
Ringers' Roundtable

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A Made For Movie Experience

Because we were not sure what photos we were allowed to take during the film shoot, the photos here just give you a glimpse as to what was going on during the two days.

On July 3rd, Morna-June Morrow received a telephone call from Heather Madill, Extras Casting Director for a film company requesting three handbell ringers to appear in a Christmas film being shot in Winnipeg. The story takes place in current day Minneapolis in the month of December and extra people were required for the street scenes, and three bell ringers were to be seen ringing their bells on a street corner by Evergreen Park as Christmas shoppers passed by. Heather wondered if I could find three people willing to take part. I explained that being summer holidays, it might be difficult to find people who were in town. However, I took on the challenge and within an hour, three members of Rochester Ringers - Patsy Andrews-Vert from Starbuck, Viola Prowse and I agreed to take part in this new adventure.

Several telephone calls and email messages between Heather and I followed. One concern by film producers was how to “mute” the bells during filming, so as to not interfere with spoken dialogue between the main actors. Bell clappers were adjusted and we simply played the twelve bells “backwards” so to speak, ensuring no sound would emerge! Emails followed with regard to wardrobe suggestions: winter coats, jackets, boots, hats, gloves, scarves, with colour restrictions like no black, no white, and no logos. And you had to have several wardrobe changes so were asked to bring multiple clothing items. Then the hair and make-up notes followed. The call time for Tuesday, July 9th was 7:30 a.m. and we were asked to park at the Misericordia Parkade on Sherbrook Street. Because the three of us had three large suitcases plus a dozen handbells, a transport van came and drove us to Balmoral Hall where the film was being shot. We were informed to go upstairs to the cafeteria area and then we had to fill out two sets of paper work for government and movie information.



RING OUT trio of M-J Morrow, Patsy Andrews-Vert and Viola Prowse

There were about 20 extras cast members who would be the people walking down the street with their Christmas shopping packages. We were always referred to as “the bell ringers” and kept together as a group, each of us playing four-in-hand bells. We had been warned that there would be a lot of sitting around during the two days. It wasn’t until about 9:30 a.m. that we donned our winter wear and went outside where the winter street scene was to be filmed. I’m sure there were about 30 crew members behind the scene creating winter before our eyes. Yards and yards of fibrefill became the artificial snow. Window ledges had snow applied, wreaths were hung, lamp posts were sprayed to look like frost, and blow torches were used to adhere the “snow” to the Christmas trees. One thing that surprised us was a man was always using a hose to spray water on the artificial snow presumably to adhere it to the sidewalk and road. The pavement was constantly being sprayed with water. Orange arrows applied for directions on the sidewalk would have to be covered with snow so men would be tearing off pieces of the fibrefill to cover any markings. Patsy, Viola and I were squeezed up against a Christmas tree, and artificial snow flakes often descended into the bell casting, and wardrobe ladies would be brushing off “snow” that appeared on our jackets. Because the first take would be a rehearsal we were advised to open up our jackets to try to cool down, and staff were always reminding us to stay hydrated. The scene marker lady came up, announced which scene and take number. The Assistant Director shouted “BACKGROUND” which was our cue to start, then the word “ACTION” followed and filming began. The cameras started rolling, with one camera on a track which could move smoothly along. Another camera was stationary but could move up or down or sideways very smoothly. Two huge spotlights were also used. Extra background actors would walk across the sidewalk, usually carrying Christmas bags, then when they reached the other end, would turn around and walk back again. Then the two main characters would appear. They would say their lines quietly...obviously their full voice effort would be recorded later. Only lead actors Cameron Mathison and Elizabeth Mitchell had cosmeticians and hair ladies attending to them. We soon discovered that the scene would be repeated over and over again, with new instructions given each time to various cast members. So the variations in each scene were filmed over and over again for the next 4 hours.



Some of the winter wardrobe worn by the three bell ringers

By 1:30 p.m. a hot lunch was served, first to the 30 behind-the-scene crew people, then to actors who belonged to ACTRA, then all the extras. The food had been prepared by people who worked in a huge truck in the parking lot. They carried in all the food and walked up two flights of stairs. During lunch time, the heavens opened up and there was a downpour for several hours.

Crew members were hastily putting large tarpaulins over all the expensive equipment. Presumably, interior scenes were then arranged, but for the rest of the afternoon, no outside scenes could be done because of the deluge of rain (which we badly needed). So we all sat around visiting with the extras for the next few hours. Because it was so warm in the cafeteria a huge movie set fan was brought in and turned on. Within a few seconds, the room was literally "snowing" as the fan was blowing the dust bunnies off the lighting fixtures. This continued on for several minutes and everyone was laughing at this new version of artificial snow blowing around the room!

Because of the rain, we had a chance to speak with several of the other cast members. Some were movie extras who have worked on other movie shoots, a couple were full-fledged actors appearing in other films, and some like us, we're experiencing their first time in this venture. All races were represented. One Philippino lady I spoke with had been a dentist in the Philippines for 15 years but when she came to Canada her credentials were not recognized. She would have had to take all her medical courses again, and said because of the expense it was not possible. Another lady has been an extra for seven years and her son became a film director. After a couple of hours, we decided to practice our trio version of *"Away in a Manger"* seeing as how we had not had a chance to rehearse it earlier. A few crew and extra cast members were enjoying hearing the bells actually ringing. We assumed that the taping of the sounds would be done the next day.

A tent was set up outside the entrance of Balmoral Hall with refreshments mid-way afternoon, so large IKEA yellow and blue umbrellas appeared with staff ushering people one at a time to the tent for their refreshments. Because it was raining so heavily, crew members were poking poles up at the tent's roof, forcing the water off the roof, otherwise the tent might collapse on everyone!

I doubt the three of us will ever watch another movie without imagining what goes on behind the scenes. In one scene, a yellow cab arrived and the main character, played by actress Elizabeth Mitchell, got out of the cab. The cab windows had been sprayed to look like frost, but later in the scene rain was on the trunk and roof of the cab. Shifting weather patterns must really interfere with filming schedules and indeed it did today. Finally, because of the downpour, the day wound up by 6:30 p.m. I had no idea we would be filming at Balmoral Hall, but I thought, seeing as how I had been contracted to do a complete servicing of their four octave 49 Schulmerich handbells sometime during this summer, I wondered if I could get the bells to take home. I made inquiries and the six cases of handbells were put into a room and locked up. I was introduced to the security man, and when we started to leave around 6:45 he opened up the locked room and the bells were brought to the front door. I was driven by transport back to the parking lot at Misericordia Parkade. I drove my car back to Balmoral Hall where Patsy and Viola loaded up the bell cases into my car. By the time we got home it was 7:30 and Patsy kindly unloaded the bell cases into my patio. Quite a fascinating 12 hour experience for Day One.

We had been informed that further instructions would be emailed to cast members regarding the second day of filming. An email message arrived at 10:13 p.m. with wardrobe, hair and makeup suggestions, where to park and report by 11:00 a.m. to Red River Community College Cafeteria on Princess Street in the Exchange District of old Winnipeg. And so Day Two began on July 10th, but with a difference, as strong winds cleared clouds away and we had a beautiful sunny day and the humidity was less than the day before. Again, more paper work to fill out. The bell ringers were the only repeat cast characters from yesterday. All the other extras were new people, including several children.

Six of us (including the gentleman playing Santa Claus) were transported over to a street that was lined up with many trucks involved with the filming. We opened our suitcases on the lawn outside

the wardrobe truck. Nola, the wardrobe lady, looked at our various clothing options and told us what to wear. We were on an inner city street neighbourhood and puzzled walkers first asked if we were selling any of our clothing. A young child came out of a private home and wanted to see Santa Claus. We were then transported back to Red River Community College where we waited for about an hour before filming started.

Santa had makeup applied, especially rosy cheeks, and his hair and beard were trimmed. Then Patsy, Viola and I had makeup applied and hair arranged and trimmed. We found out later we had the makeup applied as the brightness of the day needed to try to "tame down" our complexion. None of the other extras cast members had any makeup applied.



Makeup applied to Morna-June



Patsy has "neutral" makeup applied

The scene on Princess Street in the Exchange District was outside the 1882 Bawlf Block building, which appeared as a Toy Store. There were Christmas trees, bows, several large Nutcracker figures, more fibrefill artificial snow, water hosing down the snow etc.



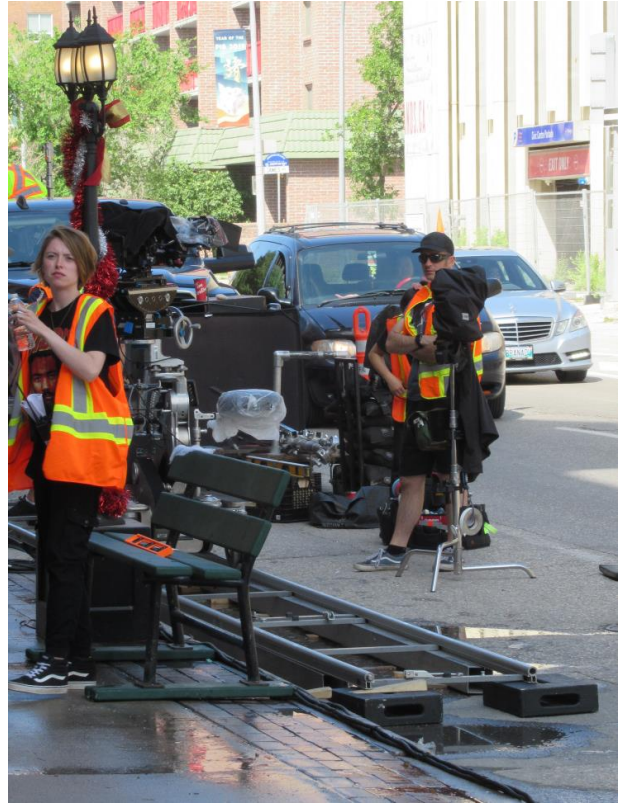
Exchange building used in the filming



Crew laying yards of fibrefill to create snow



Santa in the distance with Nutcracker figures



Movie camera runs along this track

We then started "ringing" our bells. All new street characters were walking along the street and greeted by Santa who was handing out small flyers advertising the upcoming holiday festival at Evergreen Park. Again the scene was repeated over and over again, with new directions each time. Cameron and Elizabeth realized the bell ringers were the only characters on the set from yesterday. Elizabeth told us she had to try ringing bells in another movie and was hopeless at it. She also had to "play" a violin in another movie. Very tall, attractive blonde lady, and handsome Cameron commented how lovely it was to be eye-to-eye with an actress who was as tall as he was.

Today there were stand-ins for the two main actors, and sometimes a crew member appeared with a measuring tape, measuring the distance from a camera to the face of the actor. Again, as the scenes were repeated over and over again with subtle changes, cameras filmed at different heights and angles. A third main actor arrived as an older lady appeared to have some money fly up through the air and she becomes so upset that Cameron and Elizabeth had to support her and take her inside a building. Red, blue or yellow metal T metal devices would be placed on the sidewalk's artificial snow to indicate spots where actors were to stand.



Blue T marks where actor is to stand

Adjustments would be made accordingly for each scene take. The extras walking down the street would smile or acknowledge the bell ringers as they passed us by. One lady said she wished she could hear what we were playing. We thought today they would be actually taping us with sound, but that never happened. Not sure if we will be called back to do a sound taping, or perhaps they are satisfied with the fake playing.



People on the sidewalk across the street would stop and stare at what was going on. When a small child being held by a parent stared at Santa Claus across the street, our Santa would wave at the child. At one point, a mother with a stroller and two children dashed across the road toward Santa, at which point Assistant Director shouted "CUT". On occasion, a police car would block traffic on Princess Street so as to not interfere with the filming. When the scene was over, the police car would move and allow traffic to proceed.

The one gentleman we became very acquainted with was Jim Bell, who was to play Santa Claus. He has a full white beard and obviously plays Santa a great deal. We spoke at great length with Jim and found out he and I knew many other musicians. He himself is a tenor and often sang in

Gilbert and Sullivan productions. Five years ago, he had an emergency quintuple bypass. As a matter of fact, because of his emergency surgery, the intended quintuple bypass surgery scheduled for CBC radio host, Terry McLeod, had to be rescheduled. I remember speaking with Terry McLeod at a Christmas concert, telling me his heart surgery had to be rescheduled. Now I know why! Glad to say that both men are doing very well now after their bypass surgeries.



Viola with Santa Jim Bell

Today we did not get our hot lunch until nearly 3 p.m. Then into our winter clothing and outside for nearly three more hours of filming. Pizza was available around 7 p.m. with crew being served first, then ACTRA actors and finally the extra cast members. Crews were starting to pack up all the equipment and we were informed we could leave by 8 o'clock.

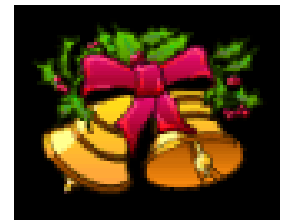


The three ding-a-lings without their handbells or gloves



Patsy watching the crew starting to put away their equipment

During the two days, surprisingly the time really seemed to pass rather quickly. It was wonderful to have so much time to converse with one another. We all agreed that we thoroughly enjoyed the experiences witnessed over the past two days. We can hardly wait to see the finished Hallmark movie which will appear sometime during the month of December. You can be sure when we find out when it will be televised, the Manitoba Handbell Guild will pass the information along to you. In the meantime, I think Patsy, Viola and I are looking forward to sleeping in tomorrow morning and perhaps dreaming of Santa, Christmas trees and ringing bells.



(Photos taken by Patsy Andrews-Vert, Morna-June Morrow and Viola Prowse)