

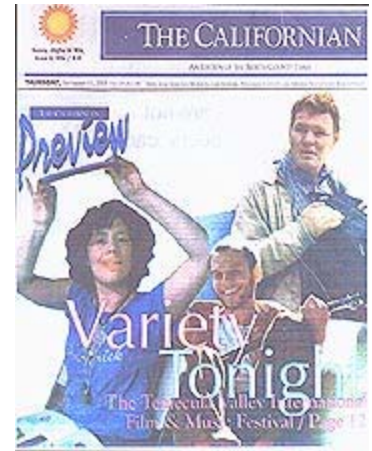
## The Californian Magazine:

### "WAITING FOR RONALD"

Article by Charles Hand:

"Life is like a New York sidewalk, a tapestry of languages, the smells of every kind of cooking wafting... "

Life is like a New York sidewalk, a tapestry of languages, the smells of every kind of cooking wafting out over the pavement, and a medley of personalities. So says Ellen Gerstein, who makes her directorial debut with "Waiting for Ronald" at this year's Temecula Valley International Film and Music Festival. Gerstein believes there is more woven into the tapestry of life than the bold and the beautiful.



There are also the reticent and the forgotten. It was among members of the latter class that Gerstein found her story – and her cast. Ronald is a 34-year-old developmentally disabled man leaving the institution in which he has spent the bulk of his life played. He is played by a developmentally disabled man. He leaves the institution to reunite with his friend, Edgar, who left ahead of Ronald and has taken a new role in the broader society. But, to join Edgar, Ronald has to leave behind two other friends, Andy and Scotty, both also played by developmentally disabled men. And Gerstein allows the story to unfold as it would if there weren't a camera looking on. "A lot of the film unfolds naturally.

You just watch this slice of life occur." Gerstein, herself an actress with credits in major movies and TV series, including "Friends," the TNT movie "James Dean" and "Murder of Crows," among many others, said she felt it logical to put out audition notices not only among actors, but among the people whose lives would be portrayed in "Waiting for Ronald." "She didn't give away any roles. "Everybody had to audition," said Gerstein. "I just let the best person get the part." But, if there were people who could play the roles from experience, she wanted them to have the opportunity. The two principle roles, Ronald and Edgar, were split. Ronald is played by 35-year-old Jody Clark, a Lancaster native who is mentally challenged. Edgar is played by Michael Luckerman, a professional actor with credits in "ER," "The West Wing," "The Twilight Zone," "Seinfeld," "Dharma and Greg" and "Beverly Hills 90210," among others. Andy is played by Patrick Cooper, who also has professional acting experience while Scotty is played by Blair Williamson, who got his acting start as a Special Olympics athlete in a national TV commercial and decided to stay. He is autistic.

The story mixes humor and pathos as Ronald and Edgar act on inaccurate conclusions about what has happened when Ronald steps off a bus and expects to meet Edgar, who has gone to the restroom. Ronald goes in search of a solution while Edgar comes out of the bathroom just in time to hear the bus leaving and assumes that Ronald has stayed on the bus because he thought Edgar was not at the station to meet him. A surprise member of the cast is Bruno Kirby, who has had starring roles in such blockbusters as "Tin Men," "City Slickers," "Donnie Brasco," "The Godfather II" and "Good Morning Vietnam," among many others.

Gerstein said she and Kirby are classmates at The Actor's Studio and she always had him in mind for the role of the counselor at the home from which Ronald is taking his leave. Only sometimes it is difficult to know who is helping whom. Kirby's Joe "doesn't have the courage to do his own life," Gerstein says. "That's why he counsels others. "And so it is that Ronald has given as much to Joe, perhaps, as Joe has given to Ronald and the other residents of the group home. As he prepares to leave, Ronald becomes part of an effort to convince Joe to do some leaving of his own in the form of taking up his life where he left off. Gerstein drew "Waiting for Ronald" from elements of her own background. A cousin is mentally slow. "She's just a beat behind," Gerstein says. "But she's very funny. "That funny cousin never felt a part of the larger society, she said. Gerstein also holds a master's degree in psychology and spent six years as a social worker, during which she worked with other developmentally disabled adults.

She came to believe that the developmentally disabled have as much a place in society as anyone else. She believes such people once had a place in society. "Years ago it was just how they were," she said. "They do it their way. They're just different. "And it is that concept that Gerstein wants to leave with those who see the 22-minute "Waiting for Ronald. "She also hopes to find the money to turn it into a feature length movie – and maybe even pay for "Waiting for Ronald." She pumped a lot of her own money into the movie. "But I'll get it back," she said. What she wants more is to find someone to underwrite the full-length version. The film festival runs through Sunday at the Movie Experience 10 in the Tower Plaza shopping center on the northwest corner of Inez and Rancho California roads. Movies will be shown 12 hours a day. Ticket information is available at 699-8681.