



Akin (seated) and other stars on the set of the television series War of the Worlds.

War is heaven for Canadians

TORONTO (CP) — War is hell, they say, but Canadians working on the television series War of the Worlds say it's heaven working on the update of the H. G. Wells classic about a Martian invasion of Earth.

"You take my best year in the business and multiply it by a factor of five and we're talking the difference in money," says actor Philip Akin, 38, of his War earnings.

"I don't have a career, house, mortgage — nothing without Americans," says Akin, a native of Jamaica, raised in Oshawa, Ont., whose career has flourished in such American-backed projects as Switching Channels and the now-cancelled television series Bizarre.

War of the Worlds (8 p.m. Saturday on MTN) is a Hollywood production being shot in and around Toronto in locales that have masqueraded as San Francisco, North Dakota and New York. It's also shot on a soundstage in a west-end industrial plant that's large enough to park a jetliner.

"This is good entertainment," says director William Fruet, who recently shot his second episode of War.

"It's light like a comic book. It isn't like doing Batman and Robin, but the villains are villains," says Fruet, who's directed several Canadian series and films.

Like Star Trek: The Next Generation, Superboy, and Friday's Curse — which is also shot in Toronto — War is sold directly to about 50 North American stations, bypassing the big networks.

In Canada, War of the Worlds, now in its first season, is broadcast by stations in Hamilton, London, St. John's, Nfld., Edmonton, Portage la Prairie, Kelowna and Prince George, B.C.

Distributed by Paramount Pictures, it's a high-tech update on the 1953 film — based on Wells's 1898 story — about a Martian invasion that ends when the invaders succumb to terrestrial germs.

"The key ingredient was that the aliens we thought had died didn't," says Greg Strangis, the creator and executive producer.

Human commandos

The bug-like Martians burrow into human bodies like worms into apples, wearing the humans as second skins that decay like rotting fruit.

In the tradition of such alien invasion shows as The Invaders and V, weekly episodes chronicle battles between the Martians and four human commandos.

The humans are played by Akin and Lynda Mason Green, a native of Sarnia, Ont., plus U.S. imports Richard Chaves and Jared Martin, best known as Dusty Farlow on Dallas.

"It could be described as the Third World War without nuclear weapons where we're duking it out with bad guys who don't see the world as we do," says Strangis, a Los Angeles resident who commutes to Toronto to supervise production.

Television production is nothing new in Toronto, where film and television work was worth \$289 million in local spin-offs in 1988. But few shows rely so heavily on special effects.

Exploding heads, radiation sores, tentacles, spaceships, lasers and green Martian blood have been some of the elements of what producer Jonathan Hackett calls a "goo-of-the-week" show.

The goo got especially heavy in one episode where the Martians started concocting an elixir that called for human brains, requiring about 30 prop brains.

The special-effects expertise was locally available but it took time and tips from former War director Colin Chilvers — effects co-ordinator on the Superman films — to organize things, Hackett says.

"Once you get started, the machinery gets rolling."

That machinery includes makeup effects master Bill Sturgeon, who earned his spurs in cinematic goo working on films like An American Werewolf in London, The Thing, and Ghostbusters.

"There's more gore than I thought there would be," says Sturgeon, a 27-year-old Los Angeles native now living in Toronto, adding the only limit involves blood.

"There's no blood unless it's alien blood, which is green. You can do anything unless it's red. It can be green or orange but as soon as it's red, people react."