

# PLATZ, AXEL,

Axel the German Shepherd is a screen star who can be nice or nasty on command. "Down, boy" isn't enough

BY A.F. LIGHTBOURN

**P**ut your fist out towards him when he rushes at you," Wolfram Klose cautioned, "so he doesn't get your leg."

That's when I started worrying.

Although I was wearing a well-upholstered arm guard, I had no protection on my legs — and a grab there with 42 pearly-white teeth would definitely cause some discomfort, considering that Axel's biting power is rated up to 700 pounds per square inch.

Normally, I wouldn't *ask* to be attacked by any dog. But Axel is pretty special. The 90-pound German Shepherd is Canada's rough-diamond version of Rin Tin Tin, Lassie, and the whole clutch of Disney dogs, including Old Yeller, Big Red and Savage Sam. "Rough-diamond" because, unlike his current American counterparts, Axel is no pampered, never-lay-a-tooth-on-you studio dog.

He is naturally friendly. But if his owner tells him to, he'll tear your arm off.

During the past two years, Axel has collected a list of TV credits that would make many human actors envious — and this spring he will make his movie debut in the feature film *Sunday In The Country* starring Ernest Borgnine, Michael J. Pollard, and another film newcomer, Canadian actress Hollis McLaren.

"Ready?" Klose asked.

"Ready."

Klose snapped the attack command in German: "*Fass!*"

In an instant, Axel changed from the tail-wagging, friendly fellow I'd been petting minutes earlier, into a growling, fangs-bared fighting machine.

With a thud he caught my hand — the padded one, thankfully — and anchored his fangs deep into my burled fist.

"Get him mad," Klose urged. "Try to

shake him off."

Well, I thought I was doing a pretty good job — of getting him mad, but as for shaking him off, the more I shook, twisted and shoved, the deeper his teeth dug in and held firm.

We fought each other for more than a minute. Then just as suddenly as it had started, at a crisp command from Klose — "*Platz!*" — Axel released my hand and sank to the ground. Poised, however, to renew the assault if necessary.

Then, again on command, he returned to the side of his master for an appreciative pat.

"Not bad," Klose announced. "Not bad at all."

I wasn't sure whether he was talking to me or the smiling dog but, at any rate, I felt initiated.

Chances are you've seen Axel at work one time or another tracking down desperadoes on the CBC's *The Collaborators*, being cruelly done in by a knife-wielding villain on CTV's *Police Surgeon*, or baring his fangs as Dracula-turned-wolf on the CBC's recent television adaptation of Bram Stoker's classic 19th-century novel *Dracula*.

## A difficult scene done in one long take

It's got so that when the CBC has a job for a dog with brains and training, somebody automatically calls for Axel. "We get him because we know he's absolutely dependable," says CBC special effects man Doug Wardle, who has spent 15 years lining up lions, tigers, leopards, crocodiles, snakes, lizards — and dogs. "As far as I know, there aren't any other dogs available who'll do as well as Axel. People will tell you they have a dog who'll do this and that, but once you get the dog in a studio, it's quite a different matter.

"If a dog just has to be there, we can pretty well use any dog. But if he has to go from Point A to Point B, then we call Axel."

Before he began acting, Axel had gained considerable reputation among Canadian dog fanciers by earning his three obedience trial titles (CD, Companion Dog; CDX, Companion Dog Excellent; and the ultimate UD, Utility Dog) in a record 4½ months by the time he was 14½ months old (he turned 5 last week).

In late 1971, the CBC was desperately looking for a well-trained German Shepherd to act as pet and protector to actress Frances Hyland in the television drama *Aunt Hilda Sends Her Love*, which appeared in the *To See Ourselves* series.

"We even tried the Ontario Provincial Police to see if they could lend us a dog," Doug Wardle recalls, "but they have to keep those dogs on hand in case they're needed. So, after much phoning around, Norm Hersch, one of our effects men, heard about Axel through the Canadian Kennel Club."

But the big question was whether Axel had the temperament to work well when surrounded by bright lights and crowds of technicians and actors. As many producers have discovered, some of the best-looking, purest-bred animals are often too high-strung for movie work.

The answer, in Axel's case, came quickly.

The Aunt Hilda plot centred on a woman, her dog, and a salesman, whose chance meeting on a beach turns into a comedy adventure when a dognapper turns up.

Frances Hyland particularly recalls one scene: "It was a long, six-minute master shot — a scene shot without interruption — in which Axel and I had to walk along the beach together, sit down, play and generally establish the relationship for the viewers." Normally, such a shot takes a lot of re-shooting

before it's done just right. "We did it in one take," she says, "which is really remarkable."

Some of the crew were a little anxious about Axel during the first film because of his reputation as an attack dog, and they were careful to avoid sudden moves.

## Klose couldn't take his first dog anywhere

"For the attack scene, when Axel was supposed to get the dognapper," Klose says, "we used a dummy leg and shot a close-up of it, but we couldn't get any of those guys to hold the leg while Axel attacked it." So Christa Klose, Wolfram's auburn-haired wife, became the official leg-holder.

"The thing about Axel that a lot of people don't understand," Mrs. Klose says, "is that he'll attack only on command from Wolfram, or if he thinks that one of our family is being threatened. He would never think of just going around biting people."

"Ever since he was a puppy, we've worked on this socialization thing with Axel. We made sure that he was used to people by taking him every place with us — to the airport, to the shopping centre, even to the drive-in movies."

Another thing that some people fail to realize is that it isn't just Axel — it's Axel and Klose, a team. And to understand Axel, you have to understand Klose, a shy, dark-haired, 6-foot, 190-pound, 33-year-old individualist who in ten years in Canada has carved out a good life for himself, his wife, and their two young sons.

As a rule, Axel is a friendly, beautiful German Shepherd. But comes a word from trainer Wolfram Klose (right), and...