

# New Benji for new movie

By JOHN LUTTERMOSER

"America's Most Huggable Hero" lay curled up on the floor in the hotel suite. Benji was obviously dog tired. And with good reason. The dog who has replaced Lassie as the Laurence Olivier of the four-legged set has been doing a lot of traveling to promote his new movie, "For the Love of Benji," which opened in the area on Wednesday.

Actually, this Benji is the dog that succeeded Lassie's successor, since the original Benji has retired at the age of 17. They say that makes him the equivalent of a 120-year old human.

THE NEW BENJI is the only one of the original's offspring who inherited both his talent and his looks, according to trainer Frank Inn and writer-producer-director Joe Camp.

"It's done everything I ever tried to teach it," marvels Inn. "It had to go to sleep in front of the camera and it did it three times. The abundance of talent is necessary because the Benji movies attempt something that Inn and Camp say has never been done before—actually making an animal the star of a motion picture.

"In all of the old animal pictures, the animal was nothing more than a

prop," explained Camp. "The people were still where the story was centered, where your emotions were." The exception is in animation, which allows the animals to talk. Camp said he got the idea for "Benji" from an animated film, Walt Disney's "The Lady and The Tramp."

I WONDERED IF it would be possible to accomplish what he accomplished with real dogs and real photography, not with Mel Allen saying "And now the dog thinks..." Camp recalled. "My first instinct was that it was impossible."

He wrote the story anyway, in 1968. But it was six years before the movie was released, mostly because almost everyone in the movie industry agreed with Camp's first instinct. A dozen animal trainers told him that a dog cannot be trained to emote.

The Camp met Inn, whose previous pupils included Tramp in "My Three Sons," Arnold the pig in "Green Acres," and all of the animals on "The Beverly Hillsbillies."

"I was ready to retire," said Inn. "I'd done everything that I thought could be done in animal pictures. Then I realized that all the people who told him it couldn't be done were people who used to work for me. They're looking at me now like maybe I'm not washed up."

"The first dog that he introduced me to was the dog that he knew could do it if anyone could," Camp said. Benji was already a veteran of TV's "Petcoat Junction."

## Auditions set for Southfield

Auditions for the Southfield Repertory Theatre's Summer Mini-Season I will be held Tuesday and Wednesday from 7-10 p.m. at the Southfield Civic Center Parks and Recreation Building, 26000 Evergreen Road.

Auditions for the professional, adult company are open to the talented public and are by appointment only.

Those who plan to audition should be prepared with a five-minute piece in any area of drama and are required to bring a resume. The acting and technical jobs with the company are paid positions.

All roles for the children's shows "Tribe" and "Canterbury Tales" are available.

To arrange an appointment, call the theater at 559-2522 weekdays between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.

"FRANK SPENT THREE months telling me that everything was impossible and then doing it," said Camp. The result was a movie that finished in the top 10 in box office earnings in 1975, due to its ability to attract both children and adults.

"It's adults that really gave it the word of mouth," said Camp, who admitted that it can be difficult to get adults to go to a family film. "The disadvantage is in trying to get them in the first place. But the advantage is that when they go in for a G-rated picture, they don't expect much. Then they say 'Oh my gosh, I knew that's what they said, but I didn't believe it.'"

Camp's company, Mulberry Square Productions, then went on to make a movie with camels—"Havens." He said that at first he didn't want to make a sequel.

"I didn't want to do another one be-



Joe Camp, who wrote, produced, and directed "For the Love of Benji," receives some encouragement from the star. The film opened Wednesday at area theaters.

cause I didn't think anything could top it," he said. But he was eventually talked into "For the Love of Benji," which was filmed on location in Greece.

"Frank has done it again," Camp said. "I think this is even a more sensational piece of animal work than the first one. There's never a moment when you don't know what that dog is feeling, what he's thinking and what he's trying to accomplish."

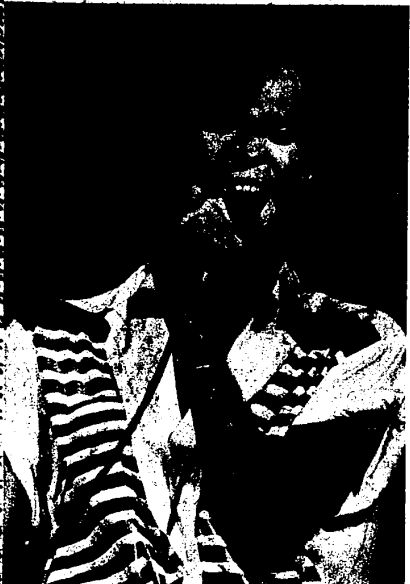
IN FACT, Camp is so optimistic about the success of "For the Love of Benji" that it bothers him.

"I feel better about this one than I have about any of the other pictures at this time, and it scares me," he said. "If you're slightly nervous, you can't be too disappointed."

A third Benji movie is not necessarily forthcoming, according to Camp. He said that it all depends on public reaction to this one and his ability to turn out another good script.

"We won't put out a picture and call it a Benji picture just to say we made a Benji picture," he said. "I like to think that what we're maybe doing is the kind of thing Disney would be doing if he were alive today."

They may have started a fad. Inn said that another Lassie picture is in the works, although he doubts that it will be made from the dog's point of view, like a Benji movie. "I think it'll be mostly in line with what Lassie's always done," he said. "They're going to have a co-star. I think they're shooting for Jimmy Stewart."



## Hall on stage

Daryl Hall, half of Hall & Oates, in action last weekend at the Pine Knob Music Theatre. The duo appeared at the theater in Clarkston Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Coming attractions include Dan Fogelberg Thursday, Glen Campbell and Roger Miller Friday and Saturday, and the Captain & Tennille Sunday-Wednesday. The Fogelberg concert starts at 7:30 p.m. while the others get under way at 8. (Staff photo by Steve Cantrell)

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