller's 1950s Hollywood work, thought the 69-year-old veteran would be the perfect choice. "The only person I could think of who could write the picture in two weeks and get ready to direct it two months later was Sam Fuller," said Davison. "He's a remarkable talent."

As soon as Par had approved Fuller, the writer-director and original scenarist Hanson (another buff who had known Fuller for years) holed themselves away in Fuller's Hollywood Hills home to hammer out the script in sessions, spread over two weeks, which sometimes lasted 30-40 hours. To anyone who knows Fuller, this

should come as no surprise, and everyone on the film throughout the shoot admits that Fuller's energy has been inexhaustible, that he has set a pace that crew members and actors twice and three times younger have found difficult to keep up with.

Collaboration on a script was something new to Fuller, who personally wrote all but one of his 20 previous pictures. Part of Hanson's original design was retained, but Fuller added much that was new and crucially revised the character of the black animal trainer, played by Paul Winfield.

Re Racist Charges

Those close to the production allowed that the main problem with previous approaches to the material, which concerns a young actress (Kristy McNichol) who finds a dog who she soon learns attacks blacks, was that the crucial story twist had the trainer trying to reverse the canine's learned racism, so that it would later attack whites instead. Fuller's important contribution was to make the Winfield character a dedicated, even obsessed, trainer who sets out to cure the dog of its racism.

"It is not a racist story," stressed the director. "It's the fact of life in the U.S. today and for the last 100 years. People who make the racist charge are dumb for two reasons, because they're repeating hearsay, and because if you gave the story to them on a platter, they wouldn't recognize it without platform lecturing. The trouble is that, when a project deals with something hot, people automatically take sides." Stating that the film would not be pessimistic, Fuller added that both he and the Winfield character look upon the dog's racism as a disease, and said that "once you can cure a disease like that, you're going to change a helluva lot of s.o.b.s."

Origins Of Plot

A friend of Romain Gary's dating back to the author's stint as French consul general in Los Angeles during the 1950s, World War II vet Fuller ironically had been approached by Gary in those days for information on "white dogs" that had been trained by the Nazis to search out Americans in Tunisia during the war. In his official role as France's representative here, Gary had once been obliged to ask the filmmaker to remove a prolog deriding the French in his 1957 "China Gate," arguably the first Hollywood film to depict the armed conflict in Indochina. Later, Gary suggested that Fuller make a film of his novel "Company Of Men," a favorite of Fuller's about kids surviving in Paris after the liberation, but Fuller replied that, "I've already seen it, and it was called 'Shoeshine,'" referring to Vittorio De Sica's neorealist classic on similar subject.

As written, the script demands an extremely expressive performance from the white dog, which Fuller is treating "like a man, like another character." Five animals are being used for the role and, in a move both artistically expressive and ophthalmologically correct, the frequent p.o.v., dog's eye shot will be done in black-and-white. Per Fuller, "what he sees is not what any other animal would see, and the sounds he hears are not the sounds we hear."

Despite difficulties of working with animals, pic will wind on sked after 43 shooting days, with some possible pickup shots to be done next week. Budget of \$7,000,000 in-

cludes considerable development fees spent on previous attempts to launch it over the years.

Early Sequences

Several weeks of lensing were accomplished at an unusual, never-before-used location in the mountains at the north end of the San Fernando Valley called the Wildlife Waystation. Dubbed "Noah's Ark" in the pic, isolated compound houses lions, tigers, bears, hyenas, antelope, snakes, large birds and a wide variety of other animals and perfectly fit the description of the animal training center run in the script by Winfield and Burl Ives.

Operated by Martine Colette, waystation takes on animals rejected by zoos and found injured in the wilds, although, per Colette, "most of our new arrivals are from people who wanted cats and pets but couldn't keep them when they grew up. We don't solicit movie business, and it's not a zoo, it's not open to the public." Nevertheless, prospect of being used in the film was a godsend, since Par installed a hospital, office, shed and large caged arena for sets which will remain a permanent part of the complex.

After long stretch through the late 1960s and 1970s during which their experience was undervalued and relatively neglected by the majors, vet directors such as Billy Wilder, George Cukor, John Huston and Fuller are now being hired again for major projects, and Fuller's confidence and sureness as to what he wants have been evident on the set. The director has done only one take on the majority of his shots, covered many of his scenes in long takes and has asked a lot of his crew in the way of unusual moving camera shots. Working with Fuller for the first time has proven energizing for cameraman Bruce Surtees, who said that "he has more imagination than other directors, much more."

Once the DGA situation has resolved itself, Fuller will hie to Japan to helm the actioner "Let's Get Harry" for CBS Theatrical Films.