

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DENNIS BRACK

TITUS SPARKS A 16 MM

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**W**HEN a red-bearded high-school English teacher with a couple of degrees from Harvard puts his head in a former student's front door and asks him to assume expressions that are "lustful, slobbering, cretinous and animalistic," the student could not be blamed if the first expression that slipped across his face were one of mild surprise.

As it happened, though, according to teacher William Teunis, who recently conducted brief but intensive screen tests of his former students before casting *The Rape of Lavinia*, Stephen Maurer launched instantly into "an incredible series of goggling faces." Teunis was assured that Steve, a Swarthmore math major on vacation, had a face mobile enough to play Sam Sludge.

Next, at the Hillendale Shell station, where ex-student Griffith Morris has a summer job, Teunis filled up, pointed to a strip of grass beside the station and asked Griff to "pantomime an epicene flower fancier and then show me how you'd protect a girl from a monster." Griff glanced apprehensively at his fellow mechanics. "But then he was superb"—ideal, in fact, for the part of hero Arthur Abstract,

a gentleman of refined profile, neat haberdashery and a gallant manner.

A test was scarcely necessary for Lavinia. Teunis wrote his scenario with Emily Michalski in mind for the title role. The brown-eyed nutbrown Emily, a Wellesley Latin major, was just "the charming, feminine girl for the part." All Emily had to do in preparation for her role was to lop off two feet of white muslin from the costume she wore as Lady Anne in Teunis's production of *The Bloody Axe*—a combined Richard III and Henry VI—which his high school students performed for the Shakespeare Society.

Paul Menzel's screentest consisted of a fast run around Emily's front yard. The Maryland U. physics major passed. "He looked like a speeded-up movie already." So did George Daly, who plays guitar in a combo called "The Hangmen." The two sprinters thus copped the roles of Chiron and Demetrius, who figure first in the production's movie-within-a-movie of *Titus Andronicus* and then in the comic chase that follows.

The screenplay combined several of Teunis's interests, notably, in Shakespeare and

the ways of the Keystone Cops. And the athletic turn which it took was no surprise to members of the cast, who were veterans of other Teunis productions.

Even so the new script reached new extremes of choreographed exuberance and feats of derring-do, calling for fender-shivering chases by Volvo and Volkswagen, races in and out of cemeteries, caves and the Shenandoah River.

The plot of *Lavinia* is uncomplicated if bizarre. The story opens with a cameraman on a cowstren knoll directing four classically robed actors through Act II scene iii of *Shakespeare's* venture into extremism, *Titus Andronicus*. As Lavinia is dragged off by the two sons of Tamara, Queen of the Goths, a slobbering lout by the name of Sam Sludge leaps down on her abductors.

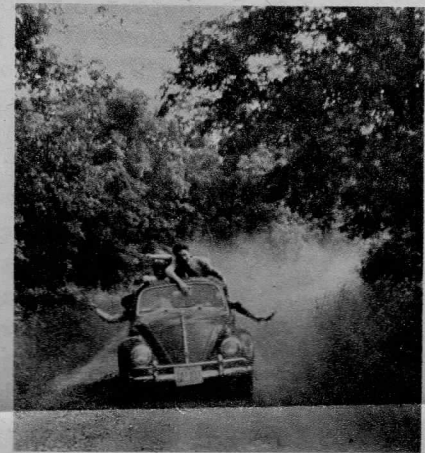
From this point the film develops into the Beauty and the Beast chase which accounts for at least 12 of its 14 minutes. In the lead flits the frightened Lavinia; lunging after her, Sludge, snorting and flailing his arms. Next, the actors, hobbled by their tunics, high-stepping it through waist-high grasses and down



*Hatfield, below, film Rape of Lavinia. Stephen Maurer, left, is the villain Sam Sludge.*



*Sludge pounces from ruin and catches Lavinia by graveyard.*



*Lavinia's fellow actors chase Sludge and girl on foot, by car.*

# CHASE

*By Peggy Thomson*

steep embankments. And far behind them, Arthur Abstract clutching his umbrella and holding his golfing cap to his head as he runs.

In the end, though, it is Arthur who leaps 30 feet from Horsehead Rock into the Shenandoah, swims a mile and a half, still immaculately dressed, overcomes the repulsive Sludge and rescues Lavinia from her precarious perch in a dead tree, halfway over a dam.

Teunis's idea in filming the movie was that the weekend's work should not only produce an interesting film—something in the stylized, fast and funny manner of the 1920s silents—but that it should be an event, bringing together a group of witty and congenial young people who enjoyed acting.

As it turned out, everything in the two days' filming conspired in the cameraman's favor. The rented camera rolled smoothly. Sun shone into the woods in dappled patches. Local inhabitants were either helpful (lending bikes and canoes) or incredulous ("What the hell's going on here?").

Cameraman Bill Hatfield, a Montgomery Junior College sophomore, risked tripod and limb to film the car chase. He took some of

*Continued*



*Sludge paddles unconscious victim down Shenandoah River.*



ac



Member, Ford

# ANDRONICUS AND THE COPS

... *Keystone, that is*

his footage strapped to the windshield of a convertible. Once, positioned at a crucial turn in the narrow dirt road, he instructed the drivers: "Come at me fast and don't turn before you get to that point there"—a few inches from his toes.

Lightmeter in hand, he helped rewrite the script as the shooting progressed.

Off-camera dialogue was as wild as the film itself, coming from a cast who knew not only their Shakespeare but the popular culture of old Bogart films, Plastic Man comic books and the Katzenjammer Kids. "Glom it," was a frequently used stage direction (*cf.*, Donald Duck). "Mit dese kids," wrote actors Morris and Daly in Teunis's guest book, "society is nix."

Sludge's sleazy wig, which sank in the river at the end of the filming, was the only casualty of the peril-fraught weekend. Until then the worst that had happened was Chiron's collision with a cow, Lavinia's lost contact lens and an unplanned venture into "grimy Italian neo-realism" when a miscalculation of the depth of a creekbed left the actors slogging hipdeep in mud.

As the black-tentacled hairpiece sank in the murky water, Arthur "Griff" Abstract theorized that it had swum away to its nest.

Two weeks after the filming, at the apartment of *Lavinia* actor Raul Zaritsky, president of Maryland U.'s Students and Faculty for a Free University, the cast saw its finished production. Despite the vociferous acclaim of the premiere audience, strict grader Teunis rated his film with its \$60 budget only a C plus.

Teunis, who last year got his MFA from the Writers' Workshop of the University of Iowa, returns in the fall to the Montgomery County system to teach at the John F. Kennedy high school. He and cameraman Hatfield plan as the next 16 mm project for their company of Allied Dilettantes, a film with the working title of *The Collarbone of a Hare*. ■

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by Tomlinson

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