

Tracker brings his skills to Hollywood

By KIRK MOORE
STAFF WRITER

Tom Brown Jr. first learned his woodcraft in the Pinelands forest. Now he's in the Pacific Northwest, showing actors and filmmakers how to authentically portray a manhunt through the Oregon mountains and streets of downtown Portland.

"None of the stuff that comes out in this movie has really been shown to the public before," said Brown, a professional tracker and survival-skills teacher who is technical advisor on the set of "The Hunted," starring Tommy Lee Jones.

The film is directed by William Friedkin, who 20 years ago directed "The French Connection" and later "The Exorcist." Jones portrays a Tom Brown-like character — a retired tracker who has trained many people to survive in the wilderness, including Navy SEALs commandos and Army Special Forces troopers.

Brown, a Beachwood native who now lives in Harvey Cedars, runs his Tracker School in the remote woods of Lacey and on an old farm in Hunterdon County. In addition to writing a series of books on tracking and survival, he has trained thousands of students on how to live in the woods, track animals and people; and avoid detection by using camouflage and mental discipline.

In the movie, Benicio Del Toro plays an accomplished military commando, trained by Jones' tracker character, who starts hunting innocent civilians. The teacher is called into play by the FBI and begins tracking his former protege through the Northwest forest, into downtown Portland and then back into the hills.

Brown said Friedkin is making a film that will stand apart from other action movies where exotic machine guns are the co-stars and armorers the most important technical support. In "The Hunted," Jones and Del Toro face off with Brown's handmade flint knives.

"In most of these movies there's stuff blowing up and car chases," he said. "We're doing exactly the opposite. It's a low-speed chase."

As a script consultant, Brown advised the filmmakers on changes big and small to make the story line accurate and real-



Tracking school owner Tom Brown (left) teaches his students how to track people in the woods without being seen. Brown, a Beachwood native, is teaching those skills to actor Tommy Lee Jones for a new film, "The Hunted."

istic. On the set, he taught actors the finer points of tracking and concealment — both in the woods and in city settings.

"Tommy Lee Jones is easy to teach. He's an outdoorsman, lives in Texas," Brown said. "Del Toro gets into the camouflage, and it's not the military stuff (clothing). It's mud, leaves and sticks. This is all from nature, so it matches the landscape."

"The camouflage was so good that we had to lighten it up, so the cameras could see them."

In Friedkin's world, violence is squalid, not a villainous joke or heroic solution. That grim realism is apparent on set of "The Hunted."

"If someone gets hit with a stick, he's going down ... This is probably one of the most authentic movies I've seen," Brown said. "It's so different. The skills are different, the approach is different."

"The Hunted" is tentatively scheduled for release in early 2002, according to producers at Paramount Pictures.

"I've seen about half the movie cut already, and it is stunning," Brown said.

The hunter vs. hunter genre in filmmaking is an old one. It goes back at

least to "The Most Dangerous Game," a 1932 movie adaptation of Richard Connell's short story about a mad Russian emigre general who finds a famous big-game hunter shipwrecked on his private island hunting preserve — and makes him the ultimate quarry.

The resulting chases and ambushes lent action to the movie by Ernest Schoedsack and Irving Pichel. The 63-minute thriller remains a classic on videotape and DVD, along with their more famous "King Kong."

Friedkin's 1970s work earned him a place in the pantheon of Hollywood directing, and accolades from critics for his dark vision of flawed humanity, and police thrillers where characters navigate blurry lines between the good guys and the corrupt.

Controversy followed Friedkin too, for his brutal depiction of demonic possession in "The Exorcist." His forays into homosexual culture in "The Boys in the Band" and "Cruising" made him enemies in the gay community among critics who accused him of exploitation.

His more recent films include "Jade" and "Rules of Engagement."