

# A NEW FILM ACTOR STARTS AS A STAR

## Alex Cord Gets 'Synanon' Lead After Life of Labor

By **PETER BART**

Special to The New York Times

SANTA MONICA, Calif., Sept. 17—Alex Cord, a one-time New York construction worker, won his first role in a movie a few weeks ago — a starring role at that. Since then, however, he has spent his waking hours in a frowzy tenement in Santa Monica among a number of former drug addicts and derelicts.

The tenement is, in effect, the set for Mr. Cord's first film, "Synanon," which relates the true story of a group of narcotics addicts who sought to throw off addiction through their own efforts. The film went into production this week and it will be shot entirely within the walls of the Synanon building, a decrepit old beach club in Santa Monica.

Mr. Cord has all but lived with the residents of Synanon, trying to pick up the speech patterns and mannerisms of addicts who are struggling to live without drugs.

"I've never been on dope, but strangely I find I identify with these people," Mr. Cord said last week after finishing a 45-minute volley ball game with the addicts.

### He Had Problems, Too

Although Mr. Cord has never had to conquer addiction, he recalls that he had other problems to overcome. Born Alex Viespi 31 years ago, the son of a Long Island laborer, he was stricken at the age of 12 with polio and left with a paralyzed leg.

Young Viespi was sent to

live on a ranch near Lusk, Wyo., and soon developed an interest in horses. Evolving his own exercise to ease the paralysis in his left leg, he was soon agile enough to break in yearlings and do other chores.

"I started to train myself as a jockey," he recalled. "But I soon had to give up that idea. I was growing too big."

Instead, Mr. Cord taught himself how to rope and wrestle steers and, at 16, he was touring the country as a rodeo rider. By the time he was 21 he had earned a reasonable amount of money but had also been gored five times by steers, suffered a brain concussion and a fractured skull and had broken three ribs at Madison Square Garden.

### The Steer Wins

Eventually, he met his master — a steer that trod so heavily upon him that he was hospitalized for eight months with a ruptured spleen. "You might say that last episode put an end to my first life — it was a completely physical life and it was over."

In the hospital Mr. Cord started to read and soon became addicted to Shakespeare, reading the plays over again. When he was released he headed back to New York, taking construction jobs in the daytime and finishing his education at night. After seeing Sir Laurence Olivier's "Richard III" he determined to become a Shakespearean actor, enrolling in the Shakespeare Academy, Stratford, Conn.

"I was a very promising Shakespearean student with my Wyoming rodeo drawl," he recalls.

Mr. Cord mastered his drawl and has experienced a remarkably fast rise as an actor, first in Stratford productions, later in TV roles, and finally in London as Shioban McKenna's leading man in "Play With a Tiger." He also starred in "The Umbrella" in London.