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The Screen

Michael Winner On the Set

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"Life isn't lived in movie studios, is it?" asks director Michael Winner. It's one of his favorite questions.

"Life is lived in real places," Winner answers himself. "Movies should be made in real places. I always insist on shooting everything on location."

Location filming gives a picture authenticity, but it does have its drawbacks -- one of which was apparent on the afternoon I talked to Winner. We were in a Washington, D.C. park, one of the sites he had chosen for his spy film, "Scorpio," and the rain was coming down in sheets.

The crew was squeezed uncomfortably in a diner, waiting for the skies to clear. Every few minutes Winner would jump up and run outside, pacing up and down while an aide held an umbrella for him. This having no effect on the weather, he would come back and resume the interview.

I ASKED Winner, who is British, how location filming in the United States compared to his experiences in other countries.

"It's fantastically expensive here," he said. "Six or seven times as expensive. The crews are highly skilled and most willing to work, so I have no complaint there, but the money..."

He cast another look outside. Now I know why he was so worried.

"Of course, spy films in general are expensive to make," he continued, "because most of them take place in several different countries. 'Scorpio' does; after we leave Washington we're going to London, Paris, Vienna -- the money for transportation alone is considerable."

"SCORPIO" is the first spy film in Winner's varied career. He has directed the comedies "The Jokers," "I'll Never Forget What's 'Isname" and "Hannibal Brooks," the drama "The Games," the Westerns "Lawman" and "Chato's Land" -- and, most recently, "The Nightcomers," an offbeat suspense film with Marlon Brando.

Did the chance to do a different kind of film play a part in his choice of "Scorpio?"

"Yes," he said. "I think spying is a field that films have scarcely touched in any serious way; only 'The Spy Who Came In From the Cold' has dealt with the realities of espionage. 'Scorpio' is in the same vein, and I think it has a good plot. Unexpected things happen."

"I WAS ALSO attracted by the theme -- the problems of men who have opted out of normal society to make their own way. I find, incidentally, that many of my films deal with this idea. They have different settings, but there is an underlying similarity in that the characters are people who operate outside the ordinary social conventions."

Winner's favorite theme, in this instance of "Scorpio," becomes a story about an aging CIA agent (Burt Lancaster), suspected of selling out to the Russians, who tries to hide in Vienna until he can prove his innocence. Alain Delon plays a free-lance assassin hired by the CIA to kill Lancaster, and Paul Scofield is a Russian agent who tries to persuade Lancaster to defect in earnest.

Lancaster has worked for Winner before -- in "Lawman" -- and the director has a high opinion of him.

"I'VE ALWAYS admired

Lancaster for his choice of roles," Winner said. "He has often chosen very personal and private subjects, like 'The Birdman of Alcatraz,' instead of big general-audience pictures that could have made him a lot of money. He's been very brave."

"You know, Europeans think a great deal more of Burt Lancaster as an actor than Americans do. That's not uncommon -- every country tends to ignore its own actors."

There are a number of British actors who have bigger reputations in the United States than at home. John Mills, for instance -- in England, we think of him as a competent actor but no more. Everyone was dumbfounded when he won the Oscar for 'Ryan's Daughter.'"

So was I, I said. "He played the makeup," said Winner crisply, and jumped up again to see whether the rain had stopped.