

February 5, 1984

2



## JEAN SHEPHERD 3

Also inside: Part I of 'McQueen' series 11

## Shepherd drives hard bargain with Hollywood movie moguls

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Entertainment Editor

**T**he good news from Jean Shepherd is that he's working on another film to follow his surprise hit, "A Christmas Story" and a new set of programs for PBS.

The bad news is that it's going to drastically curtail his live performances for much of the coming year. An exception will be his appearance Tuesday for the WCNY Studio Club at their annual banquet in Hotel Syracuse.

"A Christmas Story," based on his book, "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," already has grossed \$20 million against its peanuts cost — \$4.5 million, the humorist reported in a phone conversation from Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., where he was escaping the frigid Northeast.

In Hollywood phraseology, the hit movie was 10 years in the making. In spite of Shepherd's large number of fans around the country, the simple family story found no takers at the studios until Bob Clark obtained industry clout from such films as "Black Christmas," "Murder by Decree" and "Freaky."

It's not that Shepherd hasn't had offers from studios. "Many of them have come to me over the years," he explained. "They'd want to buy the rights. Disney was after me for years, but I didn't want my work to end up with Dean Jones and a little Volkswagen jumping around."

The deal would be Shepherd in firm control, or no deal. In his view, "Doing the movie without me would be like taking a Woody Allen script and giving it to someone else to direct."

Ten years ago, the Indiana-born writer-performer inked up with Clark, who called him through an agent. Along with his wife, Leigh Brown, also a co-collaborator in the movie, he journeyed to Canada and saw the director's horror film, "Black Christmas." "I liked Bob and we struck a gentleman's agreement. But we were both involved in other projects. I was doing my PBS series and he had another film. Finally, he got the clout to get the movie made."

Hollywood moguls were confused by part of Shepherd's contribution to "A Christmas Story." He bristles if it's called narration. "A narrator is a disembodied commentator. Basically,

what I did is a character. He reacts to all the situations," Shepherd stated.

The next movie will be taken from the humorist's book, "A Fistful of Fig Newtons." The story titled "The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness" is a summer story. But, warns the author, "It's not 'Ralphie Goes to Summer Camp.' This is not like an Andy Hardy movie. It's about the whole family. So was 'Christmas Story.'"

"Bob and I have talked about a trilogy. The third would be set in the fall and Ralph would be older. He falls in love and becomes obsessed with this ethereal blonde he only sees in the distance. Get this. Her name is Daphne Bigelow."

"By the way, the boy in the series was never 'Ralphie' in the story. If he'd been called that, he'd have had his lights punched out in my town."

"A Christmas Story" will become, Shepherd said, a rare exception in today's film market. It will not be sold to commercial television or cable, but will be given a new release next December.

Hollywood's inner workings both baffle and amuse the author. He recalled an anecdote from a meeting he

★ SHEPHERD, Page 4



JEAN SHEPHERD

## Shepherd drives a hard bargain

★ SHEPHERD

Continued from Page 3

had with a 20th Century-Fox executive.

"Let's say his name was Harry. He made a call to a Rolls Royce dealer. He asked the guy on the line if he had a light cream Cornish with tan leather interior, 4-door, say model 167 and could he send it around in a half-hour and they could pick up his old car. He told him they'd talk about the price then. He bought a \$200,000 car. All this from the producer of a series that never got on the air about steel workers from Steubenville, Ohio, with the three leads played by New York Jewish comics!"

Clearly, the humorist stated, these executives are out of touch with the rest of the world. "Golly Ned, the figures they bandy about. They don't use the word million. They say, 6 or 7 M or 15 mega."

Coming from Hammond, Ind., a steel town he describes as "a step away from Chicago," the series' casting irked Shepherd. So did Karl Malden's flop series of a couple of years ago. "I'm still friends with guys from high school who work at Inland Steel in Hammond. Everyone of them has a degree in metallurgy or engineering. They own RVs, have summer homes and go to the Super Bowl. They are not tough Polacks who go home to complaining families. We're an industrial nation and yet you never see one assembly line on television."

Generally, television's lack of reality nettles the writer. "Have you ever seen a home on television that didn't have an upstairs?" he asked. "Even in that series with Redd Foxx where he was a poor junk man, his character had an upstairs." An exception is "Buffalo Bill," which he terms "a very funny show" plainly about a make-believe world peopled by phonies.

Lack of touch with reality isn't confined to Hollywood's show business minions, Shepherd said. "If you read our most popular writers, you'd never know McDonald's existed. Norman Mailer's characters never went to a Burger King. I can't read John Updike anymore because he's writing about the real world. What happens is they get wealthy. They buy those mansions in Westport and they tend to cloister themselves. You can't be a real observer if you only see Kurt Vonnegut every day."

Shepherd said he's made "an absolute effort" not to do that, but to keep living his life as he has for many years. "I go out and wash my car, go to the supermarket and I see the fist fights to buy Cabbage Patch dolls," he commented.

His series also takes him out among the people and sites of America. Filming for his PBS series of 26 episodes, including several repeats from the first, will take him next to Indianapolis' speedway and to Death Valley.