

At the Movies

Lawrence Van Gelder

■ 'The Plague' and other screen projects on the idea of buddies

Buddy Films

Forty-two years after it was published, "The Plague," by Albert Camus, is headed to the screen.

The famed novel and an adaptation of "Billy Phelan's Greatest Game" by the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist William Kennedy, as well as remakes of the acclaimed Czechoslovak film "The Boxer and Death" and the French comedy "Le Beauf" are all projects of the Pepper-Prince Company.

Pepper, in this case is the producer and director John Pepper, who grew up in Italy and began his career in films portraying Elizabeth Taylor's child in "Cleopatra." Prince is Jonathan Prince, who began his career in real estate and dentistry.

The four-year-old New York-based partnership, devoted to both theater and film, acquired the rights to "The Plague" from the author's children and the Gallimard publishing company. Plans call for the film to be shot next summer in Argentina from a screenplay by — and under the direction of — Luis Puenzo, who films include the current "Old Gringo" and "The Official Story," winner of the Academy Award for best foreign film of 1985.

As a novel, Mr. Pepper said, "The Plague" has sold 10 million copies worldwide and still sells about 100,000 copies a year in the United States alone.

"It's a story about a town that is shut down because of an illness, and our hero is a doctor who takes on man's individual burdens," he said. "And through his friendship with an outside journalist, he not only helps the town come back to life, but he helps us to understand that before you can appreciate life, you sometimes have to travel a difficult journey.

"It is a celebration of life, and those are the important words."

On casting, Mr. Pepper said there had been preliminary conversations with William Hurt about the role of the doctor and firmer conversations about the role of the journalist with the French actor Daniel Auteuil, who starred with Yves Montand in "Jean de Florette" and "Manon of the Spring."

He said he and Mr. Prince are looking for a director for "Billy Phelan's Greatest Game," based on the second part of Mr. Kennedy's Albany trilogy, which begins with "Ironweed" and concludes with "Legs." The author himself has written the screenplay and will be a co-producer of the film, which is expected to go before the cameras next autumn.

It's a story set during the Depression, when a small-time hustler who refuses to betray a close friend falls from grace with the town powers, but eventually finds him-

self their go-between after the kidnapping of the son of one of the political bosses.

"Le Beauf," Mr. Pepper said, is a project being remade at Warner Brothers under the working title "Dirty Money," from a screenplay by Israel Horovitz. It is the story of two friends from a disbanded rock-and-roll group. After 10 years, one returns to see his old buddy, a middle-class family man who has a job burning money put out of circulation by the Federal Government. And the returnee tries to trick his old friend into stealing the money so they can all go off happily into the sunset together.

And "The Boxer," written by David Seidler and Jacqueline Feather, who co-wrote Francis Ford Coppola's "Tucker," is based on the 1962 Peter Solan film about a concentration camp inmate who becomes the sparring partner of the commandant. In this film, again, "our hero is given a chance at the end to leave and sacrifice his fellow man and, once being on the freedom side of the fence, decides not to and returns," Mr. Pepper said.

"I guess this is the common denominator in all our works," he observed. "It's a story about friendship between two buddies, but one in which one individual's identity and values are put into question, and who survives and grows as a consequence of the journey he travels."