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FROM THE EDITORS OF
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Pedro Almodovar

INTERVIEWED BY YON MOTSKIN

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With his magnificent melodramas, singular Spanish style, and peppery pompadour, one of world cinema's most original and recognizable auteurs is back with what may be his best film to date. Like *Bad Education*, his new, stunning, complex film noir cabaret, the writer-director is both headstrong and hypnotic, paradoxical and passionate. On the phone with me from his offices in Spain—far from the Hollywood that he adores, yet avoids—he delves deep into a discussion about his writing process, his influences, and how his colorful imagination is starting to turn dark. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Almodovar in 2004.

Pedro Almodovar is widely considered a contemporary master and Spain's cinematic successor to Luis Buñuel. He's won two Academy Awards (Best Original Screenplay in 2003 for *Talk to Her* and Best Foreign Film in 2000 for *All About My Mother*) and has been offered numerous A-list hot property Hollywood scripts. He has a somewhat contentious relationship with his homeland's movie industry, and he is obsessed with classic American cinema. Despite all this, what many may consider good reason to cross the Atlantic and make movies here, the fifty-something filmmaker is content to keep his cameras rolling on European soil. Sure, one reason is that his soap opera stories and confessional storytelling are specific to Spain, its post-Franco culture, its Catholic religion, its Surrealism-influenced art. But there must be something else.

At press date, an English translation of *Bad Education*'s script was not available for analysis. There isn't the need for one, yet, since Almodovar hopes to compete for the Best Foreign Film Academy Award. Only if Spain snubs him and doesn't select his film as its official Foreign Film submission (as they did when they passed over *Talk to Her* for the lesser *The Crime of Father Amarro*), then he will provide the Academy with an English script of *Bad Education* for Best

Original Screenplay consideration. Until then, he prefers to represent Spain.

"I think Pedro is the freest artist on the planet," Almodovar's brother/producer Agustin told the *New York Times Magazine* in Lynn Hirschberg's excellent profile (Sept. 4, 2004). Agustin went on to explain that by waiting until after his films were finished before selling them to distributors, Pedro retains complete creative control over content and style. Think of it as a take-it-or-leave-it deal, only it's hard to imagine any distributor leaving it. In the same article, actor Gael Garcia Bernal concurs: "Pedro is lucky. As a filmmaker, he can do whatever he wants. He has more freedom than, for instance, Martin Scorsese. Scorsese lives in a system in America that involves more than just making films. He's forced to become a politician, to fight with the studios over content and money. That limits his freedom. Pedro doesn't have those limits."

Not surprisingly, Almodovar, who has written all of the movies he has directed, has much to say when I mention freedom to him. "Freedom is the first and most important condition that I need in order to be able to write. Not only about the plot of the movie, but about the tone and the genre. And because of that freedom, lots of times the first idea doesn't get shot down."

Of course, not everyone is fortunate enough to have Agustin's protection or Almodovar's track record. But is Almodovar really lucky, or is it that he simply created this autonomous environment for himself from the very beginning, out of an uncompromising vision, a fierce work ethic and an undying desire to express himself as a raconteur? To possess passion, patience and perseverance—that's a given; to know how and where to apply those qualities, that's another story.

Even on the phone, Pedro speaks fast and furious, overflowing with ideas, emotions and examples from his obsessive mental film catalogue. His English is fine, but he's most comfortable in his native Spanish. So excited is he to express himself that sometimes he doesn't even wait until Javier Giner—his colleague at El Deseo, the production company Almodovar founded with Agustin—has a chance to finish translating.

Bad Education is the tragic story of three people over three time periods told in three different ways, with actors playing multiple characters, told through a non-linear structure, containing flashbacks, multiple narrators, and even two instances of a story-within-a-story mirroring the main narrative. Normally I'd eschew a lengthy plot synopsis, but in this case it seems important to understand both Almodovar's development process and his overall evolvement into a more mature storyteller.

The first narrative thread takes place in 1980 and follows Enrique (Fele Martinez), a twenty-seven-year-old film director looking for his next film. Ignacio (Gael Garcia Bernal), an aspiring actor and former Catholic school friend, walks into his life. Ignacio gives a story he wrote, *The Visit*, to Enrique to make into a film. As Enrique reads it, we see the lengthy story play out, which becomes our second narrative. *The Visit* takes place in 1964 and is based on Ignacio and Enrique's childhood. It depicts "two schoolmates who fall in love while at the school, and together discover cinema and sensuali-

ty, and, through a third person, discover what fear is." That third person is Father Manolo (Daniel Gimenez-Cacho), a priest and teacher who abuses the boys mentally, emotionally, and physically, which leads to Enrique's expulsion from the school. Years later, the fictional Ignacio, now a low-rent transvestite named Zahara (Gael Garcia Bernal), returns to blackmail Father Manolo, the priest who abused him.

Back to the first narrative: in 1980, Enrique loves *The Visit* and wants to make it into a film; Ignacio agrees, but on two conditions: Ignacio plays Zahara, and Enrique refers to him as Angel. Enrique refuses, and Ignacio storms out. Enrique knows it's great story, and sets out on a quest to find Ignacio. But instead of finding him, he discovers Ignacio is actually dead, and someone else is posing as him. The imposter/Angel returns and Enrique, curious about this mysterious stranger's motives, takes him in as his lover and goes ahead with the production of *The Visit*. After shooting stops, Senor Berenguer (Lluis Homar), a former priest who is the real Father Manolo, visits Enrique on-set and tells him a story. This third narrative recounts the events of 1977 and reveals the bizarre truth behind the real identity of Angel, a young man named Juan (Gael Garcia Bernal), and most importantly, the true identity of Ignacio's killer. If you didn't notice, Gael Garcia Bernal plays no less than three different main characters: Ignacio/Angel, Zahara, and Juan.

The labyrinthine plot may seem confusing, until you've seen the film, after which it makes almost perfect, if not poetic, sense. In a statement about *Bad Education*, Almodovar describes it as being more complicated than *Talk to Her*. "The film tells three stories, about three concentric triangles, which in the end turn out to be just one story." He explains to me, "It's like a triangle that becomes another triangle and another triangle in the future. It's like a triangle that becomes a vicious circle."

Writers might also notice that there's quite a bit of voice-over in the film, often bridging the gap between characters, settings and time periods. According to Almodovar, voice-over was written into the original script and not used as a narrative crutch. "It was actually pretty comfortable and easy to go through three different times—1964, 1977, and 1980—because there's always the common denominator of the story called *The Visit*."

As taboo and tricky as the tale seems, Almodovar is well aware of alienating his audience. "I would like the movie to be understood by the audience with no difficulty. My interest is not to be cryptic—my interest is to be transparent. I'm very interested in making movies that are very complex. My challenge is to make transparent movies out of stories that are not. [I want the movie to be understood] in the same way as when someone understands something when they have been hypnotized. As if the story grabs you and drags you along without your being conscious of it. But I'm in the group of authors that would rather have his movies be completely understood. I recognize also that there are movies that I like a lot that I haven't understood, like *Mulholland Drive*. I didn't understand that whole film. But I don't mind."

He exuberantly dives into another description from his seemingly bottom-

less well of influences, this time citing *The Big Sleep* starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. "It was a wonderful, fascinating script by Raymond Chandler. Its sequence is so important and so strong, but when I watched it, and I've watched it millions of times, I always get the feeling that I don't understand the whole story and how its sequences are related to each other. It was larger than life for me and I'm still fascinated by it and I don't mind that I don't understand it. I think Howard Hawks said that you could have never have understood Raymond Chandler's script." He thinks for a moment and then sums himself up in English. "There are movies that can be understood in other ways, and I like them very much as an audience member. But as the author… I really want to be very well understood."

Even once you wrap your head around the puzzle-plot, there's still plenty of parallel themes and motifs to piece together. There is not enough room here to cover everything, but astute analyzers and curious cinephiles can look for many recurring instances of identity, visits, and doubles. Film buffs will also freak out at the scores of cinematic references, including *Double Indemnity, Rocco and His Brothers, Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and even Almodovar's own *Live Flesh*.

Is *Bad Education* Almodovar's *8 1/2*? Like Federico Fellini's seminal film, Almodovar's fifteenth feature comes at what can be considered a crucial turning point in his career, as he moves toward darker, more mature work. It is also dreamy, semi-autobiographical, and features a film-within-a-film. One of the narrative engines in the story is a film director's search for his next film. Before Ignacio walks through his door with *The Visit*, Enrique desperately hunts through the tabloids searching for a new story. While Almodovar admits to sometimes doing the same, inspiration doesn't seem to be a problem for the prolific picture maker.

"Bob Dylan used to say that it was as if a ghost came in through his window and left the ideas and papers on his desk. For me, that ghost only brings me that first line on the script. And when I mean the first line, I'm referring to the main character or the essential situation. And if that situation, that first line, intrigues me enough, that's the impulse that I have, that's the necessity I have to know what happens next. That's the impulse that brings me to develop a script. I always have different scripts, several of them in different stages of development. When I have an idea I start taking notes around that idea. There's always four or five scripts on my desk, in progress. I'm not organized, but just taking notes. So when I get around one hundred pages of notes, I feel that I have enough material to develop a script."

Like Lynch, Almodovar can't emphasize enough the importance of what he calls "the first idea, the first spark. That essential line that intrigues me is normally at the core of my movies, meaning, it's not at the beginning nor the end but in the middle." He gives an example from his 1991 film *High Heels*. "I was at home watching the news, and suddenly the news reporter, a woman, announces that there's been a crime, and I was sitting there and thought, 'You know what would be awesome? To have her say next: 'I know

who did it.' So that situation, not only a news reporter announcing a crime, but confessing that she is the author of the crime, intrigued me enough in order to develop the script. What intrigues me makes me try to find out what happens next to the character, and also how the character got into that situation in the first place."

In *Bad Education*, that essential line belongs to Enrique, the film director. Almodovar says that his final line in the film, "How far would you go?" not only defines the protagonist best, but also Almodovar himself. "I think most filmmakers or story creators are not only driven by curiosity, but are kind of like a detective. You're not only writing the story, but trying to figure out all the information yourself. You are relating the trip [to the audience], and in that sense you can either find all the information or not find it, but you will not know until the end, until you reach your destination at the end of the story."

Almodovar remembers exactly where his inspiration came from. "The true origin of *Bad Education* comes from a short story that I wrote, about ten pages long, in my adolescence. When I reread that short story in the '90s, I found that there was something there that I could use. The original short story only tells [about] the show that Zahara performs in the town where she grew up, the visit that she pays to the priest, and the blackmail being offered. Once I started working on it, immediately the two-brother relationship showed up."

Paramount to him was the fraternal element, an underused cinematic sentiment which "springs from love and friendship," and he cites such varying models as Sam Shepard, the novel *Middlesex* and *The Godfather* trilogy. "But in *Bad Education* I think these two brothers are closer to Joan Crawford and Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* In a sense that spilling of what we call 'grand guignol', kind of like the grotesque, underlines this whole movie. But that only lies underground and is never shown explicitly."

Once the characters were defined, Almodovar went to work on establishing an appropriate setting. "I was very interested in having these three people [Enrique, Ignacio, and Father Manolo] meet again, in the future, when the whole situation explodes. And I was also very interested in having the first part [of the movie] take place in a dark, early '60s, Spain under a dictatorship where repression was commonplace. And then the second part of it taking place in a completely different country where freedom is the norm, which is the '80s." What translates onto the screen is two-fold: a real, rooted sense of time and place, as well as a dreamy, parabolic atmosphere.

If Almodovar makes the development process sound easy, it wasn't. "*Bad Education* went through at least ten drafts, across a big chunk of time, around ten years. It took longer than usual, because I didn't get to the point where I was happy with it. But that's not what normally happens with all my scripts. When I take myself as a reference, from my experiences, it takes me a longer time to develop. [Other] scripts normally take me from two to three months to finish. But this script is pretty special. I've learned with it that there are many things that you are going to write that you are not going to use. I've gone through so many different drafts that I got to the point where I thought

I was never going to get it."

Part of the process was incorporating personal memories. "I was a singer in a choir. My fascination with the Catholic Liturgy is evident. There are brothers, there's a filmmaker, there's a school, that kind of mixes all the elements that I've used throughout my movies. But the character that I feel closest to, not because I have followed his path but because it is the character that moves me the most, the character that I identify the most with, is actually Senor Berenguer, the ex-priest who casts off his habits and gives his life to the bad boy that shows up in his life."

That bad boy is Juan (Gael Garcia Bernal), the key that unlocks the story's startling secret. As he was fleshing out Juan's character, Almodovar made an important discovery that elevates this story from being just another melodrama into the pantheon of great hybrid films that reinvent a genre, like *Sunset Boulevard, All That Jazz*, and *Unforgiven*. "What I think is very special about this movie is the tone itself. I think [it] could more easily be related to my last three movies than to my previous ones. I actually discovered that it was a film noir as I was approaching the end [of writing], which made me have to go back to the beginning and change most of it. And that is the way I work. I work through layers. I get an idea that interests me that starts developing until the end. But then when I've reached that point I realize that there's a lot of new information that interests me so I go back to the beginning and start rewriting the story from that new point of view. And that process goes layer by layer by layer by layer."

Each genre has its requirements, and while *Bad Education* may not seem like a film noir in the classic, hard-boiled Sam Spade Dashiell Hammett sort of way, Almodovar is careful to play by the rules of the game. "In film noir there may not be policemen or guns or even physical violence, but there must be lies and fatality, qualities that are normally embodied by a woman: the femme fatale." Almodovar is known for populating his films with unique, strong females—it's safe to say he loves women—so finding a femme fatale should not have been a problem. Except for one thing: "I was just interested in speaking about male characters. I present a universe from the beginning that is exclusively masculine. So, Gael's character would be the equivalent to the film noir femme fatale." Throw out tradition—this is transgressive film noir. This is sing-your-heart-out, screw-his-brains-out film noir, full of transvestites, feathered boas, homoerotic priests, and falsetto-pitched choir boys.

"For me Gael's character is a very dangerous psychopath… that reminds me a lot of those psychopaths by Patricia Highsmith, who are mainly normal, who can integrate very well in society, so only the victim of those psychopaths will be able to detect them. Actually our model, when talking about the performance and everything, was Alain Delon playing Tom Ripley in *Purple Moon*. It's a boy with a clean, innocent look to him that no one could ever think this is a person without any (conscience). Even sexual passion could debilitate him in front of the others; everything is done out of interest for something. So he can go any way—straight, bi, gay—because in a sense

it's not him that feels the passion, it's the others that feel them. And that character represents fatality. All the characters are running towards fatality. They decide to do it, they act upon it, and they never complain about it, no matter what the end may be. I never judge characters, whatever they do, even if they do atrocious things. My job is to represent them, to explain them in their complexity, and come up with an entertaining spectacle with all that. That's why the movie might resolve so dark and so pessimistically, but that was what I was fascinated by."

A big change for a filmmaker whose earlier works were noted more for their camp-color and sing-songy superficiality than for fatal attraction and conflicted criminals. But don't think that he's traded in deliverance for nihilism. "I like the fact that people don't hate Juan. And there's a certain sense of pleasure in which the immorality of the character gets into the audience. What redeems the character is that for everything he gets, he's also paying a price in return. There's always something positive in that."

This is a storyteller at the height of his powers, one who has thought out every trait and action of his characters, is aware of all the repercussions of their actions and decisions. As Almodovar told the *New York Times Magazine*, "My goal as a writer is to have empathy for all characters. In all my films, I have a tendency to redeem my characters. It is very Catholic—redemption is one of the most appealing parts of the religion. Sadly, I am not a believer in Catholicism, but the priest is probably my favorite character in *Bad Education*. I love characters who are crazy in love and will give their life to passion, even if they burn in hell."

I asked Pedro what he's working on next, but as you might expect from a professional provocateur, he played hard to get. "As always I have four scripts on my table. Two of them are almost finished but I don't know exactly which one I'll decide upon. One of them is a comedy with lots of female characters of three different generations. And there's another one that is not a comedy." Whatever papers the ghost leaves him next, no doubt it will be another wildly original plot with unique characters. But I wasn't going to let him off that easy. "If you could remake or rewrite any movie, what would it be?" I asked. He laughed loud and long, and then, for the first time, became very quiet. "I'd give two fingers from my right hand to be able to remake *All About Eve*." He described the witty, women-centric 1950 Bette Davis psychodrama about a manipulative wannabe actress blackmailing an aging theater star to take over her role. "But," Almodovar exclaimed, "I would do an original version. Not a remake. The original one would be written by Joseph Mankiewicz, and directed by me. Pedro."

Paul Thomas Anderson

On the eve of *Magnolia*'s release, Paul Thomas Anderson is clearly a happy man. Then again, it's not every twenty-nine-year-old filmmaker who gets compared to Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman on his second film, gets final cut on his third, and is able to get Tom Cruise to work for peanuts. Yet Paul's journey to where he is now wasn't always so smooth.

Paul Thomas Anderson was born in 1970 and grew up in the San Fernando Valley where *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* take place. Paul's father was Ernie Anderson, a comic who played a wild horror-show host in the '60s named Ghoulardi. Ernie would later gain fame in the '70s as a famous voice-over announcer for ABC. His voice was instantly recognizable when introducing spots for *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *The Winds of War, Roots*, and of course, *The Love Boat*. Ernie instilled a unique sense of humor, as well as a strong independent streak, which Paul carried with him into his filmmaking career. And as you'll read here, Ernie's antics would later inspire one of the most celebrated scenes in *Boogie Nights*.

In 1992, Anderson wrote and directed a short subject, *Cigarettes and Coffee*. After it played the Sundance Festival in 1993, he secured a deal with Rysher to make his first feature. He expanded *Cigarettes and Coffee* into a full-length film, which was then titled *Sydney*.

Anderson's dream come true of making his first feature turned into a nightmare when Rysher took the film away from him and retitled it *Hard Eight*, a title he still hates. In order to try to save his version of the film, he sent a work print to Cannes; after it was accepted into their competition, Rysher relented and allowed Anderson's cut to be released. With the help of the film's stars Gwyneth Paltrow and John C. Reilly, Paul raised $250,000 to finish *Hard Eight*, but Rysher dumped the film into theaters with little support and it quickly disappeared.

Boogie Nights also had its origins in a short subject, namely *The Dirk Diggler Story*, which Anderson shot on video at age seventeen. During his perpetual frustration with *Hard Eight*, he threw himself into writing an epic 300-page screenplay. The film would pay homage to the golden age of pornography, with its centerpiece being the rise and fall of a young porno star loosely based on John Holmes.

Shortly after shooting wrapped, word got around that *Boogie Nights* was really the film to watch that fall. *Variety* wrote that Anderson's "striking command of technique, bravura filmmaking, and passionate exploration of the possibilities of a new kind of storytelling recall the young Scorsese of *Mean Streets*." Anderson was also drawing comparisons to Robert Altman during his *Nashville* period, and Steven Spielberg as he was coming into his own with *Sugarland Express*.

Boogie Nights not only showcased Anderson's assured directing, but his strength in writing strong, three-dimensional characters. The film featured breakthrough roles for Mark Wahlberg, Heather Graham, and Don Cheadle, and not since John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction* had anyone made as fine a comeback as Burt Reynolds (many felt it was his best performance since *Deliverance*).

The expectations were high for *Boogie Nights* to be the next *Pulp Fiction*, and while it didn't get medieval at the box-office, the film's popularity and its influence on a number of films that followed can't be denied. Anderson also earned an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

Already everyone was wondering how Anderson would top *Boogie Nights*, but he kept his plans for the future vague, telling the *LA Times*, "I'm mostly thinking in terms of writing great roles for actors I love." He also promised *Details*, with tongue firmly in cheek, "I'm gonna reinvent drama. *Rashomon* will look timid compared to what I'll do next. I don't know what it's going to be about, but from the beginning of the movie to the end, nothing bad is going to happen."

By late 1998, Anderson had finished his next screenplay, *Magnolia*. Throughout the making of the film, *Magnolia*'s plot and characters have been kept a closely guarded secret. Anderson was granted final cut of *Magnolia*, which guaranteed his innovative screenplay would make a smooth transition to the screen.

Like *Hard Eight* and *Boogie Nights*, *Magnolia* follows a group of haunted lives intersecting with one another, this time during a twenty-four-hour period in the Valley. Again Anderson has written strong and unique characters that fuel great performances, the character Frank T.J. Mackey already generating much advance buzz and talk of an Oscar nod for Tom Cruise.

Anderson hasn't lost his appetite for risks: *Magnolia* takes plenty, including a spectacular freak-of-nature climax that proves once and for all, it's not easy being green. *Magnolia* is a complicated, unique, and often painful movie that's both uplifting and haunting. He subsequently wrote and directed *Punch-Drunk Love* (starring Adam Sandler). *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Paul Thomas Anderson in 1998 and 2000 and found him as unique and thoughtful as his films.

What's the most common mistake in written dialogue?
Complete sentences. Bad movie dialogue speaks in complete sentences without any overlapping or interruption, and avoids elliptical speech, which is truer to how people actually talk.

Did you consciously train your ear to be sensitive to how people talk?
I probably did when I was eighteen and was just starting as a writer. Actually my mission then was to rip off David Mamet, because I foolishly believed Mamet's dialogue was how people really talked. It took me a while to realize that Mamet had developed a wonderfully stylized way of highlighting the way humans speak. People immediately think of dialogue when they hear Mamet's name, but I think the strength of his writing is his storytelling—he uses very solid, old fashioned techniques in setting up his stories. *House of Games*, for instance, is one of the best scripts ever written, and it's the story structure that makes it so brilliant.

When you're writing dialogue, does it take on a life of its own and move in directions that surprise you?
Absolutely. I'm showing some of my cards here, but I often write scenes without knowing where they're gonna go, and as I write I start acting and sort of improvising. It's great when the scene takes on a life of its own and frustrating when it doesn't, because the passages you have to labor over are invariably worse than the ones that seem to write themselves. This notion that writing happens in the rewriting is something I've never agreed with. I've always hated rewriting. Rewriting is for pussies! Send it out, zits and all, is my feeling.

What passage of dialogue in Boogie Nights *are you most proud of?*
The three scenes where Amber and Rollergirl are on a coke binge. This movie has many Achilles heels, but when I watch those scenes I put my ego hat on and say, "Okay, we nailed those scenes."

How do you know how people on a coke binge talk?
I've done a lot of coke and had those insane conversations.

I was struck by the dialogue in the scene where Mark Wahlberg's character, Dirk, meets his sidekick, Reed Rothchild, played by John C. Reilly. I get the impression you're not a guy who hangs out at gyms, yet you had those ridiculous, "how much can you bench press?" gym conversations down pat; how did you learn gym dialect?
Just by knowing those kinds of guys when I was growing up, and loving the absurdity of those conversations. John [Reilly] and I have a similar sense of humor and we've spent hours riffing with dialogue and laughing. I wrote that scene to give John something he could have fun with.

How quickly does slang evolve? Was there language commonly used in the Boogie Nights *era that would sound completely foreign to people now?*
Probably not because pop culture is currently obsessed with the '70s. So, although a word like "foxy" may be given an ironic spin now, it certainly isn't foreign to us.

Is it always a failure when dialogue is used to explain the plot, or can that be a stylistic device?
In theory it's a failure, however, there are actors—such as Philip Baker Hall— who are so good at helping the story along that you can get away with it. Perhaps it's because he's the antithesis of a classical Shakespearean actor, but Philip can deliver massive amounts of exposition without diminishing the character he's playing.

What elements must a story have in order to interest you?
I like stories with good old-fashioned roots that obey the rules—you know, "the gun on the wall in the first act goes off in the third," and so forth. My favorite directors are the ones who know and embrace those rules, then pile something completely punk rock on top of them—François Truffaut, for instance.

Do you have any interest in adapting material, or do you intend to be the sole author of all your scripts?
I'm open to adapting material, although the one time I tried it I wasn't too successful—I adapted the Russell Banks novel *Rule of the Bone* for Carl Franklin. Having been through an experience with *Hard Eight* where I felt my work had been violated, I sort of became this master protector of other peoples' work, and I couldn't make myself tread on the bible, which was Banks's book. I couldn't get a grip on the fact that I was writing a movie, not a love letter to the book.

Do you have structured writing habits?
Absolutely, and they revolve around finding a pattern of behavior I can depend on. Waking up at the same time every day, having certain rituals to go through that free me up so I don't even have to worry about putting my pants on—it's all about routine. I write in the morning and can put in three or four focused hours a day. It's limited to that because I smoke myself to death when I write, and smoking makes me tired. At the same time, there's almost something superstitious about smoking, as if the cigarettes are a good luck charm. It's probably very silly.

In the firecracker scene in Boogie Nights, *I noticed some of the lyrics of "Jessie's Girl" seemed to show how afraid Mark Wahlberg was, like "I play along with the charade" and "He's watching them with those eyes…." Was that intentional?*
It was but actually not exactly in that way. What I liked about "Jessie's Girl" playing there was just a weird sense of romantic melancholy that the song gives me. It reminded me personally of a far more innocent and goofy time

in my life. I liked hearing this goofy love song over watching Mark Wahlberg just squirm. The relation I have to that song is being fourteen and having a crush on a girl at the mall. It was wonderful to plug it in there because that's where that character should be at that time in his life. Instead, he's stuck in a house with firecrackers going off in some stupid, pseudo drug deal. That song should mean something else to that character. Instead, he's suffering through that song.

Your father, Ernie Anderson, was a horror-movie host in the '60s named Ghoulardi, and I read that on his show he used to perform skits with firecrackers. Is that where the idea for the firecracker scene in Boogie Nights *came from?*
Yeah, absolutely. It comes from two places. It comes from the inspiration from my dad lighting off a bunch of firecrackers on his show as well as… if you watch *Putney Swope*, which is a movie Robert Downey Sr. made, there's a wonderful piece of background action where a character throws a firecracker off in a scene and everyone turns around and looks. Now that's practically the end of it. I called up Robert Downey Sr. and I said, "You have a great piece of background action that I want to take and make a piece of foreground action." He said, "Great, be my guest."

So did that scene in Putney Swope *give you ideas about how to build tension in your own scene?*
No, I just thought it was wonderfully goofy and thought that would be enough. I remember rehearsing that whole Rahad Jackson sequence in *Boogie Nights*, and it was very nerveracking. We did the full rehearsal, my friend Joe Chan played the kid with the firecrackers, and I told him, "Just for the rehearsals, we'll mime that you're throwing the firecrackers. You'll throw one here, throw one here…" We would do these full rehearsals and here we were for the final set-piece of the movie and I was not exactly happy. I was wondering what was wrong with this scene and really nervous. This two and a half hour movie was coming to an end and my punchline isn't working. So I said, you know what? I guess the only thing to do here is start shooting it. Well the second one of those firecrackers went off for real, I knew I was okay! Everybody jumped! Everybody jumped except Alfred Molina, and he didn't jump because he had an ear-wig playing the Night Ranger song in his ear, so he couldn't hear the firecrackers going off. His character is completely unresponsive to it, but everybody else on the set and in the room is jumping out of their seats because these firecrackers were so fucking loud!

What a lot of people liked about Boogie Nights *was the film told a story in a nonjudgmental way. It didn't paint the world of porno as an evil empire, but it didn't exactly say it was the greatest thing in the world. It just said, "Here's the story, draw your own conclusions." How were you able to do that?*
Well ultimately I think the funniest thing is, and I think this might attribute to the lack of box-office success for *Boogie Nights*, is that it is, to a certain

extent, judgmental. I love those characters. And I love pornography just as much as it completely disgusts me and completely depresses me. So the first half of the movie is all fun and games, but the back-half of the movie is a sort of punishment for those fun and games. It's my own guilty feelings about pornography. So to a certain extent, the characters and pornography are judged. It's just done in such a gentle and honest way because I didn't know I was doing it. I also write for my friends that are actors. And no matter what I do, I'm never fully writing the character. I'm writing eighty percent that character and twenty percent that person I know will be playing that part. And I'll never truly never let them get hurt.

I actually tried with *Magnolia* to make one judgment that was important to me, and I hope this is very clear. I wanted to judge Jimmy Gator. I wanted to make it very clear that I wouldn't let him kill himself. I would let a frog fall from the sky, land on a gun, make that gun blow up a television, cause a fire, and make him burn. Because it was my judgment that what he did was so wrong and so unforgivable that it would not be good enough for the writer to allow him to kill himself. I wanted to put a writerly judgment on that character and relate to an audience what my moral standards are. Frank T.J. Mackey is on that line where you've made enough mistakes in your life and you better start making up for them. Because if you don't really, really soon, you're pushing to that place of unforgivable. But I can still forgive Frank. If he smartens up by the end of this movie, I'll be happy. If he doesn't, fuck him, [laughs] because he's hurting too many people.

The transformation that Mark Wahlberg made in Boogie Nights *was really well done. It's hard to pinpoint an exact moment when he starts to change and it's so gradual, it's totally believable.*
I just like movies, and I guess what I like in my movies is where you see a character change by maybe two degrees as opposed to the traditional movie change of maybe ninety degrees. I guess that always feels false to me in movies because that doesn't truly happen. Around me, at least in the life I live, I guess I don't see people change ninety or a hundred degrees. I see them change in very small increments. I think it's just a monitor I might have on myself as a writer not to make any false scenes. I would have had to sit down as a writer and think, "I'm gonna write the scene where Dirk changes." But instead I'm keeping a tab on the reality factor while hopefully making it entertaining. Therefore it's going to creep up on me, just as it maybe crept up on you. I'm just going along, and as I'm hitting a certain point in the movie, Dirk's just kind of changing. It's a hard thing to describe but I can probably only successfully pull that off if I'm not being self-conscious.

One scene in Boogie Nights *that was very effective was when Dirk's mother screams at him and kicks him out of the house. A lot of people who come from dysfunctional families told me that scene was like something out of their lives. Were you surprised a lot of people could not only relate to the scene but also thought it was one*

of the strongest in the film?

Yeah, but I was also surprised by how many people thought it was one of the weakest scenes in the movie. When his mother comes at him like that, she's really crazy and out of control. She's kind of without motivation to a certain extent. I think one of the greatest mistakes that I've made in the past and that a writer can make is, "What's the character's motivation?" Well, a lot of times it's so fucking confused and so polluted that you really have no idea. That woman is pretty nuts, and I think it's sometimes hard for an audience to grab a hold of a character whose intentions aren't clear. You don't really know what the fuck she's yelling about. You know she has an odd jealousy towards him or towards the neighborhood girl that he's banging, so she's upset about that, but her actions are so manic, you can't get a hold of them. I was just really glad that the actress in the scene didn't require a lot of clarity on her behavior, because I couldn't have given it. I really wrote what made sense, and what made sense was sometimes so illogical. There are some people that saw it and said, "That scene doesn't make sense! Why is she going crazy?" And I would just say, "You know what? I've never been able to figure it out." But it sure makes sense, and I've sure been there.

One of my favorite lines in Boogie Nights *was during the documentary that Amber Waves made. Reed Rothchild says, "If movies caused violence, we'd be able to wipe out violence tomorrow. Boom! No more films!" Of course there's a lot of debate about how movies supposedly cause violence and the way I interpreted that line, it almost showed how silly that argument was. Was that your intention?*

I think John [Reilly] and I have both had a good laugh many times about this argument that movies don't cause violence. But movies do cause violence. Movies absolutely promote violence. I know that as a kid when I saw movies, I would want to be like the characters in the movies. I would want to dress like them, and I would want to talk like them. Now luckily I've channeled that into a pretty good job making movies. However, if I'd maybe gone a slightly different course, I could see how wanting to kill my classmates might have been appealing to me. It might have been promoted by what I saw in movies. Listen, I think [the scene] is a very sarcastic approach to that argument, because I just don't buy that filmmakers don't have a responsibility. They absolutely do. I feel like I have a responsibility. I don't particularly want to see a whole lot of guns in the rest of my movies. I'm not really interested in it anymore. I'm sick of it. I think a movie like *Fight Club* is an incredibly irresponsible film.

I wasn't expecting you to say that. Most of the time when a filmmaker is asked what their responsibility is towards an audience, they'll say something like, "If someone blows up a building, that's not my fault."

Bullshit. I think that's a bunch of bullshit. Listen, I don't want to make beautiful, candy-coated movies, but there's a lot more dramatic things and more tension-filled moments in my life than guns coming out, you know what I

mean? I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the violence, I'm sick of the easy way out which is, "Well I'm just showing how it is." It's time to do better than that. We have an obligation.

Were you ever afraid that anything in your movies might have been interpreted the wrong way?
Absolutely. I think I came to this kind of theory and fervor because the very first time we screened *Boogie Nights* for a test audience, when Little Bill discovers his wife on New Years Eve and goes to get his gun, the audience cheered. And when he shot her, the audience cheered. Now I sank in my seat, and I have never felt worse in my life. I thought that I'd really done wrong in terms of those characters, and in the movie and everything else. But I felt a little bit better when he shot himself because they weren't laughing and applauding anymore. There was dead silence and they really felt it. So when I saw that and I felt that, I really kind of changed my tune and felt a real responsibility to not want an audience to cheer, laugh or have a good time when violence happens. I'm all for having fun, but gunshots hurt. You know, I always thought the subtitle for *Boogie Nights* should be, "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt."

If you make a film that's really outstanding, will the studio trust you? The word of mouth on Boogie Nights *was strong before it came out, and it seemed like the studio was happy with it. If you make a movie like a* Boogie Nights *or a* Pulp Fiction, *does that put you in a position to call the shots?*
Not during that movie, but after that movie, yes. The truth of the matter is, I thought *Boogie Nights* was a great movie, but there were a few people within New Line who didn't think *Boogie Nights* was a great movie. I still had to fight for my cut of that movie. Eventually I got it, but there were a lot of people within New Line who thought it should be shorter, who ultimately don't even like it that much now. The truth of the matter is, it's only now since the success of *Boogie Nights* that I haven't had to do a true song and dance to defend my vision of the movie. When I showed *Boogie Nights* to the studio the very first time, they came out and hugged me and shook my hand and said, "This is the greatest movie we've ever made at New Line. We're so thrilled, it's wonderful." Then we went and tested the movie, and when the movie did not test well (because there's no way in hell a movie like that is going to test well), they got cold feet and were real confused about their own opinions. I have to thank Lynn Hirschberg, who's a wonderful writer and a journalist. When she saw the movie, she wrote something about it to send to the heads of New Line, basically saying this movie's one of a kind, it's fantastic, etc. That helped them get their confidence back that was lost from the test screenings. So then all the early press reactions started to happen and the truth of the matter is, I don't think a few of the New Line executives got their full confidence back because it resulted in a very weak release strategy.

The bottom line is, I started to realize why movies cost so much money. And

sometimes it's quite a good thing if they cost a lot of money because it means the studio is then shackled with that cost, which means they've got to pour even more money into marketing it. If a movie is as cheap as *Boogie Nights* was, they essentially knew that with the reviews that they had they could under-advertise it and walk away with a break-even. It's a very scary notion, but there are actually computers that run studios where they plug in how much the movie costs, they plug in how many theaters are going to get it, they plug in the reviews, they plug in the subject matter, and they can know exactly how much it's going to make. And they will get it to that number so they can walk away without having risked anything. I knew exactly how much money *Boogie Nights* was going to make before it came out because a marketing executive at another studio told me so. He said "$29 million and da-da-da-da-duh cents." And if you look it up, that's exactly what the movie made.

Leonard Cohen once commented, "every artist—be it a painter, composer, or film-maker—has one song he writes over and over again. And the beautiful thing about this endeavor is that you don't realize you're writing the same song repeatedly, but in fact, it keeps returning to you wearing the original blue gown." Do you agree?
Probably, although it's too early for me to tell what mine is. I think there are similar themes and motifs in the two movies I've made, but I didn't see that until after the fact. Both stories have father figures, a young protégé, a makeshift family, and the paying of some kind of karmic debt. With *Hard Eight*, the lead character, Sidney, is dealing with guilt he feels over something he did before the story in the film begins. *Boogie Nights* could almost be seen as a prequel to *Hard Eight* in that it follows this kid as he does things that leave him with a huge karmic debt. When the story ends, you sense that Dirk will now attempt to atone for the things he's done; in other words, Dirk becomes Sidney.

Do you feel it's important that your next film be markedly different from Boogie Nights*?*
No. I think it's important that I resist being influenced by people who encourage me to make another *Boogie Nights* type of movie though, and I want to put the proper pair of horse blinders on. I try not to second guess my instincts, and at the moment I'm writing a part for Luis Guzman. As the character has developed, I've realized I'm basically writing Maurice [Guzman's character in *Boogie Nights*] again. Part of me says, "wait a minute—you're writing Maurice again," but another part of me wants to explore this character more—maybe because Maurice got shortchanged in *Boogie Nights*. The new script is set in 1997, so maybe this is Maurice twenty years later.

You're presently in a precarious place as a artist. You've been able to privately develop your first two films, but the success of Boogie Nights *has brought many conflicting forces to bear on you and your work—the pressures of the marketplace, the distraction of flattery, the demands being made on your time. Are there steps you*

can take to protect your sanity and your future as a filmmaker?
That's a good question and all I can say is I'm learning as I go. I wrote my first two movies fueled by a desire for revenge on all the people who told me I'd never amount to anything, and those movies came from a place of "I'll show you." Now I hear people say *Boogie Nights* is great, but what are you gonna do next, and that's a challenge too. Ultimately I'm not worried because once you start writing and you're alone in a room and you get in a groove, there's nothing else going on in the world. I've been to the Hollywood parties and the lunches with so and so, and without sounding arrogant or ungrateful, I can tell you that none of it is as fun as making a movie.

How were you able to avoid the hoopla of Boogie Nights *and concentrate on writing another movie?*
You know, it's actually pretty easy for about three hours of the day and those are the three hours of the day that I'm writing. You're really only self-conscious or thinking about it when you're not writing. My general work pattern is that I wake up very early in the morning and I write. I can really only write for three or four hours before I'm either tired or I've smoked too much. And that's when you start getting self-conscious and you start thinking, "Jeez, there's all these people paying attention to me and what I'm going to do next." I'm just thankful that it's not when I'm writing, because it's not affecting it. You know how it is: when you're alone in your room and it's you and your computer, you're truly not thinking of anything else. In the off-hours, I was probably self-conscious, but in the on-hours I wasn't.

Did you ever feel any pressure to follow up Boogie Nights*?*
Well, I might have. The truth of the matter is when I sat down to write *Magnolia*, I truly sat down to write something very small, very quick, very intimate, and something I could make very cheaply. *Boogie Nights* was this massive, two-and-a half-hour epic. And I thought, "You know what? I wanna bury my head in the sand and just make a little small movie." So, in other words, I might have been reacting to the size of *Boogie Nights*. But obviously, no hoopla informed it, otherwise I wouldn't have made a three-hour movie that's as big and long as it is. I truly just ended up writing from my gut and my gut took me to writing *Magnolia* as it is, as opposed to a smaller version of it.

How long did it take to put Magnolia *together? When did you first start writing?*
I was kind of where I am right now, as I'm mixing *Magnolia*. You start thinking about, "Well, gee… what am I going to do next?" It was the same sort of thing on *Boogie Nights*. On *Boogie Nights* we had an incredibly long editing period because I was going through a lot of MPAA negotiations regarding the rating, trying to get an R rating. I had a lot of free time to think and tinker with the editing on *Boogie Nights*, and I started formulating some of the thoughts that were *Magnolia*. Now what happened was, as I came closer to the finishing of *Boogie Nights*, that's when I started to write stuff down. While

I was mixing *Boogie Nights*, I started jotting ideas down. Once the movie was off and out into the theaters, I was able to jump right into writing. That was November 1997.

Why do you feel you write with such a big scope?
I think if I have a problem as a writer it's writer's block in reverse, which can be just as detrimental as not knowing what to write. I think I have so much shit in my brain that sometimes I just kind of vomit a lot of it out. *Boogie Nights* is a three-hour movie, but believe me, I had enough pages to make an eight-hour movie. It's just about pairing it down to where I think it's right. It's funny because the movie that helped me make a mark, *Boogie Nights*, was long, and then this movie's long. But my first movie was an hour and forty minutes, a regular movie length. So it's not as if I'm completely interested in being the "epic guy" each time. I might sit down with a master plan and want to write a ninety-minute movie. But if it ends up being 200 pages, at a certain point, I've just got to decipher whether I'm being lazy or whether my gut's truly taking me to a proper place.

How did you avoid repeating yourself?
I'm not exactly sure that I haven't. Maybe I've just dressed the same thing up in different clothes, you know what I mean? I was not really able to notice a pattern in my work until I made three movies. Now I'm starting to decipher that they all have something to do with surrogate families and family connections. I'm only noticing this probably because people say it about my stuff. I think a lot of things interest me, so I'm prone to repeat myself because there's a million different styles of clothes that I like.

In Magnolia you did a really good job of going back and forth between stories without confusing the viewer or losing momentum. Are you able to write a story all the way through like that?
What I did on this was, at certain points, if I felt lost or confused with any of these characters' stories, I would break it out and string it end to end chronologically instead of its being interrupted by another person's story, just to see how that was working as a movie of its own. Like the Jason Robards/Phil Hoffman story, I plucked that out on its own just to make sure that it was going well. I think the writer in me loves to branch off to other characters, but it's the director in me that gets excited in terms of working on transitions and how to successfully pull it off. So I think I end up writing for myself as a director when I go to places like that.

How did you come up with Tom Cruise's character Frank T.J. Mackey?
About three years ago, a friend of mine was teaching a class on audio-recording engineering. He had two students in the class that he thought were particularly interesting. One afternoon he was going to lunch and he noticed these two guys talking in the recording studio. There was an open mike out

there, and he recorded a DAT of these two guys talking. So a couple of years after that, he found this unlabeled DAT and what he heard blew his mind. He played it for me and essentially what happened was you heard these two guys talking about women and about how you've got to "respect the cock and tame the cunt." They started talking all this trash and ultimately what we decided was they were quoting this guy named Ross. Well if these guys were talking this ridiculously, who was Ross? What we deciphered was, there's this guy Ross Jeffries who was teaching this new version of the Eric Weber course, "How to Pick Up Women," but this guy had a whole new slant on it which had to do with hypnotism and all these subliminal language techniques. Then after researching him, it led me to four or five other guys like him, and so I just went hogwild in the arena of this guy, trying to decipher, "Why is anyone like this?"

How did Tom Cruise become aware of the role and did you write it for any actor in particular?
I wrote it for him. He had called me up when *Boogie Nights* came up. He was making *Eyes Wide Shut*, and his agents called me to ask if I was interested in meeting him. He was a big fan of *Boogie Nights*, and I said absolutely. Coincidentally, I happened to be going to London to promote *Boogie Nights*. So I went and met Tom and told him I was about to sit down and write my next movie. I was just sort of formulating the character and Tom said, "Listen, anything you do I would love to take a look and be involved." I said, "Okay, let me call you in about eight months when I'm done writing." I talked to him once or twice over the course of eight months and I said, "When you're done shooting that movie, I'm going to be done. I'm going to give this to you and I think you're gonna have a lot of fun." So I finished writing it, handed it to him, and it was literally like one of those Hollywood stories. We got together the next day, talked about it, and we were off.

How happy were you with his performance?
I am completely enamored with his performance. I must admit to writing a very show-offy role, and Tom kinda knew that. I told him, "You get to do everything in this. You do the banquet hall seminar where you get to be on-stage and you get to do the 'going to see Dad' bedside scene. You really get to run the gamut here." I think he was really excited by that, and I think he just went with it. There was not a moment where he was scared, there wasn't a moment where he questioned what I asked of him. If anything, he brought too much to the table and I would say, "No, you can't use a whip in this scene!" I would just have to calm him down and remind him to keep it simple sometimes. That was really the only direction I gave him. He really was spot-on with how to do it.

In the scene where Mackey sees his father before he passes away, in the screenplay it seems like they came to some sort of reconciliation. But in the film, we don't

know if they reconciled or not.

There are very, very, very few times as a writer where I will write a scene and leave it to what happens. That was one scene where I just kind of underwrote it intentionally. I just said, "Listen. The most important thing is that this character goes to see his father." I felt when he decided to see his father, he should walk in very quickly, very aggressively, with a real hard on to get back at his dad. And whatever happened after that was really, truly up to Tom. It's one of those moments that you do leave for an actor. It's a very scary, dangerous thing to do, and generally I don't do it because you should have a plan. But it was one of those things where I decided the best way to do this is probably leave room for whatever happens and whatever Tom can emotionally bring to the table. I said, "Listen, you can be as angry as you wanna be, you can be as sad as you can get. Let's start doing it and let's see what happens."

The rain of frogs at the end of the film was great. Several scenes in Magnolia *refer to the book of Exodus in which there was a plague of frogs after Moses's people weren't allowed into the promised land. Was the rain of frogs a natural reaction to the turmoil that built up in the film?*

Well, that's certainly an element. There's certainly a Biblical reference there, but I'd be a liar if I said to you it was written initially as a Biblical reference. I truthfully didn't even know it was in the Bible when I first wrote the sequence. I had read about a rain of frogs through the works of Charles Fort, who's a wonderful writer. He was the person who coined the term UFO, who wrote about odd phenomena. So when I read about the rain of frogs, I was going through a weird, personal time. I don't want to get too personal, but maybe there are certain moments in your life when things are so fucked up and so confused that someone can say to you, "It's raining frogs," and that makes sense. That somehow makes sense as a warning; that somehow makes sense as a sign. I started to understand why people turn to religion in times of trouble, and maybe my form of finding religion was reading about rains of frogs and realizing that makes sense to me somehow. And then of course to discover it in the Bible and the reference that it makes there just sort of verifies it, like, "Hey, I guess I'm on the right track."

Do you want everyone who sees Magnolia *to have to interpret the scene in their own way and think what it could mean to them?*

Absolutely. I'm normally not a big fan of that; I generally like to make my points. But there are some times where if you pull it off properly, you can put something on the plate of the viewer and go, "You know what? However you want to decipher this, you can." And there absolutely is no wrong way. If you want to reference the Bible, that's good; if you want to link it to something else you can. There's a notion that you can judge a society's existence by the health of its frogs. There's something about a frog's health; the color of its skin, the texture, the wetness on its back, that's an indication of how we're treating ourselves as a society. So when you look around and see

that all the frogs are dying or deformed, it's sort of a warning sign about how we're treating ourselves.

The ironic thing is as I was thinking this up, I met with Phillip Baker Hall, who's an actor I work with over and over again, and he asked, "What's the next one about?" And I said, "Well, I can't really describe much to you Phillip, but there's this one sequence in the film where it starts to rain frogs." He was looking at me and just nodding his head. Then I explained the history of frog rain, because it really does happen, it's something that has happened many times. Then he said, "I have an interesting story. Just after the war, I was in Switzerland and I was in a rain of frogs." I said, "What?" Phillip had been driving on a mountain pass in Switzerland and he said for about fifteen minutes it rained frogs. It was really foggy and the mountain road was covered in ice. The frogs falling was not the thing that freaked him out. What freaked him out was that his car could not get any traction and he was afraid he was gonna fall off the mountain! I just thought right then and there I gotta go through with this sequence.

Magnolia and Boogie Nights *have a lot of great songs in their soundtracks. Do you write to music?*
Absolutely. Even more with this one than ever before. This one was very specifically written to Aimee Mann's songs. She's a good friend of mine, she's a wonderful singer and songwriter. In addition to a lot of great songs that have been released, I was privy to a lot of demo stuff she was working on at the time. So I had those to work off of. In a way, I sat down to adapt one of her songs. There's a song called "Deathly" that she [wrote] and the very first line of the song is "Now that I've met you, would you object to never seeing me again?" Melora Walters says that in the movie. That sort of notion of being unlovable or being so fucked up you can't understand how anyone could love you back was really important and really beautiful to me. It kind of made sense to me at that time in my life. I probably owe Aimee a ton of money for the inspiration she was to this movie.

You have final cut on Magnolia*, and you're certainly in an enviable position as a writer and director. A lot of people reading this could be on the verge of a break as a writer and are about to face the den of wolves that's known as development hell. Do you have any suggestions or advice on how writers can empower themselves more?*
Right off the bat, I want to say that my motto is: remember the power is yours. The power is in the writer. It seems that the writer has been so neutered lately that he's forgotten that the buck starts and stops with him. I think that's how I got to direct my first movie. Basically it was a bribery situation; it was, "I know that you like this script, but there's no one else who's going to direct it, and I own it." I think to get paid for a script before you write it is just certain death, because you're basically giving ownership to someone else. I think what most writers have to remember is they can not only have power of authorship, but if they really want to, they can have power of own-

ership. There's a very big difference. Ultimately, it is my choice about who I give my script to. Anyone who is writing alone in their room, that is their material, that is their product, their copyright; they own that. Don't give up easy: never fuck on the first date. However, I think I've only come to learn a lot of lessons because I got incredibly fucked. I'd made my first movie with a company I'd never met. I never shook hands with anyone at Rysher Entertainment, and it was the biggest regret of my life, because there was that small period of time where I had my first movie taken away from me. Ultimately I got it back, and what's out in the world is my version, but I went through a movie being taken away from me, a movie being recut behind my back. I went through all of that, and it created a sort of paranoia and guardedness in me that I'm glad I have, because that will never, ever happen to me again. But I was so fuckin' anxious to get my movie made, I would have gone anywhere. So it's hard to say. Is it good advice to tell someone to hold out? Well, I sure wouldn't have taken that advice when I was twenty-three years old and I could get my movie made. You're gonna go where you can go, but if you can just remember that your brain is yours and they can't own it, then it's a really healthy thing.

What's the most valuable thing you've learned about this movie business in the last two years?
I unfortunately learned that writing and directing a good movie is only fifty percent of my job, and that the other fifty percent is dealing with the people who finance it and get the movie seen. Because however good your movie is, it doesn't mean shit if nobody sees it. It's very odd, but the movie business is full of people who don't love movies, and the more people I meet in this industry the more I want to run away.

How is having a hit movie different than you'd anticipated it would be?
I still feel like I don't know the secret frat boy handshake. I was recently at Carrie Fisher's birthday party, and they were all there—Jack Nicholson, Madonna, Warren Beatty, you name it. And sure, some people knew who I was and complimented me on the film, but I still felt like I wasn't a member of the club.

Do movies shape the culture or merely reflect it as it already exists?
I think they shape the culture—and that, of course, means they have a responsibility to the culture. As a filmmaker, how much I feel the weight of that responsibility changes from one day to the next. If you feel it too heavily you're probably becoming pretentious; if you don't feel it at all you're probably a jerk.

Wes Anderson
& Noah Baumbach

INTERVIEWED BY JEFF GOLDSMITH
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"About fifteen years ago I had written the beginning of a short story, just a paragraph really…. Over the years I would do a little research, and I had the idea of a father who had never met his son who was then thirty years old—and what would their first meeting be like?"

—WES ANDERSON

When *The Life Aquatic* was announced there was a bit of confusion about the conditions of the collaboration between screenwriters Wes Anderson *(The Royal Tennenbaums)* and Noah Baumbach *(Kicking and Screaming)*. Since Baumbach had also announced a project entitled *The Squid and The Whale*, many figured that Baumbach might have concocted his own aquatic adventure before Anderson and that a "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" philosophy ensued in which the two decided to collaborate in order to make the best possible version of the same story.

This, of course, couldn't be farther from the truth. Baumbach's *Squid* was being produced by Anderson, and the script barely has a droplet of water in it. Instead, it succeeds as a dark comedy set in the '80s around a family's divorce. "It's very autobiographical," Baumbach says. "I started writing it before I read *Tennenbaums*, which shows you how long it took me to get it made. Wes and I traded scripts just as friends and he gave me *Tennenbaums*, which he was getting close to shooting, and I gave him an early draft of *The Squid and the Whale*. He really liked it and wanted to get involved as producer, and that's what started the process. Wes was very helpful because he was just very good at focusing the story, but he also knew my life so he was good at helping me draw on other things that I could use. It was a good experience for both of us, and it really helped me hone the script and get it into fighting shape." Baumbach's script overflows with a comedic style similar to

Anderson's, and *Squid* is slated to premiere at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Anderson and Baumbach in 2004.

But this still leaves the question of what happened to Anderson screenplay collaborator Owen Wilson (who stars as Ned in *The Life Aquatic*). "Well, Owen doesn't have that much time to do this," Anderson says. "He's a movie star, so it's really just not practical anymore. Noah and I were friends. I had a good time working with him and decided to ask him to work with me on my script." Anderson began this process with a brief vision based on some old ideas. "About fifteen years ago I had written the beginning of a short story, just a paragraph really, that had this character that had this show that he does and his wife, Eleanor, and his boat, the *Belafonte* and he was hunting for this Jaguar shark," Anderson says. "So I had those things for years. And over the years in between I would do a little research now and then, watching oceanography documentaries and movies that are related to the sea. I then had an idea of this cross-section image of the ship, a live-action cross-section, and I had the idea of a father who had never met his son who was then thirty years old—and what would their first meeting be like? Then I spent some time in Rome and when I came back, I decided it was time to write this movie and set it there."

Anderson listed off these ideas to Baumbach and asked, "So what can we do with this?" Thus began a long series of lunch meetings during which time they'd write their script together (the same way Anderson and Wilson wrote). "Well, it's pretty similar in both cases: we talk out things and talk about the characters and make up the dialogue and I write it down and go type it up," Anderson says. It's almost a throwback to the Beat Generation days when writers wrote in coffee shops, except Anderson and Baumbach did all of their writing in an Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village. "We would go there before lunch and stay for two meals and do all our work there in the back of this restaurant," Anderson says.

They worked without a computer. "We'd order and talk about other things," Baumbach says, "and then we would take out a notebook and talk the movie through. We spoke it to each other and wrote it that way, and Wes would type things up or bring things back in and we would edit. The restaurant got pretty used to us, and Wes, in an old New York fashion, got a tab there so he could sign for everything. I'd hate to know what the bill was for this! We would involve the wait staff sometimes. Since we knew we wanted to shoot the movie in Rome and since it was an authentic Italian restaurant with Italian waiters, we would use their names and get them to translate things for us."

Six months of these discussions landed them their first draft, which they constantly rewrote throughout the entire process. "It was probably a way to fool ourselves into writing, like, 'We're really just going to meet there for lunch, but while we're there, we'll get some work done,'" Baumbach says. "The way our process went was that we accumulated the characters and the different places where the things were going to happen and then started to

get the story brewing," Anderson theorizes. "The setting is a big part, because we have our characters and our setting—now what's going to happen among them?" Next, the two slowly built a set of scenes that ranged from character back stories to set pieces. Anderson has taken this approach in his previous works, where Rushmore is centered on the academy and *Tennenbaums* the family house. Here he chose Zissou's island and ship. "In this movie we have his island, which is a big part of his character," Anderson says, "because it's his whole domain where he operates. What we wrote was sort of inspired by the Mike Nichols movie *Day of the Dolphin* in which George C. Scott has an island compound."

Characters, locales, backstories, and stories were what drove the team through the early side of their process. "For instance, the stuff with Ned, we knew this was a loaded story as to whether or not he's Zissou's son," Baumbach says. "So that brought up a lot of story stuff immediately. It depended at what point we were in the writing. In the beginning we had a lot of story ideas and possible interactions between these characters, but once the story began to take shape a lot of those were no longer relevant." By the end of almost a year's worth of these six-hour lunch meetings, their polished pre-production draft was completed.

BUOYANT CHARACTERS

Anderson's character-oriented films have also always included a great introduction of his colorful characters. In *The Life Aquatic*, we meet Zissou's crew while they are watching one of his old movies at an Italian film festival. Throughout the rest of the story, Anderson and Baumbach layer in titles to suggest that the film the audience is watching also happens to be Zissou's latest production. "That was there in the beginning, and then it wasn't carried out as much in the script," Baumbach notes. "So that was something that Wes, when he first screened it, decided that he should add. It was always going to be the idea that you're watching the same movie that the Italians are watching." This film within a film setup also allowed for a more economical way of meeting much of the cast than the more elaborate introductions made in *Tennenbaums*. "In the *Tennenbaums* we do it like three times in the beginning," Anderson says. "First we do this thing set in the past where we meet all the characters and have their names printed on the screen and we tell facts about them and show their rooms. Then we do a sequence that just says, 'Gene Hackman as Royal Tennenbaum' and 'Angelica Houston as Ethelyn Tennenbaum,' and then it says, 'twenty-one years later,' or whatever it is and here they are. Then we do a sequence with a narrator who says, 'Now Royal is doing this,' or 'Now Chaz is doing this,' and we show their current lives. That's three times, and by the time we finish that, the first reel is over! This violates every possible rule of storytelling. It works, although for some people they'd say, 'By the time the narrator starts talking again, the movie is dead for me.' If you're captivated by what's happening, then great. If you're not, then it's not going to work and that's it."

Another Anderson trademark involves creating larger-than-life, goal-oriented protagonists who are commonly brought back to earth by various sorts of failures. In *Rushmore* it's almost prophetic when the only Latin Max Fischer can use to impress a hot teacher at his school is "Sic Transit Gloria," or "Glory Fades." In *Tennenbaums* we're exposed to a talented family, most of whom have lost their drive. In this film Zissou says, "I really haven't been at my best this past decade." It's a conceit Anderson has stuck with, since he could have easily made each of these films showing the protagonist's glory days, rather than their faded aftermath. "I've always been more interested in failure than success; it's just more complicated and more interesting and more moving to me," Anderson says. In fact, one of the few scenes in the film chronicling Zissou's success, the film-within-the-film flashback about the snow mongoose, was one of the last pieces added to the script. "That had to be added later because we realized we hadn't shown any of the good times and only the bad times," Baumbach says. Another character trend involves the distant father character who surfaced in *Tennenbaums* and continued here. "The thing with the father, these tough crazy fathers, these narcissistic wild fathers—that's what my father isn't," Anderson says. "But the mentors that I've had are, maybe a little bit—I don't know how they are as fathers—but some of the people who I've enjoyed as mentors are wilder people."

Speaking of mentors, let's not forget that James L. Brooks illuminated Anderson and the Wilson brothers concerning all things filmic and storytelling during the making of *Bottle Rocket*, which he produced. "What Jim made us look at was, 'Are you communicating with your audience?'" Anderson says. "And 'Yes, you have your ideas and the funny things you're doing, but are you going to get the effect? Is it going to connect? Is it going to work? Are you going far enough to grab them and make things clear?' Even movies like ours that are odd and have a certain amount of stuff that's a little on the subtle side, the degree to which you have to be blunt and clear is deceptive."

It seems like Brooks's good advice stuck with Anderson. "One of the things Wes is great at is he's very good about not being sentimental about any material," Baumbach says. "There was a lot of stuff that made us laugh in the restaurant, and even just in the moment he's very good at knowing, 'Yeah that's funny, but it's never going to make the film.' It's a really great way to work because that way you don't get attached to stuff that you probably shouldn't be shooting because you're going to end up cutting it later. It makes practical sense for him as a director not to overshoot, but also it's really a smart way to approach things."

One of the traits that rubbed off from Max Fischer's character in *Rushmore* onto both Zissou and Royal Tennenbaum is the notion of ill effects associated with keeping up a larger-than-life and often false appearance that only crumbles when the world around them forces it to. "There's something inherently funny and touching about people trying to keep up appearances—the character they've invented for themselves that's now starting to show its cracks—and how they desperately try to hold onto that. Those people tend

to find people to look up to them because they need that kind of reassurance. That's sort of who the Ned character is when he comes in at just about the right time for Zissou, since Zissou really needs someone who sees him as how he used to be." Of course, Zissou presents himself as a mentor and father figure to Ned, but as the film asks, is Zissou really Ned's father? "I don't know," Anderson says. "Eleanor says he shoots blanks, but this was also thirty years ago. She might not be right about that or maybe she is. Either way these two guys see something in each other, and whether they're really father and son or whether they just want to be father and son, they make that connection with each other. When it comes to a more definitive answer, I feel like I don't know."

Every writer understands that a protagonist needs an antagonist, but Anderson commonly stacks his antiheroes up against their very own grand nemesis. "Once we have a main guy who's this oceanographer who's down at heel, I guess we just thought, 'Well now, let's see the guy who's not,'" Anderson says. It was a good exercise for Baumbach, who isn't as used to writing a nemesis. "That was the fun in writing a character like Zissou," Baumbach says, "because he's so self-aware in so many ways and so involved in his own mythmaking…that he already has these ideas of his nemesis [Hennessey] and has already written that story in his head. In some ways, Hennessey is really less his nemesis than Zissou would like to think he is." In the early stages of the script Anderson and Baumbach spent more time constructing a past for these two archrivals, most of which was cut from the film but would have made for hilarious flashbacks involving Zissou and Hennessey as roommates at "The Academy" for oceanographers. These scenes included the strict tutelage of their hero, Lord Mandrake, various hazing scenarios, and their eventual parting as Zissou emerged as the star of the class—a status that has faded as Hennessey's more scientific focus has elevated him to an equal level of fame and greater level of fortune. Yet Zissou and Hennessey ultimately get along, and by the film's end Zissou saves Hennessey's life—an echo of Anderson's other works where similar grudges are laid to rest by rivals because, as Anderson explained, "I like to see them forgive each other."

MUDDY WATER
While *Rushmore* had a few slightly dark moments, Anderson's tone shifted toward a much darker level in *Tennenbaums* when Richie mutilates himself with a razor blade. And if that scene weren't enough, Anderson again tested the limits when Eli and Chaz have a zany fistfight after the former runs over Chaz's son's dog. Intermixing comedy and drama has always been a great balancing act, and Anderson has continued his experiment in *Aquatic* when pirates board Zissou's ship and the previously slapstick violence kicks into a more hardcore scene. At one moment Zissou yells at a gun-toting pirate, "Don't point that at him. He's an unpaid intern," and by the end of the sequence we see a pirate brutally hack into an intern with a machete, rocketing the tone completely across the spectrum in just one scene. "The tone

of it is mainly Fellini-esque and a little bit of surreal fable," Anderson says. "I wanted to go right in the middle of it with something that was maybe brutal and have this one scene that was maybe something out of a Friedkin movie and have it just blast into the movie. He's still going to just fight them off in this crazy superhero moment that's out of a dream or something, wearing a Speedo and a bathrobe. But I did want to do something where this scene would happen and it would shock you in the movie and be a jolt that would be felt for the rest of the movie—and that would shake the whole crew where the interns would quit and the script supervisor leaves…."

"I do remember [producer] Scott Rudin asking us if it's going to be '*Pirates* Lite,'" Baumbach recalls of an early meeting. "We definitely did not want them to be '*Pirates* Lite,' although we definitely could have, and the same movie could hold that. On some level we both really like the idea of movies that don't have to be one tone or the other. As research we watched a lot of John Huston movies about guys on hunts and surrogate families that come together in these groups, which I think of as more American stories. Then when we're on the water Wes and I tended to go toward conversational scenes, and in a way that's more European in nature. European movies, like Fellini or Truffaut movies, tend to be more comfortable showing comedy and then taking a left turn and that being fine because that's a part of the world and the world can contain that. That is something we both like in other movies and we never thought twice about doing in this film."

Another tonal shock occurs when Ned dies unexpectedly, a scene that Anderson says split his script tone right down the middle. "From the very beginning," Anderson says, "the first scene where they meet—I had intended that he was going to die. And why? I don't know. I definitely had people tell me when they read the script, 'Don't kill Ned.' But in a way, sometimes when a bunch of people tell you not to do it then I feel like, 'Well, it's getting to them.' Some people are not going to like that and wish it didn't happen…. For other people it might be something that will affect them or something that makes it more interesting the second time you see it. It's just my instinct, and I know when we're writing it we are going to lose some people. There are people that it's just not going to work for."

EVEN CAPTAIN AHAB COULDN'T DO IT
At its core *The Life Aquatic* is a character piece, but early in the story the central question is raised: Will Steve Zissou take revenge on the shark? It's the hunt for the shark, and the possibility of revenging the death of Zissou's friend Esteban, that drives Zissou throughout the film. When he falls into a spell of self-doubt, either Ned or one of his crew members is there to cheer him up, similar to how any classical secondary character reaffirms the quest when the protagonist encounters a "refusal of the call to adventure." Yet, after Ned dies, Zissou gains the support of his entire crew to join him on the quest for the fabled shark. Upon finally getting the shark in his sights, Zissou marvels in awe at it and takes no revenge—seemingly learning a lesson

from Captain Ahab's dark fate in *Moby Dick*. "I feel it sort of represents Esteban and Ned," Anderson says. "There's some kind of redemptive thing for this guy who was at this low point in his life, who's made so many mistakes, and he isn't really a scientist or a documentarian—he's more of a showman. But he does make this discovery; this is something special that he comes across and it is something that's maybe beautiful—so that's why he spares it. When he sees it he feels he's only there to pay his respects."

Baumbach concedes that Zissou's choice is the right one to be made, since Zissou couldn't possibly beat the shark. "Certainly fighting it is out of the question anyway, because he would lose," Baumbach says. "But in a way it goes back to the idea of the blend of American and European film. The American movie would be strictly about revenge and maybe the European movie sort of becomes about something else—it starts out as a revenge story, but in some ways the movie isn't about searching for the shark, it's about other things. So even though the shark sort of bookends it—by the time we see the shark, it's more that the shark's existence is exciting rather than what Zissou would do to it."

Shane Black

S hane Black is a forty-two-year-old Pittsburgh native whose solo screen-play credits include *Lethal Weapon, The Last Boy Scout,* and the *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. In addition to these original scripts, Black co-wrote *The Monster Squad* and *The Last Action Hero*. Black has enjoyed spectacular success in the '90s spec-screenplay market, earning $1.75 million for his screenplay *The Last Boy Scout* and $4 million for *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. Originally drawn to acting, he studied theater for four years at UCLA and went on to appear in such films as *Predator, Robocop 3*, and the television drama *Dark Justice. Creative Screenwriting* first spoke to Shane Black in 1996.

You first studied theater. What interested you in screenwriting?
It was sort of default, in a way. I've read books ever since I was very young. I'm a voracious reader. I've escaped from a lot of my life by spiriting myself away and reading books in my room, reading books at school on my lunch hour. So, I had more of a sense of storytelling than anything else. I wanted to translate that to acting, but I wasn't a very good actor and was very intim-idated by the cattle call auditions where fifty guys looked just like me and I recognized one of them from a soap opera. You have to feel you've got some-thing special to bring to the party. I didn't have that feeling with acting. I felt like I was fighting to catch up.

Screenwriting seemed to tap more naturally into what I had known and loved all my life—basic storytelling. I had a friend, director Fred Dekker, who had gotten a few deals and was a buddy from college before any of us knew what we wanted to do. His scripts were really interesting. I read them and thought, "this looks like something I could do." He was good enough, at one point, to show a piece of my work to his agent, who got me some meetings.

That was your script Shadow Company*?*
That's right. *Shadow Company* was the first thing I tried, the first screenplay I actually completed. I had done some plays in college. I produced them with college actors, but I had never done anything professionally. This was a stab at getting a job, because I needed money. And I was surprised, it got a very good response. It got me a ton of meetings. At that time, I was excited just to have a chance to meet with anyone in Hollywood. I must have taken thirty meetings. People who'd say, "We don't want to make *Shadow Company*, but we like the writing. Is there something else you have?" Or, "We've got a project you might be right for." So, it was a great foot in the door.

The good news is no one told me how to write screenplays. I never went to film school, there wasn't a set of rules I followed. It was just a friend of mine who happened to think my writing was interesting and gave me a shot. For that, I'm very grateful.

Is there a film or a script you found especially inspirational for your writing?
Sure. I studied William Goldman's writing style, especially the scripts for *Marathon Man* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. I found both of those to be really riveting, entertaining in their own right, as if you were reading a condensed novel good for one sitting. Similarly, Walter Hill's scripts for *Alien* and the original *48 Hours* when they were looking for a Clint Eastwood kind of pairing—I thought these were wonderfully written scripts. I studied the language and the style. I didn't realize as I was reading them, that these were very unusual. That most people wrote scripts much differently. I assumed there weren't many rules and you just sort of did whatever you wanted to stylistically and had fun with it. So, I took those two writers as examples and mentors.

You write in short, staccato bursts. Why did you adopt that style?
Because I like the idea of telling the story in as concise a way as possible. In other words, to generate, not a sense of what a flowery and eloquent guy I am, but rather to convey to the audience reading the script a sense of how the scene's supposed to play.

What's more important than explaining every detail, you know, "the mahogany desk with a purple blotter, teak pen holder and rosewood adornments…" Rather than go into details, it's simpler to capture the flavor of what the room looks like in a few short words or sentences—that lets you move along and get to what you really want to see. All my friends in development have seven scripts every weekend they've got to take home and read. After ten pages of reading block paragraphs about what the character's thinking when you're never even going to see that on the screen, you think, "What's this guy doing? Writing a damn novel? Why don't they just give me the bare essentials?" So, my task is generating as much energy within the writing of the screenplay as possible for two reasons: First, to keep people from becoming bored. And second, to more effectively convey how a scene is supposed to

feel. If you're writing a thriller, it should feel thrilling on the page. It should give the audience [studio readers] a sense of how it will play after it is filmed. I think it helps the director too, not to call the shots, but to convey where the pauses come. What's a new beat, what's a change of beat or a reversal. It's best accomplished in a thriller by using as concise and terse a style as possible.

So, you're writing primarily for the studio reader and not just expressing how you see the movie unfold in your mind?
I think they're absolutely interrelated, I try to make the screenplay read well. But, I think that's in direct relation to what I see playing on that screen in my head. If a character's been hit on the head and they're sort of half unconscious in the scene, I'll write skewed as if the character is passing out while they're performing these tasks. And I'll try to reflect that in the language of the script because I want it to feel like you're reading about a character running, desperately trying to get somewhere with their head throbbing and spinning and the world sort of going black around them. If you can catch that on paper the director will know how to film it.

Do you think your acting experience has made you a better writer?
Oh yeah. I think everybody, even directors and producers should take acting classes. It's all about beats. As an actor you're taught to break down scripts in terms of where the attention changes and where the beat changes. That's how to write scenes. I think there's a lot of scripts where the dialogue is informational or expositional. People say stuff just because it needs to be said, but they don't have a reason. Writing should always be an act of intention, just like you would break it down as an actor.

You've said character must be the impetus for all a film's action.
Even if you write big action scenes, the images should be reflective of something more visceral than intellectual. An intellectual approach is not as good as a gut approach, coming from character. What they're afraid of, as Robert Towne would say. Or what their weakness is, the worst thing that could happen to them.

But, your screenplay for The Long Kiss Goodnight *seems driven more by plot than character.*
Interesting. Yeah, once I had chosen the premise, there was a story that naturally told itself. There are a certain number of beats that have to be played out. She has to gradually get her memory back and there has to be this sort of chilling reawakening. Having done that, she has to have the conflict of whether to return to her family or to go back out on the road as this creepy character. I get bored with plot. I guess there's a lot of plot there, but I'm much more interested in the banter and the relationship and the fun I had playing with Sam Jackson's character Hennessey and Gena [Davis]'s character. I like people shooting off their mouths at each other.

You've been praised for your dialogue. How do you approach writing banter between characters?

I think the key to dialogue is to love it first. I'll be sitting in a restaurant and someone will say something and I'll just go to that person, "Say that again. What did you say? That is so cool." You have to pay attention to people and the turns of phrase that make them distinct individuals. Little things, tics and conversational asides you notice in life. The biggest high for me is when I capture on film or paper a little conversational tic you wouldn't normally think to put on film. Standup comics score big because they talk about things everyone has had happen, but no one has bothered to verbalize. The same thing is true of good dialogue. Everyone recognizes when they're talking like they do in real life. And I throw in stupid jokes. I'm not pretentious enough to think I write great dialogue, I write banter and dumb jokes.

You really hit a home run your first time up with Lethal Weapon. *How much pressure did that place on you?*

A tremendous amount. I was very insecure at the time, a real wreck psychologically. Then my girlfriend took off, and I was devastated. I had this period where I didn't think I was any good at anything and fought desperately just to stay afloat. They put me on the sequel and it was one of the hardest scripts I've ever written. I was so terrified of it, at the end of the process I looked at the script and thought I'd really blown it. I wrote it with a friend of mine, a guy named Warren Murphy. They said they didn't like that the character died at the end, and I thought, "Oh, I've failed everybody, I screwed up, I blew it. My writing sucks." So, I offered to give the money back. My agent called and said, "Excuse me, are you fucking crazy? You don't give the money back. People write shit and they get paid millions of dollars. This is fine."

It's funny, because the capper to the story is I looked at the script again recently and it's the best thing I ever wrote. There's no question the draft of *Lethal Weapon II* that I wrote, death and all, is my best work. Head and shoulders, intensity wise, above a lot of the stuff I've done. So, the lesson is first, never give the money back. You're not objective enough to know your work is really bad. Lesson two is trust yourself.

You stopped writing for a period after that.

Yeah, for about two years until *Last Boy Scout* I was busy mourning my life and, in many ways, the loss of my first real love. I didn't feel much like doing anything except smoking cigarettes and reading paperbacks. All things come around. Time passed and eventually I sat down and transformed some of that bitterness into a character, the central focus of a private eye story which became *The Last Boy Scout*.

Writing that script was a very cathartic experience, one of the best experiences I've ever had. I spent so much time alone working on that. Days which I wouldn't speak. Three, four days where I maybe said a couple words. It was a wonderfully intense time where my focus was better than it's ever

been. And I was rewarded so handsomely ($1.75 million) for that script, if felt like a vindication and like I was back on track.

How do you normally approach a new script, if there is a normal way?
I don't outline at first. By the time I get to page forty my brain starts to take on the task of outlining, but it does it all internally. At first I just generate images and scenes based on characters that float into my head. I sit down and make them talk. I'll think of a scene and say, "That goes somewhere at the end." Here's a scene, that belongs somewhere in the middle. And here's the introduction to the character, that goes at the beginning. And then I play connect the dots. Gradually it takes on a shape. It's like carving away everything that doesn't look like an elephant until you're left with an elephant.

It's a very exploratory process. A lot of long walks when I get started. A lot of fear. A lot of just tapping on the keys saying, "This will not go into the script. It doesn't matter. Just sit there and fucking do it. Write a character scene. It's not going in the script." And then I'll just write characters until I find something that entertains me. Basically, I try to find something that casts a shadow. I try to get a character in my head that feels alive, like I've tapped into my subconscious. Once I sense the reality of them, once I know how they talk, then I can write them.

Do you write your endings first or is the development more organic?
Sometimes I'll have an image I know will be the ending. But, more often than not the ending comes down to a choice. I may know roughly what it's going to be but, when I get there it's always a big choice. Does she live or does she die? I try to know the climactic point to which the character will be driven, but I never resolve how they will respond at that point until I get there.

The climaxes of your scripts tend to be drawn-out and structurally similar. How do you approach giving the audience a good BANG at the end of a movie?
It's the kitchen sink principle of anything that amuses me or I find exciting. I try to make sure the characters are driven to the extent of their endurance. I also try to make sure there's a setup, laced within the body of the screenplay, that will pay off for the character at the end. So the character reaches their apotheosis, their big ephiphanal moment at the same time the thrill plot comes to a head. So the two are working side by side as opposed to at cross-purposes.

The Silence of the Lambs is great not because she goes in and shoots a serial killer but, because this is a very vulnerable and frightened girl who is forced to overcome all her inner demons in that moment. She's facing a fucking monster at the end of that movie, and she doesn't feel she's capable. It's so real. Her character is driven by her inner workings. It would be so different if she was Steven Segal. You don't know what he's thinking. He's just kicking ass. So, I try to make sure the two work side by side. As far as spectacle, I just think you give people as much intensity as you can generate, based on your talent.

Your screenplays are slick with violence.
Right. I like violence.

What's the relationship between violence and an effective action script?
It is very clear to me that if you're doing a thriller, which, by the way, is what I prefer to call it. I hate "action," it's a misnomer. *North By Northwest* has action up the wazoo, but you wouldn't call it an action movie. In any thriller there has to be danger or you're not thrilled. It's hard to feel a concrete sense of danger if there's no violence. The more menace you can generate in terms of the bad world out there, the better. I'm terrified of this fucking world, it outrages me. It drives me nuts. It drives me insane to watch the news. So, I think the catharsis for me is in inventing characters who confront and accept violence. Who are forced to stand up in the face of it, even if they don't think they can, and somehow emerge unscathed at the end. If they do, then after seeing the film, maybe in some small measure, I feel I can too.

I also don't like cheating with violence. For instance, I'll give you an example—the old show *Charlie's Angels*. They kidnap Jacqueline Smith, this big Revlon model, hold her in a warehouse tied up to a chair, and there's three guys cleaning their guns saying, "She still in the corner? Yeah boys, she's tied up. Okay, just leave her there. Don't touch her." In real life you know that's fake. It's wrong because we know they'd rape the shit out of her. Or beat her, or burn her with cigarettes or something. But they wouldn't just take this most beautiful girl, tie her up, and sit there cleaning their guns. You don't feel the threat, you feel the filmmakers cheated. She gets out okay at the end, but you don't go, "Oh, my God, she got out. She's safe." Because you knew she was never in any real danger. Now, if she was in real trouble and got out, now you go, "Oh, my God, what a catharsis. She was in as dangerous a position you can get, man. And she somehow manages to get out. That makes me feel like I could deal with a situation like that." So, that's important for me. I feel it's important to address violence in a realistic way that reflects how the situation would actually transpire.

In the shooting draft for The Long Kiss Goodnight *you toned down the violence a notch. Was it just too over the top in the spec-script?*
Yeah, the action was toned down. The violence? At certain points I agree, at certain points I disagree. Overall, it's at about the right level now. People get scared. People think my scripts are sometimes too violent and they may be right to take out certain things. I don't know. I think we all try to be cautious because we don't want to hurt… what we're essentially trying to do— tell a story. Specific scenes may have been toned down slightly, but I don't think they were compromised seriously, creatively. Or I would have stepped in and said, "Sorry guys, I know this seems violent to you, but it's necessary." I would have fought like a motherfucker to keep it.

Were you the only writer in the revision process?
Yeah, I stayed through so many… four, five, six drafts and then on into the shoot. I was also a producer on the film, one of three, so I was in Canada the whole time on the set. It's been a very involving process.

What did you set out to achieve with your script The Long Kiss Goodnight*?*
I wanted to do a quirky pulp movie. I love espionage, I always have. I used to beg as a kid to read the James Bond books. My mother said they were too old for me, too adult. All my life I've been fascinated by espionage and good pulp. I just adore things like *[La Femme] Nikita* that take a pulp premise like a former drug addict turns government assassin, but they play it as if it were Academy Award winning material. And they give it the balls and the bite you'd expect from Sidney Pollock. I'm fascinated by good pulp, especially in the '70s with movies like *Magnum Force* and *Dirty Harry*. I just really wanted to do a movie with a '70s flavor to it, a '70s espionage film.

   The minute I hit with the idea of a housewife instead of a man, who's got this amnesia in the suburbs, somehow it just clicked. It was a powerful image all of a sudden, the two worlds that collide, the world we live every day and the one we blind ourselves to. The conflict and the contrast between extreme violence, terror and worldwide implications and the small, intimate, oblivious life of a community in the suburbs. I thought that would be a lot of fun.

What theme did you plan to come out of that?
In a way I think it's about confronting and accepting parts of ourselves of which we're ashamed. In each of us there is something of which we're profoundly ashamed, of which we don't want to admit.

For you then, this movie harkens back to the theme of Lethal Weapon*.*
Yeah. It's about self loathing and self hatred, something with which I'm quite familiar.

Other than the subplot with Hennessey and his son, were there other ways you wove that theme into the screenplay?
I tried to illuminate it in the relationship between her and Hennessey. For instance, I like the idea that Hennessey, who's this down on his luck private eye with no scruples, running con games to generate a few dollars, becomes the moral heart of the movie. At one point she comes on to him—it's a beautiful moment—and he actually says no. Not because he's not attracted to her, not because he doesn't think she's sexy or could probably use a good fuck about that time, but because he says this is bullshit. You're using me to erase your past, and I like your past. That's the essence of the theme for me. That a person who's a total scum bag like Hennessey can somehow redeem another person.

Was La Femme Nikita *the film that convinced you audiences wanted to see a woman acting in this type of a role?*

Yeah. I've always wanted to do a film like that. I used to be a big fan of *Modesty Blaise*. Or even April Dancer, the girl from *U.N.C.L.E.* People would tell me while I was working on it, whether it was producers or my agent, "Why are you making it a woman? You can't sell this. There's like four actresses that can play the part. Make it a man. That way anyone can play it." And I kept pointing to Nikita and saying it's not impossible to make a film like this that's effective. It's just a little more difficult, that's all. In the long run, I hope I'm proven right.

Your writing has been attacked for being totally male oriented. Did you approach writing for a female protagonist differently?
No. There's not as much difference as people think. It's not like you write for a woman and all of a sudden she talks about her period all the time. I treated her just like any other character. I wanted to feel sorry for her. I wanted to feel empathy for her and I wanted her to be funny and interesting. I created a character I would want to go out with, that I would find attractive, wild and fascinating.

I think a lot of women these days talk like men. I don't know if anyone's listening, but every time a studio says to me, "You can't have a woman say this…" Excuse me, have you been to a bar lately? I don't know where you grew up… but I haven't met a woman like that in quite a while.

I wasn't looking for vindication in the eyes of people who might, for whatever reason, find me misogynist. In fact, if anything, I think the character is very strong, but, she's just as sexy and racy and '70s… The '70s were a very misogynist time and it's my favorite filmmaking period. I don't think my films are particularly misogynist. I think women are very strong. I think men are very foul-mouthed. The other thing that bothers me is the tendency people have to equate the voice of a character with the views of the author. If a character in a screenplay turns and says, "Hey, what are you? A fucking fag?" I know lots of people who talk like that, but that doesn't mean I go around calling people fags.

Did you write the spec-script as straight drama or was there an underground element of satire to it?
It's supposed to be, in ways, a revisionist Bond. There is a little bit of the outrageous thrown in. Yeah. I love what Warren Murphy does. He's a very satiric writer who authored a series of books called *The Destroyer*. The early ones, one through thirty, are such wonderful blends of adventure, politics, pathos— real, genuine drama—and satire. And I've never seen it anywhere else.

I dig them so much. To this day, I still call Warren and say, "Hey, Warren. I just read *Destroyer #17* again. What a kick." I think that's where I got it from, that sense of… contempt for authority, contempt for the government, contempt for social conventions. Once again, the '70s were big in that. A real time of dissension and outrage in film. The satires were so biting back then. *Where's Poppa?* You don't see that any more.

Not to mention Network.
A wonderful movie. Where is satire now? It's just not around. I don't think I'm a satirist, but if you sense a thread in there I'm not surprised, it's what I love.

There was more in the spec than in the shooting script.
Unfortunately, that's what happens.

When New Line purchased The Long Kiss, *Michael Deluca [president of New Line Films] said, "The script didn't need a lot of work. We were effectively buying a movie as it was written." But, you went through six drafts of rewrites.*
The problem was they bought a script as it was written for a $100 million film and they had $65 million. So, a lot of the work we did was to streamline and economize the film. It's not about huge spectacle anyway. It's best when it's about the people. So, the fact the violence is a lot more intimate and personal now is better than when there was so much expensive spectacle. That's great, but we've all seen *Twister* five times. I'm pleased with the film. In a sense there is still spectacle, but, it feels more like a thriller. A lot of the cuts were made in economizing a kitchen sink draft down into something filmable.

I thought the shooting script was a real improvement. Could you walk me through a little of the revision process?
It was very unusual because the director [Renny Harlin] was supposed to start on the project right away, but suddenly, had to go off and do *Cutthroat Island*. I didn't know that going in. We thought *Cutthroat Island* had been deep-sixed, but it popped up again. So, most of the stuff was just communication by fax to Malta where they were shooting. We would try various drafts to make the plot work and the character work. When Sam Jackson came on board we were all ecstatic. I can't remember. The whole revision process is a blur.

   I remember at one point I didn't like the MacGuffin in the spec. I didn't like the MK-Ultra chemical spill, it was muddy. So, I said rather then doing some bullshit from an article about experiments in the '50s and '60s, I'd better get off my ass and go to the library and find out what's actually happening.

That section of the script is definitely improved.
My research assistant, Anthony Bagarozzi, found some clippings about the World Trade Center bombing and how one of the bombers had accused the CIA of knowing about the bombing and allowing it. In fact, the person who stamped the visa of the terrorist who built the bomb was a CIA case officer working at an embassy. Anthony and I just looked at each other and said, man, I think that would work.

How important is sex in selling an action script?
I never even think about it to tell you the truth. I think it's important 'cause I like sex. I put it in scripts just on reflex because it keeps me interested, it

keeps me awake. If I had to direct a film and I had to show up for work and say, "Oh, God, what are we filming today? Train crash? Ughh. It's the pretty ladies? Okay." That would kind of perk me right up. But I do think it's important if you do put sex in a script, that it's not just a bunch of flopping titties in a club. It should have to do with the story.

Is there an art in writing the spec script all its own?
Yeah… I don't think people should concentrate on tricks for selling their spec-script. They shouldn't think "Well, this is a spec-script, I've got to be more unique. Maybe I'll send out a clock with it *[The Ticking Man]*. Or a little gift package." I'm not really interested in tricks on how to write a spec-script. But, I do think there are some differences. One, you've got to have some fun so you're distinctive. So people see you're writing a story uniquely yours, with a unique voice they can pick out from a crowd. In the same way that an actor wouldn't want to adopt a generic character. They'd want to be notable, somehow.

Also, I think you have to have some fun when you write a spec-script, because you'll fall asleep otherwise. You're not getting paid. It's lonely. You're at your house. You have to have some fucking fun. It's a playground. People respond to people who have passion and who like to play. They don't respond to plot point number twelve on page thirty-two a la Syd Field. They respond to someone who comes in like a street theater artist. Who says, "You wanna juggle? I'll juggle. Watch. Now I'm going to do this. Throw some tomatoes at me. Go." Sing, dance, tap-dance… I think you have fun, you have energy and you just sort of put yourself on show when you write a spec script. Now, the trick is how much control, precision and finesse you can bring to that passion. People blather on and on like, "Okay boys and girls, if you thought that last explosion was big, wait until you see this one." Please spare me. I always advise people not to fly before they can walk. I used to be really wise-assed in my scripts and looking back I think, "Oh, God, why did I say that." I'm surprised it even got a development deal.

Those comments are influencing a whole generation of writers.
But, they're not mine. They started with Bill Goldman, I got it from him. You have to careful, because if you try to wing it before you're even walking, then people are going to say, "Who's this asshole who keeps making jokes and taking me out of the story?" So, maybe there are tricks, but I hate to be the one who says you have to put in a lot of jokes.

Do you think you're still maturing as a writer?
Oh yeah. I'm nowhere near where I want to be. I have a lot of energy and some of my early work I still admire for the energy of it. But, overall, I've got a long way to go. I have to mature into someone who's capable of doing complex character work, psychologically driven work.

A lot of people who are very bitter talk to me and they say, "I can't believe

it. I haven't sold a script. What do you care? You sell your scripts, but what about my scripts?" And I say, "I don't understand. Why aren't you selling scripts?" They say, "I don't know! I watched this show on TV the other night and it was terrible, it sucked. My stuff's at least as good as that." And it occurs to me as they say this, and I hear it all the time, that they feel the world owes them a career because their work is slightly less shitty than some other shitty piece of work. It really irks me to find how many people are obsessed with selling anything, regardless of its quality. I've never been like that. I've never wanted to do work that was just good enough to sell. I would encourage people to put aside their bitterness and the victim mentality which accompanies most writers starting out. Because, that's the only way to succeed. Try to make your work good and maybe it will sell. I'm still trying to make my work good, because it's not good enough. Even if it sells, I could still be writing a turkey.

Shane Black & Jeb Stuart

INTERVIEWED BY PATRICIA BURKHART SMITH
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 9, #2 (MARCH/APRIL 2002)

Creative Screenwriting caught up with Shane Black (and Jeb Stuart) at the Austin Heart of Film Conference in 2001. Jeb Stuart's screenplay credits include *Die Hard* and *The Fugitive*. Both he and Shane had been out of the spec script market for a couple of years, but both were readying new scripts in a relaunching of their careers in Hollywood. 9/11 had just occurred, so we talked about the impact of events on their writing and the state of Hollywood filmmaking.

How did you become a screenwriter?

JEB STUART: I majored in English at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and was teaching tennis. I married my high school sweetheart, then completed a Masters in Communication at Chapel Hill and took another masters at Stanford, where I won the Nicholl Fellowship in 1985. On the strength of that screenplay, I got my start. When I was coming up, there was an expression that you could make a killing as a screenwriter, but not a living, and my whole goal was to make a living. After five years of grad school, I was $120,000 in debt. Then our first child was born two months premature and we ended up with another quarter-million dollars in hospital bills. You don't know what pressure is like until something like that happens to you.

SHANE BLACK: When I was seventeen, I decided to try acting but gave that up because it seemed very much a mistake for me. I couldn't stand waiting in lines and being evaluated by people. I sort of stumbled into writing. I was in the UCLA acting program because it seemed like the easiest way to get through four years of college. I had a wonderful group of friends from there and we all loved movies. We talked about movies and fought over them and made little films together. We were sort of "the bad frat house" at the end of the block. I wrote a bunch of scripts and a friend of mine who was writing for TV showed one of my scripts to an agent and that's how I got started. It's

interesting that each of us in that original core group has been able to climb the ladder, hopscotching over each other and reaching down and grabbing each other and helping each other up to the next level.

How do you think September 11 has affected moviemaking?

BLACK: A lot of big projects have been pushed back or put on hold, but it won't kill the movie business. I actually think the fallout from September 11 will be a good, because you won't be able to just throw a lot of explosions on-screen as a substitute for a good story and great characters. Writers are really going to have to examine their stories and find ways to promote suspense without relying on carnage.

STUART: I remember sitting down with producers ten or fifteen years ago and being told, this story has great action, but it would be too expensive to produce. Now, computers allow us to create things on-screen you could only imagine before. I have watched a lot of incredible action sequences in recent movies, but what was missing was the connective tissue. You have a guy sitting at a computer and someone is saying, "Oh, try this and try that," but the guy at the computer didn't write the story. So, in what we see on-screen, part A doesn't necessarily go into part B.

BLACK: If you do blow something up, I think we'll have to see how and why it happens. It will have to be an integral part of the story. My take on current action set pieces, whether it's a car chase or a guy hanging off a building, is that they stop the story in order to have the action come in. That's irresponsible, almost inexcusable. It's almost as if they think good writing and action pieces are interchangeable.

How do you think today's action-adventure movies differ from those made when you got your starts in the late '80s?

STUART: I think ever since *Lethal Weapon* came out in 1987, comedy has been an integral part of the action genre. It was an important part of *Die Hard*. There was a lot of humor in those movies. I remember when we sent the script for *Die Hard* to Clint Eastwood and his reaction was, "What is this? There's jokes in here!"

BLACK: I think I don't like most action movies anymore. That's not to say that I haven't written anything spectacularly different, but I've actually lost interest in the genre. And I don't like calling them action movies. I call them thrillers now.

STUART: If your thing is not comedy, don't fill up your script with lame jokes. Either the comedy will appear organically or it won't. And remember, a great comedic actor will bring his own comedy to the role.

How has the recent success of the action/thriller genre affected storytelling?

STUART: There's been an unrealistic idea floating around Hollywood for a while that adventure movies didn't have to have a great story because of all the action.

BLACK: Special effects should make storytelling better because they allow you to do more; instead they have become a substitute for storytelling.

STUART: *The Matrix* did a great job.

BLACK: *The Matrix, The Sixth Sense*…those two were mythic enough to make you respond in an emotional way to the story being told, a story that's been told for thousands of years. But most movies today are not mythic—some guy gets busted for something he didn't do, then he gets redeemed. The stories may seem like they're rooted in myth, but really, they're just rooted in old movies. Thank God I started when my models were movies like *Aliens* and *48 Hours*. Now studio execs are telling you, "Make a movie like *Armageddon*."

STUART: We've been through the phase where technology was really cool; now at least when I write something that is cool technologically, I don't have to sit through three meetings trying to explain it to the suits. We've had these techno geeks out there plowing the field. Now I think the emphasis is going to swing back to the story and the characters. Any film that ends up being a legacy now will not be there because of the special effects, but because people like the characters. If you don't think you'll like the characters in a movie, you're not going to spend nine bucks to see it.

BLACK: Heroes have to have something inside of them that they don't know is there, but the audience knows is there.

STUART: Yes, the audience becomes scared for them and roots for them, wants them to do the right thing. If a hero resists temptation and finds a way out of his dilemma, that makes the audience happy.

Do you have any advice for novice screenwriters?

STUART: There are people who spend hours coming up with simple sentences, laboring over each word. But a lot of times, no matter how you describe a scene, once the director and the stunt coordinator get hold of the script, it evolves. And the writer has to get involved to make sure the action serves the story. When the writer gets shut out of the development process, things can go bad in a hurry.

BLACK: I find the best action writing is something that sets up a dilemma and asks," How are you going to get your hero out of this? There's no way out." If you can get him out of there in a way that the audience cannot anticipate, they will love you.

STUART: What works for me is I just think of trying to write movies and don't worry about all the crap that's associated with it. It's a real chore to keep your ass in the chair and come up with something that suspends the disbelief of the audience, but if you like movies, you should set a high bar for yourself and write a story that entertains you first.

BLACK: That's strangely harder than you might think. At a certain base craft level, you know the language, you know the format, but that doesn't automatically mean you're going to come up with a good script every time. And trying to figure out what to write by looking at what movies made money is crazy. Whatever you do, do not read the trades. It can't help and it will only depress you.

STUART: There's been a huge blossoming of books and material giving advice on how to write a screenplay or become successful in Hollywood.

BLACK: They might as well just put up a big neon "Get Rich Quick" sign over the movie section in Barnes & Noble, because for a lot of people, that's really what it's all about.

STUART: One of the things I've always heard, and I really believe, is that the hardest way to tell a story is straight up. You can really tell when you're losing an audience and when you've got them. When you get bored with something you're writing, I can guarantee your audience is going to be bored, too. If you feel like you've just dropped into a hole, well, then how do you get out of that hole? You go back to your story.

BLACK: Another thing to consider if you get stuck is to bring your main character down to a point from which they have to recover. Heap misery upon them. Audiences will believe the most ridiculous things if they are well written and imaginative. If it brings the main character down, they'll go for it.

Talk about "high concept."

STUART: If someone has a great concept that feels original, some studio will want to make it. I can't think of a single action movie that got made because the studio thought the characters were wonderful. It's great if the characters are good, but high concept is what sells.

BLACK: High concept is extremely important. There are things people want they don't even know they want. It has to do with upping the intensity, but if you just throw in a lot of gunfire, that's as dull as a walk in the park. Stories that are high concept succeed because the intensity derives naturally from the story, and the story is an amazing archetypal tale as old as *The Odyssey.*

STUART: Something is high concept if you can completely explain the whole story in a sentence or two. You could sell the script from one line.

BLACK: The worst thing you can do is say, "My movie is like…" It sounds like you're begging.

What about the pacing of today's movies? Do you think it's too fast?

STUART: Yeah, but we live in an MTV world. People are expected to take in more info in less time today. When you talk about pacing, you're really talking about editing. If the editing takes you out of the movie, it's like bad writing. When I see something like that, I go to the bathroom and get a Coca-Cola, because the movie is not working.

BLACK: Movie trailers suggest a shape to the audience. You'd better fill in the blanks and fulfill their expectations with a story they can comprehend or they won't like the movie.

What sort of movie would you like to see in theaters now?

BLACK: I would love to see a period spy film.

STUART: That's an area I'd like to dig into. The Cold War hasn't really been mined yet.

So, if you're an aspiring screenwriter, how do you get an agent?
BLACK: Hone your craft.
STUART: If you have talent, you will be found.

If someone wants your help, what should they do?
BLACK: I get calls all the time from people who tell me they have this wonderful idea, only they can't tell me what it is because I might steal it, but would I please write their screenplay. Like I'm so fricking dry I'm just waiting by the phone hoping someone will call me with a story idea. That's why I took my number out of the book.
STUART: It happens to me a lot, too. When you don't live in Los Angeles, no one knows how to deal with you. I got a call from a CEO at a Fortune 500 company. His son was a student at an Ivy League, the sort of kid who could be successful at anything, but he wanted to be a screenwriter. I told him the same thing I tell anybody; you have to have talent and be prepared to work hard. I paint a dire picture and tell them to get back home. What the hell else can you say to them?

But if you're an aspiring screenwriter and really need help and encouragement, what should you do?
BLACK: Surround yourself with good people. You can't network by hiding. And be willing to give. People who are always saying, "Read this or do this to help my career," they're not giving anything, they're only taking. If you read the work of your friends and they read yours and you all do things together, that implies friendship and that's the best networking you can have—you support them and they support you.
STUART: Reading is good for inspiration.
BLACK: That's true, but make sure you have your own sense of the language. Develop your own style. Ian Fleming (who created James Bond) had a knack of telling a story at an accelerating pace from the hero's point of view. There was almost a surreal collage of things happening in his books.

You guys have both hit your forties in a town that's notorious for favoring younger writers. Does that bother you?
Black: I have a friend who worries about ageism, but I don't.
Stuart: I think about it, but I don't worry about it.

What are you working on now?
STUART: I just finished a spec script, and would rather not get too specific about what it is. It's not *Die Hard*, which is nice. I've just sent it to my agent. People know that it's about to go out, and I'm sort of in that courtship phase before everybody tells me it stinks.
BLACK: I have several projects in various stages that I'm working on. The most interesting is a romance. It's the riskiest because it flies in the face of what I'm known for and if I don't get it right, then I'm a jerk. It's still in the plan-

ning stage. I'm scared shitless to try something different, but I'm going to do it anyway.

Despite your early success, you've both had long periods without a hit.
BLACK: Well, I had a girlfriend who ate three years of my life. Not that it wasn't wonderful, but I wasn't exactly focused on my next screenplay at that point. And sometimes it's hard to get motivated when you've just cashed a big royalty check, and you're going to the mall to buy stuff and at that same mall, they're showing *Lethal Weapon 4* and you're getting paid for characters you created a long time ago.
STUART: I'm really in a nice time in my life. I don't live in Hollywood, so it's easy for me to get caught up in family and other important priorities. But we'll see what happens with this script I've got out now.

John Carpenter

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 6, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1999)

One of the undisputed masters of the horror genre, John Carpenter's career has spanned twenty-five years and over twenty-five films. A director who straddles the line between mainstream and cult filmmaking, his most personal work, including *John Carpenter's The Thing, Halloween*, and less successfully, *Prince of Darkness*, is permeated with a sense of dread and the inevitability of violence. Carpenter's feature writing credits include *Dark Star, Assault on Precinct 13, Halloween, The Fog, Halloween II, Escape from New York, Black Moon Rising, Prince of Darkness, They Live, Escape from L.A*, and *Ghosts of Mars*. While he tends to collaborate with other writers on his films, and nearly all of his best films have been co-written (working with Debra Hill on *Halloween* and Nick Castle on *Escape from New York*), Carpenter is a staunch defender of the auteur theory, arguing that he normally has more personal impact on a film than any other collaborator. *The Thing*, arguably his best work, lends some support to Carpenter's argument. Written by Bill Lancaster, the finished film deviates substantially from the script and clearly bears the marks of both Carpenter and Rob Bottin, creator of the film's special make-up effects. Sadly, Bill Lancaster died in 1997. In his stead, Carpenter graciously agreed to discuss the film in an interview at the Cat and Fiddle restaurant, one of the few smoker-friendly establishments left in Hollywood.

Tell me a little bit about your early days writing for hire in Hollywood, before you made Assault on Precinct 13 *in 1976.*
Well, I came out of film school having made this really low-budget SF comedy called *Dark Star*. It didn't impress anyone in the business and didn't do any business. So my father said, "Look, you've got to figure out what you want to do with your life here. You can't just keep sitting around and dreaming." So I had to make a living, and one of the easiest and best ways was to

write. You can get a lot of money for writing and never get anything produced. My first gig was selling an original idea to Columbia, which became *The Eyes of Laura Mars*. For the treatment and writing the screenplay I got an enormous whopping check—$19,000. Wow! This is a great living. So, I went from there and worked on anything I could to stay alive, because it paid so well. I'd usually get two or three months, sometimes less, to write a screenplay, so I'd sit down for the first couple of weeks and do a treatment. Then I'd party for about two months and, when the deadline was coming up, I'd spend about a week banging it out and turn it in. Once, I had to do one in a night. That was the toughest. I had to crank it out. Wow! I lobbed it in there. But it was a great way to make a living and a great lifestyle, too.

How has the business of writing in Hollywood changed?
Well, the kinds of movies that are being made is a big difference. It's a totally different world. First of all, that wasn't an electronic world. Everything relied on the typewriter, which I've never been able to do without. I still can't write on a computer, I can't handle it. I have to be able to visualize a script page. I time the screenplay by how many script pages there are, and I have to look at them to see the pacing and structure of the story. The process is the same, though. I mean, sitting down and writing, creating something. But there are a lot of how-to books now. I don't know if you've noticed them—

[Laughs]
I think they've even got script structure programs that you can hurl at a problem and then come up with something. That would have been a dream back then, because the toughest job of all is figuring out the essentials of a story.

Have the people changed?
Yeah, big. I started in the early '80s when a lot of these folks came from television at Universal and Paramount. They were all TV guys—Eisner, Katzenberg, Diller, and Scheinberg over at Universal—and they all brought TV ideas with them, which was different from the old-time studio guys. Now you've got the Wall Street types and these young kids—young geniuses. All the old timers are getting booted out. Everybody's seen all the old movies on video and TV and they're continually picking over them, stealing ideas from them. Development people are really smart about certain things. About what works… and in general there's a lack of daring. Nobody's trying anything.

What'd you think of Dark City*?*
It was a really interesting idea. The execution was not quite as good as the concept, but that's a tough idea to pull off. I think they got a little bit buried in their effects and their set design.

But that was a really interesting film for a studio to come up with.
Well, I know Mike DeLuca at New Line is always interested in those kinds of

things. He's a big fan of *Jacob's Ladder*. Loves that movie. So you can see that influence in some of the movies that he greenlights—an alternate reality dream world type of deal.

Your writing career started out really solid and then went into a lull. You didn't write anything for five or six years in the '80s.
Well, I wrote under some pseudonyms. I used those because I got really tired of seeing my own name on everything. He did this, he did that, he did this… I think the height of that was somebody showed me a big billboard of *Christine*. I looked at it and my name was repeated over and over, and I thought I should be ashamed. It was above the title, then it was repeated, then it was the music, then it was the director, then it was—my God! What arrogance.

Before Prince of Darkness *and* They Live *though, you didn't write anything for a number of years.*
After *Escape [from New York]* I was only the director on several pictures. I didn't get back to writing until '86 or '87 because the last time I tried to write something I ran into a third-act problem. Writing isn't very fun. You really have to believe in what you're doing and you have to get inspired to do it. And I was enjoying directing—it's fun to be a director.

What attracted you most to John Campbell's short story "Who Goes There?" Was it the mystery or the horror?
Well, to be quite frank with you, what attracted me to go back and re-read it was my utter fear of the Hawks movie *[The Thing from Another World]*. Stuart Cohen, a friend of mine from USC, said we're going to remake it, and the idea of trying that was terrifying. The monster wasn't any great shakes in it, but the whole stylistic approach…you just can't touch that, and I was afraid to try. So he suggested I read the short story and see what I thought, and it was Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians* in many ways, but it was the creepiness of the imitation business and the questions that it brought up that I thought were really interesting. I also thought it was timely, that in remaking the short story I could be true to my day making this movie, just like Hawks was true to his day when he made his. And there was something else, that whole "who goes there?"—it was a spooky idea. The horror and the creature didn't come in until later when Rob Bottin got a crack at it.

One thing you've said is the people at Universal didn't really understand the Campbell story because of its pulp style. What did you mean by that?
The story is written very much the way the pulps were written back in those days. The hero is masculine, you know, strong-jawed, steely eyes looking at the other men in the camp—it's very hyped, written for the pulp magazines people picked off the shelves and got excited about.

With the lurid picture on the cover, that type of thing.
Yeah. It's got a beautiful girl—well, not really… what is the equivalent of pulp today? Uh, *Hercules*. On TV. That's a pulp style. I don't think they quite got the uniqueness of the imitation aspect. They wanted a movie called The Thing and they wanted me to direct it. They just didn't know anything else.

Why do you think pulp material makes for such good films?
I think they fit into a three-act structure. They have an imagination that captures the attention of a guy walking past a newsstand and a guy going to a movie. They have this real spark, an imagination, fun.

You're a fan of the old hardboiled novels too.
Well, they came from the pulps. Raymond Chandler wrote for a pulp magazine called *Black Mask*, and for his first novel, *The Big Sleep*, he just took two stories in *Black Mask* and stuck them together. That's why that story doesn't make any sense. He took the plot about Geiger being blackmailed and he took the second part about Joe Brody out in the gambling house in Ventura County and stuck the two of them together with a kind of cheesy connecting device and it makes no sense. It's not really written.

Stuart Cohen has said you were very committed to not writing the script for The Thing.
Well, I had just come off making *Escape from New York* and before that I was working on the screenplay for *The Philadelphia Experiment*, which was one of these urban legend-type stories about a destroyer in World War II that supposedly time traveled and went into a weird warp. It had a great first two acts but no ending, no third act; it was a shaggy dog story that didn't end. So I struggled with it, but I couldn't fix it. I hit the wall and I think it spooked me on writing for a little bit. I wanted somebody who could hammer out a script who wouldn't have to worry about that.

We met with a lot of people on *The Thing* and it was only when Bill Lancaster talked about what he would do with the short story that I thought, "This is the guy." Bill was an incredibly charming person and I loved his movie, *The Bad News Bears*. I thought he was just brilliant, and that script was really, really good. He was the one who came up with a couple of really key scenes. He came up with the scene where the doctor tries to shock another character and The Thing comes out of his chest. And we discussed the idea of the blood tests—that's the reason I wanted to do the movie. That's the showdown; that's the big scene. Bill wrote the screenplay with the monster in shadows, the old Hollywood cliché stuff, which everybody still talks about even to this day. Rob Bottin was the guy who said, "No, you've got to put him in the light, then the audience really goes nuts. They really go nuts because there it is in front of them." I wasn't sure, but that's what we did.

The critics really hammered that aspect of it.
I've always thought that was somewhat unfair. I mean, the whole point of the monster is to be monstrous, to be repellent. That's what makes you side with the human beings. I didn't have a problem with that. The critics thought the movie was boring and didn't allow for any hope. That was the part they really hammered on.

The lack of hope is built into the story. There is an inevitability to it, but that's not necessarily a negative.
Well, in the short story the humans clearly win, but then they look up and wonder if the Thing got to the birds and they're flying to the mainland. It was just a question mark that wasn't quite the two men freezing to death in the snow to save humanity. I thought that was the ultimate heroic act, but audiences didn't see it that way. I remember the studio wanted some market research screenings and after one I got up and talked to the audience about what they thought of the film. There was one young gal who asked, "Well what happened in the very end? Which one was the Thing, and which one was the good guy?" And I said, "Well, you have to use your imagination." And she said, "Oh, God. I hate that."

[Laughs] What a great comment.
We were dead. Dead in the water. Dead. Horrible.

In the wake of that type of response, what gave you the strength to stick with Bill Lancaster's ending when you had shot a happier alternative?
Well, it wasn't a happier ending. It was one shot of Kurt [Russell] having survived and what we would have had to do was a fade out or some type of title card or something, so stylistically it would have been cheesy. We did test another ending where MacReady blows up the Thing. He comes in and sits down by himself in the cold and then you go to black. You don't have Childs coming in. There was absolutely no difference in audience reaction between that and the one we had. So the problem was inherent—the film wasn't heroic enough, it wasn't the U.S. Hockey team beating the Russians. That's what people wanted to see.

It wasn't ID4.
Yeaahhh!

A number of writers worked on this project before Bill Lancaster, and they all seemed to think the material needed to be larger, needed to be opened up. Why did you think this was a story best told in a bottle?
That's what it's all about. It's a siege from within. What's scary about the movie is not that's it big and action-filled, but it's small and there's nothing out there but this blowing blackness and storm and cold and right next to you maybe a creature. That's the creepiness of the story.

Was Lancaster the first screenwriter you worked with who wasn't a personal friend?
Yeah, he was the first.

How did you two collaborate?
Bill wrote the first thirty or forty pages and gave it to me. I read it and I loved it. And then he struggled with the second act and the rest of the script. When he finished it we went up to Northern California together for a weekend, just to kind of hang out and talk it through. We asked ourselves, "Why are we making this movie? What is this about?" We went back through it again in our minds. And it was interesting. He had a different voice than the one I wrote with. He heard dialogue differently and had different ideas. So I talked to him a lot about how he saw things. How to you seeing this playing? How do you see this character? Is this a fast dialogue, or is it slow? Of course all of that went out the window as soon as the actors arrived. You're at their mercy. But Bill did an incredible job on the screenplay.

Was it his idea to move away from Campbell's "happy ending" toward something that was a little more gray?
His original ending had both MacReady and Charles turning into the Thing and being rescued in the spring. The helicopter lands and out they come out, "Hey, which way to a hot meal?" I thought no, let's not do that. It was a little too glib.

Lancaster's second draft screenplay is referred to on the DVD. Was there a draft after that, or was that the shooting draft you used?
I did a little second act work on it. It was never published.

There are a number of scenes in the script that weren't in the film. Did you actually shoot that material?
It depends. There were several sections where there was way too much dialogue.

Right. That was definitely cut back.
What plays on paper doesn't necessarily play on the screen. And some of it just didn't play. It wasn't making sense. We were losing some of the tensions that we were trying to build.

Was a little bit of the verbosity a holdover from the short story?
I suppose a little bit. But primarily we had scenes that seemed to be repeating themselves. It probably was the way I directed it, but it seemed like it was going to be the dullest picture ever made unless we got a little bit more mood in there, a little more paranoia. Verbose? Yes, a little. Mainly repetitive.

In the film MacReady has a great monologue out in the snow with everyone standing around—I love that monologue. It's one of my favorite parts of the film, but I couldn't find it in the script.
It's not in there. I wrote that. We needed MacReady to stand up there and say,

here's what's happening.

That pulled the second act of the film together.
Also, Bill tended to write ensemble stories, which is what this was. But I wanted to push Kurt out a little more heroically when he finally takes over.

One scene in the second draft that stands out in my memory was the snowmobile chase after the dogs. Was that something you shot?
No, it was too expensive for us. I believe we had a shooting script after that, that didn't involve that. The snowmobile chase was a great idea. It's under the ice, isn't it?

Yeah.
Yeah. It was a great idea but we couldn't pull it off.

Lancaster's script contains a number of classic horror beats that were removed in the film. After making pictures like The Fog where you punched up that kind of horror, how did you decide to turn your back on some of those conventions for this picture? For example, when they're searching the Norwegian camp, a body falls out in a surprising way.
I shot that, but it seemed out of place, cheap. It was obvious.

Keeping that stuff out of The Thing *made it a lot classier.*
Here's the thing: at that particular time I had unleashed this terrible thing about horror movies with *Halloween*. All these imitators came out and threw every possible cliché up onto the screen—the body in the closet, the thing behind the door, all of that stuff. I suppose I was trying to get away from that and make this film better, or I just shot it and it wasn't any good.

Do you think a great science fiction film needs to have some kind of a social anchor? I mean, a social relevance, a metaphor, or a statement that it makes?
It has to have a thematic concern. Every great work has something that's thematic about it. Not a message, because I don't think movies do messages very well. They fall flat. Socially, I mean, some great films were made back in the '30s and '40s and you can see that they were placed in the time they were made, but their themes are for all time. The biggest thing is the story, but within that you need some thematic element that gets the audience going, that reaches out to them.

So much of Hollywood filmmaking tries to somehow tie into the cultural zeitgeist of the moment. Do you think that's overplayed?
I don't think so. Movies reflect the time in which they were made. Great movies go beyond that, they reach out over time. You know, I can still watch a movie like *Only Angels Have Wings* which was made in 1939, and get affected. It's dated, but it still has something really unique in it. These days they're

just trying to make a buck, that's all.

Your remake of The Thing *is a great movie, but it was a box office failure when it was released—*
El tanko.

[Laughs]—do you think that was because it failed to reach out to the audience of 1982? It didn't have relevance for them?
Yes, it was unpleasant for them to deal with. I think the social climate in the country at that time had a whole lot to do with it. There was a recession under way and people rejected its downbeat, depressing view of things. They didn't like the horrible inevitability of the movie.

In your work you've drawn a line between the fantastic horror that you create and the more "realistic" horror of other filmmakers, like Seven *or* Silence of the Lambs. *Do you ever want to cross that line? Not that we need another serial killer movie, but—*
Yeah. That's a good question. I don't know what I'd bring new to it. *Seven* was a really good script. Really good. Highly improbable killer, but the acting was terrific. And the directing's terrific. They did a great job with that. When I read the script, I though, hmmm, is anybody going to buy this? In my hands, it would have been a comedy.

[Laughs]
Oh, cross the line? *Seven* and *Silence of the Lambs* are cop movies, essentially. They're procedurals which you either have a feel for or you don't. You know, I've always loved watching procedurals, cop pictures, but I don't know if I'd be very good at making them.

I can see through what you've put into the DVD version of The Thing *that you really care about this film. How badly did the savage criticism it received hurt you?*
Oh, big. Big. But I wasn't used to—look, I was just a skinny kid from Kentucky who came to Hollywood, and I got real lucky in my life. If you want to play in the big leagues you've got to be ready for the hits. So that was my first big one. I'd gotten bad reviews before, but I had had some success, I'd been built up a little bit in the eyes of the critics and now they needed to swat me back. And I don't blame them. Whatever they want to do is fine.

One thing you've said is that remakes and sequels are the hardest films to make. Why do you think The Thing *succeeded and* Escape from LA *failed?*
Succeeded in what way? I mean *Escape from L.A.* made more money than *The Thing*.

That's true. I'm thinking as far as its being a good film.
Well, give it a few more years. *Escape from L.A.* is better than the first movie. Ten times better. It's got more to it. It's more mature. It's got a lot more to it.

I think people didn't like it because they felt it was a remake, not a sequel.

I guess part of my problem with it, was I—
You loved the first one, you're nostalgic—

I loved the first one, and it seemed like every element that I loved was photocopied in the second—a little blurry, but the same.
I suppose it's the old question of whether you like *Rio Bravo* or *El Dorado* better? They're essentially the same movie. They both had their strengths and weaknesses. I don't know—you never know why a movie's going to make it or not. People didn't want to see *Escape* that time, but they really didn't want to see *The Thing*.

But that's had a whole second life on video, actually a third now on DVD.
Yeah, but you just wait. You've got to give me a little while. People will say, you know, what was wrong with me?

We'll come back in ten years.
(laughing) I liked *ID4*? What was I thinking?

Have there ever been serious discussions about making a sequel to The Thing*?*
Nothing serious, no.

Would you think about that?
Sure. I'd use the Dark Horse comic book series. There's a three-book series they did in the '80s which started with MacReady and Childs coming across the ice, getting discovered by a ship, and being brought back. It's a great story that ends up in a submarine. It's really cool. I'd just do that. It's all there. Big budget, though.

That would be fun. You've spoken a couple of times of your apocalyptic trilogy: The Thing, Prince of Darkness, *and* In the Mouth of Madness.
It's about the end of the world stuff, the end of humanity.

Each of those films is clearly influenced by the writing of H. P. Lovecraft. Do you think it's possible to make a film of a H. P. Lovecraft story?
Sure. Absolutely.

Because in the past you've said that you don't think it's possible.
Well, I think you'd have to change it a little bit. Although, I've re-read a couple of his stories and maybe you could do them as period pieces. I think there are a couple of stories that you can't do. You can't do "The Outsider," because it's internalized. You can't show it, because the whole point is the last sentence. One of the great things he did as a writer was he would scare you with the last sentence. Oh, my God. That was the boo, that was the shock. But

there are a couple of great stories you could do. You could do "The Color Out of Space." You may want to update certain things but that's a great one. His idea was the horror is so great that you can't stand to look at it. I think you could create something, with a little work, that would be amazing.

Right. One thing you said about not being able to do an inside story: just about every Lovecraft adaptation has done it from the outside. They focus on a character, like a private investigator, who's coming into this strange world—a fish out of water. Wouldn't it be more interesting to do it from the other side, to write the film from the inside perspective, maybe something more like a Rosemary's Baby, *where we're focusing on the character whom everything happens to.*
I don't know. I'd have to think about it. I'm thinking about "The Dunwich Horror," one of the characters on the inside experiencing it all? Maybe. I think I would always worry that the audience wouldn't have anybody to relate to. I think that's why the outsider that comes in… that's why Lovecraft did it so much, because that represents the rational modern thinker who goes into this irrational world.

But if you look at Rosemary's Baby, *she's an outsider who's brought into this, but it's happening to her. I think that's the difference.*
That's correct. As opposed to the guy who investigates it all. That's an interesting thought.

Are you in a position now to executive produce other filmmakers' work?
I will, if I believe in something.

Do people bring that kind of thing to you?
Sometimes, sure.

But you haven't done a lot of that.
Not really. You know, it's hard enough to find one good project. But if something good comes along, I'll do it.

What's next?
I don't know. We'll just see. I'll know it when it comes along. I've got a couple of ideas I've been working on and Bob Weinstein wants me to do a couple of things for him. I'm trying to work on a treatment. I haven't figured it out yet. There are a lot of different areas I haven't explored as a director that I'd like to try.

Different genre?
I'd like to do something a little suspenseful. Maybe a thriller. *Halloween* had a great deal of suspense—like you were dreading what was going to happen. I described it as a quiet movie. But again, it's always the story. That's the big thing. You have to come up with a great story.

Sofia Coppola

INTERVIEWED BY PETER N. CHUMO II
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When Sofia Coppola began writing *Lost in Translation*, her first original screenplay after her adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides*, she knew there were certain elements she wanted to build the movie around. "From the time I spent in Japan," she told me, "I always wanted to do a movie there, and I wanted to work with Bill Murray… and also I wanted to write a story that was kind of sweet and romantic." From these desires came one of the year's best screenplays, a meditative film that details the burgeoning friendship of two Americans who feel lost and make an unlikely connection at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Japan.

Young Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) has just graduated from Yale with a degree in philosophy and is tagging along with her photographer husband, who increasingly seems to be drifting away from her. She is very intelligent but aimless about her future and depressed about her lack of direction. Bob Harris (Bill Murray) is a middle-aged movie star shilling for a whiskey company for a fat two-million-dollar paycheck when, as he himself concedes, he "should be doing movies." He appears to be growing apart from his wife of twenty-five years and does not feel needed at home. Both Charlotte and Bob are in a crisis, one in early adulthood and the other in midlife.

As audiences might conjecture, Coppola admits that there is a lot of her in Charlotte, especially her younger self being "just out of college" and asking "what do I do with my life?" Charlotte tried to be a writer and photographer, paths that Coppola has taken through her filmmaking. (Coppola even put together forty pages of photo references and gave them to people working on the film to illustrate the feelings she wanted to convey.) But even Kelly, "the cheesy actress character," as Coppola describes her, exhibits another side of herself, "saying dumb things to be cute," although she relates less to that character.

Coppola did not do a lot of rewriting on the script and says she did not "overthink it and map it out because I find it's better just to go in the dark and figure it out as you go." Like her protagonists, who are not sure where they are going and are headed on a journey into the unknown, Coppola was on her own journey, living in the moment and searching out the "details that feel like a bigger deal" to build the delicate relationship between Bob and Charlotte. She likens the experience to painting: "When you're working on it, it just looks terrible and doesn't look like anything, and then all of a sudden it's done."

Coppola's script is anything but "terrible," but, because it is sparse and consists of many scenes of characters staring out of windows or meandering down streets, searching for some deeper meaning that is constantly eluding them, this way of working is certainly a risk. Unafraid to luxuriate in the long silence of a moment rather than filling each scene with meaningless noise, *Lost in Translation* is a film that defies Hollywood convention. This is best exemplified in the following sequence in which Charlotte takes a lengthy walk on her own:

```
FADE IN:

EXT. TOKYO — DAY

Charlotte finds her way down a narrow street in an old
section of Tokyo. She turns a corner and finds a
square with what she was looking for.

                                                CUT TO:

EXT. TEMPLE — DAY

The sun shines over a beautiful old temple. Birds
chirp, Charlotte approaches and goes inside.

                                                CUT TO:

INT. TEMPLE — DAY

Charlotte stands in the back and watches a ceremony. A
ROSHI speaks in Japanese, there is chanting. It's all
very foreign. Charlotte tries to feel something.
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It is hard to tell from this description of Charlotte visiting a temple just how beautiful and moving the scene will be when realized on film. Coppola knew from the outset the chance she was taking and "worried that it could just be really indulgent, really boring." But she stayed true to her vision and shot the film "for really a low budget so that if it was a total disaster, it would never have to come out."

But if Coppola did not do a lot of rewriting at script stage, she was willing to try different things on the set. She is "not uptight about dialogue changing" and would let her actors improvise if they had a better line, and sometimes she would alter lines if they were not working. When Bob and Charlotte meet for the first time and they exchange stories about their backgrounds, Bob takes her back to his young adulthood and the strange circumstances

by which he ended up with his wife:

```
                    CHARLOTTE
          Are you still in love with your
          wife?

                    BOB
          Yes... I don't know, I don't
          know her anymore. I don't know
          if you can be in love with one
          person the whole time. I was...
          actually I was in love with her
          sister first, when I was
          twenty-one. And one day her
          sister said to me she wanted to
          move to Paris, so I said okay,
          and she said no, she wanted to
          move to Paris with Hugo, this
          French playboy- and she's still
          married to him. And I moved in
          with Lydia... but I always
          really liked her.
```

Coppola finally felt that this story was "kinda grim" for the tone she was seeking and cut it from the script. It may have been interesting on the page, but in the context of Bob's overall story, it adds an extra layer that is not needed and does not serve the overall story.

While Coppola does not do much rewriting, reordering scenes during editing is a kind of final rewrite that allows her to clarify her characters. For example, there is a scene of Charlotte crying on the telephone to a friend of hers back home. She is speaking of the void she feels within her, how even when she visited a shrine and heard monks chanting, she did not feel anything, and how her husband is slipping away from her. Originally, this scene appeared later in the film, but Coppola chose to move it earlier so that we would understand Charlotte's state of mind. We would have a context for what she is going through as she is walking the streets of Tokyo and Kyoto.

Improvisation played a role in the shooting of the script, but usually it was a kind of guided improvisation—a unique collaboration between writer-director and actor that captures magical moments that can only happen through the spontaneous, creative interplay of a movie set. For instance, in the droll photo shoot sequence, Coppola cast a real photographer in the role and would whisper impromptu things in his ear, which he would then repeat as dialogue once the camera started rolling so that Murray could react to him in the moment. Thus, we have Murray's hilarious, unrehearsed send-ups of the Rat Pack and James Bond.

Other times it was a matter of tweaking a line or two. One of the things that appealed to Coppola about Murray was that, if something was not working, she could have him try something else. She might ask him, for example, to create a line as Bob that would make Charlotte laugh. In one of their early encounters in the hotel bar, they hint at the mutual feelings they have of being trapped—Charlotte in her husband's shadow and Bob in his celebrity-centered existence. In the script, Bob asks in mock desperation, "Who do I

have to fuck to get off this planet?" But in the film, Murray improvises a line that better suggests a conspiracy between them, thus making them allies standing against the world at large: "Can you keep a secret? I'm trying to organize a prison break, and I'm looking for, like, an accomplice. We'd have to first get out of this bar, then the hotel, then the city, and then the country. Are you in, or are you out?"

Coppola appreciates "meandering mood pieces," films like Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love*, which details an intense friendship that does not become sexual, and classic works by Godard and Fellini. She even references *La Dolce Vita* when Bob and Charlotte watch it on TV (Coppola recalled seeing *La Dolce Vita* in a hotel in Japan with Japanese subtitles and wanted to include it in the film). From Charlotte's participating in the ancient art of Ikebana floral design with some older women who guide her in the ritual, to writing a wish on a piece of paper and tying it to a tree, many scenes in *Lost in Translation* revolve around, as Coppola beautifully puts it, "honoring a moment." She enjoyed the idea of "looking at something…when it's at its peak or at its most beautiful moment" before it is gone. This idea may be summed up best when Charlotte and Bob are up late talking in his hotel room and she tells him, "Let's never come here again because it would never be as much fun." She is being playful and perhaps a tad melodramatic, but she is also expressing something serious about the experience she is having—she knows intuitively that their time together, just the two of them, could never be duplicated in another time and place because real-world concerns would impinge on the little world they have created for themselves. Charlotte has, in Coppola's words, come to "appreciate that moment because you can never recreate it in the same way."

This idea of "honoring a moment" can also apply to one of the most fun and entertaining scenes in the film, the karaoke party. The script is sparse about what exactly would happen in this scene. Coppola knew she wanted both characters to sing but was not sure at script stage what those songs would be. The script has Charlotte singing "Happy Together," but this must have been a placeholder for Coppola, who finally chose the Pretenders' "Brass in Pocket" for Charlotte because it is a karaoke standard and it is the kind of song that would allow Charlotte to put on a show for Bob and be flirtatious, thus revealing a different side of her. This was important in rounding off the character so that the audience would see that Charlotte, as Coppola puts it, "isn't this mopey girl in a hotel room, that she has some life to her when she's in a situation that's interesting to her. She does have a spark to her." At the same time, it becomes a "vulnerable moment" for Bob. Coppola, then, is an intuitive writer; even though she does not do much formal rewriting, details that have not yet been nailed down can be addressed creatively once shooting begins.

For Bob, Elvis Costello's "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding" was chosen to show he is from a different generation, and "More Than This" was selected during rehearsal because both Coppola and Murray

love Roxy Music and the tender lyrics (courtesy of Bryan Ferry) worked so well in the scene:

> *I could feel at the time*
> *There was no way of knowing*
> *Fallen leaves in the night*
> *Who can say where they're blowing?*
> *As free as the wind*
> *Hopefully learning*
> *Why the sea on the tide*
> *Has no way of turning*

This is yet another example of an unscripted, improvised moment that nonetheless did not come about haphazardly. The lyrics speak of transience in nature (the unpredictability of the leaves, the wind, the sea), which evokes the spirit of the fleeting yet languorous moments Bob and Charlotte share together.

The karaoke scene works first as an emotional release, a party where the characters can let loose after so many quiet scenes in which they have turned inward, unable to speak their minds even to the people closest to them. Charlotte's husband is so self-absorbed that he hardly listens to her, and Bob's wife seems so immersed in her redecorating schemes that she cannot fathom the melancholy side of her husband. When Bob tells Charlotte about marriage from the vantage point of twenty-five years and explains that he used to have fun with his wife, his words are a gentle reminder to himself of that fun side he has ignored. And yet in a roomful of strangers, in a foreign land, they can express an aspect of themselves that they would not be comfortable showing to their closest loved ones, and can act out a liberated, idealized version of themselves. At the conclusion of the karaoke sequence, Bob and Charlotte sit quietly together in repose, and she gently leans her head against his shoulder. The script has a few lines of dialogue in which Charlotte observes that Bob bites his fingernails, but the filmed version has no dialogue at all, just the intimate gesture of Bob taking a drag off her cigarette.

Delicate, intimate gestures define Bob and Charlotte's relationship. After the karaoke scene, we are treated to a subtle hint of Bob's growing affection for Charlotte:

```
INT. HOTEL — NIGHT

Bob carries a very drunk Charlotte to her room. Her
purse dangling from his arm.

He puts her to bed. He takes her shoes off for her and
looks at her lying on the bed. She opens her eyes to
smile at him. He wants to kiss her, but he leaves.
```

Thus we see his sense of longing, quietly portrayed by Murray in the film but already suggested in the script. In another scene, they grow closer verbally, discussing the life's problems that Bob may be able to help Charlotte with:

Charlotte and Bob lie a few feet apart on the bed.

                    CHARLOTTE
          I'm stuck. Does it get easier.

                    BOB
          No, yes, it does...

                    CHARLOTTE
          Yeah? But look at you.

                    BOB
          Thanks. It does, the more you
          know who you are... you don't
          care about things the same
          way...

                    CHARLOTTE
          I just don't know what I'm
          supposed to be. I thought maybe
          I wanted to be a writer... but I
          hate what I write, and I tried
          taking pictures, but John's so
          good at that, and mine are so
          mediocre... and every girl goes
          through a photography phase,
          like horses, you know dumb
          pictures of your feet...

                    BOB
          You'll figure it out. I'm not
          worried about you. Keep writing.

From encouraging her in her career, they go on to talk about marriage and the difficulties he has encountered. It is a tender scene in which the older generation offers some advice—not wisdom that will magically solve Charlotte's problems but just a little assurance that she is not alone, that other people have gone through the same doubts and anxieties that she is experiencing at such a young age. At one point, his hand softly touches her ankle—a subtly erotic gesture that hints at his attraction but does not push it too far.

At other times, the heartfelt gesture between them is playful, as when Bob rushes Charlotte to the hospital for her injured toe—it is not a life-and-death matter, but pretending it is allows Bob to care for her:

     He looks down at her feet in flip flops, her toe is
     purple.

                    BOB
          What happened to your toe?

                    CHARLOTTE
          I don't know, I think maybe I
          broke it? I knocked into
          something the other day...

     She slips her shoe off and shows it to him- her middle
     toe is black and blue.

                    BOB
          That doesn't look good.

     She enjoys the sympathy.

```
                    CHARLOTTE
          It's bad isn't it?

                    BOB
          We should get you to the
          doctor.

                    CHARLOTTE
          You think so?

                    BOB
          Yeah, look at that thing.

       She smiles at him.
```

Bob is obviously being funny and serious at the same time, but Charlotte enjoys his concern and their mad rush to the emergency room that follows, a kind of wild adventure that makes her feel special, a feeling she does not seem to get from her husband.

The power of a simple gesture reaches its apex in the film's concluding sequence. Bob is departing for home after having experienced a kind of mini-relationship with Charlotte all compressed within a week's time, a notion that appealed to Coppola. They have met, gone out together, had fun, and shared their most intimate feelings about life and marriage. He has "cheated" on her in his one-night stand with the hotel's lounge singer, which has hurt her, and they have subsequently made up. So their farewell scene had to be special and intimate. Coppola admits that she "didn't have a solution in dialogue that gave that feeling," and indeed the script's version of the farewell is rather mundane considering the well of emotions that have built up in this couple:

```
       In the distance an umbrella moves to reveal Charlotte.

                         BOB
                Charlotte!

       But she can't hear him over the loudspeaker. He rushes
       to her.

       C.U. she turns and we see she is crying.

       The music swells. He embraces her, holding her close
       to him in the crowd.

                         BOB (CONT'D)
                Why are you crying?

                         CHARLOTTE
                   (sincere)
                I'll miss you.

       He kisses her, hugs her good-bye.

                         BOB
                I know, I'm going to miss you,
                too.

       He holds her close.
```

So, to enrich the ending, Murray held Johansson close and improvised a whisper in her ear. The sound was muffled, but Coppola knew that she could

add the words later in postproduction. However, she chose not to add the dialogue, feeling instead that it was better that it "stays between the two of them." It is a beguiling ending that can frustrate audiences looking for a statement that sums it all up, but to take the obvious way would be to deny the uniqueness of their relationship. No simple statement could possibly be as powerful as the unknown, which mirrors the sense that we really do not know where they are headed.

Coppola also knew that she wanted a final gesture in which Bob "acknowledges that there was something between them, that she's attractive to him." So during one take, she asked Murray to kiss Johansson, and, caught completely off guard, Johansson reacted genuinely when Murray gave her a passionate kiss on the lips. The fact that the main scenes between Bob and Charlotte were shot in order and the farewell was filmed on Johansson's last day of shooting helped heighten the emotion for her. It has a sexual undertone, of course, but it does not suggest that Bob wants something more from Charlotte. Rather, it suggests closure for this chapter in her life as she walks away, seemingly fortified by this gesture of love.

Coppola's screenplay for *Lost in Translation* is deceptively simple, but behind it is a writer who knew what she wanted in the broad sense but was open to trying out different ideas as she shot the film. Through this method, she has created a film whose accrual of details and small gestures, such as a look of wistful longing, can be just as effective as a whole page of dialogue. In this way, Coppola's method is a reflection of the journey her characters take. A relatively loose, intuitive style of working has produced a lovingly detailed portrait of two wandering souls who share a special rapport just in acknowledging that each is not alone in searching for something deeper in life. Coppola not only honors the little moments that compose their journey but honors the larger moment that is their week together, showing the bond that can form when two seemingly incompatible but kindred spirits meet and touch something deep within the other.

Frank Darabont

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INTERVIEWED BY DANIEL ARGENT & ERIK BAUER
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 4, #2 (SUMMER 1997)
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F rank Arpad Darabont was born in 1959 in Montebeliard, France, the son of Hungarian refugees who had fled Budapest during the failed 1956 revolution. Brought to America while still a baby, Frank graduated from Hollywood High School in 1977 and began his film career as a production assistant on a low-budget 1980 horror movie called *Hell Night*. After working nine years in the industry as a set dresser and production assistant while he struggled to master his writing craft, Darabont sold *Black Cat Run* in 1986 (it took over a decade for the story to reach the screen as an HBO film in 1998). Since then, Darabont has written extensively in film, many times in the horror and SF genres, co-scripting such screenplays as *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: The Dream Warriors* (his first produced credit), *The Blob*, and *The Fly II*. He has also done uncredited rewrites on such films as *Eraser* and *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as writing eight episodes of George Lucas's television show *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*.

In 1980 Darabont wrote to Stephen King, asking him for the rights to adapt his short story "The Woman in the Room." King assented, and Darabont wrote and directed his first short film. Then in the late '80s Darabont again approached King, this time asking permission to adapt King's novella, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*. His screenplay *The Shawshank Redemption* (which he also directed) would win him the USC Scriptor Award (shared with Stephen King) and the Humanitas Prize—in addition to being nominated for an Academy Award, a Writers Guild Award, and a Golden Globe. The film continues to be a favorite on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), battling with Coppola's *The Godfather* for top honors on their list of best films.

Creative Screenwriting caught up with Darabont in 1997 and 2000 as he was finishing some pick-up shots on *The Green Mile*. An adaptation of King's seri-

alized novel of the same name, *The Green Mile* tells the story of Paul Edgecomb, who in 1935 must balance his humanity with his job as a guard on the Green Mile (death row) in Cold Mountain Penitentiary. Paul's views of life, death, and humanity are challenged with the arrival of John Coffey, a gentle giant convicted of a horrible crime who has a magical effect on the guards, the inmates, and a mouse.

Darabont is a friendly, laughing man, a Hollywood veteran who talks energetically about his work and craft. Part film buff, part film professor, he punctuates his answers with a knowing wink or laugh as he leans over his desk (when he's not propping his red Converse sneakers on it). Darabont has the aura of someone who knows how lucky he is to work in a medium he loves, and he recognizes the irony of being seen as an "overnight success" after having worked as a professional screenwriter for over fifteen years.

What were the early years working in Hollywood like for you? The nine years spent working towards becoming a screenwriter?
Those were lean years. Those were very lean years. I did a lot of weird jobs throughout that time. I was a forklift operator, I bussed tables at The Old Spaghetti Factory on Sunset, I did whatever I had to do. Mostly, luckily, happily, I wound up set dressing for about six of those years on a freelance basis. So I was Mr. Glue Gun, Mr. Screw Gun, Mr. Where-do-you-want-it? It was a pretty thrilling time actually, a lot of intense effort and guerrilla warfare filmmaking. So we worked a lot of non-union shows, we worked a lot of commercials and low-budget, often bad movies. But it was a grand experience for me. As a set dresser, as the art department's representative on the set, next to the camera, boy, did I learn a lot. That was film school for me. That was learning how to make a movie, learning how to direct. That experience was really cool.

I didn't go to film school. I didn't go to college. I graduated Hollywood High back in '77 and decided to kind of attack life and hope it worked out. It actually worked out quite well. I'm sort of stunned. I don't recommend circumventing college, it's not for everyone, but I'm one of these fellows unburdened by the benefits of higher education.

How did you learn screenwriting?
Endless hours at the desk. Endless hours at the typewriter, then the computer, which came along later. It was really a lot of applied time and effort and self-study. Which is the way most people learn. I have many ambivalent feelings about the "screenwriting gurus…"

The whole industry of screenwriting…
Yes, the whole industry of "we can make you a screenwriter." I have ambivalent feelings because, ultimately, even though there is some benefit to be gained by those things—I stress the word "some" benefit, minimal benefit—ultimately you know what it all boils down to? You're sitting at your desk, all by yourself for years, trying to figure out your craft and applying the effort

necessary. And that's what nobody wants to hear. Everybody wants to hear, "I can teach you a three-act structure, I can give you a formula, and you'll be selling screenplays within six months." Bullshit.

In only two days for $249.
Exactly. Exactly. Bullshit I say. And what's really funny is, these guys in the business of being screenwriting gurus, they don't ever write screenplays. I have never seen one of these guys' names on a screen credit in a movie. I do think there is some benefit to these classes, but I don't think people should be misled into thinking it's the be-all and end-all, and they're going to walk out a screenwriter. Everything is self-applied effort in life. Everything. You don't learn anything easily.

What has it been like, these past ten years, working within the Hollywood game as a screenwriter for hire?
It's been an abundance, a blessing, an example of putting in the effort and really reaping the rewards. That really does happen. I feel like the luckiest son-of-a-bitch on the planet. On the other hand, it's been a fucking drag, man. 'Cause it has all the complaints you've heard from screenwriters. They nail you every day. They just pop you in the nose every single time. And so, on that level, it's a slog. Would I trade it? Absolutely not. What, am I nuts? Look where I'm living. What else would I be doing? I'm unskilled labor. I never went to college. I couldn't get hired by McDonald's. It's been great.

How did you work towards your screenwriting initial break with Nightmare On Elm Street III*?*
The initial break is an interesting thing, because it seemed like every plan I had didn't pan out. The ones I didn't recognize as a plan were the ones that came through. Suddenly here's opportunity tapping on my shoulder. *Nightmare III* came about because of my friendship and association with Chuck Russell (director of *The Mask* and *Eraser*). He was a line producer, and hired me as a production assistant on my very first movie job. It was *Hell Night* with Linda Blair. Look at the end credits, I'm there! I'm in there, man. It was such an exciting thing to see that credit roll at the end. My very first screen credit. But it's a terrible movie.

Anyway, Chuck hired me again for the next movie he was doing, and it was on that show that the wardrobe lady, who had become a friend of mine, gave Chuck a copy of a spec I had done for *M*A*S*H** behind my back. Chuck read it and was sufficiently impressed that, once the show ended, he called me into his office and said, "Hey, I'm looking for a writing partner. Would you be interested in writing with me?" And I thought, hey, this is the first time anyone's asked me to write! I'll do this. In the ensuing years, he and I became very good friends.

He was doing a lot of line producing work and was trying to direct, so we were always generating scripts. He would pay me $1,000 or $1,200 bucks out

of his pocket just to keep me from having to go take a set dressing gig, which is how I was making ends meet by then. So we wrote together and turned out a lot of scripts, until one day he walks in and says, "I've been offered *Nightmare On Elm Street III*." He had just come from a pitch meeting over at New Line. They had a very problematic script on their hands and he had suggested a rash of solutions to the problems and it all made sense so they said, "Okay, you can direct." And he came home and said, "Okay, Frank, we've got two weeks to rewrite this script." And so off we went to Big Bear. Got away from the phones and everything else, locked ourselves in a cabin and rewrote *Nightmare III* in eleven days, beginning to end. We made sense out of it, to whatever extent it makes sense.

Mind you, we retained all the good ideas that were there, we retained all that worked. We weren't and aren't in the habit of changing something that doesn't need to be changed just because it might get us credit. We did happen to get credit on that one, so there was a significant amount of work that went into that rewrite. Which Wes Craven, at that time, disputed. He was grinding an ax with New Line and unfortunately, Chuck and I got caught in the middle of it. Wes had been told some things about us that were not true. There was a certain amount of dishonesty going on there that Wes didn't realize. So he responded on a very visceral level, on a very emotional level, and was a bit childish in the press. That's okay. I've never held a grudge and have since met him and got to know him a little bit. He seems like a very nice man. I just think he was in a bad situation with those folks. There were a lot of hard feelings bouncing around and Chuck and I got caught in the crossfire.

I think within three weeks of Chuck walking through that door and making the announcement, he was on the set saying, "Action." Can you imagine being three weeks away from shooting and you don't have your director? I don't know what they were thinking.

When you write a screenplay on spec, are you working to get it down on paper to be filmed as you see it, or are you also working at creating feelings in and motivating the reader?
Both. Very much both. I've always felt my job was to try to describe this really cool movie to somebody who hasn't had the chance to see it yet, to make the reading experience as enjoyable and engrossing as possible in order to convey that's what the movie will be as well. If I can get them to picture the movie in their heads, then I've done the job I intended to do.

I not only do that for specs, but for any script I write. Even the most straightforward assignment, I'm trying to make it a thrilling experience for the reader. I want to get everybody who's involved in the making of the film excited about the movie. I think that's part of my job. In a sense, I'm kind of the cheerleader. So I wouldn't make a delineation between a spec and an assignment script here.

Mind you, I'm not terribly experienced in writing specs. I haven't done those all that much. I wrote a spec, *Black Cat Run*, in '84, two years before

Nightmare III came along. And that spec gave my agent, Allen Greene, something to show around, to get me in the door and introduce me with. That spec really got my career started, got read a lot, and led to a lot of work. The only other spec I ever wrote was *Shawshank*. And I speced that specifically because I wanted to direct it.

You were getting hired a lot. How did you take the time out to write the spec for Shawshank*?*
It wasn't easy, because being a writer who gets one job after another becomes a really cushy and easy thing to take. I wrote *Shawshank* in '92 and that was maybe five years after my career had started as a writer. And when you're only five years into a career you still figure it's kind of a fluke, and you're loath to turn down the work. So, it was a bit of a nerve-wracking thing to face, to say to your agent, "Knock it off. Leave me alone. No, I don't want to rewrite that sequel to that movie. Let me just sit home and write this thing and I won't make any money doing it, but it's something I really believe in." I had to shut down operations, barricade myself in, and not come out until it was all done.

What attracts you to Stephen King's stories?
That's like answering the question, "What attracts you to chocolate ice cream?" I loved King's work from the get-go. I read *The Shining* when I was in high school—seldom have I been that engrossed in a book. I became a fan of his work from that moment on. I have read every word that the man's published and some that he hasn't. What attracts me to his work? He's one hell of a story spinner. He spins yarns in a very old-school way that tend to be very involving, very rich in character. He's considered by some of the snobbier critics, the literary critics, to be a populist and therefore not to be trusted or endorsed. The same thing was said about Dickens.

   Stephen is a very old-fashioned storyteller, in the best sense of being old-fashioned. Aside from character and absorbing narrative, he has one hell of a knack for suspense, as he's proven time and again. I may be the first person in history that draws a parallel between Stephen King and Frank Capra, but there's a real thread of humanity and humanism in King's work. King loves people; you can see it in his writing. He loves their nobility and their foibles; he loves the ways in which they can excel and the ways in which they can crumble and fall. He loves the good side and the bad side. He is an analyst of the human soul, if you will, as all the best storytellers are.

It's been said King wants to stay close to the films adapted from his work, to keep them on track.
Quite the opposite. If he's involved in a film, then he's very involved in the film. If he's not directly involved as a producer, then he's very hands off. He explained to me that very early on in his career, he had enough bad movies made out of his work that he learned to distance himself emotionally from the

movies being made, from anything he doesn't have a direct hand in. That way, if the movie turns out great, he can take enormous pleasure in it. And if the movie turns out poorly, he doesn't have to take all the emotional hits of seeing something go wrong and not be able to control it. Because, frankly, you can't control those situations. We've all felt that happen. So he was very hands off where *Shawshank* was concerned; he was hands off where *The Green Mile* was concerned. He trusts that I'm going do right by him, which is really nice. His involvement has been that he read both scripts and said, "Yeah, this is great. Good luck." It's an enormous compliment, particularly coming from somebody that I respect and admire so much. He's been very generous to me. In my life, he's occupied the niche of patron saint. Let's face it, he's provided me with some amazing material that I have used to fuel my career.

You started your career by adapting King's short story, "The Woman in the Room."
The Woman in the Room is a thirty-minute short film that I made in my very early twenties. It took me three years to get the damn thing finished. And that is what opened up the door with Steve. It remains, I think, his favorite short film of the many short films that have been adapted by young filmmakers— he has a policy of granting those kinds of rights fairly freely. So a few years later, when I asked for the rights to *Shawshank*, he was of a mind to grant them, because he had seen that short and did like it very much. And also [chuckling] it was such an obscure story, I think he figured, "Ah, what the hell."

Steve's always been a little intrigued by the notion that, as a director, I tend to gravitate toward his lesser-known works—until *The Green Mile*, which became a bestseller. But of all the youngsters who ever asked for the rights to a story, I was the only one who ever asked for *Woman in the Room*. I wasn't interested in [filming] the more obvious Stephen King-type stories. This is the story about a man whose mother is dying of cancer in the hospital. *Shawshank*—I think that request perplexed the hell out of him. I think part of why he granted me the rights was to see what the hell would happen— almost like a science experiment. So he's been great to me. I don't believe I'll ever be able to repay the debt that I owe him. But maybe the best thing I can do is keep doing well by him, when I adapt his work to the screen. Because he seems to derive an enormous pleasure from that.

What initially attracted you to King's story? Why did you consider it cinematic?
More than cinematic or visual, I first responded to the emotional content of it. The really wonderful characters, the wonderful relationships, the obstacles they face and overcome. Secondarily, there was the visual element of it which always boiled down to, "Gee, if we could find a really cool looking prison to shoot, this is going to be a really cool looking movie." And luckily, that happened. We found the OSR in Mansfield, Ohio, which they had just shut down two years prior. It was an incredible, gothic place. Mostly though, it was the emotional content. It's the little things that make a movie good, the little emotional moments. The rest of it is all candy.

You were quoted in the press kit for Shawshank *as saying the movie was about redemption. Whose redemption? Red's?*
Everybody. Everybody gets redeemed in that movie to some degree or another. One of the cool things about life—or drama, if not life—is that a forceful and righteous individual can really effect a lot of change. And some of it's awfully subtle, maybe it's just one tiny kernel of grace you take away from knowing this person. And that's what I love about storytelling too—everybody winds up getting kicked in the ass or uplifted in a really good story. Even the warden, when he puts the gun to his head and pulls the trigger, that's redemption for this guy.

Wasn't the theme of the film really hope?
I think the two are inextricably intertwined. I think hope is always redemptive. Hope really is the key word, isn't it? That's the finest part of us as human beings.

In terms of craft, how did you approach weaving that theme of hope and redemption into the screenplay?
That's a tricky question. Honestly, half the stuff I do, I don't know why or how it happens as I'm doing it. I don't think I really expended much of an effort on that because it's the whole core of the story. It's like all roads lead to Rome, every road marker led to that premise for me. Sometimes it was a conscious decision to just sort of bald-faced go for it. Some of the nicer moments in King's story are the little moments where characters reach for hope. For example, the beer on the roof scene—one of the scenes I love most from the book. Every once in a while I would make a conscious decision to do something that illustrated the point of the movie. Another scene that is similar in that sense is the Mozart scene.

That scene wasn't in King's novella.
Right. That was me just saying, "What the hell, I'm going to try to go for the throat a little here and if people think it's too corny then, well, I've shot myself in the foot." But I think it's heart-felt enough not to be corny. That scene was really a result of my listening to that opera, hearing that one piece of music over and over again. Every time I heard that piece, my soul was just lifted up, my spirit soared and I thought, what the hell. You wind up playing "let's pretend" a little bit. You think, if I were Andy and I had the opportunity, I would play this piece of music for the whole prison to hear. Maybe that would be a cool scene in the movie, but it also reinforces the whole premise—we have to grab for hope wherever we can, even in the bleakest of circumstances. Every once in a while there was that conscious decision, but for the most part it was an unconscious pursuit of Stephen King's theme, which was very strong in his story.

How did you approach the adaptation?
You do what you always do, you try to make the most sense of the story that

you can. You try to smooth out the bumps and plug the holes and find an emotional through-line.

Were there certain things you thought you had to do to bring it from a novella to the screen?

My real conceptual breakthrough was the James Whitmore character. I think this was prior to the writing, in the thinking about the story that he just kind of popped into my head and unlocked the whole movie for me. The trickiest aspect of adapting King's story was the issue of institutionalization. Which, in a larger sense, represents hope versus despair. Very fundamental to the theme of the movie. And I had no idea how to do this because King, by benefit of the printed page and just being able to describe the character's thoughts, could tell you what being institutionalized is, and how scary the thought of parole is after you're behind bars long enough. We, the screenwriter, need to figure out a way to illustrate that. Sure, you can talk about it to an extent, but you can't *just* talk about it. You have to *show* it. I realized that Brooks Hatlen, a character mentioned in passing in one paragraph of the novella, needed to be a main character, and that we needed to see his experience in order to relate to the entire theme of the movie, and to Red's (Morgan Freeman) experience at the end of the movie. I thought, ahh, there is light at the end of the tunnel. I get it. That was my biggest breakthrough. The rest of it was just sewing the elements together and having little inspirations here and there. I'm making it sound easier than it was, probably, but the rest did fall into place.

One of the things that really struck me about the screenplay for Shawshank *was the way it broke the rules on showing vs. telling.*

Rules are there to be broken.

Could that movie have been made as effectively without Red's continuing narration or voice-over?

Not at all. Not at all. And I'm delighted that it worked. I'm delighted people responded to it. I'm delighted I had Morgan Freeman to deliver that narration. Let's start there. If you're going to listen to somebody's voice for two hours, that's the guy to do it. Thank God it worked. There were many arguments in favor of it, starting with Stephen King's narrative voice in the story, told from the point of view of that character.

Much of that narration is verbatim.

Much of it is verbatim. Much of it is simply the narrative of Stephen King. And it was such a strong voice, it was such a present voice, the whole story was, "Let me tell you about this amazing guy I once knew, Andy Dufresne." It was like Red, this character, was spinning a yarn for you on a porch somewhere, telling you this story. I couldn't imagine the story working some other way without that voice. And I thought, okay, it's got to be narration. Half of

what's interesting about the story are the insights of this man.

So I started writing it, and I got really freaked out halfway through. I suddenly thought, oh my God, I'm breaking the rule. I'm going to be damned to movie hell. I'm telling instead of showing. I'm relying too much on it. As if a sign from God, I turned on cable that night and it's the premiere of *Goodfellas*. And I thought, this is a really great movie and it has a lot of voice-over. It had been about a year since I had seen it in the theaters, and I sat and watched it again. And I thought "I'm a piker, man, I'm a stingy little bastard when it comes to narration compared to these guys" [Nicholas Pilleggi and Martin Scorcese]. There are no rules, and as soon as you think there are, you're fucked. Because it all comes from the heart, from the instinct, and if it feels right, it probably is right. So, my talisman in Ohio was my tape of *Goodfellas*. I took it with me, and on weekends—my weekend was Sunday—I'd sit there totally blown-out and depressed, and I'd pop in *Goodfellas* and get inspired again.

It's a great movie. I don't know how many times I've seen it.
Yeah. You lose count with a movie like that. It's a brilliant movie. One of the best ever.

Another thing that struck me about your adaptation was the way you added a lot of violence to the cinematic version. What do you think the relationship is between violence and effective cinematic drama?
Was there?

If you look at it, yes.
Well, you're right. Tommy gets killed, and Fat Ass gets killed. Then the warden commits suicide, right. That was not really an effort to spice the movie up with violence, which is something I don't believe in, so much as it was an attempt to create more dramatic closure for these characters. In King's story—and mind you, I'm not criticizing King's story because I think as a story it's largely flawless—but on the printed page you can be a little more ambiguous, a little more ambivalent. Movies need a greater sense of closure in plot elements and in an overall sense. In the story, Tommy is merely transferred out of Shawshank to a minimum security prison. He's only got another six months to go and he'll be back with his wife. And I thought, well that makes Tommy kind of a shit. Granted, I understand. We can't all be brave and courageous and take a stand in life, but, one, I like him less. Two, we're missing a good opportunity to make a better villain out of the warden. And three, we're missing a great opportunity, by virtue of the first two, to intensify Andy's triumph. So, to tighten all these dramatic screws, I thought, okay, we've got to whack the kid. We've got to love him, and then we've gotta whack him. It makes the warden such a terrible man that Andy's triumph is that much greater, and there's much greater catharsis in the movie for the audience. So, in honesty, shooting the kid to pieces was not just me trying to have squibs on the set one night and do a cool bit of violence on screen.

It was really an attempt to make a dramatic turn more precise and satisfying. The same thing with Fat Ass. You can tell people all you want that this is a terrible place. They see a guy being beaten to death the first night in, they *know* it's a terrible place.

But I don't think the violence that was added to the narrative of the movie was glamorized. I remember sitting there, tapping my head, asking myself: how do we do this scene where Fat Ass gets beaten to death? Do we do the obvious, do we do the sort of erotic close-up, big blurry quick-cut shots of some guy getting beat up and blood hitting the wall? I thought, screw that, I'm sick and tired of that. I don't find it interesting or erotic anymore. I think it's pretty sophomoric now. The solution to Fat Ass was to just do a wide-angle, static, very objective point of view where you're looking at figures in the environment. It's not about violence, it's about the place.

Could you talk a little bit about setups and payoffs?
I'm a big believer in them. I love them. It's a popcorn rule of thumb. You always have to have a setup and you always have to do a payoff. But, you know what? It works great! And it works in great movies as well. I noticed some setups and payoffs in *Courage Under Fire* that were very subtle and sophisticated, but they still work on the same level of your basic action movie setup and payoff. They're great! I live and die by my setups and payoffs, and most good screenplays do.

In Shawshank, *the one that seemed particularly clever to me was the Bible and "Salvation Lies Within."*
Thank you.

What do you think little clever bits like that do for a movie?
I think they delight an audience, for starters. When I see something clever like that, when I see something that is carefully thought out and planted, I'm simply delighted. I always want to thank the storytellers for doing a good job. Setups and payoffs, at their best, create a sense of irony that is delicious. You take it home and think about it and ask, why isn't life like that? It should be. I think they're really an intrinsic part of storytelling.

An example of supplying payoff to a setup in *Shawshank* was the fact that in the novella, Andy's revenge is simply to escape. His false identity, the money he walks away with, was all a separate issue. King mostly got away with it in the story because he could finesse it. But, from the bald storytelling point of view of a screenplay, it was a bit of a contrivance. Andy had a friend on the outside whose existence is introduced very late in the story, who set up this false identity and made investments for him. Somehow, it didn't feel integral to the story. It worked fine, but for my purposes, I needed something a little cleverer. So, I decided to tie it in with all the scams Andy was doing for the warden. I thought, if he's doing all these scams, if he's generating all this money, why can't he also be setting up a false identity for himself? Why

can't he be setting up his own score? It makes him a cleverer hero. It makes the warden a more defeated villain. It provides a payoff to the setup, because the setup was in the story to begin with. What a great setup. To not have that be the payoff seemed a bit of a misstep. Sometimes doing a rewrite or an adaptation, you're trying to take those elements and tie them in. Trying to make those connections work a little better.

I thought one of the real strengths of the screenplay vs. the original novella was its increased dramatic unity.
Thanks. The screenplay was a much more mechanical affair as well. By necessity, it is a mechanical construct. Whereas, a work of fiction doesn't have to be. Getting back to what I was saying about the story feeling as if Red were telling it to you on the front porch one night, not only was that a delightful kind of folksy technique, but it also provided a loose, rambling narrative. The real challenge was to take that nice rambling narrative and put all the pieces together as if it was the transmission of a car. Do the linear, mechanical structure a movie needs and still retain that sense of whimsy in the narrative. That was the challenge of the adaptation. Telling what seemed like the same story, but actually with a lot of differences along the way.

Are you really conscious of structure when you write?

Oh, yeah. But not like some people. I'm not a big carder. I'm not a big pre-structurer. I find that to be an onerous task. I fuckin' hate it. My best work has been the result of writing organically, or starting without a completely firm notion of what the next scenes are going to be. And, funny enough, apparently some of my best structured work is the result of doing that as well. I know my beginning, I know my end and I know certain key things along the way. Certain markers in the road. That's how I like to write. Otherwise, it becomes nothing more than a mechanical exercise and writing shouldn't be that. But, if pre-structuring things in a firm way helps a writer organize his or her thoughts, great. Whatever works is what needs to be done. Chuck Russell always cards things. He always wants to know in the first act these things happen…George Lucas is the same way. One can't criticize results, can one?

How do you approach the rewriting process? In reading the two drafts of Shawshank*, there weren't any major changes, just a tightening.*
Right. By the time I've got a first draft done, my structure is pretty much there. I don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel when I rewrite. Sometimes, however, the areas are gray. You wrestle with whether or not you need something on the very basic level of two plus two equals four. The audience will understand what is going on without it. But perhaps it's a grace note that makes the experience or the character richer, so you don't want to lose that. It's not just math and mechanics, sometimes it's poetry and you need to follow your heart and not lose something that enriches the moviegoer's experience.

There were a couple of scenes toward the end of the movie that were cut pretty late in the process. Right after our first test screening. They are scenes of Red after he's been paroled, after he's gotten out of Shawshank and before he gets to the tree. This is the section where he's coming to grips with the fact that he's not going to make it, that he's institutionalized as Brooks Hatlen was institutionalized, that all he really wants to do is go back to prison.

That seemed pretty well mirrored in what was left.
Yes. The scenes I cut out were good scenes. One was a scene of Red walking along, it's the Summer of Love and there are hippies in the park. It's like he's on a different planet all of a sudden, looking at all these crazy people, at women not wearing bras. The audience loved that scene. There's another where he has a nervous breakdown, this huge anxiety attack in the supermarket where he's bagging groceries. And there's another scene where he's talking to his parole officer. It was all meant to build up the notion that he's not going to make it. But, ultimately, all it built up was a terrible impatience on the part of the audience, because they knew it already. They had seen James Whitmore's experience, and Morgan himself says, "I know I can't make it on the outside. I'm just like Brooks Hatlen was." When Morgan says it, the audience believes it. The man has nothing but integrity on screen. So they bought it immediately. They knew the moment he left the prison and walked into the same hotel room—*boom*, the point was made. After that, anything I gave them was just taxing their patience, 'cause now they wanted to see where the movie was going to go. They wanted to see the end of the film. They wanted to see what happens when he gets to that tree. That's part of the fun of it. You discover your own movie when you're cutting it together. That's my favorite part of making the movie.

How has Shawshank *and all the heat it generated changed things for you?*
Obviously, it's been a huge blessing. My credibility level has risen to a point that was unprecedented for me before. Now I'm a guy they wouldn't hesitate to let direct something, which is sort of a remarkable place to be. The downside to that is you have to slog through a lot of really bad scripts they send you. Half the time I read these things and I want to call them and say, "What exactly in *Shawshank* leads you to believe I would be the right director for this *Die Hard* rip-off, or yet another serial killer movie? What exactly was there in that film?" *Shawshank* also elevated my visibility as a writer in the industry, and it's nice to know I always have that to fall back on.

Doing the script doctor routine is not a bad deal for me now. Lord knows, the money is great. And there's something really satisfying about feeling you know your shit about at least one aspect of your life. I've been doing the writer-for-hire routine for so long now that it doesn't faze or intimidate me at all anymore. Which I never thought I'd hear myself say. If I feel I have something I can contribute to a script, I'll take the job. I know I can make it better. I know I can give them what they want.

In a way, however, on a personal level, it's made me more cautious. More cautious about what I want to do next as a director. Perhaps a little more cautious than I need to be. I started out so strongly, I don't want to just roll snake eyes.

Has living up to Shawshank *forced you to be tougher on yourself as a writer?*
Absolutely. But more so as a director. As a writer there are so many kinds of writing jobs. I know I can take a rewrite job on so-and-so's next movie and write a draft or two, and know I'm not going to be judged on that. I can come in and clean the windows and detail the car, so to speak, but I'm not the guy who's going to have to be driving it.

That's interesting because many writers complain they're not recognized for their contribution to movies. The flip side to that is the anonymity you seem to cherish.
There is an anonymity that can be very comforting sometimes when you're a writer. You can go and make a great living and remain fairly anonymous. Somebody like John Sayles is not judged by the rewrites he's done, he's judged on *Lone Star*. That's him, that's John Sayles. Your visibility as a director is much higher. And sometimes one is grateful for that. I've had credit on movies that are embarrassing to me. Sometimes you don't get credit at all. You've just gone in and done a job of work for somebody and given them what they needed, and your name won't even appear on the screen. And there's some comfort in that too. If the film turns out successfully, you'll take pleasure in it anyway. My ego doesn't need to have my name up there, necessarily, to be satisfied. I don't need to steal somebody else's thunder. Although if I've provided a substantial amount of work, if I feel I've helped shape the movie, I definitely like to share credit. But in that situation, I'm never interested in having my name up there alone. I'm certainly glad I shared credit on *Frankenstein*, for example, because I didn't have to take the blame for how that ended up.

I haven't read your draft for Frankenstein. *How did it differ from the final film?*
I've described *Frankenstein* as the best script I ever wrote and the worst movie I've ever seen. That's how it's different. There's a weird doppleganger effect when I watch the movie. It's kind of like the movie I wrote, but not at all like the movie I wrote. It has no patience for subtlety. It has no patience for the quiet moments. It has no patience period. It's big and loud and blunt and rephrased by the director at every possible turn. Cumulatively, the effect was a totally different movie. I don't know why Branagh needed to make this big, loud film…the material was subtle. Shelley's book was way out there in a lot of ways, but it's also very subtle. I don't know why it had to be this operatic attempt at filmmaking. Shelley's book is not operatic, it whispers at you a lot. The movie was a bad one. That was my Waterloo. That's where I really got my ass kicked most as a screenwriter.

Did people associate you with Frankenstein*?*
No. Branagh had made himself such a visible target by proclaiming himself the ultimate auteur of this work, that when people started shooting bullets, they were only shooting at him. They were punching holes in his hide, not mine. He really took the brunt of the blame for that film, which was appropriate. That movie was his vision entirely. If you love that movie you can throw all your roses at Ken Branagh's feet. If you hated it, throw your spears there too, because that was his movie.

What did you bring to the adaptation The Green Mile*?*
Oh, golly—this is going to be a very unsatisfying answer. The normal set of changes one usually brings to something. In that sense, it was no different from *Shawshank*. You're trying to exploit or heighten the dramatic turns as much as possible; you either pull out or circumvent or reinvent narrative that can be more concisely presented. You're trying to tie up any loose ends that might be there. But for the most part, trying to mimic King's voice; trying to speak in his patois—not just in terms of dialogue, but in terms of the characters. You're trying to be very true to the author of the original material, as much as possible—at least I do. And that does involve a certain amount of texture and a certain amount of poetry. It's not just, "Let's put the simplest version of the narrative on screen that we possibly can," because often that winds up being unsatisfying. If an adapted story tells you the story but you feel it's not quite the same—well, we've all had that experience of seeing a book we loved turned into a so-so movie. It's the same story but it's missing the soul; it's missing the blood in the veins, somehow. And that's because often times [writers who adapt are] focused on narrative and they toss out a lot of that in-between-the-lines stuff, which is another thing that makes King such a compelling writer. There's a lot of between-the-lines stuff with his characters, and with his texture, that's important. So even when I invent new material, I try to keep it organic to the story that I'm telling. For example, there's a scene in *Shawshank* where Andy locks himself in the warden's office and plays his Mozart over the prison speakers—that doesn't exist in the book. That was invented by me, out of whole cloth, because I love that aria. I was listening to "The Marriage of Figaro" quite a lot while I was writing. And I thought, "What if Andy locked himself in…"? That thought took me into a different place, but it worked very seamlessly with the story that King was telling. So I try to do that as much as I can. Speak in the author's voice, even if you're using your own.

How long did it take you to write the adaptation for The Green Mile*?*
Two months. To the day.

Some reports implied it was an ongoing process, over years.
You've been looking at the Internet, I bet [laughs]. The wellspring of misinformation and speculation. I promise you, the adaptation took two months.

With one exception, I have never spent longer than two months writing any script. *Shawshank* was the same thing. That tends to be my rhythm. I lock myself in; two months later, I come out, like a groundhog, see if my shadow's there, and then I move on.

When you go into a new script, are you confident that it's going be a two-month hike, and that you'll have a great piece when you're done? Or is there still that "What the hell am I doing?" aspect to it?

A little of both. The "What the hell am I doing?" aspect doesn't ever go away—nor should it. It keeps you on your toes; it keeps you trying. But I've noticed that in recent years, I've gotten to the point where I'm at least relaxed about my uncertainty. I feel like I've done it enough times—and it's worked out well enough—that whatever the problems that arise, I'll manage to figure it out somehow. And that's a nice place to arrive at, because I never thought that I would.

When did you arrive at that point?

Post-*Shawshank*. Pretty much in the last couple of years, writing *The Green Mile*, doing work for Steven [Spielberg] on *Saving Private Ryan*, and some of the other things that I've been working on in the last three years or so [his ongoing adaptation of the Robert R. McCammon novel, *Mine*]. It doesn't make them any less challenging to write. You always feel like you're making it up for the first time as you're going along, as if you've never done the job before. But at least I figure I have a decent shot at making it work. So I'm a little more relaxed about that aspect of it. I'm hoping that one day I can look that way at directing.

You open The Green Mile script with a one-page scene of the manhunt. What is the function of that scene?

I'm not sure how obvious it is on the page, but the way it works in the film is that it's a very provocative shot. Because you don't know what the hell's going on. Obviously, something horrible and heated is happening. But in a subtle way, it also serves to introduce us to the old man [the old Paul Edgecomb] in the nursing home, because the scene functions almost as a dream he is having. It's the past torturing him in his head, even in his dreams, even after sixty years. And when he wakes up, all of these events are very much on his mind. As the story continues and we see how those events unfold, we wind up understanding exactly what that shot meant at the opening of the film. It's pretty cool.

It sets up certain questions.

I love setting up questions about the movie that the audience is seeing. I love people not getting it until later. Because that makes for a much more satisfying storytelling experience for the viewer. If you know everything that's happening every inch of the way, that's boring. You're not involved in the story

so much as you are watching it. If the filmmaker poses questions, and you have to be patient to see what those questions mean, it makes for a much more engrossing experience. It's the more cerebral version of the set-up and pay-off. And those questions are wonderful. There's a scene in the first five minutes of the movie with old Paul in the nursing home. He's in the TV room, and the channel is being changed on the television set and he sees *Top Hat* playing. And it's the moment in *Top Hat* when Fred Astaire starts singing "Cheek to Cheek" to Ginger Rogers and they begin to dance. And this huge emotional train wreck occurs in the character of old Paul watching what is an innocuous and lovely moment from an old movie. It prompts him to tell his story to his friend, Elaine. It's the past catching up with him. The audience hasn't a clue what it means. It's unexplained, until later in the movie. Very late in the movie, you find out how *Top Hat* figures into all this. That is pretty satisfying, when filmmakers can work those kinds of threads into a film.

In The Green Mile, *you set up the question about John Coffey much like Andy Dufresne in* Shawshank—*is he guilty or not?*
But those are red herrings. What's fun about working with such material is ultimately, the question of their innocence takes a back seat to the story. It's not a huge gasp to reveal that Andy Dufresne is innocent. It's not a huge gasp to reveal that John Coffey is innocent. They're amazing in other ways. And it's how they effect those around them that is significant. That's the character-based, character-driven story that I'm interested in telling. Are they innocent, are they guilty? It's not the big plot point of the movie. So I love those red herrings.

Could there have been a middle ground between innocent and guilty? Could the story have functioned if Dufresne was not shown to be a victim of circumstance, or if John Coffey may not have committed that particular crime but may have had a record. Dirtied their souls a little bit.
A story can work in that fashion, but I think these stories could not have worked in that fashion. It's more than a question of a sympathetic main character for the audience. Both characters have a purity of soul that drives what they do and what they are, and if either of them was guilty of their crimes, it would so fundamentally change those characters that the stories wouldn't be the same. But I can see a story being compelling about a man who is guilty, who finds a redemption through the process of incarceration. In fact we've seen that story told very well. Frankenheimer's great movie *Birdman of Alcatraz* leaps to mind.

And in some ways that's a more easily told story, because the path is from dark to light. It's always hard to write a hero, and it's hard to write a hero who stays a hero.
Is it? I don't know, I have no basis of comparison necessarily. Although most of the characters I've known as a writer have traveled something of a path from darkness to lightness. Those are the characters that I love: those who

seek some kind of enlightenment or betterment, a nobler sense of themselves. Those are the characters I tend to write. It's a recurring theme in my work.

I love that. I want more movies showing us the potential of ourselves. People seeking what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," rather than necessarily being mired in all the ways in which we can fail—spiritually or emotionally. I want to see more movies about working through those pitfalls and coming to a better place. Hey, I just described Frank Capra, didn't I? [Laughs] That's another thing I've always admired so much about Steven Spielberg's work, and George Lucas's work. Not to say that there isn't room in this world for nihilism, but we seem to be nihilistic at the exclusion of all else in our movies of late. And that's very disheartening to me. I don't want to get into a big debate about Hollywood's responsibility, but it's all too easy to tell a stupid story about a guy who solves his problems by picking up a gun. We're better than that. Not that I don't like the original *Die Hard*, because it's one of the best movies I've ever seen [laughs]. I love that film! But even there, there was something greater going on. There was more to it than just body count. I've always described *Die Hard* as a guy who spends the entire movie [laughs] trying to make up with his wife.

What is the meaning of Coffey's inevitable end?
I haven't the foggiest clue. And that's the truth of it. The exciting thing about *The Green Mile* to me is that I can't sum it up. I don't know how many times that's going to happen in my life. But it's for the audience to define this one, not for me. *Shawshank*, I can tell you what that's about. It's about hope and resilience and the redemptive essence of the human spirit. Boom, I just told you. I'm not sure what *The Green Mile* is about. All I know is that it's a hell of a story. And it will be fascinating to see what conclusions are drawn by the people who see it. Because I'm not sure that I've drawn my own yet.

At the end of the story, when Paul explains his situation, he has his theories as to why he is where he is. But even in the context of the story, these sound more like theories than answers. It seems that an answer might be that this was Coffey's gift. But Coffey doesn't quite understand the downside of that gift. That's a perfectly good answer. And on that level, it would be my answer. But there's also the "because it feels right" answer. There is a poetic irony that—as compassionate, as well-intentioned as Paul is (and he is, very much so)—a man who makes his living from death winds up having to live. There's a monkey's paw beauty and clarity to that, poetically, that I can't resist. It feels right.

In the script, Bitterbuck asks Paul: "You think if a man sincerely repents on what he's done wrong, he might go back to that time that was happiest for him, and live there forever? Could that be what heaven is like?" And then at the end of the story, when we find out the fate that Paul has been given, it seems to be almost the antithesis, that Paul won't reach heaven, that his earthly existence from that point on, all that he's learned, has given him an E-ticket to a bad place, at least temporarily. Is

there any connection between those two aspects?
I've never considered it, but there might be. It's a provocative question. If Steve King were here, I'd ask him [laughs]. Because the words you quote are virtually verbatim King, and a very interesting notion to me. I don't know. How's that for a lousy answer? [laughs]

The Green Mile *plays with the idea of the denouement where the hero rides off into the sunset. That doesn't happen for Paul and that's a little disturbing for an audience member.*
Paul is in an unfortunate position. He is an honorable man, yet if he were any less honorable, he wouldn't have gotten himself in the position of being the one to pick up the karmic baggage of events, whether it's fair or not. What I find fascinating about the character is that he's one of the few people involved in the situation who had the strength of character to shoulder that burden. If you'd given him a choice in the matter perhaps he wouldn't have, but there he is. Again, it's a wonderful storytelling irony, to me.

Ironic if not necessarily pleasant.
In the context of the fantasy that's occurring, it is a very realistic thing, a very melancholy thing. Not that it's complete hell; you can still see his light shining. He hasn't been beaten down by what's occurred to him, completely, as many people would.

Green Mile *comparisons to* Shawshank *are, unfortunately, inescapable. While* Shawshank *is about hope,* Green Mile *seems to be—well, the easy pitch is the anti-*Shawshank. *It's not, but it is a very grim story.*
I don't agree because everybody's humanity rises to the surface. That's the measure of a great story. There's a very haunting and melancholy quality to this story. Save for those who don't know any better (i.e., the villains of the piece) the people in it are all very human and they're trying very much to do the best they know how. They're trying to do right by the situation they find themselves in. And they're wrestling with issues of compassion and morality, all the things I love to see in a story.

They're trying to make things work for themselves.
And for one another, as well. There's a lovely sense of camaraderie among these characters, that I particularly relish, which came out in the ensemble that I was lucky enough to put together. The actors in this are the top grade. They're an amazing group.

The interesting thing about the script—as in the novel—is that you don't give any background as to what these inmates have done to deserve death row. They're portrayed as average people; we're not tainted by knowledge of their crimes. Was that a conscious decision?
It was, for a number of reasons. Number one, that kind of conversation tends

to be expository: the "Gee, what are you in for?" dialogue. I like it that, tonally and conceptually, you're meeting these guys for the first time, objectively and in this place, and you're seeing how they behave and how they react, and not being loaded down with baggage about what they did to get there. The same thing was true in *Shawshank*. The only thing that you ever know about anybody, why they're there, is the Morgan Freeman character. Interestingly enough, he's one of those characters we were talking about before, a man who is guilty, and who has found a peace and a redemption in his incarceration. He goes from darkness to light. He's the only one who cops to what he did. And it was important there for us to know that about him. I didn't go into any specifics or particulars or detail, he just said, "I'm in for murder, and yes, I'm guilty."

"I'm the only guilty man in this prison."
Exactly. And I love that about him. He's obviously been in that place long enough that he's cut through the bull and is perfectly willing to admit his responsibility for things. I think when Red first got to Shawshank he was like everybody else: "I'm innocent, I'm innocent." So that was very important. It was important that Red be guilty of his crime and that he cop to it. The real power at the end of the movie is the final parole scene, where—in a manner that doesn't beg sympathy—he basically unloads his soul on the parole board. Here's who I am, take it or leave it. That's his walk, that's his trajectory, that's his arc as a person. And boy, how lucky am I that Morgan Freeman was the actor to say that speech [laughs].

You worked for years writing genre films, dealing with creatures and monsters. And then you become known as the Shawshank *guy, the warm-hearted guy who makes us glow when we walk out of the theater.*
I loved it when *Shawshank* came out. There were a number of reviewers who pondered, "Where the hell did this guy come from? He did *Nightmare 3,* he did *The Blob*, he did *The Fly II*. Where the hell did this come from?" That was funny. Most recently, there was some mention of me in the trades: "Darabont, known for star-driven drama…" I thought, "Wow! Off of one movie!" Very funny how the perception of people changes as time goes by. You're remembered for your last movie more than anything in this town.

Why did you use the framing device of old Paul?
Because without it, there was no beginning and no end to the movie; there was no context for the movie to exist in. *The Green Mile* has now proved to be the world's longest *Twilight Zone* episode. But without the character of Paul Edgecomb as an old man in the retirement home, there's no story to tell. There's a lot of narrative, but it needs context; it needs the point that it's making. In the same way that I couldn't see an alternative to using Morgan's voice-over narration in *Shawshank*, because that was the narrative voice of the story that King told—I couldn't imagine the story any other way but hear-

ing it from Morgan's perspective, with his observations and his point of view. The same thing with *The Green Mile*. I took the framing device from Steve's framing devices. He had that framing device operating in every volume of *The Green Mile*. I pulled that out and focused on the most straightforward narrative version that I possibly could, so that the movie itself would have a framing device; in other words, a beginning and an end. Steve went back in [on every book in the series] and had a lot more to say about the old man. But then he also was functioning in a serialized form, as Dickens did. So the old man in the nursing home device was a handy literary way for Steve to bring the reader into each new volume, re-introduce the world to the reader, especially if somebody came to a later volume without having read the first ones. Steve could ease them into the story. It was a very clever device for him, but certainly not something that the screenplay required. [In the film adaptation] we set up a question at the beginning and we answer it at the end, using that device. And that was the enormous value of it. Plus we found an actor to play old Tom Hanks who kicks ass. Man, Dabbs Greer is great. Wait'll you see it. He's awesome. I shouldn't admit that. We should try to convince everybody it's Tom Hanks in old age make-up.

What other changes occurred from page to screen?
Brad Dolan [the vicious orderly in old Paul's nursing home] is history. Brad wound up being a burr in my side in that script. It took me a while, but before we shot the bookends I removed him from the script. And indeed, I believe when we publish the screenplay, I probably will not include him in the published screenplay. I'm pretty much a believer in publishing the script you went to the set with, even if stuff changes. But it's such a fundamental change, and I'm so happy to have him gone [that I'll probably omit his appearance in the published screenplay]. Steve needed to go back to this old folks' home at least six times, and Brad was a very clever invention in order to do that. Otherwise all you're left with is old Paul reminiscing. Steve needed a device to keep the reader in that old folks' home. In my loyalty toward the original author, Brad Dolan was an unnecessary hangover from the book. The end of the movie in my first draft was very much like the end of the books, where Brad Dolan shows up at the end in the shack when Paul is explaining everything to Elaine. And, man, he felt like a bump in the carpet to me.

Brad was beside the point. He has an interesting echo of Percy Whetmore. The interesting thematic point that King made is that there's always going to be a Percy, somebody in some position of power, even minimal power, who lacks the reason and compassion to be a person. But the bookends for the film didn't need Brad. When it came time to shoot the bookends, I thought, I have got to get rid of this guy [laughs]. 'Cause if I don't I'm going to be in the editing room trying to cut him out. Brad Dolan was a red herring in a bad way, something that never paid off for the movie.

When it came down to translating The Green Mile *into a screenplay, how did you*

put it together? Did you work with paradigms, three-act structures, reverse structures?
I don't think I'd know a paradigm if it came up and bit me. I don't think in terms of three-act structures. I can't tell you what's going to happen in the third act, 'cause I ain't there yet. For me, writing is a much more organic process. You sit down from page one and you try to experience the story as you go, and you try to make the most of the dramatic potential of the story. I generally have an idea where a story begins and I generally have an idea where a story ends. Believe me, there are plenty of screenplays I never wrote because I could never figure out where the damn thing was going. Why bother starting then? I tend to know certain signposts along the way, and I start working toward the first signpost. And once I'm there I know that off in the distance is the next signpost, and I have to get to that. All the structural elements flow from walking down that path, and from what the characters are telling me. That's not to say the more organized method is wrong. Whatever works for the writer is what the writer ought to do. Left to my own devices, it's an organic process.

In adaptation you have a leg up, because if the material is good at least you know what those signposts are. The method with which I approached *The Green Mile* was to go through all six books and type out a list of scenes. I had a page for each book: "Number one, here's what happens in the first scene in King's book. Number two, here's what happens in the second scene." And so on. And that gave me, at a glance, the structure of the whole damn thing. Beyond that I jumped in, and I would obviously refer to the book for the content of the scenes. That was the first time that I ever typed out the structure that way. But I needed to, because the thing was so sprawling. It was a real pleasure to go down that list and say, "Well, I won't need this scene and I won't need that scene," and cross them off. What you're left with is what winds up being molded into the screenplay. So that's my lazy method. Well, I'm not sure if it's lazy or not, but that's my method. It's only paper and time. If you go down a blind alley you can always backtrack.

How do you see the relationship between your writing and directing? Is one an extension of the other?
Ideally, yes. But I could never be Joel Schumacher because he apparently thrives on the process of directing a movie. He goes from one film to another to another. I admire that so much. I don't know how he does it. I'm not sure I want to do it all that often. I'd like to have some time off in between, because I do find the job hard. I'm going to be cautious about what I choose to do.

Luckily, I do have a pretty good career as a screenwriter to fall back on if I have to. So, I don't think everything I write I'm going to want to direct. Although, that has been the ultimate goal, hasn't it. Being able to protect what you do. There are some screenwriters who just luck out, they get great directors who vibe with their material, and actors who understand the subtext and make marvelous films. Part of me wants to go across town and slap the shit out of Eric Roth [*Forrest Gump*]. It's like, "How'd you get so lucky, you bastard?"

He writes a good script and they make a good movie. Why can't I do that? Usually, it's been the opposite experience for me. And after a while, you can only weather so many disappointments. I'm proud of the movies Chuck and I made, even though those are early works and, creatively speaking, not high on the ambition scale. *The Blob* and *Nightmare On Elm Street III* are not works of art and weren't meant to be. But at least the director got it right. But most of my other experiences have been very poor. Dick Donner directed one of my *Tales From The Crypt* that I'm very happy with, a western titled "Showdown." There was an episode of *Young Indiana Jones* that I'm as proud of as anything that's hit the screen. It's an hour of TV that made me cry, and I knew what was going to happen. Simon Wincer really nailed it.

You've always written for both TV and the movies.
Features were always my focus, although television did come along and seduce me here and there. Not with big paychecks. "I'm being paid what for this? Oh, my God, can I afford this?" I just got seduced by virtue of it allowing me to have a little bit of fun. The first thing I did for TV was *Tales From The Crypt*. I grew up reading *Tales From The Crypt*. Obviously not in its initial incarnation, but the reprints. EC Comics were always one of those magic little things that only I and a few other fans really knew about. Now, of course, everybody knows about them because of the series. When I was given the opportunity to write something for them, I grabbed "The Ventriloquist's Dummy" because it was always my favorite of the stories. I adapted that and was nominated for a Writers Guild award. One of my two. Then George Lucas came along and asked me to be one of the writers on *Young Indiana Jones*, which was one of the best, most satisfying, thrilling, creative experiences of my life.

How did you get that gig?
George was looking for writers. He had apparently interviewed a great number of writers and had picked six of the seven writers he wanted for the show. A woman named Sara Boman recommended me to him. She was working at Amblin at that point, but when I first got to know her she'd been at TriStar as an assistant to the executive I was dealing with. She remembered the script I'd written there and recommended George read it. He read it and was interested enough to want to meet with me. So I went and met George Lucas, who is one of my gods. That was really a fun meeting because he's so down-to-earth, so unimpressed with himself, and soft-spoken. So I went in and we talked for about an hour about everything but my TV credits, because I really didn't have many. We talked about education, socio-political issues, we talked history. He was pleased I knew my history, which apparently many TV writers don't. I asked him once, "George, what was it that recommended me—why me?" And he said he'd had one meeting with a very, very popular writer, a guy with a list of television credits as long as your arm. He came in, he's Mr. Hollywood, Mr. Powerhouse TV writer. And he proceeded to get George into an argument about when World War I took place.

One of those debatable issues.
Yeah, exactly. Apparently, this guy didn't realize it took place in the teens. He thought it took place in the thirties. So George was looking for someone with a basic knowledge beyond television.

How did you develop the stories for that series?
They were very much a group effort that sprang from George. We would go up to Skywalker Ranch, flying in from all points of the planet, because at least half the group was British. George would come incredibly well prepared. He'd have historical events or historical figures he wanted Indy to meet or become involved in. Along with those, he'd figure out a way to get Indy to whatever part of the world he had to be, and would often have at least the thumbnail of a story. Many times it was very fleshed out. And, on occasion, he hadn't a clue. It was just, "I want him to meet Tolstoy. And obviously if he's going to meet Tolstoy he's going to be here in Russia at this year and he's going to be nine years old." And we'd sit and have our story session. We'd do our homework, we'd read through the material, and George would say, "Well, my idea is this. Anybody have anything to add?" And we'd spend an entire day just brainstorming and then in the afternoon George would start, "Okay, in our first scene this happens and in our second scene this happens." And we'd go, "In the third scene this should happen." And he'd go, "Okay, fine." Or, "No, but what if that happened." So it was George and the seven dwarfs. We'd sit there in the room and hash out a storyline every day. And this would go on for a couple of weeks. Then we'd get our screenplay assignments—we'd vie for the scripts we had the most desire to write individually. Oftentimes, it worked out pretty well. If there was a tie breaker, George would decide who got what, and we'd go off and do our first drafts. We'd send those in, they were disseminated, and we'd all fly back for the second draft sessions where we'd go over everyone's first draft as a group and do second draft notes. It was amazingly creative.

It really sounds like a wonderful environment.
It was a great environment. It was a great way to work. We knew even at the time what a special situation it was, but you're always too busy to really appreciate it. Now I look back on it and I think, aw man. George really is the Wizard of Oz, he's the man behind the curtain. He's so busy. My God, I've never seen a busier human being in my life. Nor one with a more focused work ethic. This is not a guy who sits around and takes it easy, which is one of the reasons he's George Lucas. One of the reasons he's the mogul that he is. He's really a throwback, I think, to an earlier brand of visionary. As far as inspiring people, every time I turn around I'm meeting another *Star Wars* baby. My assistant Dave's the same way. He saw *Star Wars* when he was seven and his life hasn't been the same.

I'm the same way. Exactly. It had that effect.

I was a senior in high school when I saw *Star Wars*. At eighteen, it still had a major impact. It was really one of those remarkable experiences sitting in a theater where everybody is seized by the filmmaker and possessed by the movie. And knowing what you're watching is changing all the rules. Which you pretty much knew from the first shot of the movie. For better or worse it has had an effect which is still being felt more and more every summer. It's got to be a blockbuster, it's got to be the BIG thing. George is really the guy who got us into this mess and now it's up to him to get us out.

There's been scuttlebutt about you writing one of the next series.

At times it seemed like a sure thing, at times it seemed like an impossibility. Right now the jury's still out. George has pretty much written the first one and their focus is on getting that started and made. I don't think he needs any help on that first one. Whether or not he wants me to write the second or third, whether or not I'll be available, it's all still up in the air. I've learned not to hold my breath in this business.

Are there more opportunities for beginning writers in the entertainment industry now?

Sure. I think so. Just in the sense alone that the market is constantly expanding. We're making more and more movies every year. The foreign markets are expanding. They need more movies, they need more product. Obviously, that's going to make more opportunities for everybody.

Sometimes there's too much emphasis on youth, on young writers. What's the hottest, what's the latest? There are some serious Academy Award winning dudes who have written some of the best movies in history who can't get a gig. It's nuts.

A lot of the product of the last so many years has been aimed at twenty- and eighteen-year-olds. They figure the writer's got to talk on the same level. It's lowering the curve—their life experience is formed by movies and television, so we're getting less sophisticated insights into life in our movies.

And a lot more references to other films.

Yeah. Which is really starting to be a drag, as far as I'm concerned. Having made references to other films myself, hey, I'm as guilty as anybody. It's also tough on the very real level that everything has been done before. No matter what you try to come up with, somebody else has done it. So where do you get a really good original notion or good original idea? They're as rare as diamonds in your garden. You can't completely blame Hollywood, it's us as well. Sometimes you go to bed at night praying for a good idea to come along.

So having absorbed some of the blame, let's now turn to Hollywood and blame them too. 'Cause even if you do come up with one, chances are they won't want it. This is where I love Castle Rock. They're into trying different things. Miramax seems to be blazing some trails too. But most of the big studios want their big action star movie for next summer. That's their key focus,

and yeah, they tend to be derivative because they don't understand what makes a movie successful either. They understood what made that movie successful, it was really cool and a lot of things blew up, so let's do that again. Or let's try to copy *Home Alone*, or whatever. I can understand it. It's not an evil conspiracy, it's just people trying to do their jobs as best they can.

I think audiences are in the mood for more sophisticated movies again. The big, dumb action movies that have held sway for so long are starting to crumble around the edges a little bit. You can only shovel the same horseshit so many times. There's nothing wrong with a good action movie, but some movies invent form while others imitate it.

Sit down and read Eugene O'Neil. Sit down and read Paddy Chayefsky. These were writers who drew from life. When I see a movie like *Courage Under Fire* that doesn't seem to recall another movie, that seems to be taken from life experience, I think to myself, "That's the most honorable job we do."

With The Green Mile, *you're mixing a bit of fantasy in with the dramatic. The story is set in the real world, and we're not expecting anything magical. The rules are different because in this case you can't say, "Everyone knows about Freddy Krueger." How do you bring the fantasy into the real world and make it realistic?*
That's King's greatest strength. He's always done that: he took Dracula out of a crumbling castle and he put him in a small town in Maine where people go to McDonalds. It's an approach that Steve credits Richard Matheson for introducing him to. Matheson was also a very fundamental writer in my world. A brilliant, amazing, and evocative writer, Mr. Matheson. One of my all-time favorite novels is *I Am Legend*. It's a guy in a tract house in Los Angeles who's apparently the last man on Earth in a world where the vampires come out at night and try to bust in and get him. *Night of the Living Dead* owes a huge debt to Richard Matheson. It might be an oversimplification to say he took the uncanny and put it in suburbia, but he did take those elements and inject them into a world that we're all familiar with. And that's what Steve does so well. Most of his work is very much planted feet-firm in the real world. No matter how fantastic the extraordinary is, you're usually next door to whatever's happening. I believe that's why King is such a popular writer. It's very relatable stuff. The same thing with *The Green Mile*. There's something very magical that plops into this very unlikely place, in the character of John Coffey, who is a bit of a Christ figure.

Crucified for what people believe he's done, or fear he's done.
Crucified for the inevitability of having to crucify visionaries, and those who are plugged into something higher. Though I won't mention this to *Entertainment Weekly* [laughs]—because I don't want that to be seized upon and turned into a mountain—I do believe that on a thematic level this is about Christ being crucified and the guys who have to crucify him, who have to drive the nails. What's fascinating about it is, what if the guys who have to drive the nails know what they're doing? And what if they are decent and compas-

sionate men? That's what's so provocative about the story.

What are your views on miracles, and the death penalty? Are there some of your personal views which come out in this film?
Some. Not all. The ones that do are somewhat ambiguous, and I'd like to keep them that way. Because the audience will want to draw their own conclusions, they'll bring their own views to the table here, which to me is very exciting. Am I in favor of or against the death penalty? I'm going to keep that one to myself. Do I believe in miracles? Yes, I do, but not necessarily the kind the Biblethumpers have been drilling into our brains. I believe in miracles that spring from the better angels of our nature.

What's an angel to you?
Raoul Wallenberg. Oskar Schindler. Albert Schweitzer. Gandhi. Martin Luther King. It's the best part of us. I have yet to see somebody in flowing robes with wings flitting around my house. I'm not saying they're not there. But, I'm also fairly pragmatic about these things [laughs]. And I am also desperately and deeply skeptical of anything that people have to tell me. Like the ones who wrote the Bible, for example. I promise you, God did not sit with an Underwood, slamming this thing out on a deadline. The problem with people telling us things as absolute fact is that everybody brings their agendas to the table. I was raised Catholic, so I've earned the right to be skeptical.

What is your personal vision? What do you want your stories to bring to people?
[Pause] The notion that we can be better than we are, as human beings; that there's a bar that can be raised in all of our lives. And that there are certain acts of incivility that we should no longer indulge in. Maybe we should try to do a little better.

Helping everyone on their personal angelic flight?
That's why I hesitated to answer the question. Because when you say it, it sounds cultish and preposterous and pretentious. I don't shout it from the rooftops; I'm no evangelist. But I think that's the element that keeps popping up in my work.

Brian DePalma

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID KONOW
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Structure can be difficult for many filmmakers. A director who likes to fly by the seat of his pants may find preplanning things too constrictive to his creative freedom, but there can be a lot of room for great things to happen in the right structured environment. Brian DePalma is a filmmaker who, like one of his heroes, Alfred Hitchcock, has the whole movie laid out like blueprints in his head, laying down a strong foundation for terror and suspense. "I loved to work with Brian because he always knew what he wanted," says cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, who shot *Obsession, Blow Out*, and *Bonfire of the Vanities* for DePalma. "He storyboarded everything because he wanted to see the pacing of each sequence."

Well known for his complex camera moves and great shot compositions, DePalma is a director with a strong command of the language of cinema. "Brian has a rare ability to construct scenes without dialogue that are involving and that function almost as silent films," says editor Paul Hirsch, who cut *Carrie, Obsession*, and *Mission: Impossible* among others for DePalma. "They are not action scenes, they don't involve car crashes or any of the usual conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. They are cinema."

DePalma came out of the "new Hollywood" of the '70s, and his work has proved very influential on Hollywood's current new wave of directors. *Carrie* was a film that transcended the horror genre and truly captured teenage alienation. *Dressed to Kill*, which had Michael Caine pulling a Norman Bates as a killer in drag, is a modern-day classic. *Blow Out* is one of the most underrated films in recent memory and features one of John Travolta's finest performances. *Scarface*? Fuhgeddaboutit. One of the greatest gangster movies ever made. Not to mention a number of other great DePalma films such as *Sisters, Phantom of the Paradise, Obsession, The Untouchables, Carlito's Way*, and more.

DePalma has written a number of the films he's directed including his latest, *Femme Fatale*. *Femme Fatale* is a puzzle of a film with a lot of interesting pieces. It's one of those films that melts in your mind: the more I thought about it after I saw it, the more I liked it. Like the title, the film is deceiving. At first you might think you're going to see a period thriller, but DePalma has built a lot of twists, turns, and blind alleys while constructing his latest maze. *Creative Screenwriting* talked to Brian DePalma in 2002 on the release of *Femme Fatale*.

What was the inspiration for Femme Fatale*, and why did you go back to writing your own screenplay for this film?*
I always had an idea of trying to make a contemporary noir movie, and trying to find a world where that could exist today. I'm a great admirer of noir movies. But it isn't the '40s, and I was trying to find a way to do it in a contemporary setting. So I figured that the best way to do it was to make it kind of a noir dream. The noir part of the movie is when she falls asleep, then wakes up, and you sort of set it up in the beginning of the movie by having her watching one of the great noir movies, *Double Indemnity*. And then I had a story idea I had been playing around with for a year about a character who is involved in a heist who double-crosses all of her compatriots. They pursue her, and she stumbles onto a double whose life she steals. Those were the ideas that created *Femme Fatale*. I only write things when I think I have a really good idea. I've written many screenplays over the years that I ultimately don't make for one reason or another, because I don't think the ideas are good enough, or I can't get the movies financed for one reason or another. This was an example where everything seemed to work out.

Who or what was the inspiration for the femme fatale of the title?
It was just a great noir spider-woman basically. I love these characters like Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, Jane Greer, Rita Hayworth, all these wonderful, great noir women, and I was trying to find a story where I could stick one in. I like these kinds of manipulative, sexy seductresses. The genre's pretty clear, and the noir women are fairly standard: the woman leading a man to his doom. It was difficult to find a terrain where that works today. I was trying to find a way to make noir work. Noir has a very pessimistic worldview, and noir women are not particularly politically correct, that's why we don't see many of them; but they're a hell of a lot of fun to make movies about.

When you come back to writing your own scripts, does it take you a while to warm up your writing skills or do they still stay sharp?
No, I basically write all the time. I just sort of look at what's the best screenplay. I enjoy working with other writers and other genres, it gets me away from my particular material. So you can find me making movies like *Mission to Mars* or *Mission: Impossible*. I like moving into other people's sensibilities. I like to work as a director and not do the whole thing.

You've made a lot of films during your career, and you've also written a lot of your films. Do you prefer to work fast when you write?
The problem with writing a movie is you've got to have a great idea. I loved the idea for *Femme Fatale* and it came very quickly. *Dressed to Kill* was another great idea, and *Blow Out* was a very good idea. Those scripts came very quickly. But when you don't have a good idea, it can take years. These ideas rattle around in my head forever. The idea of somebody fleeing, then they run into their double and take their life, I've been thinking about that for ten, fifteen years, and I never found a way to put it into anything. So it's very much circling in your brain, and then you get to a certain place, you have a certain experience, and it all kind of jells. Then it's easy to write. You're in a terrible situation where you have to turn the pages in when you don't really have a good idea. And of course, I guess 95% of what we see is like that.

When you see a stunning idea like *Memento* or *Boogie Nights*, or something by the Coen Brothers, when someone comes up with a tremendously interesting idea, you take your hats off to them, because you know what a difficult process that is. I've had a couple of pretty good ones throughout my career, and if you read as much as I do what everyone else is doing and what kind of trouble they're having, and if you're a student of the history of cinema, you realize there aren't that many good ideas out there. That's why there's some extraordinary movies, and some that are sort of okay. You have to be in the right place at the right time with the right actors and the right economics. Something like *On the Waterfront*, Kazan was in the right place at the right time. Orson Welles was in the right place at the right time with the right contract with *Citizen Kane*. That's why those movies are so extraordinary.

You use split screens in Femme Fatale *like you have in a number of your films. How do you decide when to use it in a scene?*
Split screen is just another storytelling technique. You just have to find a place where it's appropriate and it can be effective. I use it where, like everything in my movies, whether it's a crane shot, or a steady-cam shot, or a point-of-view shot, I try to find exactly the right word or the visual grammar for the place in the movie. I'm very much interested in visual storytelling. I think it's kind of a dead form; you don't see very many directors working in it. I try to find story ideas that are driven with visual ideas, unlike the traditional sort of storytelling with character development, dramatic development of your characters where the antagonist and the protagonist come up against each other, and you have a three-act structure in your movie. I find these story forms are almost exhausted by television, which is almost completely driven by dialogue and close ups of people talking to each other. Contemporary filmmaking has beaten them to death, so there's very little to do with that kind of storytelling. Not to say that it isn't effective if it's used well, but to me I'm practicing a visual storytelling that not many people are interested in. I like the unexpected. I like being surprised.

When you started making films, was there more of an emphasis on utilizing the language of cinema?

Well yeah, because we were looking at directors, a lot of them had started making movies in the silent film era where there was no dialog, so they had to learn these techniques. Whether it was Hitchcock, Ford, or Fritz Lang, you had to learn these techniques and not try to solve all of your problems in dialogue.

When you're planning a camera move or a cinematic technique, do you plan those during the writing process or does the visual planning come later?

When you write a script, or when you direct somebody else's script, as you read it, if it's somebody else's script, you start getting ideas of how to tell the story visually. When you write the script, and when I do scripts of my own, they're usually driven by a visual idea. Not a character idea, not even a story idea; it's usually a visual idea, because this is what I think cinema is all about. That's why the images are so compelling because you're dealing with pure, visual storytelling. That happens when I'm putting the ideas together for the story. The trick of *Femme Fatale* was getting in and out of the dream without the audience groaning, because it's a very old idea, somebody waking up and everything you saw wasn't real. But I think I came up with such a stunning image of her underneath the water, that you can surprise the audience because it's such a strong visual image, to get past that transition. And then I had this other visual idea of Antonio Banderas being a collage artist, and I literally created that collage with my brother Bart, who's a painter. We literally created that huge panel of pictures over a period of like four months. The movie is very much like the picture. The completed image is the last piece in the puzzle. And again, it's a purely visual idea.

Christopher McQuarrie has said he works closely with the composers of the films he's writing, and he's found they can make valuable changes to the screenplay before the film starts shooting. You had worked closely with Bernard Herrmann on Obsession, *and he also made contributions to the story. Do you usually work closely with the composers in this regard?*

Not much in the beginning. I've worked with many fine composers, and in this day, you can literally listen to the score on a computer before you record it, which is quite unlike how I started out, and you can really adjust the score at that stage so that by the time you get to recording it, more or less all the problems are solved. This movie I very much had the Ravel Bolero idea at the beginning of the heist, and then I abandoned it because I wanted to use a lot of eclectic music. The first pass at it, [Ryuichi] Sakamoto wrote a very *Mission: Impossible*-type score, and it was quite good, but I went back to my Bolero idea. I said, "This isn't *Mission: Impossible*, this is a seduction, and there's no more seductive music than Ravel's Bolero." He did a version of Bolero that fit in with what we had done with the picture.

One film journalist has written that a theme you deal with in many of your films is the "moral consequences of the failure to act, or acting too late." We've seen this in Carrie, Obsession, *and* Blow Out, *and Rebecca Romijn-Stamos says in* Femme Fatale, *"No good deed ever goes unpunished." Why do your films often return to this theme?*

I think things like that are buried deep in your subconscious. I've thought about why I have doubles in my movies? It's the kind of stuff I don't quite understand, and you see it in your movies over and over again, and you're intrigued by these ideas. Sort of like a painter who likes to paint the same cathedral or the same bowl of fruit, you're drawn to certain images over and over again for kind of inexplicable reasons. It's an insight into what's going on in your subconscious. This movie is so much driven by a subconscious idea that… it just feels right. I guess that's the best way I can say it, and I don't quite understand where it all comes from. I was always fascinated by that phrase "no good deed goes unpunished." I find it's something that happened in my own life many times! I wondered where it came from, I finally looked it up, and it was Claire Booth Luce talking about politics. I guess in politics no good deed goes unpunished. It seemed like such a strange idea, but in many ways very true.

What are the keys to building a suspenseful scene?
Withholding information. Just keep withholding information. And not quite showing everything. Slowing things down is always very effective.

Hitchcock had famously said that suspense is two people sitting at a table, then the camera shows us that under the table is a bomb, and we have no idea when it's going to go off. That makes me think of the scene in Carrie *with the bucket of blood, where we have no idea when it's going to get dumped on her. Were you trying to follow that rule of suspense when you were constructing that scene?*
Well, Hitchcock laid down all the classic ways to use suspense. He's done it so many times in so many movies, it's all there. You see what works and what doesn't work. I've taken some of those ideas, and taken them a little farther. I try to make it even more uncomfortable for the audience by shooting it in slow motion. I really make it just the worst kind of thing when you know it's going to happen. The bomb starts ticking extremely slowly. And I have many balls in the air at the same time, so that you can drive this thing so slowly. I've used that technique, whether it's in *The Fury* or the Odessa Steps in *The Untouchables*, where you just slow everything down. You need all this parallel action going on, because slow motion, if it's not really cut very well, can be very boring. So you have to find a way to drive it with all kinds of counter action. And you need a great score, because you're completely relying on the music to get you through.

What were the most important things you learned from watching Hitchcock's films?
Well, it's like when you see things the same way [as someone else], you find

a writer who writes how you think. You say, "This guy is speaking to me." Hitchcock always spoke to me right from the beginning, and I took many of his techniques. Like the use of the point-of-view shot, which is seen in *Rear Window* in the umpteenth degree, where you convey information directly to the audience. The character sees something, the audience sees something; there's no other form in which the character and the audience sees the same information but the movies. It's an essential building block that is completely unique to cinema. That's what I'm constantly striving to find in making movies—these things that are purely cinematic. That's what makes great cinema great to me.

When you started your film career, you tried to work within the system and stay true to yourself at the same time. Now that you have a lot of films under your belt, do you still have to fight to make the movies you want to make?
Oh sure. It's always a fight if you have some kind of personal vision. You're always struggling to convince people to put up money for it, and since I make movies that have very elaborate sets and very expensive film toys, they can't be done for a million or half a million dollars in a couple of bedrooms in Brooklyn. I've made movies like that, and then I evolved out of that. So it's always a struggle, and every once in a while, you have to go out and make a big hit so you can continue to make movies. You have to go back and forth.

I have a particular visual style that I can apply to genre movies; so I can go in and out of the system. If you're completely independent of the system, so much time can be spent just raising money. You can certainly make movies like that, but like John Sayles, you're constantly struggling to get money to make your particular movie, and having to do other jobs to pay for them, much like Orson Welles did. I'm a big student of Welles, I knew him very well because he was in *Get to Know Your Rabbit*, and I had studied his career, which seemed to me to be the classic example of what not to do with the system, and how cruel the system can be to a great artist. I think there's many good things about the system, and there are many things that aren't so good about it. But I'm an American, and I'm working in the American movie system. To try and say that Hollywood doesn't know what they're doing is absurd. Hollywood's made some of the greatest movies in the world, and you can make that system work for you.

Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio

INTERVIEWED BY STEVE RYFLE & DEN SHEWMAN
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A t first glance, it would appear that Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio are liv-
ing every genre film fanatic's dream. Few screenwriting teams have
worked on so many high-profile popcorn pictures; in the summer of
1998 alone, their names appeared in the credits of three major releases, *Godzil-
la, The Mask of Zorro*, and *Small Soldiers*. Before that, they got their first big
break by selling the children's horror comedy *Little Monsters* (1989), did some
fine work on Disney's hit *Aladdin* (1992), adapted Heinlein's *The Puppet Mas-
ters* (1994), and helped punch up *Men in Black* (1997). They have also penned
yet-unfilmed adaptations of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars*, and a
Sandman screenplay that creator Neil Gaiman reportedly loved.

Upon closer look, however, their dream has been somewhat nightmarish
at times. *Little Monsters* hardly resembles the film they intended; their *Godzil-
la* script was dumped when director Jan De Bont quit that project; *Zorro* was
tinkered with; they received no credit despite substantial work on *Men in
Black*; they got sole screenplay credit on *The Road to El Dorado*, a film they
probably wish they'd never worked on; and their *Sandman* draft is collecting
dust at Warner Bros. In short, Elliott and Rossio have learned every lesson
possible about the screenwriter's sometimes exciting, but often frustrating
place in the movie-business hierarchy.

Thankfully, they're sharing their hard-earned Hollywood street smarts with
their compatriots in cyberspace on Wordplay (www.wordplayer.com), a
screenwriting think-tank of a website that includes input from many of their
professional colleagues on the art and business of screenwriting. The site con-
tains forty-five essays on topics related to the realities of writing for Holly-
wood, along with a number of columns written by professional scripters and
studio executives.

Elliott and Rossio have been writing together for nearly two decades, so it's

about time their names were emblazoned on a movie that they're truly proud of. That movie was *Shrek*, the new CGI-animated, high-tech summer offering from DreamWorks and PDI (the same team that produced *Antz*). Adapted from the William Steig children's, it's the story of a swamp-dwelling ogre who just wants to be left alone, but his solitude is invaded by an array of wacko fairy-tale characters. In their most recent film *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Rossio and Elliott created a gothic horror pirate tale on the high seas.

There's a lot of laughter between Elliott and Rossio, and you get the feeling their senses of humor have kept them sane in some of the insane development meetings they've suffered. Rossio cites *Aladdin* and *Pirates* as their two best experiences. "Every ten years, we have a really great experience," laughs Elliott. "Which lets us put up with the next ten years." Rossio and Elliott are currently forging an alliance with Digital Domain to independently produce major films on their own, relying on the studios only for distribution à la George Lucas. Screenwriters controlling the fate of their scripts? Now that's a storybook ending. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio on *Shrek* in 2001 and on *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* in 2003.

How do you divide writing tasks and responsibilities?
TED ELLIOTT: Basically we figure out the outline—I hesitate to call it that, because it's more than an outline—we figure it out using a bulletin board and cards, but not all the information about the screenplay can fit on a card; there's a lot of it we understand just through our conversations about how we're going to approach it. A character may have one or two words that describe that character at that moment, at the start of the movie, but we know a lot more about what that character's like. Once we know the outline and structure, what the story is, we break it up into sequences, so there's usually about twenty to twenty-four sequences. A sequence isn't a scene, but it can be a scene, or a series of scenes. And then we say, "Okay, which ones do you want to write, which ones do I want to write?" It turns out that I usually end up writing the first couple of sequences.
TERRY ROSSIO: I like Ted to write the first sequence, or a sequence that introduces a character, because he's really excellent at establishing the voice of the script, or even the voice of a particular character. I can fill in and mimic once it's been established. I lean toward trying to get the action scenes.
ELLIOTT: A lot of the way Terry and I work… is what we call "egoless arguing." If Terry has an idea, he says, "Here's the idea," and from that point on, there's no ownership of the idea. I'll make arguments for or against it, Terry will make arguments for or against. The idea has to prove itself as being correct.
ROSSIO: We put the ideas into an arena and let them battle, and in the end the stronger idea will win out.

How did you get involved with The Mask of Zorro*?*
ELLIOTT: We were actually the second or third writers on that project. They had

sort of run into a dead end, development-wise. We read the screenplay and we said, "We'll pitch the story we want to pitch." Our original story pitch wasn't a remake of *The Mark of Zorro*, but it went back to *Curse of Capistrano* [Johnston McCulley's first Zorro story, and inspiration for the Douglas Fairbanks film]. It was about a young Diego coming to California, his father has gotten into problems and he dons the mask of Zorro, all of that. We were pitching it to Steven Spielberg at the time, and he was responding well to it, but we only got halfway through our pitch because there were a lot of questions and conversations, stuff like that. The idea was that we'd come back the next day and pitch the rest. We come in the next day and Steven says, "I've thought about it, I really like this, but I like mine better." So he pitched out the one he liked better, which was kind of based on *One-Eyed Jacks* [1961]… Diego is betrayed by a friend, he is imprisoned and his daughter is kidnapped by the friend and raised as his own. Then, twenty years later, he meets Alejandro, whose brother has been killed, and trains him to be the new Zorro. The problem we immediately had was that it's a story about revenge; for one thing, I don't think revenge is a particularly noble motivation for a hero. Just because a hero kills a drug dealer out of revenge for the drug dealer's killing his partner, that doesn't make him a hero, it just means he got revenge. So we came up with a way to make the story be about something more than revenge, that basically both these characters start off incorrectly motivated, and through the course of the story they come to the correct motivation. In our story, we had come up with the whole plot about the gold mines being kept secret and Montero using the peasants to mine his gold, and he was going to use the gold to buy California from Mexico. A lot of the stuff that appears in the final movie as Alejandro and Elena's romance was initially Diego and the woman he was in love with's romance, so there was a lot of movement like that.

We wrote a draft, and I think it was after we turned in our first draft that we read Randall Johnson's script, and there were a few things in there that we brought over into our script. Then we did another draft, and then another, and then the movie stalled because they were looking for a director and we went on to other things. Then they got a director, but we were unable to do the rewrites so they brought in John Eskow.

How much of what ended up on screen is yours?
ELLIOTT: Not every line of dialogue was a line of dialogue we wrote, and yet everything on screen was something we did write, with the exception of one thing, and that was killing Diego at the end. The story was not designed for Diego to die; we never wrote a version where Diego dies, and I think it works against the movie. The movie would be much better if Diego didn't die, or if the story had been designed so his death had meaning. But as it is, our concept was this whole story is driven by Diego wanting his daughter back, and it felt wrong and unsatisfying for Diego to go through all this hell and then have no time with his daughter. It's the only element that came from somebody else that's in the final movie.

You received story credit for Godzilla *even though your script wasn't used, but you weren't credited on* Men in Black *even though you wrote a lot of it. Why?*

ROSSIO: Either we're completely clueless as to how credits should be arbitrated, and completely misunderstand the WGA guidelines for arbitration, or we've been screwed on every movie we've ever had arbitration on. [laughs] If you look at *Men in Black*, there's more of our work on screen but we didn't get a credit. Well, then you have to look at *Godzilla* and say, "If that's correct, how can *Men in Black* be correct?" It's very inconsistent, I just don't understand it…

ELLIOTT: There's no way to talk about it with any objectivity whatsoever. I'm at a point now where I feel like the whole arbitration system should just be abandoned. It should either be "one writer, one screenplay," but the studios would never go for that, so I would say only the first writer gets credit, don't tie bonuses to receiving credit, or all writers get credit. That's the only way to do it that makes any sense at all, I think.

What motivated you before you were successful?

ELLIOTT: Terry motivated me. Getting a writing partner is a good way to go. And don't write at your house, write together, so you know the other guy is going to be at the coffee shop and if you don't show up, he's going to be angry. When I hear aspiring screenwriters who talk about, "Yeah, I saw *Godzilla* and it was terrible. I can write better than that." My feeling about that is, no, go watch *The Godfather* or *Casablanca* or *Ghostbusters*, and say, "Holy crap! That was great, I want to write something that good!" If you look at a movie and say, "That's crap, I can do better," then basically all you're trying to do is write crap plus one. It's far better to try to write the best thing you've ever seen, because at least you're aspiring to a higher level.

When did you get attached to Shrek, *and how long did you work on it?*

ELLIOTT: We worked on it from about mid-1997. We were on the project for about two years, and we outlasted four or five different producers who came and went, three different directors came and went. And all the time, I must say, we were fighting for the movie that it is today. That's one of the things about the animation process. It's not just about exploring the right story, it's exploring every story. So it becomes very wearing on writers when you're asked to write a scene that you just don't think is right. And when it became obvious that it was going to be about a *Shrek* who decides to go be a knight to get people to like him, that was the point where we said if we stayed on the project as writers, we're going to be standing in the way of what needs to happen to get this movie made. What's really nice is that eventually that story proved itself to be as lame as we thought it would be, and it came back to this story, the one we'd been fighting for.

ROSSIO: We have a co-producer credit and a co-writer credit on the movie. There are two other writers who contributed great stuff, things that are perfect for the movie. But I have to add that writing credits are not always accu-

rate on animated films, and one of the reasons for that is they don't include the storyboard crew. If they said, "screenplay by Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio and the DreamWorks story crew," then they would start to be more correct because it is a group experience that takes place over many years, with everybody in the room including the director, the story people, producers, the writer. They call it a story crew, and that story crew contributes significantly to these films. What we think of as the screenplay doesn't necessarily exist in the way you usually think of it in the live-action model. In fact, for many months all that exists are different sequences and script pages for those sequences, and the boards; the boards are the screenplay, and then the screenplay comes off the boards.

Quite simply, answers get in the way of solutions in the animation process. It's a trap that we've always fallen into, providing answers before people were ready for them. What you have to do is step back, and let people ask questions and discover answers on their own…. The role of the writer on an animated project [is] not the traditional role. The actual role is to provide possibilities of what it could be, not to argue against everybody over what it should be.

ELLIOTT: That's true in live-action too. We've seen examples where the right answer at the wrong time might as well be the wrong answer…. Good movies result when all of the problems become apparent and the solutions are there. What happens, more often than not in modern films, I think, is they just run out of time before they have to go shoot something, but they haven't yet figured out the real problems that need to be solved.

From a screenwriter's standpoint, the process sounds disheartening.

ELLIOTT: The classic model—and this is what you think when you come into the industry—is that you write a good script, people read it and go, "This is a good script," and they buy it and say, "We're going to make this script." And then you go to the movie and you say, "Wait a minute. That's bad." This was our experience on *Little Monsters*, the first script we sold. Everyone said, "It's a good screenplay, we like it." A lot of problems happened there, but one of the big ones was that there was a writers' strike just after we sold it, so we got to do one draft only with the director, and then we had to leave. So we go to see the movie, and we're sitting there, and it stinks. Our agent put it best: "They actually took out everything that made the story unique and have heart." That's just how it happens. There's a different process for writing a great screenplay, or even just a good screenplay, and getting a good movie made from that screenplay.

ROSSIO: I've actually come to the absurd conclusion—and this is advice that I give my closest writer friends—that the worst thing you can do with your spec screenplay is sell it. It's the biggest mistake writers make, because selling it only ensures that it either won't get made, or it won't be made the way you want. And of course they think this is crazy. How can you get a film made if you don't sell your screenplay? I admit, it's a paradox, but writers

always celebrate the day their script sells, and then a couple of months later, they start to ask, "Are they really making it?" It's one of 140 films in development, and other scripts that attract directors and stars are ahead. So the writer starts to say, "Well maybe somebody else wants to make it. I wish I could get it away from this place." So the writer actually starts to rue the day that the script was sold, because they're now frustrated that what they wanted isn't happening, which was to see their film up on screen. Actually, agencies are getting more and more savvy on this. They're starting to say, "Selling the script is not our goal. Our goal is to get the film made." And they will start to advise writers to look into packaging their screenplay. Look into aligning with a director or a star…. You essentially have to step into the role of producer on your own picture.

How did you go about adapting Shrek*, which is a fairly short book, into a full-length movie?*

ELLIOTT: The book is a lot of fun. It's just the simple idea of an ogre, this traditional fairy tale villain who really likes being an ogre. But he's not a villain to himself. The book is actually this Jungian journey of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. It was that character that attracted us to the project—taking the traditional fairy tale villain, and, if not making him the hero, then at least the anti-hero who becomes the hero.

ROSSIO: Our involvement was almost a reaction to the fact that they [Dream-Works] didn't get it. I think there was a preliminary approach, where it was the "woe is me" Shrek.

ELLIOTT: It was like "Shrek the friendly ogre," where he goes up to people and says, "Hey, wanna be friends?" And everybody goes, "Aaaaah! An ogre!" And then he walks away with his head down, and his shoulders slumped. That was one of our hardest battles, to [convince the studio] that people don't think Shrek is an ogre simply because he's ugly; being ugly is an aspect of being an ogre, but we tried to keep him from being interpreted as just another nice guy. His character had to be somewhat ogre-ish; we always said that because the point of view of the movie is on Shrek, you read him as the hero. But if the point of view had been over the shoulder of any other character, except the donkey, he would have been an ogre. That was how it had to work.

ROSSIO: Our approach was also inspired by the fact, that if you take an ogre and put him in the lead and make him the hero, you've already overturned one of the main conventions of fairy tales, and we felt that's what's cool about this. You can actually do a comic fantasy where all those conventions that you're familiar with are going to be messed with.

One of the really fun things when you're working on an animated film is the process of characterization design, or what you could call character psyche design. It was really fascinating on *Shrek*, because all four main characters are organized around the concept of self-esteem, and appropriate and/or inappropriate reactions to appropriate or inappropriate self-assessment…. It's best explained by example. Shrek is a person who thinks he's just fine, but

the world rejects him. How does he deal with that? Well, he decides he doesn't need the world. That's an inappropriate response to his accurate assessment of himself. Lord Farquaad [John Lithgow] thinks he's just fine too, but the world doesn't accept him either, so his response is, "I'll change the whole world." So he assesses himself wrong, and reacts wrong. Donkey [Eddie Murphy] doesn't think he has any value whatsoever, except for that given to him by other people, so he's desperate for a friend, for just one person to like him, and he chooses Shrek, probably the worst person in the world to choose because Shrek is rejecting everybody. And the princess [Cameron Diaz] thinks there's something not correct about herself and is also seeking external validation….What you end up with is a unity among those characters, but the animation process is not necessarily going to provide unity in plot. That unity of characterization will help the entire animation team, when it collaborates, to stay on track thematically.

With all the variables involved, is it easier for the story to get derailed when you're making an animated film, versus live-action?

ELLIOTT: In animated stories, the significance of each scene or sequence has to be understood within the scene or sequence itself, because if you design the story so that the setup for a joke takes place at the fifteen-minute mark, and the punch line takes place at the forty-five-minute mark, well, you might end up with the punch line still there but the setup, for whatever reason [has been deleted]. You can't rely on that sort of thing. You've got to make the story simple enough to be bulletproof to all the changes that will occur as it's going through animation, but also flexible enough to allow all those changes to improve on the story. It's Disney's concept of "plusing." If it hits your desk, when it leaves it needs to be better than it was when it came in. But the real difficulty is making sure that it gets better appropriately, as opposed to better individually.

ROSSIO: I should add that this is only true of the initial design of the story, because at a certain point, usually two or three years later, people will be completely exhausted by this process of exploring every aspect of the possible story. And then some people, when they come in later on in the process, will get to define the plot and make the final decisions that make things work. On *Aladdin*, we were the lucky people who got to come in later and make the final decisions, and that's a completely different thing. What we're talking about here is the early stages of how you approach designing an animated movie.

Every protagonist needs something. What does Shrek need?

ELLIOTT: What he needs are friends. He needs a relationship with other people, but because he expects those relationships to all be negative, he's cut himself off from any relationships. So basically it's about those walls slowly coming down enough to accept the Donkey, accept Princess Fiona, accept the possibility that, yes, most people are going to react negatively to him,

but not everybody will.

ROSSIO: It is not the standard model. Here's a lead character who actually needs to get something that is almost the opposite of what he would say that he wants.

ELLIOTT: I think it drives Jeffrey [Katzenberg] nuts that he actually has made an animated movie where a character starts off saying "I want this," and in the end it doesn't even matter. I think it just drives him crazy!

Why couldn't Shrek be loved by a beautiful woman? Doesn't the film inherently say "ugly people belong together?"

ELLIOTT: I had recently read a book called *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher, which is about the sociological pressures faced by teenage girls. It focuses a lot on expectations for appearance and behavior. That dovetails very well, I thought, with what was already in *Shrek*, which is about a character whose external appearance caused people to judge him in a certain way, which caused him to behave in a certain way that actually prevents him from getting what he genuinely needed in life.

ROSSIO: There was about a six-month period where we had to fight for the notion of the shape-changing princess. Everybody thought "Oh, that's too complex, you can't do that." I think that book helped give us faith that this was a legitimate and correct choice to make.

ELLIOTT: In the *Shrek* book, Shrek only finds the princess at the end of the story, and she is ugly, which works for a twenty-eight-page book. In the book, Shrek's epiphany, his self-realization, comes in the form of a dream. Even then, he maintains in the dialogue that it was a terrible dream, but the illustration makes it clear that he is sad when the dream is over. The métier of fairy tales is about how people should act and behave and even look. In our society, there is a built-in awareness of this—when *Aladdin* came out, there were comments like, "They've taken this Chinese fable and peopled with characters straight out of the San Fernando Valley." So, all of those things came together and led to the aesthetic that formed Shrek.

Initially the whole idea of the shape-shifting princess was rejected on the basis that shape shifting doesn't seem appropriate for fairy tales. And we said, "Wait, did you not see *The Little Mermaid*, did you not see *Beauty and the Beast*?" The other thing we did in the screenplay was we described the princess's other self as being "furry" or "hairy." All we wanted was her "ugly self" to be uniquely ugly to her, to not be a female version of Shrek but to be a unique version of herself, as unique as her human appearance was. Unfortunately that was not an argument that we won. The way we finally got people to stop objecting to the shape-shifting princess was a change in words. We realized that what we needed to do was to refer to her not as a shape-shifting princess, but as an "enchanted" princess. If we'd just done that in the first draft, I don't know that we would have had any problems at all [Laughs].

ROSSIO: Regarding the ending, what we did not want to convey was the notion that ugly people belong with ugly people. One thing that we explored

was the idea that Fiona actually was somebody who, as her true self, was somebody who changed shapes. And the best moral to give would say that, "Even princesses who change their shapes can find love too." And Shrek would love her in all of her varied forms. To me, that was the obvious right way to go, in terms of the message. What's amazing is that it's one of those things that is fairly inarguable, and seems right. But there is some type of built-in resistance to the idea from "studio people." They take up the mantle of trying to determine what people are going to be willing to understand and accept. Even if they get it, they think the audience won't.

ELLIOTT: The question that's naturally raised by the audience is, "Is her true form beautiful, or is her true form ugly?" And the answer we wanted to give was, "Her true form is beautiful by day, ugly by night." That's her true form, and she was trying to rid herself of part of who she truly was, because society maintained that was wrong. One of the difficult things was figuring out how to dramatize that. There were explorations of that idea, but I think ultimately the group consensus was she should be ugly at the end—in which case, I still would argue that she should have been uniquely ugly. I believe they tried to find a character design that everybody could agree on, but unfortunately what I think happened was that you saw the actual prevalence of attitudes about appearance in society manifest themselves unconsciously in the story. How do you like that? [Laughs]

ROSSIO: The resistance to that idea is fairly profound. It seemed like, in the sequel, that would be the natural next step to take; that maybe it was hard to dramatize in the first story, but the sequel would give ample opportunity to actually say, "Here's what Fiona's true nature is." We tried again there, but nobody would have anything of it.

ELLIOTT: I think the idea that Fiona ends up as a female version of Shrek is a more conventional idea—"It's not how you look, it's who you are." That to me is a great conventional message, but the reason that message comes through very loudly instead of "ugly people belong with ugly people" is because of the little throwaway moments between Donkey and dragon, where he kind of cuddles up to her. At that point, you have to say, "This is not about appearance whatsoever. Type does not attract type—that's not what this story is about."

The humor in Shrek *is wide-ranging, but most of it seems to flow from the characters and plot rather than throwaway jokes. What comedic ground rules, if any, did you establish?*

ELLIOTT: In my mind, the only rule was, "Any gag that violates the psychological underpinning has to go; other than that, the sky's the limit." I think *Shrek* is very funny, but there's still that *South Park: Bigger, Longer, Uncut* pinnacle of a laugh every three seconds; you're laughing so hard, you're missing four more jokes. We didn't quite get there, but that was the goal for me—let's make a rip-roaring funny movie. And this comes from the characters' psychology. Even in scenes where they are arguing from their emotions,

there is that opportunity for humor because of whose these characters are, and what this world they exist in is. We had always designed for that silent montage with the song as the moment to really put the screws on the audience emotionally.

One thing that I notice happens in a lot of animated movies…it even happened in *Aladdin*, is this idea that when you shift into the characters dealing with emotional issues, as opposed to plot issues, you lose the humor. It's almost like you can only focus on one thing at a time. And yet, if you look at the great comic movies, that's not the case. The emotion comes through because the humor is there, not because it's absent.

I'll give you the weirdest example. At the end of *Ghostbusters*, there's a moment where they're about to cross the streams and die. Dan Aykroyd looks over at Bill Murray and says, "Nice working with you, see you on the other side." It's perfectly in character, and it's a funny line if you think about it. The moment is designed as a gag, and because it is in fact a joke, the emotion of that situation plays through very well. The characters didn't have to stop being the characters to say those lines, and that was the goal with *Shrek*. We never wanted the Donkey to stop being Donkey simply because he had something to say that spoke to the heart of the character, the heart of the audience, the heart of the story.

To take fairy tales and twist them around this way is quite amusing. This was not part of the original Shrek *children's book.*

ELLIOTT: No, but it really goes back to William Steig's decision to make an ogre the hero of this fairy tale. You're taking this conventional concept and turning it on its ear. Everything grows from that idea. Early on, we decided we wanted other fairy tale characters to show up—Shrek lived not in "Shrek world," but in a fairy tale world shared by other characters. Fairy godmothers, pied pipers, talking animals—and public domain characters, which are best known in their Disney versions [Laughs].

ROSSIO: It is so important to choose as your arena something that has immense audience familiarity. So much of your work is done for you—you don't have to provide both the context and then the punch line. I wouldn't even want to try to write a comedy unless I felt like I was tapping into a lot of what the audience is familiar with. As it turned out, one of the great things about *Shrek* was that the difficulty was to find something familiar and still fresh. What we found out was that audiences knew all this stuff already— they knew the fairy tale conventions and characters—but it really hadn't ever been made fun of before. From the time they're two or three years old, kids are watching fairy tales. They know how the stories work. And they watch them over and over, because of how the stories work. So audiences go into a theater and all of sudden there are jokes being made about something they are intimately familiar with, and they've never been able to laugh at before. To find something like that is really rare.

Elliott: If there's anything that all ages are familiar with, it's the stories they

first heard as children. You can count on that. A forty-year-old knows *101 Dalmations* or *Peter Pan*. So does a four-year-old. With Shrek, we didn't have to explain to the audience that Shrek is an ogre, and an ogre is traditionally the villain. They already knew that; the audience brought that context with them. We didn't have to explain why it's funny for Peter Pan to be turning Tinkerbell in for a reward. Terry and I always said the great thing about this was that we could do a movie that had almost all punch lines, and no setups, because the audience was supplying the setups for us, with that built-in familiarity. And it all goes back to that first image in William Steig's book, when you realize, "I'm reading a fairy tale about an ogre."

William Steig also didn't take potshots at Disney. That's also your handiwork, I assume.
Elliott: I just want to point out that these kinds of jokes could be made in a Disney movie; in fact, they have been. If you remember, in *The Lion King*, the little bird starts singing "It's a Small World," and they say, "Shut up! That's the most annoying song in the world!" In *Shrek*, we have this "It's a Small World" type of song, and then Donkey says, "Let's do that again," and Shrek's like, "No! Anything but that."

What about the theme park jokes, like the turnstile and the velvet ropes?
ELLIOTT: Jeffrey was at first resistant to the flat-out anachronistic stuff, but once he came on board with it, he actually suggested the photo-op joke. That came from him, and that's one of the funniest bits in the movie to me. It's one of those things that's incongruously congruous. It shouldn't work, but it does. But as for those scenes, I think people are looking at the narrative and judging intent. It is an amusement park, but we knew that people would assign it to Disneyland, and that's what's happened. But people have decided that the intent was to rip Disney—if we had wanted to rip Disney, the movie would have been way too mean and dark. I think it would have been distasteful. These are jokes, but I think they're very affectionate for the source material. I think people are ascribing Jeffrey Katzenberg's relationship with Michael Eisner to what is going on in *Shrek*, and that's unfair. In ten or twenty years, when that's ancient history, those jokes will still be funny, and accepted in the spirit with which they were intended, not the spirit in which they've been interpreted.
ROSSIO: One thing that never gets brought up, and I don't know why not—there was a rather famous issue between DreamWorks and Disney where the term "midget" was used…

Mr. Eisner's infamous reference to Mr. Katzenberg…
ROSSIO: …And here we have a villain who's actually short. I don't know why that isn't clearly interpreted as Katzenberg saying, "Hey, nobody's safe here. We can make fun of everybody and anybody." I haven't seen that in print anywhere, and it seems so obvious.
ELLIOTT: All I can say is, Farquaad's character was created as an antagonist to

Shrek's character. You have a misanthropic antihero with no regard for social niceties, so the best antagonist for that is the perfectionist who is all about appearance. In dealing with some of the themes of prejudice, this is the one that seems obvious to me: Farquaad's a self-hating dwarf! He is a fairy tale creature who is driving out fairy tale creatures. He is not acknowledging his own fairy-taleness. In my mind, that's a more interesting aspect to Farquaad. People say, "Why is he short?" He's short because he's a fairy tale creature who thinks he's Prince Charming, he thinks he's the hero who looks like Tom Cruise. He's not! [Laughs]

The theme of self-esteem, or lack thereof, applies to all the major characters.
ELLIOTT: Exactly. So you have a character who is insisting that his vision of perfection is correct, which ties in with what's going on with Shrek, it ties in with what's going on with Donkey and his self-esteem issues, and it ties in specifically with what's going on with Fiona.

There are other kinds of jokes in the film, like the Matrix *riff where Fiona fights the bandits. Won't this make* Shrek *seem dated someday?*
ELLIOTT: In our original draft, we wanted a fight between Shrek and Fiona in her monstrous form. Basically, Fiona's hiding because it's night and she's become monstrous, and Shrek barges in on her. He sees this monster and assumes it has done something to Fiona; Fiona, not wanting to be found out, takes off; Shrek gives chase, and it results in a fight. We had described it in terms of Hong Kong action movies, but unfortunately, at the time we wrote that, people weren't familiar with those things. *Matrix* hadn't come out yet, and nobody was familiar with the emphasis on action and physicality that Hong Kong action movies have, over the violence that American movies have. So no matter how much we described it, [the studio] saw "fight between Shrek and Fiona" and they imagined this violent, knock-down, Steven Segal-type, bone-cracking fight. There was a feeling, particularly by a couple of women on the production, that this was misogynistic, that you don't show a man and a woman fighting. What then developed was that Fiona had a lot of admiration for Fiona's monstrous side, which Fiona found appalling.
ROSSIO: I think the *Matrix* joke will continue to be funny, because it's actually a parody of the *Matrix* joke, not just an imitation. It actually has that little primping moment right in the middle of it.

Eddie Murphy's Donkey *is reminiscent of Robin Williams's* Genie *in* Aladdin*, in that it feels as if much of his lines are improvised.*
ROSSIO: Yes, maybe if you actually counted up lines, you'd say seven to eight percent of the lines are improvised. Maybe they're incredibly memorable, and they're the funniest, but part of me wants to point out on behalf of the writers, producers, directors, storyboard artists, and animators, that it also means ninety-plus percent of the role wasn't improvised. I want to say that improvisation is crucial to the process, but in the end, they walk in and they

have character, they have a scene, they have a context, and they have jokes to work off of.

ELLIOTT: In creating the *Shrek* story, we actually intentionally created room for improvisation in the narrative—not just by Eddie Murphy, but by the storyboard artists. I would love to be able to take credit for the idea of the fairy tale creatures showing up at Shrek's swamp. Terry and I didn't come up with that idea. [In our original version], Shrek was actually burned out of his swamp, and then on the way, he runs into these fairy tale creatures. That restructuring of actually having the creatures show up in his swamp is absolutely brilliant and adds a huge amount to that movie. In the improvisation, the best possible version of the narrative has been found. I think that's critical, at least in the process of writing for animated movies.

Why aren't you writing Shrek 2?

ROSSIO: I don't think we'll be working on the sequel in anything other than a consulting capacity. Many great *Shrek* sequels can be made. We felt that all of the good versions had a similar quality, which is that you'd always begin with the fairy tale conventions, and out of those conventions you'd tell a dramatic and funny story. And the [story] that was chosen was actually one that does not deal with fairy tale conventions. As long as that fundamental choice is in place, it precludes it from reaching the level of the prior movie….I don't want to be immodest, but I think what *Shrek* became is something that Ted and I were championing, in that it was an opportunity to do a comic fantasy type of story that had been going on in novels for a long time, but hadn't really been done in movies.

ELLIOTT: *The Princess Bride* was the only thing that came close to it….Here's my turn to be immodest. I read through the book, and I immediately saw not the potential of what the movie could be, but what the book was really about and how perfect its form was. It really is a perfect little book in terms of story, because the subtext is perfectly suited to the subject matter of the story. It is just a perfect story. What I realized was that everybody who had looked at the book previously seemed to be focusing on the text only, which was the story of this ogre who has to leave home and finds out there's a person and a place for everybody. That's the text of the story, but there is this marvelous subtext about recognizing what you need and making the changes necessary to get what you need. It was clearly written by somebody who was very familiar with Jungian fairy tale symbolism. It just clicked for me, in a way that I don't think it did for everybody else.

ROSSIO: Even the screenwriting teacher Michael Hague, who did an analysis of the film, said the same thing. He read the book and didn't see anything there at all. And then we started talking with him about it, and he said, "I can't believe I missed it." The other thing that was key about the genesis of *Shrek* is that the book came along at a time when it had a context. The context was that the creators—the artists, the animators, and certainly the writers—were getting a little tired of the previous formulas. One of the things

that Ted pointed out in the early going was that this was a story that stars an ogre, and an ogre is a traditional villain. Once you say that, you know we're not going to use the usual formulas here. That was a key aspect, and that's what got the animators, the storyboard artists interested. That's the potential that we saw at the beginning.

How did you get involved in Pirates of the Caribbean?

ELLIOTT: Our involvement actually began around the time we were working on *Aladdin* in 1992. Terry and I had come up with this great approach to a pirate movie. We pitched it at Disney as a tie-in to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, and at the time Disney said, "No, don't think so."

ROSSIO: "Do a film based on the ride?! That's insane!" [Both laugh.]

ELLIOTT: Recently the studio had developed a story of their own, which I think went to protecting rights to the ride. Jay Wolpert was the first writer, then while Stuart Beattie was on the project, Jerry Bruckheimer's company became involved. In 2002 [Bruckheimer Films'] Mike Stenson asked, "Would you be interested?" I said, "Yes, absolutely. But I have to tell you, we have an approach. It's the only approach we want to write, and this is the only approach that has a shot in hell of being a successful movie. If you don't like this approach, we really don't want to do the story." That intrigued him, so we went in and pitched this approach—the same one we had pitched ten years earlier—and everybody came on board. It was the idea of bringing in the supernatural element. Instead of doing a swashbuckling romance, doing a swashbuckling Gothic romance.

ROSSIO: We realized that there really hadn't ever been a supernatural pirate movie attempted. We went to Disney and said, "Look, the ride itself begins with a talking skull."

ELLIOTT: We came up with the idea that, if we're doing this based on the ride, let's base it on the ride! Cursed treasure, the sacking of the city, let's just extend that all the way through the story.

ROSSIO: We just wanted to direct them back to some of those great elements that [legendary Disneyland art director] Marc Davis originally wove into that ride experience.

ELLIOTT: What is it about the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride that audiences like? That, more than anything else, is important to give to people. It's scary and it's unknown and it's fascinating and it's fun and it's exciting. What we wanted to do was come up with a story that would make an audience feel that way, no matter how old they were. There are story elements to the ride, and a lot of them appear in the movie, but it wasn't about adapting the story. It was about creating a movie for which the audience experience of the movie was similar to the audience experience of the source material. The emotions generated by the original material.

The script for Pirates *starts off, not in the middle of a pirate battle as many would expect, but very quietly with a sense of foreboding that draws you into the story. You set up a lot of things before the first cannon is fired.*

ROSSIO: Well, it's a ghost story.

ELLIOTT: We made the decision that, rather than starting like you'd expect a pirate movie to start, we needed to start it like a horror movie. And so that's what we did.

Did the studio accept that right away, or did they suggest they wanted to sell something different?

ROSSIO: We came in with our Academy Award nomination, and they bought every decision we decided to make [laughs].

ELLIOTT: I think people could look at the ride and say, "There's something here that could be a movie." Terry and I said, "Here is something that *is* a movie." This scene that starts this movie will intrigue people. Things happen. There are interesting images. We don't see a pirate battle, true; what we see is the aftermath of one. We see young Elizabeth take the medallion, and you immediately know that's going to mean something. Why else would we be showing it to you that in that first couple minutes; if it wasn't going to mean something later? You get the tone of, if not a horror movie, then a supernatural movie. Then there's the weird, "Did she see or did she not?" aspect of the pirate ship [when a young Elizabeth thinks she saw the *Black Pearl* in the fog]. All of that satisfies the audience's desire to understand what this movie's going to be like without in any way tipping them as to what the story is. It creates an expectation. I think the promise is strong enough that the audience is willing to enjoy everything that leads up to the fulfillment of that promise. And that of course is when the *Black Pearl* attacks Port Royal.

How did you collaborate with Jerry Bruckheimer and director Gore Verbinski?

ROSSIO: *Pirates* was the best live-action experience we've ever had on a movie. I think it's perhaps the best experience we're likely to have. We were able to come in and, with [Bruckheimer Films'] Chad Oman and Mike Stenson, really design the film and the story. And then Gore Verbinski came on and only made improvements, and Jerry Bruckheimer supported the whole thing. It's such an odd thing to have a film from start to finish and to be able to say, "Everything worked in terms of whatever your best fantasy of what it is to be to be a screenwriter in Hollywood."

ELLIOTT: It was genuinely a collaborative art form. In the true sense of the word "collaborative," not in the usual Hollywood sense of "collaborative art form so shut up and do what we say, or else we'll fire you and get somebody else who will." We did the first draft, Gore came on board, and we started working with him. He had some ideas that made changes in the plot and the structure…

ROSSIO: …for the better. The audience experience of the story…

ELLIOTT: …is going to be better because of the changes we made that Gore

wanted. With our theoretical movie we had said, "Oh, this is going to be a great movie." Gore came in and said, "Well, here's a different theoretical movie." And we said, "Hmm, that's going to be a great movie. We don't know what we were thinking with our first theoretical movie. It would have been good, but it wouldn't have been great." And we worked with the various actors—Johnny Depp [Jack Sparrow] and Geoffrey Rush [Barbossa] and Keira Knightley [Elizabeth]—going through the script, incorporating their ideas. I think the final version of the story that Barbossa tells of the curse was probably twenty or thirty hours of work with Geoffrey Rush.

That sounds like Robert Shaw working on the Indianapolis *monologue in* Jaws.
ELLIOTT: That was the inspiration. We said, "Look, *Jaws* was a sea story and they told a story. The story of *The Indianapolis* is one of the great scenes of modern cinema. We've got to have people telling stories in this movie!" [Laughs]
ROSSIO: The process was getting together and reading through and having meetings with Gore and Geoffrey, just talking it through. Is the story clear? Is it interesting? Is the rhythm right? It's looking at it over and over again with an eye toward those aspects.
ELLIOTT: In all honesty, we had to overwrite our version. We knew there were things that could be pulled out. In talking with Geoffrey we could say, "The intent of these three lines is to communicate that the character is thinking this," and Geoffrey would say, "Wait, I can do that by arching my eyebrow." "Okay, then we only need one word here." It was not just working on the lines he was going to say, but talking about his performance. Again, that genuine sense of collaboration.

It's dependent on the personalities involved.
ELLIOTT: Absolutely. We had a very collaborative relationship with Mike and Chad, and through them, with Jerry. Gore is a guy who is so confident in his abilities, he has no problem listening to anybody else's ideas. He does not take it as criticism if somebody says, "Hey, I have an idea." Right there, that sets the tone for the entire production.

By contrast, do you mean that directors who are not open to that collaborative experience may come from a place of insecurity?
ELLIOTT: I think… yeah.
ROSSIO: I think there are a couple of things that come into play there. Sometimes one of the job requirements of being a director is to project this image of absolute authority. One way to do that is to be the person who always defines the movie and always makes every decision. There are all sorts of other talents that are involved in directing; one of them is being able to own a story, understand a story, completely, in all of its workings. Some directors have the ability to understand a story only if they've constructed it. So what they'll do is break text down, destroy it or obliterate it, and then slowly construct it back up according to their own sensibilities. It's not necessarily

because of ego; it's because of a legitimate need to understand all of the workings of a story, why every decision was made and how it was made. And then once they've reconstructed the story to their own sensibilities, then they can go out and tell it in an effective manner. So it has the appearance of a director being insecure, but in fact it's the director simply lacking one talent.

ELLIOTT: My experience is insecurity [both laugh].

Rossio: Oh well, I tried.

ELLIOTT: That was nice of you. But I would argue that some of our worst experiences with directors are because directors are so insecure that an idea from somebody else is an attack on them.

ROSSIO: An attack to their authority. Yeah, that can be, and is often, an aspect.

I wanted to apply a few concepts you deal with on Wordplay to Pirates. *What would be the Warner Bros. Hallway Test?*

ROSSIO: The notion is to recognize how people in Hollywood talk: over the phone, in the hallway, between meetings. You're going to have a ten-second chance of somebody passing by somebody else and the conversation's going to go: "So, how's that new draft of *Pirates of the Caribbean*?" And the answer's going to be something like, "Wow, it's really cool—"

ELLIOTT: Sword-fighting skeleton pirates!

ROSSIO: Unless your script can be described in a shorthand way that has all these obviously intriguing or cool elements, the conversation might not go well. It might go, "Well, it has some cool things in it…" [trails off weakly].

ELLIOTT: It may be unbelievable, but the way people talk in Hollywood is not too dissimilar from the way people talk in the real world. "I saw *Matrix*." "What's it about?" "Oh, man, it's about these guys, they live in this computer simulation program, they have these superpowers and all this neat kung fu." "Oh, really, tell me more."

You have to get to the "Tell me more" part.

ELLIOTT: Exactly.

What are strange attractors, and what are the strange attractors in Pirates*?*

ROSSIO: People played with this notion of "high concept" and I was just annoyed with that concept. So, "strange attractor." "Strange": your idea should be unique. "Attractor": you've got to get people attracted to it. For *Pirates*, there could be any number of things that are attractive. But if you said, "Hey, how about a pirate movie, and instead of looking for treasure, they have to get back the treasure that they've stolen," there's something about that. It's unique, and it should have the quality of making people intrigued by it.

ELLIOTT: There has to be a sense that this is something where I can't think of a movie like that. The strange attractor for us to do Pirates was, can we do a—

ROSSIO: —a $300 million movie? [Laughs]

ELLIOTT: Can we do a movie that embraces the story sensibilities of the golden age of Hollywood pirate movies while appealing to the story sensibilities of the

modern audience? Can it have all the strengths of the old movies and all the strengths of current movies? Just the challenge of that was attractive to me.

ROSSIO: I thought it was, "Can we get a free trip to the Caribbean?"

ELLIOTT: It was also that.

When you were developing Pirates' *characters, did you intentionally compare and contrast them, such as Norrington versus Will?*

ROSSIO: That's something we tend to do when we do story creation in conjunction with character creation. It's fun to take whatever your major theme is and then use your characters and character design in such a way as you can fully explore all the major facets of the theme. If you put the characters at these different extremes in your theme, when they come together there's almost automatically something interesting happening in the scene between the characters, because they've been designed that way.

ELLIOTT: Going back to the classical Greek construction, the way those plays worked was that you would have a protagonist who would embody a particular point of view. The antagonist would embody an opposing point of view, and the structure of the story was an argument between these two points of view, with the resolution of the story being the resolution of the argument. In *Pirates*, Elizabeth is the protagonist, representing the idea of the romance of the pirate. The romantic illusion of the outlaw is a very common concept in our society; in fact, the underpinning of all romances is the anti-hero, the Byronic bad boy. That's what Elizabeth is looking for. Each of the characters surrounding her present differing points of view on that issue. [Buena Vista Motion Picture Group President] Nina Jacobson put it best. She said it's like an animated movie: you have the prince (Norrington), the pauper (Will), the rogue (Jack) and the villain (Barbossa). All of these characters are presenting these different points of view to the princess (Elizabeth). Hopefully, the final resolution of the story is our point of view about the whole thing, which is "Don't fall in love with the romantic illusion; find the romantic reality."

You write upbeat action-adventures stories. The audience knows that no matter what you put the hero through, he or she will be victorious in the end. Did you plan to write such positive stories or did it just happen that way?

ELLIOTT: There's that great Neil Gaiman quote from *Sandman*, where he's talking to the nightmare of serial killers and telling him—I'm paraphrasing here— "You told stories that told people the world is a bad place. They already know that." Come on, how hard is it to tell people, "The world sucks"? People know that. Much more valuable, in my mind, is to point out the ways in which the world is a great place, and people are worth a damn. Ted Tally has a terrific quote: "There's almost never been a movie made that couldn't benefit from its ending being a tentative affirmation."

ROSSIO: Because anything more is too pat and anything less isn't worth it.

ELLIOTT: There's a truth to that. I guess my own point of view is that people for the most part are worth a damn.

Why Wordplay and how did that come about?
ROSSIO: I don't consider myself a talented writer. I've had to teach myself and learn through study. Writing a web site on how to write screenplays is the perfect way to learn how to do screenplays. I've always been jealous and somewhat resentful of writers who always talk about being in "the zone"; for me it was always one excruciatingly difficult word after another. I've never not had writer's block [laughs]. It's nice I can't get writer's block because I'm always in that space. Also, there are so many books and seminars and such out there, and it always bugged me that they're written by people who don't write screenplays. It just seemed there ought to be a place where somebody could go to see where people do it starting from the blank page, and also get a glimpse into the reality of what Hollywood is like. For a lot of people, Hollywood is this dream and they spend all this time and effort and energy pursuing it. Which is great, as long as there's an accuracy to what it is they are after. I think through the web site people can see what it's really like out here and make a better informed decision about spending years and years of their lives trying to get into the system.

You mentioned that your company, Scheherazade Productions, is working on an "opportunity" with Digital Domain. What's going on there?
ROSSIO: This is a project where we're trying to do something very crazy. We're basically trying to create the next Pixar. It's not just a movie, it's a film commitment. Possibly even the creation of an entire company.

How did you guys come up with this idea?
ROSSIO: It doesn't make a lot of sense for screenwriters to look to Hollywood to execute their stories. There's this notion that you write a great script, you wave it around, and everybody looks at it—directors and producers and studios—and they go, "Wow, that's a great script, let's go make it." Since that never happens [laughs]—
ELLIOTT: Rarely happens.
ROSSIO: I might even say never. What has to happen then is that the writer has to take responsibility for getting that project to the screen the way he wants. That means becoming a producer or a director or forging a strategic alliance with those elements. We've tried the other route, where you just write really, really well for a very long time [laughs]. Sometimes it works. Not really enough. For all the success we've had, it's always been navigating the studios creatively. I don't think the studios do a very good job of development. They're really not built for that, but they're very good at distribution and marketing. So the ideal thing for us would be to have a place where we could go and develop stories and make films and then shop them to the studios for distribution.

This will be a new animation studio, then?
ROSSIO: Live-action films with heavy special effects and CG elements. Digi-

tal Domain specializes in live-action CG. Imagine if one company had a reputation for doing *The Mummy, Jurassic Park*, and *The Matrix*.

That's fantastic.
ROSSIO: Yeah. Also impossible to pull off [laughs].

The Farrelly Brothers

INTERVIEWED BY DANIEL ARGENT
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 8, #6 (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2001)

I n just a few short years, the Farrelly brothers have created their own niche in screenwriting. Their mix of sweet if befuddled heroes, almost-anything-goes humor, and the fluids, sounds, eruptions and ejaculations of the human body combine to form a very specific subgenre of comedy. Not bad for two guys who, as Peter Farrelly points out, were "never good at anything. We weren't good as students, we weren't good out of school, we were terrible salesmen."

A post-college epiphany led Peter to Columbia University's writing program, where he met future writing partner Bennett Yellin. Peter and Yellin moved to Los Angeles in 1985, and their first script turned them into working screenwriters. They used Bobby Farrelly as a punch-up man for their scripts, but it wasn't until 1989 that Peter's younger brother (by seventeen months) left Rhode Island—where he'd filled up his non-writing hours with entrepreneurial projects like the Sun Spot, the world's first round beach towel—for Hollywood. The trio wrote *Dumb & Dumber* in 1990; the film was finally produced in 1994 with first-timer Peter in the director's chair. The Farrelly brothers then developed a two-year release pattern: *Kingpin* (the Farrellys didn't receive credit for their substantial rewrite of the Barry Fanaro & Mort Nathan script) (1996); *There's Something About Mary* (1998); and *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000). They also recently directed the live-action portion of this summer's *Osmosis Jones*, written by their friend Mark Hyman.

With *Shallow Hal* the brothers take the next step, moving from gag-centric humor and toward more character-based laughs. The story, conceived by friend and former roommate Sean Moynihan, tells of an average-looking man who unsuccessfully chases beautiful women. A chance encounter with Tony Robbins has the self-help guru hypnotize Hal to view people based on their psychological, not physical qualities, and results in Hal falling in love with an

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obese woman (Rosemary) whom he perceives as a "luminous beauty." "What I find interesting," said Bobby, "is that Sean, who is legally blind, wrote a screenplay about inner beauty." With guidance and assistance from Peter Farrelly, Moynihan created the script that would eventually become *Shallow Hal*.

Creative Screenwriting conducted separate interviews with the Farrellys, which have been merged together for this article. Bobby's interview was completed in early September 2001, with Peter's interview coming a week later. In between those two calls came the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The Farrellys had flown from Boston to Los Angeles on the morning of Monday, September 10. If they had flown out a day later, they would have been on one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center. As soon as Peter and Bobby heard about the attacks, they rented a car and embarked on a four-day cross-country road trip to return to their wives and children. In the shadow of such a horrific event, it was sometimes uncomfortable discussing how to make people laugh, but this odd, sad turn of events gave Peter reason to reflect on the healing power of comedy in times of tragedy. The Farrelly brothers subsequently wrote and directed *Stuck on You* in 2003.

How did you get involved with Shallow Hal, *and what kind of work did you do on the script?*

PETER: Sean Moynihan came to me with the idea. We worked out the story together while he was writing it, then he handed it over to me and Bobby. It was Sean's idea, but I was with him from the start.

BOBBY: Sean wrote a beautiful script. The problem with it was that there were a bunch of clichés in it. When Pete and I write our own scripts, it takes us four or five drafts to flush out our own clichés. Any time you see something you're familiar with you think, "How can else can you get the same thing without going down a road that's been gone down so many times that the audience knows what's going to happen?" So we attempted to flush out a lot of the clichés [in Sean's script].

For example, in the original draft Hal went to a fortune teller to find out what was going to become of him and the fortune teller ended up putting a spell on him where he sees people at a different level. That's a big part of the story, and we thought [it was] flawed. It's magical, and it's a leap of faith for you to believe that could happen. To have that leap of faith is risky in a story that is otherwise pretty much reality based. Whether or not people would go with that, we just weren't sure. What we ended up doing is that Hal gets stuck in an elevator with Tony Robbins, who gets Hal to change the way his mind works. I thought, "I don't know if Tony Robbins could actually do this, but it's sort of believable that he could." So we got away from a cliché, and we made something that's fresh and original. Tony Robbins is a real guy, and maybe if you spent a whole day with him he could get you to change the way you see things.

Comedy scripts often get tabled, and I'm sure Shallow Hal *is no exception. Could you walk through the process of tabling* Hal*?*

BOBBY: I never really understood if this was something the Writers Guild was totally against or not, but before we go to bat with a movie, we're going to sit down and table that script with ten of the smartest and funniest guys that we know. We're going to go through it and read each line. Any time anyone has a way of making it better, we're going to listen to him. If a guy says, "My bull-shit meter's going off," we're going to listen. We've done that on every movie. You can look at a script so many times that you don't see an inherent flaw because you're too attached to it. You bring someone else in and he's read it once and he says, "I don't like this character, or this scene," and it's like, "Wow, that's something that we need to step back and evaluate." Rather than put your dukes up and say, "Oh no, you're wrong and we're right," you really need to flush it out. Maybe there's something to what he's saying.

And a lot of times you say, "I understand where you're coming from, but we're going to do it anyway." On *Shallow Hal*, one of the guys we brought in was Jeff Ross. A guy we respect tremendously as a comedian, very funny, a sharp mind, and just a good guy. When he says something, you better listen. Well, he said that he didn't agree about Tony Robbins [as the story device to replace the fortuneteller]. We thought this was a way to strengthen the script, but we also knew we better hear him out. We talked about it for an hour and everybody gave their opinions. There was a sizable chunk of the guys who didn't like the Tony Robbins character. They felt that was like breaking frame. But ultimately we thought, we gotta trust our own opinion here. We didn't come up with anything better as we were sitting around the table, and we liked it, so we're comfortable with it. So we went ahead. But it is something we had to consider. Because Jeff's other five ideas were on the mark.

You've said that when you strip away the vomit and semen jokes, your scripts are really just saccharin stories about a guy going after the girl he's in love with. With Irene *and* Hal*, it seems like you're moving toward a stronger emotional arc for your characters in these last couple films. Is that intentional?*

PETER: My goal always has been to write a comedy that could also make people feel something emotionally. All our comedies have a touch of, I'll say, substance to them—and I'll underline "a touch." We've never really gotten heavy. But even *Dumb & Dumber*, which is a very broad comedy, has that moment at the beginning where Jim Carrey is trying to talk Jeff Daniels into going to Aspen. Jim looks out the window and says, "I have nobody, I have nothing" and he plays it straight and he works up a tear. Our feeling is that you need three-dimensional characters for our type of comedy to work, because if you don't, you'll get bored and the movie will die halfway in.

There was actually a big battle between us and New Line Cinema about that very line, which was only maybe a thirty-second scene. They said, "What are you doing? This is a comedy, nobody wants that." We fought them vehemently; we felt it was necessary. Because in practically the next scene, Jim's

selling a dead bird to a blind kid in a wheelchair. And you better love this guy, if you're going to get away with that kind of stuff. I'd always wanted to get to a point where we could do a movie that's got huge laughs, and could also make people feel something, and maybe even get a little emotional. I hope that this is that kind of movie.

BOBBY: We've always tried to have that emotional arc, but people have always concentrated on these bodily fluid gags. We do put that in, so it's natural that they do talk about it. But to me those big gags have always camouflaged the fact that there is a sweet story there. I don't think we'd be comfortable telling a sweet story without any laughs to it. It's not our style.

So you wouldn't do a romantic drama?
PETER: I can see us doing more dramatic things, but I don't see us ever doing a drama that doesn't have laughs in it. That's just not our world. We just drove across country during a low point in American history, and we had a lot of laughs. Now we also had some tears in there. But even at the low point in life, fortunately for us, we're able to laugh at times. So I don't see us ever doing a drama that would be a straight drama.

BOBBY: Our strength is coming up with things that make people laugh. And particularly, I think, to make them laugh when they don't know what they're supposed to feel. Make them feel slightly uncomfortable. And go from there to making them laugh.

Speaking of which, you get a lot of grief for your disabled characters. But it seems that you write them as regular people who just happen to be albino or in a wheelchair. Much of the time the humor is a reflection of the other characters, not the disabled person.
BOBBY: We catch a lot of flack. Almost always we catch flack before anyone has read the script or seen the movie, like with *Me, Myself and Irene* and the split personality. With this movie, I'm sure a lot of people are going to say, "Now they're picking on fat people." We're not. It's just the opposite: we love our characters. They have their flaws, but beyond the flaws they have a lot of humanity in them. A lot of people are uncomfortable just having disabled people in movies unless they're perfect. That's really not the case with people with disabilities—they're just regular people. They're just like us, and they're all around us. So why can't they be in a story?

As a group [Bobby, Peter and Bennett], you guys wrote fifteen scripts before Dumb & Dumber *hit. But on all your projects after that, you've taken an existing script and rewritten it. What's the attraction for rewriting? And are you burned out on writing originals?*
BOBBY: I think rewriting is what we do best. We can see potential in a script that's not quite there, but it's got a good idea. We can see clearly what we would do differently. That's a huge starting point, rather than coming up with an original idea. If we have an original idea, we'd love to do that, too. But there's always people throwing scripts at us, so you end up seeing one

[where you go], "Hmmm, Pete, this is one that's got a lot of promise. If you and I buckle down on it, we could make something of it for ourselves."

It almost sounds like you're thinking, "I wish we'd thought of this."
BOBBY: Yeah [laughs]. If a guy's inspired enough to sit down and write a 120-page script—every writer knows how hard that is, and how much time and energy it takes—well, there must be something there that's driving the guy or girl. In their hearts they feel that they've got a good story. And a lot of times, they're right! A lot of times we'll see a little bit of inspiration in a script that we feel we can run with.

You guys wrote on Kingpin *but didn't get screen credit for your work. You also table scripts, and those roundtable writers don't get screen credit for their contributions. What are your feelings on the WGA rules for limiting the number of writers credited on a script?*
PETER: I have mixed feelings about the Writers Guild. I'm a strong union guy, and I'm extremely grateful that the Writers Guild exists. All writers should be. But I'm appalled that they don't [credit] all writers who work on a movie. It's just awful. The reality is, many movies have five, six, seven writers. And the Writers Guild feels that only the writers who do the most should be credited, which is a very bad idea. Particularly because the guy who delivers the donuts to the set is getting credit at the end of the movie.

I'm not saying you should take away the importance of those writers who are credited because they did 52%, but if someone did 48% they should certainly be [credited] on that movie. My suggestion—and many people have suggested this—is that you say "Screenplay by Blah and Blah" [in the title credits] and at the end of the movie you list "Additional Writers." If you write one word on a movie as a paid writer, you should receive a writing credit. It's criminal that people routinely write 30% and 40% of a movie and are uncredited. Particularly since good writing is all about honesty. It's just dishonest to say that two people wrote this movie when six did—it's not the truth. And I find that offensive to all writers.

Yeah, *Kingpin* was a bad experience, because we felt we'd done enough to be credited. But forget that. We do tables. The fact is, that's how movies are made. If it takes ten minds to make a movie better, we'll use those minds. It's upsetting to me that at the end of the movie, I can't credit the guys who contributed so much. If they have to be listed at the back, at least they're up there. They can tell their grandchildren, "I worked on that movie" and they can prove it. The Writers Guild's fear is that by having additional writers listed, it takes away from the stature of the credited writers, the guys who did the most. But it doesn't. All it does is add to the stature of the additional writers. And it helps everybody in the Writers Guild. It just disappoints me that they would lie. They're not being completely truthful, and the truth is always right.

I understand that Bennett Yellin split from the writing team in '92 because he was tired of writing scripts that were never produced.

PETER: Yeah, he got burned out. We were doing it for seven years, and although we were making a living, it reached a point where it wasn't satisfying for him. Bob and I always sensed that each script got us closer to getting one made. There were times when you looked at some of the crap they made during those years and you shook your head, "Why are they making those things and not our movies?" I'd call home and my father would say, "What the hell is going on? Why aren't you getting your movies made?" And I'd always say, "Pop, you gotta just be patient. Our time will come." I had faith that, eventually, things would look up. But on the other hand, my whole self-worth didn't depend on whether or not I had a movie. I was riding high on the thought of being a paid screenwriter and writing books on the side. I was running around and having a lot of fun. People ask us, "It must have been hell, nine years in LA without a movie getting made." It really wasn't. In fact, I was as happy then as I am now.

You've said, "I'm a big believer that you don't wait for happiness."

PETER: I never did. When I was writing these screenplays and working on my book, I was living the dream. I admit there was a part of me that was frustrated that I wasn't getting movies made, but everybody has frustrations in life. I was well paid and I was writing and very happy. I felt like I was always on the verge. Though it can be frustrating to be like that, it can also be exhilarating.

You had nine years of getting paid to write scripts and yet not getting anything produced. What did those years teach you about writing and Hollywood?

PETER: For the first five years, we were writing what we felt the producers and the studios wanted. We were writing scripts that felt like movies that were getting made at the time. Or, writing what the studio and producers asked us to write. And we were making those scripts pretty darn funny. Many times we'd hand in a screenplay and the studio execs would call us up raving, "This is phenomenal, we love it, it's perfect," yet they wouldn't make our scripts. And finally I realized, "Why don't we write what we think is funny?" The first time we did that, where we just threw caution to the wind, was *Dumb & Dumber*. When we handed it in everybody looked at it and said, "That's funny, but there's no way you can make that. You got a guy taking a dump, you got too many stupid things." And for four years it didn't get made. But the bottom line is, when it did, it was different from what was out there at the time. So you gotta just write what makes you happy.

Also, you gotta bust your ass on that script. You have to write a tremendous script, a great, great script. And when you're done with it, when it's as good as it can be, when you think, "This is just unbelievably good"—make it way better. People get by on a script and say, "This is good" and they send it off. We don't do that. When our script's good, we put it down and we think about it and we say, "Okay, now let's make it phenomenal." That's the key.

Me, Myself and Irene wasn't phenomenal. It was good, and we were satisfied. We were probably a little cocky, because we were coming off *Mary* and we were thinking, "We're pretty damn good, and this is from us so it must be great." And later you realize, "Wait a second, we busted our ass on those other scripts, and we probably didn't try as hard on that one."

The creative talents whom you admire—Tarantino, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, Zucker brothers, Jim Brooks—are all people with very individual styles.
PETER: I like guys who are honest and original. I'm a huge fan of Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson. When we were rewriting *Mary*, we were halfway in and we hit a wall where it just seemed so predictable: "Well, of course he's going to go find her, and how satisfying is that?" Somebody told me to rent the movie *Bottle Rocket*, and it blew my mind. Brilliant. They could have done a movie about their robbery spree. But they didn't. What they did, I'm guessing, is start writing a screenplay about these robbers, and the characters stopped at this motel and the maid appeared and they're writing away, and suddenly they were open to the story veering off in that direction.

That's what good writing is: you must be open to all possibilities. Suddenly it struck me that, as we were writing *Mary*, we only had one option, which was that the guy ends up with Mary. And that was just not right. You have to have many things that could happen. Because if you know on page forty that he's going to end up with Mary, then the movie's over! Suddenly we looked at it from a different angle, and we were including as an option that Ted doesn't end up with Mary. That in fact it could be the character of the private eye, or it could be her friend, even Woogie. Anything could happen. By opening our minds, and keeping all possibilities open, the movie got a lot better. If you think you know where you're going the whole time, you're not letting God do His work.

Is that God in the specific sense or the general?
PETER: Whatever the thing is that gives us inspiration. I've said this [about me and Bobby] a lot of times: everything we tried, failed. And yet, we've succeeded at writing. It's not because we're smarter than other people, and we're certainly not more talented than everyone else. But what we do is, we recognize our limitations, and reach out for inspiration. We're open to it. A lot of people write, and somebody will say something really funny, but it's not in the direction that they're going and everybody laughs and they say, "That's good, but let's go where we were going." Well, when we do that we say, "Whoa, that's funny. Let's look at that direction." Anything's possible. You must keep yourself wide open to ideas. And these ideas, I don't know where they come from. But they don't come from us.

Be open. Don't go in thinking you know what you want to write. Let anything happen that wants to happen. A lot of times you open those doors and you go down a road and you hit a dead end and you back up. But if you don't look down that road, you don't know what's there. When we were writing

Hal, at one point Sean said to me, "I don't know, man, my grandmother's going to see this movie." I stopped right there and said, "Don't ever, ever say anything like that again. You can never think of somebody else when you write." That is the kiss of death. And that's what too many people do. Because they're afraid of what people will think. It's a little egocentric, but you can't be afraid. Writing is all about honesty. When you read something great, it's because it's the truth. You recognize good writing when you recognize the truth. You can't be truthful if you have prudish tendencies, or if you're afraid of what people will think. It's all about honesty. And for that I thank my parents. They were always open: you can say whatever the hell you want to say. We weren't afraid.

It's great to have that kind of relationship with your parents.
PETER: Yeah. I'm glad my parents lived to see this. Because for the first 25–30 years it was just one disappointment after another for them. But they never gave up hope. They would always say, "You can do something. You can do something good." But they didn't know what it was, and that scared them.

When did you know what it was?
PETER: I was twenty-three and I remember thinking, "Is this it? Is this where I'm at? I'm a salesman?" And I wasn't a good salesman, I was bad, the worst in my office. Yet I knew I was capable of something. I thought, "Maybe if you wrote down what has happened to you in the last few years, there'll be a sign of what you should be doing, what you're good at." I would take long drives up in Maine, New Hampshire, western Massachusetts, by myself. Things would be running through my head, things that had happened to me in my teenage years, and I started writing them down. I found myself really liking the process of writing. I couldn't wait to get out of work to write—I'd sneak away from work to write. It was just a journal, I didn't know where I was going with it. And then I woke up one day and realized, "Wait a second, this is what I like! I like writing!"

The problem was, I was twenty-three, I hadn't written a word, I was considered dumb by all, and the idea of announcing to everybody that now I was going to be a writer was just too embarrassing. So I stuck with my job for another year and a half, while trying to get down something substantial. Eventually I had to 'fess up that that's what I wanted to do. And it was met with ridicule by many people. But my parents were extremely supportive. They were thrilled with it! Because it was the first time in my life I'd ever come out and said, "I want to do something." They said, "Go for it! You'll probably do well!" And I never looked back from that point. Luckily, it's worked out. I don't want to get preachy. I remember feeling many times, particularly in the beginning (1982–83), all I had was prayer. I'd pray when I woke up in the morning, I'd pray when I went to bed at night. I'd pray, "Jesus, God, please help me. I'm going for it. I need help." And everything worked out. It made me very fond of God.

Was this when you didn't know what you wanted to do with your life, or when you were first getting into writing?
PETER: Everything. I asked for direction, "God, what do I do with my life?" Some people I know, they don't believe in God. They have that right. And some people have no reason to believe in God, they haven't felt God. But I tell people who don't believe, "Listen, pray for one month. And ask for something." I think people don't ask [Him] for enough. I did ask. I asked for specific things. And I got them. I can't write it off as luck. It was such a shot in the dark. And yet it all worked out. And the only thing I can account for is a strong belief in God, that He was there or somebody, something was there—[stops himself]. I've gotten preachy enough, I'm going to end it right there.

It's important for people to hear about these experiences. Spirituality doesn't get brought up very much in the media, yet there are a lot of people who believe.
PETER: Yeah, I'm a believer.

In these tragic times, what is comedy's purpose?
PETER: Comedy is a funny thing, no pun intended. It can be helpful in times of crisis, like right now, or it can be painful. [Bobby and I] were talking today, when do you think you'll hear the first World Trade Center joke? I hope not for a long, long time. There's inappropriate comedy, and there's comedy that relieves the pressures of everyday life. What we're going through now is beyond everyday life. This is the biggest, most viewed human tragedy in world history. The world watched as the towers were hit by planes and then dissolved in front of our eyes, and instantly thousands of lives were lost. It's unprecedented. I think right now, collectively, all humans are in shock. I think it's even shocking to the people on the other side.

In answer to your question—in an odd way, it's a great time for comedy. I don't think the human mind can take what's been happening. Put it this way: when *Zoolander* [Ben Stiller's new movie] opens, I'm running right out. Because I need two hours off. That is exactly what the doctor ordered right now. Comedy serves the same purpose as sports does for many Americans— a break from reality. We've lost that this week, with all the focusing on this unbelievably overwhelming disaster of mythic proportions. If ever there was a good time for people to go out and watch a comedy, it's now. For therapeutic purposes.

Scott Frank

"I have so many demons and voices telling me what a fraud I am and how my meager talent will be uncovered," says Scott Frank. "Scripts have to be pried from my cold, dead hands before I let anyone read them."

It's hard to imagine that the screenwriter of *Dead Again, Little Man Tate, Get Shorty*, Academy Award nominee for *Out of Sight*, Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (with Jon Cohen), *Flight of the Phoenix*, and *The Interpreter* would harbor such demons. If you asked him, Frank would tell you that his "inner critic" has always been there. It's not a self-imposed kind of thing he says. "I try to not let it get the best of me. I do find that whenever I'm overconfident, I crash and burn in the most spectacular ways."

Scott Frank first worked with Steven Spielberg when he was brought in to do some rewriting on *Saving Private Ryan*. It was an experience that convinced him he wanted to work with the director again. In 1999, he got his chance. The opportunity presented itself in Phillip K. Dick's short story, "Minority Report." "I didn't read the material and say 'boy I have to do this.' Which is usually how I decide," admits Frank. "I did it because it was Steven Spielberg." Which would explain why he chose to take on a genre he wasn't exactly suited for. As a result, his character approach to screenwriting would be put to the test. "It was the hardest script of my life," confirms Frank. "But looking back, it was a great experience."

There are only a handful of screenwriters working today who have a distinct style and a unique voice, and Scott Frank is one of them. Wrapped in a shroud of constant self-doubt is a true cinematic dramatist in search of the perfect story. Though he is convinced he'll never find it, it's the chase that keeps him going.

Scott Frank was gracious enough to take time out of his busy schedule to sit down and talk with me about *Minority Report*, what it's like working with

Cruise and Spielberg, his inner critic, what the future holds for him, and much more.

I didn't know you were a sci-fi fan.
[Laughs] I'm not! I certainly enjoy watching science fiction movies, but I don't seek them out, and I really don't read science fiction. For me sci-fi is *Blade Runner, Star Wars*, and *The Omega Man*. I don't have a vast sci-fi vocabulary, and it wasn't in my wheelhouse to begin with. So to do science fiction was very difficult for me. To get inside the genre, I had to immerse myself in the world of science fiction. I did read a little, including Phillip K. Dick. I do find sci-fi less about the characters and more about the universe of its concepts, and that's not as interesting to me. Very rarely does sci-fi go beyond that. I know I'm leaving out all kinds of great films in my generalization.

Science fiction tends to rely on the conceptual to produce the narrative thrust of the story. So it's problematic.
Right, and I wanted to approach it from the other end. As a matter of fact, in the short story the character of John Anderton embraces this new idea of people being arrested for crimes they are going to commit. And in the end he even sacrifices himself to save that system. But it was written in the '50s I think. So I thought, "how do you get behind someone who embraces such a Fascistic system?" "Why would someone ever believe this is a good thing?" Well, first, the situation in the world would have to be pretty dire. The murder rate would have to be out of control. More people would have to be dying from murder than from natural causes, and there would have to be a panic situation that would force us to embrace such an extreme loss of civil liberties. Second, I thought there had to be a personal issue to make it really interesting. The main character had to be running from something or acting out some personal problem for it to really work. So, what if Anderton was a policeman before Precrime and experienced the loss of his own child right in front of him. He would have felt completely powerless to stop it. I thought that anger and guilt would lead to a denial for the character in terms of what he was doing, and that might give him some real motivation and make things interesting.

You've taken that identity approach before with your characters.
Yeah, I think all of my movies have been about someone trying to find a true identity. From *Little Man Tate, Dead Again, Get Shorty, Out of Sight*, and *Minority Report*. They're all about people looking at themselves in a new light. Who they are versus who they thought they were. Anderton is a man who is blinded by his own grief.

How were the challenges of adapting Phillip K. Dick different from those of Elmore Leonard?
Very different. Because I begin with character and write from that perspective, and Elmore Leonard is all character. There is so much material you can

draw from to create plot and new characters. Leonard creates such rich and delicious characters who help generate the narrative. Phillip Dick's stuff, at least for *Minority Report*, operates on a purely conceptual level and his characters in the short story were very flat. They had no arc. So for me they weren't all that interesting. There wasn't much to draw from in the short story in terms of character.

How important was Jon Cohen's script to the work you did?
Very important, because what remains from his script to the final version are very crucial elements. First of all, and the least important, is his creation of hardware. He created some very interesting gadgets that I just loved. From the ship they used to the robotic spiders, I thought those were really wonderful inventions. Also, Jon's idea of scanning the eyes for identification, and having John Anderton get his eyes changed because of it, was wonderful I thought. The storyline involving the female Precog Agetha in the second half of my script was also his idea. And this led to the whole idea of having Agetha help Anderton with his own problems and delusions, and not just solving the crime. I also ended up giving Agetha her own history and her own narrative as a result. All of this, which is crucial for the story, came from the ideas that Jon Cohen had. More importantly, he had a structure that was very good. There were basic stepping stones that I used in the final script. Even though I created a brand new story with brand new characters, I was greatly influenced by Jon's script.

I think you have really injected a tired genre with some new life. Something that I haven't seen since Andrew Niccol's Gattaca.
Science fiction has become more about hardware than anything else. All the CGI and special effects crap they throw into a film in order to make up for a shitty script. Or maybe they just don't care about the story to begin with. I don't know. What I did was ignore the hardware. In my first draft of the script, when I say "someone picked up a phone" or got in a car, I say just that. I didn't try to describe the phone or the car. I wrote the story as if it were happening right now. The only difference is there were these three prescient beings who were capable of predicting the future, and people were being arrested for crimes they haven't yet committed.

   That was it. With the help of Jon Cohen's draft, I created a system that evolved around those three beings. And then I went back and created a history as to how they (the Precogs) were discovered. I decided to make the discovery an accident. Like all great discoveries, the Precogs were not intended. A doctor was trying to treat children of drug addicts who were severely brain damaged. In the course of this research and treatment the doctor discovers that several of these kids were having nightmares that were coming true. I created a whole character history for them and then I injected that into the narrative.

Your script is working on several different levels. It's really a mystery within a mystery.
Yeah, and Steven was game for that. He was willing to experiment with a very complex narrative. He even told me he had never done a mystery, so I think that appealed to him. His only caveat was that the audience has to understand the journey we're taking them on—or if they're confused, it's supposed to be that way. Steven was very concerned we make sure the audience was getting enough answers along the way so they weren't in the dark, while at the same time there was a mystery building.

But the plot was so complex and the script was long, and the challenge was really finding a way to tell all the stories we wanted to tell. We even tried to cut it down, but every time we did Steven would say he missed this or that, so we ended up shooting a very long draft of the script.

It's very Hitchcockian. It's also an ardently dark story—it reminds me of the old film noir. Your script Dead Again *did as well.*
I've gone to that well before. I went to the *Rebecca* well for *Dead Again*. I love his films and he has taught me a lot about writing and building tension. Hitchcock always populated his films with interesting characters. I like that, and I like to do that in my own writing. It doesn't matter the character. If you have someone speaking, at least give them a unique voice. Helps make things more interesting.

Those are the kinds of stories I enjoy reading and watching. You don't see a lot of those movies anymore. We don't seem to be telling complex narratives like we used to and as a result the audiences miss something when we do. They'll say, "I don't understand what happened at the end." Well, if we would just write better stories, people would start paying more attention. If we told better stories, people would stop answering their cell phones, or replenishing their M&Ms.

I think there are expectations of genre we as an audience have right now, and the writing that is being produced just feeds right into it. It's turned into a vicious cycle.
You're absolutely right. I don't see too many writers today who are trying to write complex characters and then from those characters create a complex plot. What they're doing is starting with a concept, and then they're creating attitudes, not characters. You have an idea to make a movie about car racing, not about a race car driver. So you're working backwards, and you end up making up stuff to fill in the blanks as opposed to starting with an original and interesting character. What baffles me most is that audiences seem to like that—at least right now they do. Filmmaking is at a high level in terms of technology, and it can be exhilarating to see some of these movies from that standpoint. I go to see some of them myself for that same reason, so I don't mean to devalue the accomplishments of those films. But what I am seeing is that we're more obsessed with technology than content. We can make anything now on film. You can now do *The Lord of the Rings*! You couldn't make that movie fifteen years ago.

They're targeting the teenagers, not us.

Exactly! Genre movies used to be for adults. *Dog Day Afternoon* wasn't for high school kids. Today genre movies are *The Fast and the Furious*, they're for kids. They're not for grownups.

Was there ever a concern that Spielberg wouldn't have the same vision for Minority Report *as you did?*

I never know what the theme is until I stumble on to it halfway through the process. I know we had conversations from the very beginning, and as I started forming an outline we were talking about what the story might be, and in the end it ended up being much different from what we thought. The constants were that it was always going to be a mystery and a complex story. The irony of an age where homicide detectives were no longer needed and then Anderton having to become a detective again to save himself, was very appealing to both of us.

One of the themes of Minority Report *is the loss of privacy.*

We had a think tank where we invited all of these experts, architects, scientists from MIT, and even journalists. We invited people to talk about weapons, social and privacy issues, and all kinds of things about what the future might be fifty years from now. Where are we heading? Things like that. The issue of privacy really hit home to me during this time. What we're losing more than anything, especially with the Internet, is the notion of privacy. We're learning more and more about people. You can carry that into the world of advertising, security and law enforcement. Those entities where they really want to get inside people's heads. Being able to know when someone is going to commit a murder before they even do, is the ultimate example.

Also, in Jon Cohen's script there was a very interesting thing he did that I touched on earlier—the idea of reading a person's eyes to identify them. I thought that is the theme of this movie. In fact, at one point in his script, Anderton gets his eyes surgically removed from his head so that he can maneuver around without being tracked. It's about being seen, and seeing what you want to see, and about being blind to certain things. This is a man who has a blind spot, and because of it he has embraced the system for all the wrong reasons. And it takes the system coming after him for him to really see what's going on.

Once you knew what the story was going to be for you, how long did it take to find the spine and then begin constructing the script?

It took months of meetings and talking about the story, and then it was months of outlining where we had to rethink the shape of the movie. During some of the early story meetings, Steven and I had talked about a style for the movie and we both liked the idea of doing a kind of *The French Connection* in the year 2050. Yet at the same time we're marrying that film style with a science fiction narrative where the hero of the story has a very dark side. Steven and I actu-

ally ended up watching *The French Connection* together.

It's interesting that you would mention that, because I could see a little of Jimmy 'Popeye' Doyle in John Anderton.
What I liked about Popeye Doyle was that he was flawed. In the films of the '70s, often the heroes were flawed almost as much as the guys they were looking for. Whether or not I subconsciously did that, I don't know. I can tell you that it's the way I write. I like to write about those kinds of characters. The superhero kind of character for me is dull. There's usually no conflict for them where they're having to hold it together in terms of their inner needs.

Was there ever a time when the writing was fluid for you? It sounds like you were always struggling with it.
No, it was always agony for me. I seem to take ten steps backward and a tiny baby step forward. I'm always throwing away much more than I am keeping. Since this movie was so outside of my wheelhouse, when I was finally able to make the material mine, that's when it started to fall into place. But then I panicked because my ideas were gonna stink [laughs].

At one point when I was writing *Minority Report*, there was this horrible rainy season, and outside my window they were doing construction. There was pounding and the building was literally shaking every fifteen seconds, and that damn beeping sound trucks make when they back up, and there were guys yelling at each other. It was a mess. As if that wasn't bad enough, my office sprung a leak. So it's raining inside my office, there's this pounding noise outside, and I was still able to write. That's how I knew I had it— I could still write with all this shit happening around me.

How involved was Spielberg in the development of the script? You had story meetings together.
Early on, before he went on to do *A.I.*, we worked for a year solid. Initially when I came on in January of 1999, Steven wanted to begin shooting that August. But Tom was in the middle of making *Mission Impossible 2* in Australia, and that schedule kept getting pushed back for various reasons, so therefore our production kept getting postponed. We had more and more time to work on the script and what we ended up doing was reinventing the story. Steven was incredibly indulgent of my messy process.

What was it like working with Spielberg? He's a modern day John Ford—you're working for God essentially.
The greatest and hardest thing about Steven is he has access to everything and everyone. So I'm constantly getting information during the process. He'll talk to whomever about this idea, or that technical thing, or whatever. When I was working on *Saving Private Ryan*, I had two large binders full of historical facts that he had accumulated about D-Day, and all this stuff he wanted in the movie. It's wonderful because it gives you ideas for scenes and char-

acter, but at the same time it is very overwhelming in the sense that you have to be careful not to write to the research. He reads scripts with a tape recorder in hard, and he takes copious notes. I would then get the transcriptions. Steven has a tremendous instinct for what an audience is going to feel. Often times when we hit a problem he is the first to find the solution.

Did Tom Cruise ever have any reservations about playing John Anderton because of the character's dark side?
I had one meeting with him early on, and then he went off to Australia. During that meeting he was game to pretty much anything. Tom is a fearless actor, he'll try anything, and so I felt he would actually like it. During the filming, I was on the set and he was very much a student of the page. He works very hard at making what's there work. He did have ideas, but most of them were behavioral. He was very enthusiastic about the screenplay. In fact, I think his enthusiasm for the project kept it together a few times.

Did you ever come close to dropping out of the project?
I did really get depressed after a while. There was a point where I had written the first fifty pages and was convinced that Steven wasn't going to like it, because it was so different from anything he had done before. Also, the schedule was taking forever. I couldn't work on other obligations I had. At one point I decided I just didn't like science fiction, but Steven kept telling me that I had to write this for myself. He kept encouraging me to find my own unique point of view for the story. My way out was, if I write it for myself and he doesn't like it, then I don't know how to write it. So here I am fifty, sixty pages into the script, and I just thought, "there's no way he's going to like it." Talking about it in theory was one thing, actually seeing it on paper was another. But Steven ended up responding well to it and told me he couldn't see the movie any other way than the way I wrote it. Now I was stuck, I had to do it [laughs].

    But then we went round and round about the details. Walter Parkes, the president of DreamWorks, was also very involved in the process. We all had different ideas of what we wanted in the script, and most of them were really good ideas. We wanted to do everything. Every week Steven would fax me pieces of research or ideas he had and all of it was good. What I ended up with after a year was a 180-page screenplay. That was when Steven went off to do *A.I.* At this point we had everything we wanted in it, but it still wasn't quite working. Then I went to finish some other projects I had, and about a year later I came back to finish it.

Were you on the set a lot?
Yeah some. I did have a lot on my plate. I was working on *A Walk Among the Tomb Stones*, and had to finish that while *Minority Report* was shooting so I needed to step away from the set more than I wanted. I would go as often as I could. It was very difficult to leave once I was there. Normally I hate being

on a set—it's usually so boring. Writers who say they love being on the set are nuts. It's not very interesting to me. It's great when you're there working, and can help problem-solve and things like that. But on a Steven Spielberg set it's always interesting [laughs]. First of all, there's so many interesting things happening in terms of the way the movie is being made. New cameras, experimental cameras, new ways of using cameras. Steven had a robotic arm brought to the set one day from an automated factory of some kind and they put the camera on the arm. Not to mention the people that visit his set. From the Secretary of the Navy, to Sting, Mike Myers, and Bill Clinton [laughs]. There was always someone showing up.

Do you set goals for yourself?
I do, both short term and long term goals. I think it's hard to feel good about yourself when you're not obtaining your goals, so you also need to have those shortterm goals. I'm going to work on my book, or whatever it is. Instead of saying I'm going to finish something by December, I'll say I'm going to write one page per day.

What is your writing process like?
I spend a lot of time writing about the script, thinking about the characters, getting ideas, lines of dialogue, before I actually write it. Anything that pops into my head I write it down and I start to organize that to shape the story. I spend months doing that. Sometimes before I write a scene I'll spend an hour writing about the scene, and I sometimes realize I'm stuck on something. So what I'll do is start with the dialogue and see where it goes, and then I fill in the action and different elements.

Does your inner critic become debilitating for you sometimes?
I have to work on it because it's not helping me any. I think I might be more adventurous if I wasn't so hard on myself. I might actually be a better writer if I was less inhibited. My inner critic inhibits me a lot from trying new things because I immediately stifle whatever sort of idea or notion I have. I'm constantly worried it's not a good one. The most satisfying thing is the process of writing. Being alone in my room, satisfaction is only found in problem-solving. And my inner critic is constantly pointing out those problems for me to solve [laughs]. What I have to do is let go and just write. I'm truly reluctant to turn anything in. The hardest thing for me to do is turn in material. It's hard to look at my own stuff. I rarely print anything out. If I print out my script to re-read it before I turn it in, I'll never turn it in.

It must be difficult for you to see your work on screen.
It's horrible. It's very difficult. I'll sit there and think, if I only had ten more minutes, I could have fixed that bit of dialogue or whatever. But there have been times when it's wonderful. I've seen it from rough cut to final print and have been very happy. And it's not because I don't like what the director did.

That's a different feeling. I'm more annoyed when that happens, and I can't say that's happened all that often. The movie you have in your head is never going to be on screen, it's impossible. The script will be interpreted differently by the director, the costume designers, the actors, everyone.

But writers have to stand up for what they believe in.
I have a very strong point of view about my own material. But I do know that there are certain things I can and can't do, like when a producer or whoever wants to take the story in a different direction and I just know I can't do that. If it's not consistent with my voice, I have no problem arguing my point of view, and I'm willing to find a way to solve the problem. I enjoy it actually. I enjoy collaborating within a creative team. I find that if I work with equally intelligent and creative people, sometimes more intelligent and creative ones, it challenges me to write better work. When I worked with Steven Soderbergh on *Out of Sight*, those days pacing around my office, spitting out lines of dialogue and running down to the deli for lunch, were some of the happiest I've had as a writer. When I can work with someone and we're challenging the material in the same direction, and not fighting each other over what it's about, that's when it's fun. Writers often don't ask tough questions about their own work. While my scripts are sometimes imperfect, at least I know I'm always going to ask myself the tough questions.

You're one of the few screenwriters who can get involved in the editing process of their films, and you even did some second unit directing on Minority Report.
I've been very fortunate. The second unit stuff was a blast. Working with Jersey Films on both *Get Shorty* and *Out of Sight*, they even included me in marketing meetings, everything. Soderbergh was very generous about showing his film. He would show me early cuts of *Out of Sight*. There were scenes we were thinking about losing, but weren't sure. We'd go into the editing room and talk about it. Jodie Foster was the same way. Kenneth Branagh was the same way. I spent a lot of time with him in the editing room. Barry Sonnenfeld was also very good to me. All of the directors have shown me cuts of the movie very early on. As for my experience on *Minority Report*, Steven would show us cuts of what he was doing. He was always very excited about it. He was very generous. Whenever I needed to talk to him, he would always get back to me right away, no matter what he was doing.

What's the status of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? Last I heard Gwyn Lurie was being brought in.*
I think they've already brought her on, and I think it's a good idea. I walked away halfway through that to be honest. I wasn't writing a good script. So I asked to be let out last May. They were in a big hurry for the script, and at the time we were shooting *Minority Report*. I also couldn't solve the problems of that script, and you know what, even if I had three years I couldn't have solved that one. I was really struggling with it. I couldn't figure out how to

make it relevant in the age of, you know, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The new kind of kid movies they're making today.

I know you're looking at possibly directing Bye Bye Brooklyn. *Is directing something you've always wanted to do?*
It's a book I really love by a writer I admire. The trick for me is do I want to direct something I didn't write? So I'm not sure. Right now I'm open to anything. I just know that I have become a little bored with myself, and I want to figure out what will re-inspire me. Movies don't inspire me that much right now, and I'm not sure I want to go spend a year or two working on one. I am working on a novel and that really inspires me. I'd like to finish that. I'm more inspired by fiction right now. I really want to shake myself up and get reinvigorated like I once was. Lately I've been turning down everything. I'm trying to discover what I want to do next. I honestly don't know.

I was twenty-four when I first started earning my living as a writer, and back then I really thought I would direct. Since then I've gotten to work with some terrific directors. I also now have three young kids. I don't know how I would feel about being away from their lives in the service of something I'm not even sure I like anymore. I have a very good life and directing would be disruptive to that. I don't know if I want that.

Why aren't you inspired by movies anymore?
Because they're not good; they're not written anymore. The writing is all about servicing the concept. It's not about writing real characters. It's about putting in a movie star and figuring out how to get them from point A to B. To be honest, I'm not sure where I fit in the whole mix of where film is heading. I don't know if I write the kinds of movies people want to see anymore. I believe that some sort of new wave is going to eventually happen, and that we'll get back to making more character-driven movies, and better ones. At least I hope we do.

William Goldman

INTERVIEWED BY DANIEL ARGENT
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"There's only three movies I've been involved with in my whole life that I really care about," said screenwriter and novelist William Goldman. "*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was one and *Princess Bride* was the second and *Hearts in Atlantis* is the third." High praise from one of the grand masters of screenwriting. Goldman may have begun his writing with novels, but over the last thirty-five years he's lit up the cinemas with his screenplays. While he has written some original screenplays (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, A Bridge Too Far, The Ghost and the Darkness*), his forte has been adaptations (*The Hot Rock, All The President's Men, Misery, Absolute Power, The General's Daughter, Dreamcatcher*), some even adapted from his own novels (*Marathon Man, The Princess Bride, Magic*). His mantle holds two Oscars, for *Butch* (1970) and *President's Men* (1977). And there have been numerous "Special Thanks" and "Creative Consultant" credits bestowed upon him for his script doctoring.

While his novel output has slowed of late, Goldman has directed that energy into journalism. He's risked Hollywood's wrath by writing several best-selling books on his experiences in film (*Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* and its sequel, *Which Lie Did I Tell? More Adventures in the Screen Trade*), as well as books on Broadway, the Cannes Film Festival, and magazine articles for *Premiere*, *New York* magazine, and many others.

"Someone said it's very nice to have Stephen King behind you," said Goldman, and he should know: he adapted King's *Misery* (1990) for director Rob Reiner (detailed in *Which Lie*), *Hearts in Atlantis* (directed by Scott Hicks, of *Shine* fame) is just about to be released, and he's currently working on the script for his latest, *Dreamcatcher*. With *Hearts in Atlantis*, Goldman adapted two stories from King's anthology, creating a script that shows Bobby Garfield

at ages eleven and fifty. "Low Men in Yellow Coats," the basis for the main story, sets the young Bobby Garfield in Harwich, Connecticut in 1960, during his last summer of innocence. Here Bobby deals with bullies, his first kiss (from girl/friend Carol Gerber), and a mysterious boarder, Ted Brautigan. "Heavenly Shades of Night Are Falling," the last story in the anthology, provides the film's bookend, returning a fifty-year-old Bobby to his old hometown for a friend's funeral and a surprising meeting with Carol.

How did you get involved in adapting "Low Men in Yellow Coats"?
I was sent the book—it's a wonderful book—and the thing that appealed to me was the story of Bobby and Carol. It was that relationship and the father-son thing with Ted. The other three stories [in the anthology] are marvelous but they didn't fit. I'm convinced, as I get older, that movies are only about story. And that sometimes when you get fucked up is when you try to include too much. Once you go off the spine, you get into terrible trouble.

I'm trying to remember the moment when I said, "I've gotta do this." Because it's tricky. The original thought was, "Could you figure out a way to do it all? Get all [the stories in the book] to reason?" And I couldn't figure that out. The Bobby/Carol thing just stayed so strong to me. I love Bobby and Carol. That was the initial pulse, for me. And then I loved Ted. I want those people to do well.

Did you know this was going to be one of your favorite projects?
Oh, no, no, no. I didn't know until I saw the film. Because I never much like the scripts that I do. They're as good as I can do, but I'm not enamored of them. There was just something moving. That scene on the Ferris wheel [where Bobby and Carol share their first kiss]. There was something… I've always needed father figures in life. The line they're going to use to sell it, which is marvelous, is, "What happens when one of the world's great mysteries moves in upstairs?" I love that! Because that, in essence, is what the movie is. This weird guy comes up and the kid is so desperate and they bond and it's wonderful.

The thing about Stephen King is, I don't know where he gets his notions from. Forget the fact that he's so amazingly prolific. I don't know where the ideas come from, but they're different from anybody else's. They're fascinating stories. It's beyond me. I'm doing his latest bestseller, *Dreamcatcher*, as we speak, and there is amazing stuff in it. But there is in almost everything he's ever written. I'll tell you a great book which you should read: his novella, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*. It's a brilliant, brilliant fucking piece of work.

Why did you use the older Bobby returning to Harwich to segue into the younger Bobby's story?
Well, because King does, in a way, doesn't he? ["Heavenly Shades of Night Are Falling"] opens with the older Bobby going back to Harwich. Originally, I used it because King has it, but the main thing was because I had always

assumed there was going to be the last scene on the bench. [Like King, Gold-man originally ended the story with Bobby and Carol, older and wiser, meeting in Harwich's park, while behind them the young Bobby carries a young Carol across the park just as he rescued her forty years ago.] Would I have used that story if I'd known the ending was going to be different? I don't know. But it was very important to me. I loved when they found each other again on the bench. I got very moved in the novel when King [earlier] tells us Carol's dead. I just thought, "Ah, shit." I really wanted Bobby to find some happiness. [The new ending] is in the movie because Scott Hicks saw *Billy Elliott*. The ending of *Billy Elliott*—when he's older—doesn't work. At least it didn't work for me; it didn't work for Scott. And he was terrified because our script had the Bobby/Carol ending from the book. Then Scott just got obsessed that we don't know anything about the adult Carol; we'll have only seen her at the funeral where she appeared for a blink. So you bring in this new character at the end of a movie and Scott was terrified, I think quite rightly, that it might not hold. Someone came up with the idea of having it be the daughter. And the fact that the actress can play both Carol [as a child] and her daughter is wonderful. We never shot the original ending. But I would have loved to have seen what it would have looked like.

The original ending had the older Bobby and Carol sitting on the park bench, and Bobby says, "Ted told me we were going to be happy forever—he just never got around to saying when forever was going to start." In the finished film, there's still the unrequited love between Bobby and Carol, but you show Bobby has moved on, he has a wife and kids now.
Yeah, that's all different. The line, "Ted said we'd be together forever," that's gone now. Once you change the ending, it's a different story.

You've said you can't begin writing until you know the end of the story. When the ending changes halfway through the process, how difficult is it to create the new ending and make it seamless with the rest of the story?
When Scott came up with the new ending, I'm sure I screamed. I didn't write that immediately. It's a whole rethinking of what's going on. That was a big change for me, but I think it was a good one. I haven't ever read the scene I wrote, the Bobby/Carol scene on the bench, but I'll bet it goes on too long because she [has to relate how she] gets blown up, and then she's been on the run. You have all this stuff you gotta get in and there was no way of getting it in sooner. Probably it's just as well it's not there.

For me, that was the most powerful scene in the script. Does it still hurt to lose those moments?
Oh yeah, sure. The best opening I ever wrote was for *The Great Waldo Pepper*, which was about airplane heroes after World War I. I opened it with these kids flying through the air [with arms spread]. I thought it was the most magical opening. [Pepper director] George Hill didn't like it for various reasons, and

he didn't want to shoot it. And he's probably right. But you get these visuals if you're a screenwriter. And they don't come easy, and you would love to know if they would have worked.

The line that will be on my tombstone is "Nobody knows anything." That caught on out there [in Los Angeles]. And it's true. It's not just that people don't know what's going to work commercially. The fact is, you don't know what's going to work in a movie. You don't know. We don't know. So we're sitting here with *Hearts of Atlantis* and you have no idea what the reaction's gonna be. You have no idea if people will enjoy it, and you have no idea if people will go to it. And that's one of the great crapshoots of the movie business.

What's your adaptation process? When you look at "Low Men," how do you break it down?
The first thing is, I read it the first time and decide, "Do I really care about this project?" Because one of my great breaks is I have only done work I wanted to do. I've been very lucky and it's true. The other thing is, "Can I make it play? Can I figure out how to do it?" Once I do, once I say yes, and the agents fire their guns across the waters with the studios, then what I do is, I'm not going to start writing for months. What I do is I reread the source material with a different colored pen for each pass. For instance, in *Hearts in Atlantis*, I made a mark by, let's say, the Ferris wheel scene, in red. And I read the book and then I'll put it away and then about two weeks later I'll read it again.

If you had the *Hearts in Atlantis* that I had, you would see there are these incredibly stupid marks in color and circles in the text. They look bizarre 'cause the last reading, when there are all these colored marks, I begin to circle pages that I know I'm going to use. I knew I had to go back to the Ferris wheel sequence: 'It was the kiss by which all the others of his life would be judged and found wanting.' That's marvelous! The great scene when Ted resets her arm, that business, pain, writhes, bite the belt, that marvelous scene. Every time I came to that, I knew that was going to be in the movie, so I would mark that.

So about two or three months later, I've read the book five or six times—this is why you better love what you're doing. I'll then go through it and I'll look at what I've marked a lot, because I know pages with no marks are not going to be in the movie. I'll try and figure out, "Have I got a spine? Have I got a story? Is there a way of telling it, using these scenes?" If I do, then I write a shorthand thing that I tape to the wall. In *Hearts* it might have been "baseball glove." That would have meant the first sequence when he's doing the picture taking and the baseball glove comes and he goes home. But I would just write "baseball glove." Then there was a long sequence, which has been cut, during the credits of driving from wherever he lives to Connecticut and I would have written "drive." And then I would have had "funeral." For the entire scene at the Ferris wheel—the Ferris wheel, the cotton candy, all that stuff—I would just have "fair." I can't do that until I have the story in my head. But when I'm done, what I have on my wall is twenty-five or thirty

snippets of one or two words.

What I'm trying to do is have twenty-five or thirty sequences—it could be one sentence or it could be ten pages—that hook onto the next so that at the end I have what I think is a story. And then I'll write that. I tend to write quickly. I think one should. When I start, I won't quit the first day until I've written three pages. And that seems like a lot if it's a book, but with all the white space we have on screenplays, like "Cut To," and double spacing and all that, it's not that much. I won't quit until I've written three pages. And I'll go that way and then gradually it begins to up. It'll go to four, and then to five. This is only about building up confidence. And then once you get halfway through, you think, "Holy shit, I could make it to the end!" And then you have more energy and you write it more quickly and then you're done.

If I say, "Yes, I'll make a movie out of this phone call," you would get the first draft in six months (I'm compulsive about deadlines) but I wouldn't start to write for four. I'll write it in three weeks or four, and then I'll fiddle with it and give it to you. But the whole thing is building up confidence that it's not going to stink this time. If you decide you want to write, you magically have people in your head that drove you toward that life decision, to whatever you read when you were a kid, or whoever you saw when you were a kid. And you know you're not that good. You realize you're not going to be Chekhov, you're not going to be Cervantes, you're not going to be Irwin Shaw, who is the crucial figure for me. And so you go into your pit alone, hoping, trying to fake yourself out that this time you will be wonderful. And that's hard and that's why the building up of confidence is so crucial for me.

You changed the scene where Carol gets beaten. In the second draft she gets hit several times on screen, but in the third draft she gets hit once. Why?
That was intentional. In the book, all three bullies beat her up. They club her with a baseball bat. First thing you have to be careful of, this is in a movie now. You've got to be clear [to the movie audience] that they don't molest her sexually. The second thing is, how much do you want to see? There's a marvelous shot that Hicks has: her book falls in the stream, there's a sound of birds flying away, and you hear the bat hitting something. Then Bobby comes in and she's dazed and she says, "He hit me." If you go more than that, it gets tricky. I'm sure I wrote it tougher.

There's a wonderful legal phrase in the music business called the "money part." If you've written a song and I sue you, the money part of the song will be the part that's famous. [Sings] "Some enchanted evening…" Pardon me for singing, but you know what I mean? That's the money part. I'll use that very often. When you read *Hearts in Atlantis*, clearly the beating was one of the money parts. That's something you know is so important that it's going to be a major part of the movie. But it's one thing when you read it in King. It's something else when you write it for the screen. How much do you want to see a girl get beaten?

When you are adapting a story, do you look at the characters as people or as func-tions of a theme? When you write Carol, do you write her as person or a represen-tation of hope?

As I've gotten increasingly longer in the tooth, it's more and more and more the story. When the mother comes back [and has the confrontation] with Ted, that's a plot point in the story of Ted's betrayal, and that's what it should be. But I know what you're saying about character. It all mixes up. All I'm thinking about is how can I make this story interesting for me. How can I make this story work for me—if I think it's a decent story, people around the world will. You don't know if it's going to be true. You don't know if the stu-dio's going to make the movie. But that's what I go on.

I believe when people leave me—when people walk out of a movie I've been involved with—it's my fault. I believe we [screenwriters] have fucked up somehow on the storytelling. We're telling you stuff you already know, stuff you don't want to know, the wrong person's talking.

The same scene, if it was on page ten or 110, would be totally different. Because once you're running for curtain—as you are when you're fifteen, twenty pages from the end—once you're running for curtain, you want to speed up as much as you can because there's a whole excitement that's build-ing, and you don't want to have people in those last twenty minutes who are not of great interest to the audience. It's an odd skill, an odd writing thing. I don't know quite what it is yet after all this time.

What is the secret to writing great child characters?

First of all, there are no secrets to anything.

Okay… What is your approach to writing characters like those in Hearts in Atlantis*?*

Go with King. It's one of the great things about King. Bobby and Carol are pretty much King. I don't think I did much with them. Some of the dialogue is me but most of it is King, as much as I could make. Were there any big changes? No. A lot of it is just taking out bits and pieces and making it play. But I think that's all King.

I believe when you decide to do a movie about something, there's some-thing in it that moves you. Whatever that is, you'd better protect that. Bobby and Carol, unrequited love, whatever you want to call it, I found just heart-breaking. I thought they were so great together and finally they got togeth-er again, at least in the book. So I wanted to protect that. The other thing is Bobby and Carol and Bobby and Ted. So you want to protect that. You want to stay with as much as you can that moves you.

In the novel you get into all kinds of stuff as to who the low men are. I was talking to King on the phone and he had read, that to fight communism, Hoover began hiring people who were telepathic or had certain mental skills, which is fairly insane. I didn't want to go there. That's swell for the book, and that's swell for King, but [I thought] that's not what this movie is going to be.

Stephen King is known as being pretty hands-off on his film adaptations. How much contact did you have with him?

Not much. I talked to him on the phone a couple of times. He stays up in Maine. I don't see him much.

Lack of confidence seems to be an ongoing issue for many writers. Have you met many writers who were confident?

It's an odd life. It's not a good life. It's been wonderful for me, but I don't recommend it as a way of getting through the world. It's weird! You intentionally closet yourself from everybody else, go into a room and deal with something no one gives a shit about until it's done. It's a strange world.

What are the tricks you've learned that help you survive "the pit"?

You've gotta get in there and do it. There are so many things on the planet that are more fun than writing. I know a very gifted young writer who said to me, "My problem is never writing, my problem is sitting. Getting to my computer is like a mine field: I'm remembering chores I have to do, and all of a sudden the day is gone." I think that happens to a lot of us.

One of the things that young writers falsely hope exists is inspiration. A lot of young writers fail because they aren't putting in the hours. I had a great, great editor, Hiram Haydn, who had many children and was a novelist. Toward the last years of his career, the only time he could write was Sunday morning. He would write four hours every Sunday morning. And he would get books done. It would take him years, but I think it's crucial that we have some kind of rhythm. Whether you can write all day every day, or whether you can write four hours on Sundays, whatever it is, you have to protect that time.

The whole idea of a rhythm is crucial, almost the most crucial thing for a young writer. Also, treat it like a real job and be at your desk. I don't necessarily stay there but I think it's very important to have [a place to work].

What is your rhythm now?

I've been doing it for so long… my rhythm now is, I have coffee and I read the papers. And then I go on my computer and the first thing is that I see what *Calvin and Hobbes* is that day; that's crucial. And then, if I'm writing, I'll be there all day. I'm finishing the second draft of *Dreamcatcher* now for Castle Rock [Larry Kasdan will direct]. I will be there every day, pretty much all day, until I finish this draft—whenever that is. Then I'll take some time off. I'm not writing novels anymore. I used to alternate novels and movies, but I haven't written a novel in a disgracefully long period of time. Except I wrote an opening chapter to the sequel to *The Princess Bride* [*Buttercup's Baby*] two years ago.

Why haven't you been writing novels?

It's funny. I don't know why. I wish it weren't the case. I wrote novels for thirty years. When I was a kid, when I was in my teens, until I was twenty-four,

I used to write a lot of short stories. And they were all rejected. It was so horrible. I remember the fuckin' *New Yorker*, once, I think rejected a story the day I sent it out. It was the most amazing thing. I go in my mailbox and there was the rejection slip, and I thought, "I just sent it to you this morning!" They were always the same printed form. Never a note. You'd pray that some editor would say, "Well, let us see the next thing you write." Nothing. Then I wrote "Temple of Gold" and I don't think I ever wrote a short story again. I stopped getting ideas for short stories. The last novel I wrote was a not-very-terrific book called *Brothers* [the sequel to *Marathon Man*]. I haven't had an idea for a novel that excited me for fifteen years. I think if I got one, I'd write it. But I wrote a lot of novels. I just ran out of juice.

None of the news clippings that you included in Which Lie Did I Tell *spoke to you as a short story or a novel? Not the seventy-eight-year-old bank robber or "the dolphin" [a ten-year-old autistic boy lost in an alligator-infested swamp who swam fourteen miles to civilization]?*
Oh, I think if I were younger. Those are marvelous pieces. My God. If I was younger and had all that energy, I don't know that I'd write another original screenplay. The dolphin is just breathtaking. I just love that piece. Don't I end the book with the dead guy they found in the subway? [The clipping tells of a corpse that rode the subway for three days before someone noticed he was dead.] Well, come on! That's a great start or middle or end of something! When you're young and you have all this energy and you want to write and write and write, you can do that. But I'm older and dumber, and I don't know if I have the energy to follow that through. My God! How old was the guy? It wouldn't have worked for a movie, because they wouldn't have made it. They would have made him young. But I just thought what a great thing. How old was he, seventy? This is an amazing story!

I read a terrible thing in the paper. There's this crazy lady, Andrea Yates, who killed her five children. Terrible, terrible, terrible. I mean, Jesus, she's fuckin' nuts! Don't tell me that she had any kind of depression from having too many children. She's not what interests me. What interests me is, there was another woman down south who killed three of her children because [they think] she had been influenced by the woman in Texas. If you are a poor, miserable, half-crazed woman down south, and you read about this Yates woman and her husband saying, "Oh, I love her," you think, "My God! How wonderful it must be to be famous!" I don't know that we should do that. I think there's a book in that.

I think there's a book in the madness that's happening now with "Oh my God, Diana's dead. Let's all stop everything for a week. Oh my God, John Kennedy Jr. died in a plane crash. Let's stop everything for a week." And run the same news quotes, news pictures over and over and over. When you're getting into violence and you're making crazy people famous, I don't know how good that is. For me, that's an interesting piece of material. I don't know what the answer is. But I can understand if your life is just shit, why you

would kill your kids to be famous if you read how famous the Yates woman is. I'm not going to write it, but I think there's something fascinating in what we do here now.

In Which Lie Did I Tell, you touch on the story structuralists like Robert McKee. Do any of the classes or books mean anything to you? Do you use any paradigms or strategies when you write?
I think McKee is good. I went to his class. Anything that makes you do it, is worthwhile. And if going to a course makes you do it, I think that's terrific. The problem is that girl who said that thing at Oberlin, "Do you always begin your second theme by page seventeen?" I'll never forget that. Ever. Because I knew she'd been reading some structuralist who had told her that. It's just wrong!

It sounds like you don't use any particular formula or paradigm, you just get in there and write.
Yes. That's the deal. Thank you very much for saying that. What I try and do is, find the story and then write it. My problem is, it takes a while to find the story. George Hill said a great thing to me: "If you can't tell your story in an hour fifty, you'd better be David Lean." Movies are wildly long now. Movies are boring; you want to think, "Cut that! Cut that!" It's a complicated thing. You're trying to do something that's going to please an audience all over the world, and you don't know what it is.

In both Adventures in the Screen Trade *and* Which Lie Did I Tell*, you open yourself up to criticism from film professionals when you say, "Take a look at this short story adaptation or original screenplay* [The Big A] *and give me your notes."*
Oh, that was the most heavenly experience. When I had *The Big A*, I read all their answers at the same time, and I was praying that they'd be negative. [Goldman sent the partially completed script to the Farrelly brothers, Scott Frank, Tony Gilroy, Callie Khouri, and John Patrick Shanley for a critique. There were few kind words.] If they were positive then it's all Hollywood horseshit, and it doesn't do anybody any good as a teaching exercise. And they were so horrible. I still speak to all of them. But, my God! You just read them and think, "My God, they're so full of shit! Why are they wrong about this?" But you've gotta listen, because when you're doing a movie, there's no way of knowing.

You've had an amazing run in Hollywood all these years. To what do you attribute your longevity and survival?
I'm always amazed. I'm going to be seventy in a month and I'm amazed that I'm still employed, and thrilled, because they're very ageist. I think one of the reasons that I've survived is that I've lived in New York. No one gives a shit in New York; in LA, it's such an obsessive place in terms of who's in and who's out and who's hot and who's cold. I think it helped me that I was a novelist for so long because I had something else to do, and it helps that I've written

non-fiction about the entertainment business. Listen, it's been a terrific run, and it surprises me, and I'm thrilled! And if I knew what I was doing…

With all the experience under your belt, are certain things in the writing process easier now or harder now?

It's the same. I write on a computer now instead of on a portable typewriter, so I'm faster. Certainly no better. It's tricky. You're trying to figure out the fucking story! And that's all it is in a movie. It's not like writing a book. It's not like a play. You're writing for camera and audiences.

One of the things which I tell young people is, when you're starting up, go to see a movie all day long. See whatever is a big movie that's opening on Friday in your town. Go see the noon show and the 4:00 show and the 8:00 show. Because by the time the 8:00 show comes, you'll hate the movie so much you won't pay much attention to it. But you'll pay attention to the audience. The great thing about audiences is, I believe they react exactly the same around the world at the same places in movies. They laugh, and they scream, and they're bored. And when they're bored it's writer's fault. I had a great disaster I wrote about [in *Which Lie*], *The Year of the Comet*, which was a romantic adventure comedy thriller about a chase after a legendary bottle of wine.

I saw it in the theater, because of your name.

You're one of them! My kids haven't seen it! [Laughs] It's not that bad! The fact is, the first sneak, I'm sitting in the theater. I always sit, if I can, in the rear left by the wall so I can hide there. And I'm sitting there and your nightmare is that people are going to leave. You might lose five, six people. We had 500 people in a free preview. And I'm sitting there and fifty people left! Just in the first scene! I can still see them leaving the theater! They just hated it! And I just thought, "My God! They're leaving a free movie!"

The opening scene was a wine tasting. It was in London and everybody was very like they are at wine tastings, they sound very phony. So we quickly wrote a new scene in which the hero did not want to go to the wine tasting because all the people were so phony. We thought we were being clever. Well, they hated that, too! They didn't want to see a movie about a bottle of red wine. There was no interest in that particular subject, and we were dead in the water. But you don't know that.

As you've said, there aren't any rules in Hollywood.

There aren't. It's bewildering. I look at movies and I think what works and what doesn't work, and it's got nothing to do with quality. But there is something that they can't figure out how to manufacture: word of mouth. That's the great problem the studios have. If they could figure out how to manufacture that, they could all be relaxed about the world. But you can't figure out why people say, "I want to see that," and, "No, I don't want to see that." They try, but they can't do it.

I wrote a movie based on a fabulous piece of material, called *The Ghost and*

the Darkness. It was a disappointment. After the first sneak preview, the studio asked, "Who's your favorite character?" The Michael Douglas part was the fourth most popular. And when there are three people who the audience liked more than your star, it's not going to work. You can't make someone likable.

When I was thirty, I got to work doctoring a show on Broadway for George Abbott, who was the most successful director in the history of American theatre. He said, "You can't tell anything until you get hot bodies out there." And I said, "What are hot bodies, Mr. Abbott?" He said, "People who don't know your mother. People who want to come to the theatre and enjoy themselves or not and if they don't, they'll leave." And that's still true. They spend all this money hyping all these movies that open on Friday and they've gotten very skillful, but you still don't know what's going to work.

Do screenwriters get more or less respect today? Or did they ever get respect?
Oh, I don't know. I think every time anybody makes a killing as a screenwriter, anybody who makes a huge sale, that's a huge plus for everybody. Because when they watch the *Today Show* or they watch *Letterman*, what the audience sees is the stars being adorable and saying, "Yeah, well I wrote that part." And I want to say, "Fuck you, asshole! Show me your script!"

I'll give you my theory. One of the reasons that screenwriters are never going to get what they should is because people who write about the entertainment business want to be in the movie business. They believe that screenwriters don't do anything, so they can do it too. The director is in charge of all visuals and the stars write all the classy dialogue. So what does a screenwriter do? His position is very small in the public's mind. And I don't think that's going to change.

You touched a little on this earlier: have you ever felt ageism in the industry?
I was a leper, but I was younger. I had the five years I wrote about [in *Which Lie*], 1980–85, when the phone didn't ring. And that will happen again. It happens to everybody. But I had a lot of energy then, and I wrote all those books. I couldn't do that now. I think it happens. Absolutely. It's certainly true for stars. If directors are forty and have had a lot of hits and have a flop they'll say, "Great." If somebody's sixty, "Maybe he's lost touch."

Studio executives have every right to hire who they want to, to try to have a successful movie so they can keep their jobs. That's what all of this is about. I have never been hit yet by ageism because I'm still working. But you hear a lot of stories. Executives get younger and younger and we get older.

In Adventures in the Screen Trade*, you said that comic book movies were starting to take over. Now we're twenty years later.*
Yes, and they are. And sometimes, like *The Matrix*, they're wonderful. And sometimes they are not. I wish there were answers. Billie Jean King, the great tennis player, said, "If it were easy, everyone would do it." That's true of making movies.

In your section on The Ghost and the Darkness *in* Which Lie Did I Tell, *you had a quote from a lion tamer who displayed a terrible scar and said, "I made a mistake once." What dealings with Hollywood have you had where you say, "I made a mistake once"?*

I've turned down a lot of hits: *The Godfather, Superman, The Graduate.* But I should have because I wasn't the person to write them. It's thirty-five years now and I'm still here. I have very little to bitch about. Period.

Lastly, what's your favorite lie?

When people ask me to read scripts, I always say, "Do you want me to tell you you're wonderful? Do you want me to be honest?" And everybody always says, "Oh, I want you to be honest!" When I discuss the script with them, I'll take a scene and say, "This scene here, I have a couple of questions." And they'll say, "Oh my God! That's my favorite scene in the movie!" And then you know they don't want to know what you think. The best thing to do is tell them how wonderful they are and get on to the next. I've always liked to know how horrible I am. Because I need all the help I can get.

Peter Jackson

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER

Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 9, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2002)

Born in New Zealand on Halloween in 1961, Peter Jackson began making movies with his parents' Super 8 camera at an early age. At seventeen he left school and, failing to get a job in the New Zealand film industry as he hoped, he started work as a photo-engraving apprentice. After purchasing a 16mm camera, Jackson began shooting a science fiction comedy short, which, three years later, had grown to the seventy-five minute feature *Bad Taste* (1987), funded entirely from his own wages. The New Zealand Film Commission eventually gave Jackson money to complete the film, which has become a cult classic. "I got into filmmaking by doing horror movies, by doing low-budget splatter films, which is a good way to break into films," says Jackson. "It's a great genre to make some sort of an impression on people when you haven't got much money and you want to make a movie."

Jackson's other film credits include *The Frighteners* (1996), the adult puppet feature *Meet the Feebles* (1989), and *Braindead* aka *Dead Alive* (1992), which Jackson co-wrote with Stephen Sinclair and Frances Walsh. *Braindead* played at festivals around the world, winning sixteen international science fiction awards including the prestigious Saturn. Jackson and his co-writer Frances Walsh received widespread acclaim for *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), which was awarded a Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and nominations for both the Academy Award and Writers Guild award for Best Screenplay [and the subject of a script review in *CS*, Vol. 5, #5].

"I wasn't one of those total *The Lord of the Rings* aficionados," says Jackson. "I read it when I was eighteen, and I didn't read it again until the whole idea of doing the film came up seventeen years later." Jackson and partner Frances Walsh began adapting *The Lord of the Rings* in April 1997 at Jackson's Christchurch, New Zealand home. Starting with a 90-page outline of the three books, Jackson and Walsh rewrote the outline again and again seeking

the essence of Tolkien's story. Of that difficult process, Jackson told readers of aint-it-cool-news, "….the books themselves are not structured to easily equate to a screenplay. Most of the first book is a gentle stretch of journey and masses of exposition… For the movies, we will have to make motivations a little tighter and more urgent. We have to focus on The Ring, Sauron, and the threat to Middle Earth." Jackson says, "The way that we often write is to provide different layers over subsequent drafts, i.e., write the villain in one draft, get that working, then go back over the scenes and humanize him in the next draft."

When the task of adapting scripts for all three books became too much work, they recruited their long-time collaborator Stephen Sinclair (who did not receive screen credit) and New Zealand writer Philippa Boyens for assistance [her work is detailed in an interview with her appearing in *CS*, Vol. 8, #2]. The writers crafted two approximately 150-page scripts for Miramax. After the project was taken over by New Line, that 300 pages was broken into three 110-page scripts, each adapting the narrative in roughly one of Tolkien's books. Work would continue on the scripts for over a year with final revisions made on the set as the writers took every opportunity to tighten the screws on their narrative.

Jackson is very aware of the incredible opportunity he has gained for himself. "It gives me a chance to break new ground in the movies. Every film genre has been done well over the last 100 years, but not this type of fantasy story. If we get it right, it will be the first time. No filmmaker could ask for a greater challenge than that." He has already made history with *The Lord of the Rings*, becoming the first person to write and direct three feature films simultaneously.

Where did your spark for making Lord of the Rings *come from?*
A lot of people somehow think I've had a long-standing ambition to make *The Lord of the Rings*, which is not actually true. What I have had is a long-standing ambition to make a fantasy film. My desire to become a filmmaker began when I was eight years old and I saw the 1933 *King Kong* on TV. It's still my favorite film, and I love it because it's a wonderful piece of fantastic cinema that does everything a fantasy film should do: transports me out of the real world, shows me things, amazing and exciting things, that I know I'm never going to experience in real life, and locations that I'm never going to go to. I've always had a desire to make a film like that. When Fran Walsh and I were making *The Frighteners* in 1995 we were thinking of what to do in the future. I'd wanted to get away from horror and do a fantasy film like the *Jason and the Argonauts/Sinbad* type of films, but do them with computer effects so that the technology advances. For a little while we thought about doing an original fantasy film. You know, you sort of think of a *Lord of the Rings*-type of film, because *Lord of the Rings* was automatically the benchmark that you compare all fantasy stories to. But then *Lord of the Rings* was on our minds and we started to wonder, why hasn't anybody made a live action *Lord of the Rings*?

Once you were interested, how did you pursue the rights?
We made a phone call to our agent Ken Kamins at ICM, and asked him if he would do some research for us to find out, you know, who had the rights, which ultimately were with Saul Zaentz. Saul Zaentz had had *The Lord of the Rings* rights for about twenty-five years and Ken said that Saul had been approached by different filmmakers at different times but had never really embraced the idea of doing a live-action film, that he didn't think it was really possible.

How did you convince him?
Well, we didn't have any direct contact with Saul ourselves, surprisingly enough, at that time. We've obviously met him since, but what we had in 1995 was a Miramax first-look deal. So we called Harvey Weinstein at Miramax because the nature of our first-look deal was that any project or any property that we wanted to acquire the rights to, we had to give Harvey the first option. As it turned out, Harvey got really excited about the idea, and he got even more excited when he found out that Saul Zaentz had the rights because Saul Zaentz was the producer of *The English Patient* and Harvey had just taken the film over from Twentieth Century Fox, who'd put it into turnaround just before it was due to start shooting. So Harvey and Saul had this thing going with *The English Patient* right at the exact moment that we made that phone call, which was extraordinary luck, really.

How do these books speak to our day and time?
Well, I just think the books are universal in the sense that they are about good versus evil, about heroism, about innocent people who have to display courage and be brave in a way that they never thought they could. They talk about great friendship, about friendship under adverse conditions, friendship without strings attached. I mean, they talk about things which I suspect are relevant at any point in history.

Ralph Bakshi [director of the 1979 animated adaptation of The Fellowship of the Ring *and* The Two Towers*] has said that he feels it's impossible to do Tolkien. That it's impossible to get the brilliance of what Tolkien wrote about. And in a recent interview, he made what would seem to be a direct challenge to you in saying, "You know, as far as everything in the book, I can't do it, and the next guy's not going to do it, even in a million movies." Do you agree with that?*
I agree with it to some extent. There is a particular style in the way that Tolkien writes, there's a style in the way that he describes things that make the books incredibly enchanting to read. Now that's not going to be in the film because, you know, Tolkien can spend a page describing the weather as the Fellowship have their breakfast and pack up their bedding and get back on the road again. What we've tried to accomplish is to take the story and the characters and to try to honor as many of Tolkien's themes as we can and to also incorporate things that we felt were important to him. But you

know, the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* is only our interpretation of a wonderful book.

Is that just to cover yourself from diehard Tolkien fans, or do you really feel you've brought your own personality and perspective to this material, and made it your own?
That's a good question. I guess what I've done is to try to be the final arbiter for a lot of good ideas from a group of people. I'm a filter towards achieving a goal and I try to encourage everybody to suggest ideas. Now whether it's Philippa Boyens and Frances, whom I wrote the script with, and then later those people who are designing the film, it's all to create a movie that I'd love to see. That's my ultimate goal. I'm just trying to sort of filter the great ideas down to making a film that I would really like, because that's the most honest thing I can do. I can't make the film for millions of other fans. I can only really make it for me. You know, that's the ultimate agenda there.

It seems one of the things you've brought to it is an increased role for comedy.
A little bit, a little bit. Not too much, but a bit, yeah.

Your films have a certain love of campiness and caricature. Is there a place for that in Lord of the Rings?
Not really, no. I don't think there's anything campy in *The Lord of the Rings*. Caricature—only to the point of view that characters like the Hobbits have certain, you know, traits and certain humorous qualities in their like for food and, you know, the love of six meals a day, and their dislike of adventure and of discomfort. And then, you know, these elements that Tolkien writes that are naturally quite funny that can be exploited, in a general way, but certainly the humor that we have is fairly gentle, and there is a degree of humor in the characters that Tolkien wrote himself. There was more humor in *The Hobbit* than there actually is in *The Lord of the Rings*, but certainly, you know, that humor is transferable.

   I have sort of an inherent dislike of things that take themselves too seriously and I just think there's a sort of a pompousness that I'm always trying to avoid and sometimes I really try to avoid it big time. In *The Lord of the Rings* I didn't want to make a self-important sort of pompous fantasy adventure. I wanted to make something that was gentle and sweet and in part, obviously, scary and exciting and adventurous, and humor's an important part of making that. I also think that humor helps make the world feel real. Humor is part of the way that all people survive. No matter what the circumstances, there's usually room in most peoples' lives for a good laugh and some humor, and I think that this helps make these people feel as real as you or I, rather than being clichéd characters.

What freedom did you feel you had to shape Tolkien's story in crafting your screen narrative?
It was interesting because as the screenplays went through various drafts,

they got closer and closer to the books. We did an exercise at the very beginning, draft one if you like, where we said there's stuff in the books that doesn't work, the plots are cluttered, and there is stuff that characters do that we don't like, so let's try and improve the flaws of the book and make it much more of a film, make it much more like what you'd want the film to be. Not that we necessarily did anything horrific, but we certainly made changes in areas that we felt we needed to make changes. But by the time we wrote another four or five drafts, each time we'd read the book a lot more, we'd immersed ourselves much more in the world, and each draft got closer and closer to the books, to the point that now we really haven't made any substantial changes to the books. What we have done is we've shortened things and we've tightened things up and we've lost some characters. But we ended up with a story where what happens within sequences and within acts of the film is fairly close to the books.

What control did Miramax and New Line exercise over the development of the scripts?
Well, fortunately with both Miramax and New Line we've been given a lot of freedom. I mean, I think that because *The Lord of the Rings* is so complex and so dense, it's a project which the studio has a very difficult time asserting any sort of authority over us as screenwriters, because you would have to have some sort of expertise in *The Lord of the Rings* to do so. Mark Ordesky, the New Line creative executive, is certainly a big *Lord of the Rings* fan and so from that point of view we're lucky, because Mark loves the books as much as we do. The biggest difference with the Miramax version is they didn't embrace the idea of doing three movies, so we decided to split the trilogy of books into two movies and that led to certain structural changes that had to be made. For instance, the first movie of the two was going to climax with the Battle of Helm's Deep, which is in the middle of *The Two Towers*, the second book. So we manipulated the structure a lot, pushed and shoved the story around in order to make it work as two screenplays. Then it was Bob Shaye at New Line who wanted us to return to three films and to stick with the structure of the books, so that was fantastic. I mean, that was a key moment which enabled us to shift to being much more faithful to the books in the way the story unfolds.

You've said that your most daunting challenge was shaping an ending for Fellowship. *How exactly did you approach that?*
Well, the ending of the films, and in particular *The Fellowship of the Ring*, are obviously a challenge. The first thing you do is you make a fundamental decision about what sort of ending you want for the first movie. Because we do have quite a unique position in which we're making three movies back to back, and that there's going to be a year between each film, we asked ourselves do we end the first movie with a complete cliffhanger, someone in jeopardy, with a feeling of the story being up in the air, or do we try to wrap things up in a much more tight way? I think the answer lies somewhere in between.

We didn't feel we wanted to end with a cliffhanger because I didn't want people walking out of the cinema with a feeling of anxiety. That wouldn't have been a satisfying experience. If you were releasing your second movie three or four months after the first, you could probably get away with that, but a year we thought was too long to leave people in that position. But also we had the problem, or fact, really, that the story of *The Lord of the Rings* is about Hobbits who travel to Mount Doom to destroy a ring inside a volcano, and we know that they're not going to get to Mount Doom at the end of this film; they're not going to get there until the end of the third film. So that's the basic problem as well. Whatever you do, you're telling a larger story that has no conclusion at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, so before we had written a word of the script we constructed a new ending built around the character of Frodo that will hopefully be emotionally satisfying.

The breaking of the Fellowship was clearly the climax of the book and the film, and that had to have an emotional resonance for Frodo. That's really what we based the plan around when we devised how to end the film. Frodo needs to decide that he doesn't need the others or, more than that, that the others pose a danger to him, because the ring is starting to exert power with the people around him. That's really the climactic moment in the film, and we thought it was very important that when Frodo makes a decision and goes on alone [with Sam trailing behind] at the very end, that you feel good for him, you feel he's courageous, and that there's some real hope now.

From a structural perspective, did you also work at building up the final confrontation to give it more impact? Specifically, creating an antagonist to be defeated?
The interesting thing with *The Fellowship of the Ring* is that you've got internal conflicts and you've got external conflicts. The external conflict is the fact that there are other forces in this world that also want the ring. The Orcs and Uruk Hai from Isengard…. Saruman sends them to capture the Fellowship. So we definitely built that up, and we created a character of one of the Orc-like creatures, a character called Lurtz, who's not in the books. It's the only time in the movies that we've created a character that Tolkien didn't actually write about. Because we thought we needed to personalize the leader of this band of Orcs. It's Saruman who is the villain, but he doesn't leave Isengard, he dispatches his guys to go get the ring, so we wanted to actually create a character of the leader of this group who goes after the Fellowship. That helps us beef up these external forces of opposition that lead toward the climax, which is this battle on the slopes of the River Anduin just before the Fellowship breaks. The other strong force at work is the internal conflict where the ring has this incredibly seductive attraction to other people and particularly men, Aragorn and Boromir feeling it stronger than the Hobbits. That is providing just as much jeopardy to Frodo as the Orcs that are pursuing them. We definitely used those two external/internal forces concurrently to crank the climax up into something that's pretty powerful.

It seems to me that your project is unique, in that you're telling a single story over three films. What gives you the conviction that audiences will respond to this kind of installment approach to storytelling?

I don't know. I have no idea how I'd respond if it was me. I'd think it was kind of neat that somebody was making three *Lord of the Rings* films and I could see them one year apart. I think that's fine. I think it's brave, courageous, and it's a great way to tell the story. I think that's the reason why, in fifty years, *The Lord of the Rings* has never been made into a live-action film because people have been trying to squeeze it into one single film and it's impossible. So I think in a way it's the reason why it's been made now, because somebody's had the courage to actually do that.

The initial reviews and response to Harry Potter *have been strong. Do you think this impacts* The Lord of the Rings*? Does it raise the bar for the release of your film five weeks later?*

I've always looked on *Harry Potter* as an extremely positive thing for us. I mean so much of the media's attention has been focused on some imaginary competition between us and them, which I just have never really understood, because, talking on a purely cold-blooded financial basis—if *Harry Potter* is very successful, then it can only be good for us. There is no downside for us because if people love *Harry Potter*, they've got another year to wait for the next Harry Potter film but *The Lord of the Rings* opens in four or five weeks. If you've suddenly developed a love for fantastical cinema or imaginative stories, then we're the next one down the line. So *Harry Potter* only helps us. I've never seen any downside to it at all. Ultimately, people will make up their own minds which of the films they prefer, which they thought was the better film, it doesn't really matter. I mean, I think there's certainly room in the marketplace and in people's imagination for both stories.

What's it like to be living in the fish bowl that is this huge fan base for The Lord of the Rings*?*

It's been interesting. I'm glad I've been in New Zealand making the film because I am protected from it to some degree, but I'm very much looking forward now to the day that *The Fellowship of the Ring* becomes a movie, because I think for so long, it hasn't been a movie, it's been sort of like this anticipated event, and it's been going on for about three years now. It's a long, long time to have everybody winding themselves up and to have all of the rumor and all of the gossip and all of the anticipation and ultimately, it somehow—it's almost not fair for what this is. It's just a movie. It's just like anybody else's film. It's just a bunch of people who've made a movie and hopefully if you go see it and you pay ten bucks to see it, you know, hopefully you'll enjoy it and say that you had a good night out at the films. That's all I really want it to become. I want it to become a movie. For so long it hasn't felt like a film, but it's about to become one and then it will be all right.

Peter Jackson, Philippa Boyens & Frances Walsh

I t will be an absolute atrocity if *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* fails to win Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Picture, and Best Director Oscars. The trilogy doesn't just deserve these awards; it's honestly earned them. In the history of cinema, no film series or trilogy has ever maintained such a high narrative quality for three consecutive films, and more importantly, none has ever delivered such a fulfilling final installment. It's hard to argue that any trilogy contains three consistently great films other than Sergio Leone's loose "man with no name" trilogy: *A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* or Kieslowski's *Blue, White*, and *Red*. Most other trilogies either become too bloated for their own good by their third film or fall flat storywise, thus insulting the two films that came before them. This again points to the importance of *Return of the King*'s place as both a trilogy finale and an excellent film—and why the Academy's failure to recognize it as such would be tragic.

BEGINNINGS

Many filmic trilogies weren't mapped out in the beginning but were rather sequels to already successful films. It's important to remember that *The Lord of the Rings* was itself a sequel to Tolkien's lighter book, *The Hobbit*, which meant that by the time he wrote the trilogy, he was already so immersed in its world that the narrative quality only got better with each page. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* as one epic story, but due to a post-war paper shortage in Britain and better publishing strategies, his story was broken up into three books. So even before the books hit the stands, Tolkien's original vision had been altered, albeit for the better. The popularity of these books worldwide is proof that splitting up Tolkien's tale didn't hurt it and, in fact, made it more accessible. Not surprisingly, in order to translate the books to

the screen, the delivery of Tolkien's massive epic had to be altered once again.

In 1995 Peter Jackson landed a deal with Miramax based on his impressive film *Heavenly Creatures*. After his next film, *The Frighteners*, Jackson wanted to push the envelope digitally by making a fantasy film. "We sat around and talked about what to do and concluded that there is only one seminal fantasy story," screenwriter Philippa Boyens recalls. "It's *The Lord of the Rings*—we've got to write something like that. Then we finally came around to the obvious thought of, 'Why don't we just see if the rights are available?'" They didn't have high hopes, as Jackson remembers, "When you're sitting in New Zealand thinking, 'Oh, I'd like to do *Lord of the Rings*,' it seems really silly. I thought it would be impossible." They learned that producer Saul Zaentz had held the rights for years and had turned down many filmmakers, including a John Boorman script and, astonishingly, a joint venture between The Beatles and Stanley Kubrick. Yes, The Beatles. After all, there's a hobbit for each of them. As luck would have it, Miramax had just saved Zaentz's *The English Patient* when Fox was ready to pull the plug, and he owed Harvey Weinstein a favor.

Boyens, Jackson, and co-screenwriter Frances Walsh (Jackson's wife) began writing an outline for Miramax. "I was horrified because I had this overwhelming sense of 'how do you do it?' I didn't know, and I panicked," Boyens says. "Peter never felt that way." Jackson's confidence undoubtedly stemmed from the greatness of the books. "We felt we would become derailed very quickly if we attempted to write these scripts to please every fan in the world," Jackson says. "You realize that the only way to really do this is to say, 'Well, we're fans and we're just going to write for ourselves and not for anybody else.' So, we took a fairly selfish attitude toward it right from the beginning. It's an interpretation…these movies have the same title, but they're not *The Lord of the Rings*. It's not like on the day *The Fellowship of the Ring* opened there was a meeting where everyone in the world had to burn their copy of the book. Eventually these films will become dated and the book will live on. Also, we sort of had this rule of thumb that we were writing it for the people that read it ten years ago, not ten months ago." Essentially the team's plan was to hit all the important story beats and improve upon the details at their discretion.

The final jolt in the arm that the screenwriters gave the waning fantasy film genre was to add realism. "It's not fantasy," Jackson says. "It's history, and Tolkien himself thought of this as a pre-history and mythology of Europe. He had always felt that it seemed England lost its mythology after the Norman invasions of 1066. So, this world was about 6,000 years ago in Tolkien's mind. We built on that and based everything in the movie in reality. Rohan is based on Scandinavian culture. Gondor is more Roman with its big white marbled city. We tried to base it on things that seem familiar rather than foreign."

OUTLINING
The team surrounded themselves with *Rings* artwork for inspiration and they wrote the outline. "We did it in the form of a scene breakdown," Jackson

says. "We'd write a heading like 'EXT. Shire – Day' as you would in a script and then we'd describe the scenes. Sometimes we'd throw in lines of dialogue if they sprang out. It was thirty pages per movie; that's how we ended up with a ninety-page treatment. It was a useful way to go the first time through it and weed stuff out. Any characters or scenes that didn't contribute clearly to the spine of the story—of Frodo's quest to destroy the ring—were left out." The team also sensibly deducted that Aragorn, on his journey to reclaim the kingship, could use a love interest more than the book's secondary love interest between Faramir and Eowyn. Using the appendices, they successfully bolstered the love between Aragorn and Arwen without ever overdoing it.

Tolkien's hidden gift to the filmmakers was his trilogy timeline in the appendix of *Return of the King*. The team occasionally consulted it, and it helped them think of their outline as a timeline and even helped them to intercut the stories. "You're certainly right in the sense that we did have to create a timeline," Jackson says. "One of the decisions we made early on was to not follow the fairly simplistic structure that Tolkien had devised himself. By the time he got to *The Two Towers*, his characters were separated into different storylines, and he structured the book so that the first half of the book would be Frodo and Sam and the second half would be Aragorn. He didn't attempt to intercut it. Right at the beginning we decided that that's the way that we'd present the story, and we'd intercut as much or as little as we deemed necessary. So we did have to work out a timeline. A lot of people ask why Shelob didn't make it into *The Two Towers*, although she was in the book, and that's actually a product of the timeline because at the time Frodo and Sam are encountering Shelob, Gandalf and Pippin are in the middle of the siege of Minas Tirith in *Return of the King*."

Aside from connecting events, the timeline also helped connect characters. "You've got two more movies where your principal characters don't actually meet each or have anything to do with each other, which is kind of odd," Jackson says. "So we were always looking for ways where we could somehow create connections by feeling that events were happening simultaneously and just give the illusion that even though they weren't in the same space, there were times in the story where there was a coherency to the pacing of things." Miramax approved the outline and bankrolled two films with a total budget of $70 million. The treatment was reworked and split in half, presumably dividing *Two Towers* down the middle. This marked the first of Miramax's comedy of errors.

MIRAMAX'S FAILURE

Although Miramax was at the forefront of progressive film in the '90s, fantasy wasn't their cup of tea. Odd notes trickled in. "They once said, 'What do you need four hobbits for? Why not two?'" Boyens recalls. "Harvey was giving us notes," Jackson says, "and he sounded like a guy from the mafia and says, 'Look, ya gotta kill one of the hobbits. One of the hobbits has to die.'"

Then quirky notes were replaced with financial problems. When Miramax asked their parent company, Disney, for more money, Disney ran the numbers on all past fantasy films and refused to pay. Boyens remembers, "Miramax said, 'You're going to have to make this much shorter to conform to our budget parameters. You're going to have to make a two-hour version in one film. If you don't agree to do our version, we'll give it to one of our stable of writers and directors to do.' We found this very depressing because we knew we could never conceive how these films could work in that format."

Jackson's gang decided to leave the project rather than ruin it, and since Miramax wanted to recoup its $20 million in development money, Jackson's agent negotiated a four-week window for them to set up a deal elsewhere. This sparked Jackson, ever the filmmaker, to make a film. "Peter spent a week making a promotional video showing [his company] Weta's digital work, designs, and armor," Boyens says. "With three weeks left [of the four-week window], he flew to L.A. Fox wouldn't meet with him because they were still hurting from *The English Patient*. Another studio said they didn't make children's films. And our options got narrower." Only two companies bit: Polygram and New Line. "Polygram was being sold," Jackson says, "and told us maybe in six months, but we only had four weeks! Then we met with Bob Shaye at New Line and he asked us, 'Why do two movies? It's three books—you should make three movies.' And they said we could have a $100 million budget to do it! Harvey agreed to it and has been totally cool all along."

"We had to completely readapt things quickly," Boyens says. "We did one draft of each [film] and then were rewriting every day for eighteen months." The three films were shot back-to-back. "Some days we were writing for seven different [film] units," Boyens says. "So if you ever get a yearning to shoot three films out of sequence with twenty-two main characters—there's a reason why it isn't done too often!"

WRITING EVIL
The screenwriters initially had trouble with the film's antagonist, which is more subtextual and thematic than physical. "We discovered early on—in terms of this manifestation of evil—Sauron's as scary as can be," Boyens says, "but he is this disembodied eye, and when you try to do too much more than that with him, it didn't really work. One of the things that we always had right in front of us is the ring. At the beginning of the first film, Frodo knows that he loves it and needs it. It's Frodo's struggle with the ring which really is at the heart of this story. And it is the ring—not Sauron—who is the villain because that is a much more present evil."

"We had to create something that went beyond just being a piece of metal on a chain around Frodo's neck," Jackson says. Building from the book, the screenwriters found a way to give the ring a voice without dialogue. "The ring could speak to certain people," Boyens says. "Some people would hear different voices…. This thing would try to reach out and speak to people, not with a physical voice, but with an energy that was embodied with music

and sound. It would signal that it was either this incredibly beautiful sound that was angelic in a profane kind of way and drawing somebody in. Or a few characters, such as Frodo and Gandalf, could actually hear something else underneath it, which was the true voice of the ring and the true intent of its maker, which was completely evil." Jackson then focused on visualizing that idea. "Screenwriting is my first pass thinking about the visual side of the film," he says. "And it's a valuable pass for me because I get to sit at the computer and type in 'Extreme close-up of the ring in Frodo's hand. It emits a strange sound.' So even at that moment in the writing process, I thought about how I'm going to shoot the ring, and I thought about what I'm going to talk to the sound design guys about. For that reason, writing description in the script is such an important thing for me."

The team also gave the ring a metaphysical level of character depth not generally found in inert everyday objects, which prompted many viewers to see the ring as metaphor for the evils of addiction, something Jackson only partly agrees with. "It's really enslavement," Jackson says. "I guess in our twenty-first century world, we use the term addiction, but I don't think Tolkien was thinking about an addiction when he was creating those dynamics. He was thinking about enslavement. They're related in the sense that somebody who's addicted to a drug is also obviously enslaved by that drug. But one of Tolkien's passions was his hatred of the machine and his hatred of what industrialization did to England," Jackson continues. "The longer that you hold onto it, the more you become a servant to it and crave it and long for it. It inhibits your free will, the same way that the factory inhibits the free will of the workers. That was certainly a very strong theme of his that we wanted to honor."

The refining of the ring as a character ultimately helped the team write Sauron. "Tolkien once described evil as the will to dominate corrupted by hatred, and that's been something that we've used as a template for Sauron's goal," Walsh says; "but Sauron only really works through symbols and representations of his evil. It dogged us, this problem, and we wrestled with it for years because, incredibly, I think this process has taken us about seven years. We thought about *The Exorcist* because you never actually saw the force of evil that was wreaking so much havoc in that house and on that child and that was manifesting itself in various ways that were absolutely horrifying. And yet, if I was ever confronted with an image of the devil itself, it would certainly not be scary at all, so I thought, okay, symbolism is better. Fear is all about the unknown. So we were content to use the symbols of his evil."

WRITING BATTLES
Return of the King's battle of Pelennor Fields is expertly crafted. When it comes to writing battle sequences, Jackson takes it to a deeper level. "It sort of intercuts. We jumped around because one of the things that I learned with battles is that they get boring very, very quickly," Jackson says. "So there's not really any Pelennor Fields section that lasts more than five minutes. It

becomes impersonal. While the effects can be as spectacular as you want, within a few minutes of watching spectacular effects, they cease to matter any more. They cease to be important and you really just have to start to look for your characters." The screenwriters extended this sentiment to the orcs. "We finally realized there's no way we can have a battle of this size without us being able to really personalize the orcs, and so we created a character called Gothmog," Jackson says. "There actually was a character named Gothmog in the book, but we sort of used him a lot more than Tolkien does, and a lot of the orc stuff we do is through Gothmog's eyes."

Another challenge was to convey that the Witch King could only be killed by a woman, without overtly telegraphing it. "That's just one of those great expositional things that you always rip your hair out when you try to write a script," Jackson says. "How do you do that without giving away the surprise? It's just sort of one of those tricky things and we ended up laying two little seeds. We have Gandalf talking about the Witch King an hour before Eowyn actually confronts him by remarking, 'It's said that no man can kill him.' So you listen to that and go, 'Okay, he's invincible.' And when we have the ultimate moment, the Witch King has basically defeated Eowyn and broken her arm and we have him picking her up and saying, 'You fool, no man can kill me.' And at that point he gets stabbed by Merry, who's a hobbit, not a man. So the Witch King gets injured and that gives Eowyn a moment to pull her helmet off and let her golden hair fall out and she says, 'I am no man,' and stabs him. So we allowed the moment to play itself out in a fairly organic way."

Interestingly Jackson's toughest battle lay in adapting the army of the dead. "My least favorite aspect of the whole book is the army of the dead," Jackson says. "They're ghosts, but they have the power to kill the orcs. They're incredibly undramatic. There's nothing more boring than an invincible army, because there is no development with an invincible army. We tried to use the army of the dead in the most minimal way that we possibly could. It's something I would have never put in the movie if I could have gotten away with it, but it is such an iconic part of the book…I didn't have the courage to chop them out. I felt that it would not quite be *The Return of the King* without them. But I was rather annoyed by them all the way through the process!"

PICKING IT UP
Traditionally production rewrites handle fixes, ranging from dialogue to story holes, but due to the complexity of these films, major rewrites were needed all along. "We've been fortunate enough to have been shooting for so long that at some point you get a moment of insight," Boyens says, "and you're still shooting, so you can go and fix something in film one, even though you're now shooting film three." The most significant rewrites came after the rough cuts of each film had been assembled and the team could see what the problems were. "There's times when you feel you've made the worst film ever," Jackson says, "like when you're editing and it's all still so rough." Smartly, they budgeted two to three weeks of pickup shooting for each film. "*The*

Two Towers I think ultimately was a problem because of the three scripts we wrote, *The Two Towers* was the script that needed the most work done," Jackson says. "It was kind of underdeveloped and hadn't had the care and attention spent on it that the other two had." Because it was essentially the second act of the trilogy's three film, three act structure, it had gotten the least attention. This was partly due to both the initial pressure associated with making the first film work and the great responsibility of ending the saga properly.

In *Two Towers* Walsh wanted to add more depth to Gollum. "We wanted to make it really clear that there were two of them in there," Walsh says. "How do you do that? How do you make that really clear? It's actually not that clear in the book, believe it or not. And the best way to do it was to have him have a conversation with himself. And we realized that we'd actually kind of failed to do that the first time around—and it was something that was done in the pickup." At the end of *Two Towers* they decided to show the Ents attacking Isengard, which is only retold by Merry and Pippin in the book. The decision adheres to one of the most important filmmaking rules: showing rather than telling.

The pickups in *Return of the King* were the coronation scene, Gollum's pool speech, Gandalf and Pippin's conversation about death, along with some Grey Havens bits and hobbit homecoming material. "We found we hadn't written or shot anything special of them returning to the Shire in which we see how other hobbits reacted to them," Jackson says. "So we wrote the pub scene in which the guy with the huge pumpkin walks in and everyone goes crazy while our guys are just sitting there without anyone paying attention to them—they're being ignored. We felt it was similar to Tolkien's return from the first World War in which after an experience like that it's comforting to be surrounded by your comrades because there's an unspoken knowledge about what you've all been through. When you write the script, you think that every word is amazing and you can't imagine ever living without all of it. Then while you're editing, you look at it and have to start to watch it as an audience member. Then you start to feel what's unnecessary and not working and you have to forget your theories behind the writing because your theories are gone and you're now writing on film."

ENDINGS

It's taken over nine hours to get here, but in the book the scene is written very arbitrarily. Once Gollum bites Frodo's finger off and gets the ring, he essentially does a dance, trips, and falls into the Crack of Doom. For its own good, the screenwriters knew they had to heighten the drama. "You actually hit on a big dilemma," Boyens says, "Exactly how and in what way is the ring destroyed? We tried different ways. In the book, it was arbitrary and one of the first things we did was we had Frodo play a more active role. Because, we thought, the demands of the film narrative would tell you that you followed this guy all this way—and now he's going to fail in this last important step and the climax is not going to be his? It's gonna be Gollum tripping?" Jackson

echoes this: "We felt that we couldn't do that in the movie. This is one example where we felt our responsibility as filmmakers couldn't actually conclude the film in this way. We'd taken Frodo on this incredible journey and we couldn't simply have him be an impotent spectator as Gollum accidentally trips and falls with the ring. While that kind of worked in the book, we thought it had the problem of being a little bit laughable in the film."

The screenwriters knew there was a very thin margin as to just how much they could cut down Gollum. "The demands of the book," Boyens says, "very strongly tell you that fate does play a huge part in the story and it was incredibly important to Tolkien. There was something about the fact that very early on Gandalf told Frodo that Gollum 'has a part to play.' And we were very conscious that in making Frodo more proactive in the destruction of the ring, that in effect we were taking something away from Gollum's meaning that Tolkien showed us." Such care to detail allowed Frodo's intervention to never overshadow Gollum's role. "Of course there's the wonderful twist that Tolkien created," Jackson says, "at the very moment that he's able to destroy the ring, Frodo can't bring himself to do it. It's only Gollum's presence that enabled the ring to be destroyed. If Gollum hadn't been there it would have never been destroyed and Frodo would have fallen completely into the dark side— to use a phrase from somebody else's film. So we have Frodo wrestling with Gollum and it's in the grappling with Frodo that he ends up going over the edge with the ring. But we were very careful to make it ambiguous because the question is, 'Is Frodo trying to push Gollum into the lava in order to destroy the ring?' or 'Is Frodo trying to get the ring back?' We felt that he's more likely trying to get the ring back and that he's actually not trying to destroy it at all." This decision is reinforced by the ring's enslavement theme. Although Jackson shot it with some ambiguity, the debate is a short one when considering how overcome by the ring Frodo is at this point in the movie. He really has no other choice than to dive after the ring as his last selfish effort to retrieve it. "Yes he probably is," Jackson says. "and I think Elijah felt that too because I said to Elijah, 'Look you've got to play this both ways. You've gotta play it that you don't quite know what your motivation is.' And he said, 'I can do that, but I really think I'm going after the ring.'"

As in the book, it's Gollum who falls in with the ring and even that got special attention. "He's a damned character," Walsh says, "and that's why he's incapable of making a sacrifice for the good of others. But he does achieve his goal. He is fulfilled falling in. What I thought was really interesting was the question of, 'Does Gollum have, in that moment before he dies, any sense of realization as to what the ring is? And to what it did to him?' We tried to reach for that but it came down in the end to an expression on his face. You're dependent on its all coming out in this serious process of animation and I hope it did. But I haven't seen it enough to know if there's some knowledge passing across his face just before he disappears."

Finally, they added a deeper connectivity than the book provides between the battlefield and the ring's destruction. Cross-cutting between Aragorn

nearly losing his life and the struggle for the ring works superbly. "What Tolkien did in the book was take you right to the brink," Boyens says. Even once the ring falls in, the screenwriters gave it another beat. "It hangs on," Walsh says. "It struggles to be, to remain. But once it finally gives in, once that energy is removed from the world, then all of the things that it fueled lose power." Sauron's inhuman cry and the earthquake destroying the orc army add absolute closure to the destruction of evil. "It's a bit nebulous in the book," Jackson says, "but it's all to do with connecting the moments and thinking as a filmmaker. We asked people to come along for the movies for three years in a row now to actually get to this point, and so I wanted to do something that was spectacular enough to make everyone feel like it was worth the journey."

Charlie Kaufman

T o paraphrase an old Hindu saying, Charlie Kaufman is in Hollywood but not of Hollywood. Like a yogi who simultaneously occupies two opposing realms, Kaufman's writing bridges the subtle world of unfettered imagination and the more earthly dictates of commercial consideration. His screenplays are at once idiosyncratic and accessible. His absurdist visions are both the exegesis of private experience and the fuel for mass entertainment. Justly heralded as an auteur after only one script, Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* was nominated for an Oscar in 1999. His other screenplays include *Human Nature, Adaptation* (based on Susan Orlean's nonfiction book, *The Orchid Thief*), *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (based on the Chuck Barris tell-all "memoir"), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,* which received an Academy Award in 2005.

The common denominator in Kaufman's diverse body of work is the uniform befuddlement of his protagonists. Talented, ambitious, lonely, self-loathing, and socially inept, his anti-heroes are noble schlubs: magnificent souls leading dysfunctional lives driven by the conflicting passions of desire and self-doubt. And yet, as dark and misanthropic as these characters are, Kaufman's dramatis personae are surprisingly likeable. They're reminiscent of that kid from junior high whom you secretly hated, but who, alas, was your best friend. Sure, they were annoying and hopelessly out of touch, but they were also amusing to be with. Of course, this need to feel superior is exactly why comedy works: it satisfies our desire to delight in other people's shortcomings.

But reading a Charlie Kaufman script goes far beyond feel-good voyeurism. The more you allow yourself to empathize with the likes of *Malkovich*'s Craig and Lotte, or *Human Nature*'s Nathan and Lila, or *Adaptation*'s Charlie Kaufman (yes, that's the protagonist's name), the more you discover you have in common with these neurotic wrecks. It's self-revelation in the guise of enter-

tainment. The humor simply lessens the sting of recognition that, like Kaufman's flummoxed protagonists, you too are probably motivated by nagging fears of unworthiness. Some people assume wise men are only found in caves on the sides of cliffs. With Charlie Kaufman, it's more like discovering the guy standing next to you in the checkout line is the enlightened soul. He might not be able to tell you the meaning of life, but he'll humor you all the way to truth. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to him about *Human Nature* and *Adaptation* in 2001.

When you write, do you take into consideration commercial potential or how an audience might respond to the writing?
I think it's my responsibility to write about the things that interest me. I feel that I'd be doing a disservice to anybody and everybody to not do what I thought was good. Because other than that, you should be in advertising or something.

Unfortunately, too many screenwriters approach the job like they were in advertising.
I think that's what you're trained to do. I think that's what the studios do to a certain extent. But I think you have to ask yourself, "Is this interesting to me?" "Is this funny to me?" "Is this something I'd want to see?" That's something I always ask myself: "Is this a movie that I would go to see?" And if the answer is yes, then it's something to pursue. Otherwise you're being cynical.

It seems to me that your stories resonate with audiences because they're as honest as they are imaginative.
I'm fortunate to be able to do that. I guess at some point I may not be able to write that way, and I'll have to make a living. Then I'll have to write what other people want me to write. But right now I'm going to grab the bull by the horns and do what I want.

How do you go about deciding on subject matter?
I don't conceive of things from a very conscious place. I just write about things that interest me—that I find moving—and then I trust it. I don't think it serves me to do it any other way because that's where I get the most passion and intimacy in my work. So I don't know the answer; I like an idea, and then I tend to have three or four ideas that I might combine—which I did in *Human Nature*. Then I try to force myself to figure out how these things might fit together. I did the same thing in *Malkovich*, and with *Adaptation*. It's taking disparate ideas and then working out how and why they should fit together. How the story should be told.

You began in TV and years ago wrote some TV pilots that remain produced. One was called Ramblin' Pants, the other Depressed Roomies. Are there any plans to get these off the ground?
I actually wrote four or five and nothing happened with them. They already made the rounds years ago.

But you're a different person now, those could be greenlit overnight.
I am, but I think that I'd rather come up with something new than just go back to those.

There are some fairly successful screenwriters who view their work as a grind. I get the feeling you're someone who really loves writing.
It's important to me to do the best I can; I don't think I'd want to approach it in any kind of weary way. I'd be ashamed to do that. *Human Nature* was a spec script. I wasn't even working as a screenwriter professionally when I wrote it; I was working as a television writer. The same with *Malkovich*. They were written during my television years; I just did them during hiatus.

That was a while ago. How did Human Nature *come to be made now?*
Both of those scripts had been kicking around for several years. I think I wrote them in the mid-nineties. *Malkovich* got made and it got positive attention; then people were interested in this one. Michel Gondry wanted to direct it. There had been others interested in directing it—at one point I was going to direct it—but Michel wanted to do it. I figured that would be good, so I came on as a producer, along with Good Machine and Spike Jonze.

What was your involvement as a producer?
I was involved throughout the production in every stage: pre-production, production, casting, and post. I was very involved in the editing along with Michel and Russell Icke, the editor; and the other producers, Anthony Bregman, Ted Hope, and Spike.

Was that a new situation for you?
This is my second film as producer. The first one was *Malkovich*, which I was involved in unofficially because I had a relationship with Spike, and he respects my opinion. So I was there, unofficially, in a similar capacity. They gave me an executive producer title to acknowledge my participation. On *Human Nature* I owned the material, and that was the stipulation—that I would give it over to Michel if I were to be a producer on it. I wanted to have some kind of influence. And on *Adaptation*, again, I'm an executive producer. I have pretty much the same relationship; I was involved in casting and have been involved in editing.

   My involvement as producer is creative; I'm obviously not scheduling and doing that sort of stuff. It's important for me to be there because it's a way of having my voice heard and protecting my intentions. It's a lot harder than just leaving, but it's valuable to me because I end up working on these things for years rather than just writing them and leaving. I think to a certain extent they're honorary titles, and they're just based on my working relationship with the directors. Like on *Eternal Sunshine* I don't think I'm a producer, but I don't imagine my relationship with Michel—or with the movie—is going to be any different because we consider ourselves to be in collaboration. It's

not like I'm forcing issues because I'm a producer. I'm engaged and involved because the people who direct these movies realize, correctly I think, that it's important to have the person who wrote the material there to talk to. It doesn't happen a lot, but I think it's stupid, very stupid, not to utilize your resources, and the person who invented something is a very valuable resource. We're doing post-production rewrites as things get moved around. There's a lot of stuff to finesse or fix.

Do you mean moving scenes around? Or rewriting and re-shooting?
We didn't do any re-shooting for *Human Nature*. We did some for *Malkovich* and we're going to do some for *Adaptation*. But when you're cutting a movie down and moving scenes around there's stuff that doesn't work anymore. You have to cheat in dialogue, to smooth it, so there's that kind of writing to do.

Being involved in the editing process must give you a new perspective on screenwriting.
It really does. I think editing is most akin to writing the movie, more than any other aspect of production. It really is writing, you know? You're doing a lot more than I would have imagined: finding connections that weren't intended, but that work in this new form. It's very interesting, and it requires you to really let go of what you've gone in with. You're not really in service of the script anymore. Now it's, "This is what you have," and, "This is what it is; now how do you make this work?" As opposed to keep going back and saying, "Well this isn't what I wrote." Or, "this isn't how I wrote it." I'm fortunate because all writers should be in this situation. But it's good for me that I'm a partner in this because I know a lot of stuff gets taken away from writers and it doesn't resemble what their intentions were anymore.

Has producing changed the way you write?
One of the things I've realized is that in all three of the movies I've been involved in is if we see a softness or a problem in the script, it should be corrected at that point. The idea of "you'll fix it later" or "nobody will notice" is insane. Maybe nobody does notice, but we notice and it becomes a major issue in post, like, "How do we solve this problem," etc. And then it's glaring, and we have to do all this extra work to fix it. It happened again and again, and the thing that struck me in all cases, without going into detail, is that in almost every case we saw [the problem] before and didn't think it would be as big a deal as it ended up being for us. So, I think motivation, character intention to the most miniscule degree, needs to be attended to.

Thanks, Mr. McKee.
[Laughs] Right, I guess he would say something like that, but he'd be right.

What's it like for you to enter the editing room as both a writer and producer and be creatively involved with those important decisions?
It's hard, but it's great. I definitely wouldn't trade it in. It's exhausting, and

it's frustrating, and it's an enormously long process. You lose track gradually over all the different versions of the movie. You lose perspective; you don't know what you're watching anymore, and that's where test screenings become very, very important.

You actually like test screenings?
Yes, for that reason. I don't mean the test screenings with the numbers or whatever those things, the official ones, are. For us, I mean you can cut out a whole scene in a movie that you've been working on for three years, and your brain makes the connection between this moment and that moment because you have the information from the previous draft. But you can't really know if an audience will make that same connection. So you get people saying, "I don't understand the ending. I don't understand what happened here," and to me that's the most valuable thing about screenings. "Do we like this character?" or "Is the character redeeming?"—that kind of shit I don't care about, but I do care about if the movie makes the sense that we wanted it to make. What's most interesting is when someone interprets something differently than you had expected them to, like the reason a character does this is because of something you wouldn't have even considered, but it makes sense now and you understand where they're coming from.

Yet sometimes studios abuse the test screening process and use the results as an excuse to impose their will onto the film.
It hasn't happened yet for me. Maybe because the movies are odd, the people who agreed to make them know that they're odd going in, so they're not expecting them not to be odd. I don't know why, but we've been fortunate that we haven't been bulldozed in any direction on any of the movies. I think if I were making a big-budget comedy, a $70 million movie, and it wasn't hitting whatever it was supposed to hit, then they would come in; but they're really not those kinds of movies, ya know?

Are you pleased with Human Nature? *The film really is loyal to the script, which isn't often the case.*
One of Michel's goals was to take what was on the page and recreate it, even in terms of rhythm. If something played in a certain kind of tempo on the page he wanted to recreate that visually. But there were times when that didn't automatically work. There's a scene where Puff is being electrocuted while watching a slide show, and it says in the script "He runs to the screen and he gets electrocuted," and then in the script it says it happens seven more times. Michel thought that was really funny, but he realized that it's funny because of how it was written. The whole concept of it happening seven more times is contained in that one sentence. To actually play out seven more times is a completely different rhythm. He was very cognizant of that sort of stuff, and he worked it out in a way that I think is effective—the way it was shot and the way it was cut. The final product retained some of that earlier rhythm.

Three movies hitting the screen in one year for one writer, who incidentally was never rewritten, is highly unusual. Beyond your notorious low self-esteem, how do you really feel about this ultra-successful year?

It's been busy. I've been working on these movies on and off for five years now. It's just sort of a fluke that they're all coming out at the same time. I'm kinda divorced from all that hype, more and more so. I'm just trying to come up with another idea for a script, and I'm going into rewrites on this memory movie. All that other stuff seems unreal to me.

ON ADAPTATION

The journey of *Adaptation* began when producer Ed Saxon and development executive Valerie Thomas read an interesting article by Susan Orlean in *The New Yorker* titled "The Hothouse Millionaire." It told the tale of John Laroche, a quirky, colorful character who was arrested in Florida for stealing rare orchids from a state-protected preserve. Jonathan Demme agreed to let Saxon and Thomas option the article and develop it for his company, into a film. Meanwhile, Orlean landed a book deal from the article, which again led Demme's company, Clinica Estetico, to option her new book, *The Orchid Thief*. Columbia president Amy Pascal suggested that Charlie Kaufman adapt the screenplay, and after reading his three (then unproduced) screenplays *(Being John Malkovich, Human Nature*, and *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind)*, all parties agreed that he was the right man for the job.

The job itself turned out to be a nightmare for Kaufman. Reportedly seven or eight months later, with a little bit of nudging, he turned in his screenplay—a stunt that is now legendary. Valerie Thomas remembers Kaufman calling before he sent in his screenplay, "He said, 'Okay, I'm sending you the first draft. I hope you like it; it's not what you expect,' which is what every writer says, ya know? It was pretty obvious that something pretty wacky was coming down the pike." Saxon remembers the day it arrived, "The draft comes in, and it's not called *The Orchid Thief*. It's now called *Adaptation*, and we thought, okay…that's unusual because the book had had some success, so it was unusual to change the title. Then we noticed it was by Charlie and Donald Kaufman, and who's Donald Kaufman? We waited this long to get a script, and Charlie hadn't even written a script by himself, he got help? So these are some questions that ran through our minds." A few minutes later, Thomas burst into Saxon's office declaring, "I'm in this screenplay! I'm a character!" Thomas recalls her excitement at reading Kaufman's first draft. "It was hilarious and kind of perplexing and bizarre," she says. "At first, I was a little freaked out [by Kaufman's sexual fantasies about her], but whatever, at least I wasn't alone—there were many, many women in there. It's hard to say what's true and what's not, I have no idea. I never asked Charlie. I never said, 'Charlie, hey, did you masturbate with me in mind?' It just never came up."

What Kaufman had done was turn in a screenplay called *Adaptation* about Charlie Kaufman being hired to write a screenplay adaptation of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* and going somewhat mad in the process. Far more

innocent transgressions have warranted hardcore legal action in this overly litigious town, but Kaufman's sheer talent saved his neck because everyone loved his screenplay.

To best appreciate what *Adaptation* is, we must first examine what it was. *Adaptation* tells the tale of a generally misunderstood and socially inept screenwriter (Kaufman) wrestling to adapt Susan Orlean's dense book into a film. He can't write it and early on states his fateful goal of: "I just don't want to ruin it by making it a 'Hollywood' thing. It's like I don't want to cram in sex, or guns, or car chases or characters overcoming obstacles to succeed in the end." While the film purposely meanders through the first two acts, it is none other than *Story* author, screenwriting guru, and seminar leader Robert McKee who sends the third act into motion when he tells Kaufman, "You can have an uninvolving, tedious movie, but wow them at the end, and you've got a hit." Kaufman takes this advice to the bank, and within minutes the third act charges down a hilarious and somewhat surrealistic road. Or at least it did in the September 1999 first draft; the finished film decided to follow a different course.

The 1999 draft's third act sends Kaufman and his brother, Donald, into the suddenly evil drug lair of Orlean and Laroche, who've kidnapped Charlie and plan to kill him in a Florida swamp. Donald bites the dust while trying to save Charlie, but just as the gun is turned on Charlie, an act-two throwaway joke about a mystic Swamp Ape manifests itself into the scene and saves Kaufman! It's a moment on the page that instantly reminds you of the kind of genius in the powerful scene in *The Fisher King* where Robin Williams is chased through the streets of New York City by the galloping Red Knight. The Swamp Ape, along with the other surrealistic third-act elements, combine to serve as a perfect finale set piece to Kaufman's already wild screenplay. Such humor was what the world would have expected in the followup film to *Malkovich*, yet it seems that Kaufman and director Spike Jonze insisted on challenging themselves and their audience to look beyond their last film.

By straying from such antics they achieve a more emotionally driven conclusion to the film while keeping intact many key elements that are still vital and hilarious. They chose a more tortured path, rooted somewhat deeper in reality. Saxon explains, "The hope was that the movie would continue to be entertaining, but also get to be more significant. The idea was to try to make the picture in its last act more human and stay focused in the humanity of the characters—a goal that Spike and Charlie both set for themselves."

Through Nicolas Cage, Meryl Streep, and Chris Cooper's excellent performances, Jonze and Kaufman's continued collaboration on the new third act ends up a success. What they have created is a near critic-proof film, as everything that you would seek to critique can barely be taken seriously to begin with. Many times such elements are just pieces of the artistic tapestry woven throughout the film, continually making fun of and recycling themselves, allowing the emotional truth of the film to shine brighter than ever.

When you began adapting The Orchid Thief *were you given free rein to do whatever you wanted?*
They approached me with the book, and I liked it a lot. I was getting other kinds of offers, but this one just seemed more substantial to me. It seemed to be about something other than the usual stuff I get offered. So I took it. I kind of thought I would figure it out, and I guess this is how I figured it out. Or not. They certainly left me alone. I don't think they imagined…I didn't tell them what I had in mind because I wasn't sure what I'd do when I took the job. And when I decided I wanted to take the material in this direction, I felt like I needed to write it before showing it to them. Because if I pitched it, I thought I'd be, you know, dismissed! I don't think they expected this kind of script; they expected something a little more faithful.

You essentially blew your assignment and handed in a script about yourself. Most writers would either be fired or sued for doing this—why weren't you?
I wasn't fired when I turned it in for two reasons. First, my work was done. I guess they could've fired me and hired another writer to do it at that point, but I think the other reason is that they liked it. I didn't know that they were going to like it, but I lucked out, and they liked it.

What did your agent think?
I don't think my agent saw it until Demme's company saw it. I don't remember the chronology exactly, but by the time my agent saw it, I think it was a good thing, not a bad thing. I didn't tell anybody what I was doing, because by the time I came up with this idea to do it this way, I was pretty much out of ideas. I thought I'd better do it rather than pitch it because if I did, they would say no and I had no other ideas. I wanted to try it even though I thought it was going to be a disaster.

Were you ever worried about the repercussions?
Yeah, I thought I wasn't going to work anymore. I thought it was gonna be like, ya know, like you said, they paid good money for this thing, they hired me, I took a very long time to write it, and this is what I finally gave them after they'd been waiting all this time. But at the same time, I'd been talking about the movie/script to people, and I got the sense that people thought it was a funny idea, so I had a little bit of confidence that it might not be so terrible.

Do you have any sort of support group, close friends, etc., that reads your material before you go out with it?
No. No one reads anything I write until I turn it in.

I thought the mentions in the film of the Casablanca *screenplay were a hilarious insider writer's joke. Most in the industry know that* Casablanca *was rewritten continually on set, as opposed to being a screenplay that was simply written and then filmed.*
I'm actually just quoting verbatim Robert McKee. That's all McKee always

talks about, so I was doing a Robert McKee thing.

Interesting. I assume you went to a McKee seminar?
Yes, I didn't go to it for the reason that Kaufman goes in the movie. I went for research on this film.

Were there ever any plans to have the real McKee in Adaptation*?*
We talked about it, but we weren't putting anyone else real in there, so we thought it'd be weird.

What'd he think about being a character in your film?
Ultimately, he really liked the movie. He came to a screening recently and was very pleased.

I was sad to see McKee's one-page speech about how you can't do a one-page speech in a movie go. Why was it cut?
I think it was filmed but cut because the movie was so long… a lot of that stuff was filmed, and the assembly of the movie was so dense, so much stuff happened. Even as it is now it's a little bit overwhelming. So, we're trying to get the movie moving at that point, and that was obviously, intentionally a complete stop in everything, so I think that's why it's gone. I think we're going to publish the script as we went into production with it, so that will be in there.

Do you think the film remained true to the tone of the screenplay?
Adaptation is an interesting thing because it's an extremely modular structure. The order is completely open. It isn't arbitrary. I mean it's all intentional on my part, but at the same time when you're cutting any movie, you're moving stuff around because you have to, or because you've cut out scenes and you need to make things work again. Inevitably, you do move things, and with a more linear story there are certain constrictions; it leaves you options but not as many. There are infinite number of options to *Adaptation*. It's sort of a godsend, but it's also daunting because you never really know how to ultimately structure it. You say to yourself, "Oh, you could do this." Or, "Wait, we could do this. Move this here." And it goes on and on. So it's been tricky. We're probably about two-thirds of the way through at this point, and we still have to shoot. So we'll see what kind of shape it takes.

What about Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*?*
I'm not really involved in that. I hear what's going on, but I'm not participating in it, so I don't have much to say about it.

Do you ever take rewrite assignments?
No. I've thought about taking rewrite work or production polish stuff, but I haven't yet. I've been busy with my own stuff; it's what I prefer to do. But I guess at some point maybe I will.

Do you plan to direct?
I've been writing something now. I've cleaned my plate a bit; I've been dealing with stuff that I had to do for a long time now. I finished a draft of another script which Michel is going to direct, and that was something that's been haunting me for quite a while. So there's a draft in, and there's more work to do, but it frees me up to start a new spec. My intention is to direct it.

Tell me about your new project, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. *It's set to star Kate Winslet and Jim Carrey, right?*
Yes. What initially happened was Michel Gondry had a friend in France who had an idea—he's kind of a conceptual artist—and the thought was, "What if you got a card in the mail one day that said you'd been erased from someone's memory?" So, Michel came to me with that idea, and we kind of worked it into a bit of story. And we pitched it—

Don't say "pitched"; that's what Donald Kaufman would say.
[Laughs] Yep, Kaufman's dialogue in *Adaptation*. I hated when Donald would say that. Anyway, it was my one sort of pitching experience, and I went around to a bunch of different studios with Michel and ended up selling it. I started writing it probably in 1998, and because there was all this other stuff happening with *Adaptation* and *Human Nature*, it kind of took a while. It was also very complicated for me to write. The conceit is sort of tricky, because not only is it going backward, but the memory is being erased while the character is going through it, and there are a lot of technical problems there.

I really liked the screenplay. I heard you cut out the sci-fi beginning and ending from your first draft in order to keep things more rooted in reality?
Yeah, I like starting it this way because it doesn't tell the audience anything about what they're going to see. I like the idea of taking the audience in one direction and then jerking them in another direction and having them have to catch up to figure out what's going on, and I think this does that.

Okay, now for the question I've been waiting to ask. I loved the Swamp Ape from the first draft of Adaptation and was sad to see it go—
Oh, no…

Seriously, there should be a film one day just about the Swamp Ape! What was strange was that you replaced the Swamp Ape with something rooted in the real world, which still satisfied McKee's line of, "Don't cop out with a deus ex machina in the end." What was interesting about that choice was that rather than going for tried-and-true Malkovich*-styled humor, you guys really took a more highbrow approach, which I think worked. I'm curious about the decision to leave that and a lot of the other surrealistic scenes from the first draft behind.*
It's a discussion and an argument that Spike and I had for a long time. I think that was Spike's decision or insistence. The difference in the last part of the

movie that we shot and the last part of the movie as I originally wrote it is that it's less broad. Spike felt it was important that there be no demarcation between the first part of the movie and the last part of the movie—that they blend together so that you could watch the whole thing and be emotionally engaged and then afterward think about it and go, "Oh, wait a minute, isn't that what he said he wasn't going to do?" So, that's the reasoning why it's not there, and I think ultimately I agree with it, especially in the form that the movie has taken—even though I had an affection for the Swamp Ape too. But I think looking at the movie the way it is, it would have been very out of place.

Were you worried about changing an ending that so many of your various executives and producers loved?
Even *Malkovich* got changed. *Malkovich* was a lot sillier than it ended up being as a movie. The last third of *Malkovich* is completely changed from my original draft. It was very much more comedic, less angst-ridden.

Another change that made things more serious was cutting out most of Orlean's review of Kaufman's screenplay, which she reads when she kidnaps him—along with her and Laroche asking him for advice on how to kill him, to which he replies, "I don't write that kind of bullshit."
Ask Spike about this. I think it's all about whether its going to feel comical or whether there's a real danger in there for Charlie at that point. I like the things you're talking about—obviously I wrote them, so I have an affinity for them—but I think this is how he thought the movie could work. I also think that maybe things work on paper that don't necessarily work on the screen. You know something on paper could be more Woody Allen-ish on the screen with that bigger [third act] stuff. As for Orlean reading the script, I liked it too. I like it as an idea; I like how it works, but I think at that point the movie needed to be over, and it dissipated the tension. You know, like, "Okay, they're going to kill him, they're in the swamp and all that," and this was suddenly a break in that, so I just wanted to keep it moving.

A wave of relief flutters across Kaufman's rotund face as his collaborator, director Spike Jonze, enters our plush Sony meeting room and plops down on the couch. Kaufman looks for help and says, "Okay, take over now, Spike. He's asking about the all the things in the script that aren't there anymore."

That's right, I want you to explain why you ruined Kaufman's script.
SPIKE JONZE: [laughs] Okay, no problem.
KAUFMAN: Seriously though, he loves the Swamp Ape—
JONZE: Oh, no…
KAUFMAN: Tell him why the Swamp Ape was cut.
JONZE: This has been three years in the making, and the thing constantly evolves, constantly changes. We've been editing for a year, and it's changed immensely since then. Throughout the process we wanted it to be…true to

the characters that you watch. So we didn't want this to be a completely different level of reality; we wanted it to exist in the same reality. It goes back to being consistent to the first two-thirds of the movie, which is definitely funny and a comedy, but it's also emotional and heartfelt—filled with Charlie's longing, angst, despair, and his passion and the serious search they are all taken on, as well as Orlean. And as funny as Laroche is, as you get to know him, you see why he is the way he is and sort of the broken part of him. In that way, it was important to be true to that tone, so that even though it's funny, it also has this other level. So, hopefully if it works on that level, it works because the drama doesn't just appear out of nowhere; it's been there all along and is founded from the beginning.

What does the mysterious "ghost orchid" drug mean to both of you?
KAUFMAN: The drug is the passion; it's called passion.
JONZE: Is that in the movie anymore?

I'm not sure it was, but I watched a rough cut with some temp sound. In the screenplay I remember it was called "pash" or "P."
JONZE: I can't remember. Yeah, that's too bad.
KAUFMAN: [laughs sarcastically] Yeah, that's too bad.
JONZE: Well, we could fix it, but the flip side is that if we add it back in, we'd have to figure out what scene they say it in and make sure they say it in all the other scenes.

I'm really not trying to be critical because I liked your film, but I had just experienced it so differently on the page that I thought it was important to share the differences with our readers so that they could take a glimpse into your process. I've told you about what I noticed missing, is there anything you felt you left on the cutting-room floor that if you could insert it back into the movie you would?
JONZE: It's almost a two-part question because there's stuff on the editing room floor that is great because either the scene is written great or the performance is great, or it's all… I don't know, I think that the cut we have is the cut that is the movie, and it's not so much running time or studio time, it's more about how the film will play, and I feel pretty comfortable that it, well, the, I don't know—you know—sorry.
KAUFMAN: [laughing] He nailed that one!
JONZE: I feel this cut of the film works. There, I'm done.

Callie Khouri

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INTERVIEWED BY DAVID KONOW
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 8, #5 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2001)

One day, as Callie Khouri was walking down the street, an old man drove by and sexually harassed her. Khouri became completely enraged, and if she had acted on her anger with a firearm, her life could have been forever altered in a second, just as Thelma and Louise's lives were altered with a single gunshot. *Thelma and Louise* was the very first screenplay Khouri ever wrote. She came up with the idea in 1987 when she was producing music videos, a job which in some way inspired her to write the film. As she recalled to *The Village Voice*, "In order to get my karma straight about women, I had to write this script. When you become known in the business for producing videos that more often than not have naked women writhing in front of the camera for no reason and to not such interesting music, you eventually have to look at what you're doing."

Khouri's first attempt at writing a script turned out to be a joy. "While I was writing *Thelma and Louise*, it was the most fun I had ever had in my life, bar none," she says. "It was such a pure experience. There was no self-censorship there, there was no second guessing. From a creative standpoint, it was the freest I had ever been in my life. I loved every moment I got to spend time with those characters. Nothing came close to it, including winning all the awards and everything else. As much fun as all that was, it wasn't as much fun as sitting alone in a crummy office on Vine at 2 in the morning writing that screenplay."

Lately, it's been difficult to think of a hit action film without a female lead, but in 1991, *Thelma and Louise* was all new terrain. As Geena Davis told the *New York Times*, she was really excited when she first heard about the script because, "It's not often you see parts for two fully realized women characters and have a movie be about women's adventures and journeys."

In 1991, *Thelma and Louise* opened to critical raves, strong box-office, and

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a great deal of controversy. The film made the cover of *Time*, and in that cover story, one woman proudly said the film inspired her to leave her "redneck control-freak husband." But an article in *Newsweek* asked, "Is *Thelma and Louise* feminism or fascism?" Liz Smith wrote, "I wouldn't send any impressionable young woman I know to see *Thelma and Louise*." Rush Limbaugh even called Khouri a "feminazi," to which she replied in *US* magazine, "If I'm able to upset him or Pat Buchanan or any of those guys, I'm happy."

The original idea for *Thelma and Louise* was simple: two women go on a crime spree. Yet *Thelma and Louise* would become much more than two women on a crime spree; it was a film that became a litmus test for how men and women viewed each other. Long after the dust has settled, what's clear is Thelma and Louise is a terrific film that has stood the test of time, and is well worth revisiting. Khouri's other produced screenplays are *Something to Talk About, Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and *Mad Money*. Taking a break from making her directing debut, Khouri looked back fondly on the screenplay that immediately made her an A-list writer, and earned her an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay.

Where were you when the idea for Thelma and Louise *came to you?*
I was pulling up in front of my house at 3:30 in the morning after an awful rock video shoot. I was producing music videos at the time. A day on a music video is twenty-four hours, so I was probably in my twenty-seventh hour. It kind of came to me.

How soon after that did you start writing things down and coming up with the characters of Thelma and Louise?
Well from that moment on, I kind of thought of nothing else, but I spent about the next four months really just rolling it around in my mind, trying to just figure out what was motivating people. When an idea hits you like that, it may come complete but it doesn't come thought out. I had a lot of whys. Why are they doing this? Why does this happen? Why them? Why everything. So I spent a whole lot of time just ruminating I guess, coming up with their life situations and everything. I did that for about four months and then I started writing.

L.A. Weekly *wrote that it was "such an obviously terrific idea, you may start wondering why no one had done it before." Did you feel that way?*
Well, I would probably be more likely to ask myself that now than I was at the time. From where I was sitting, in the world I was working in at the time, anything that was centrally or mainly focused on women would have been out of the question. I didn't really wonder why. It's [with] two women, the first thing anyone's going to say is it's not commercial. But honestly, I thought the idea was so good I didn't really ask myself too many questions about why no one else had done it, I was just hoping to get it done before someone else thought of it [laughs].

Many would say Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid *was a big influence on* Thelma and Louise. *What were other films that influenced you? Were any of the road films of the '70s, like* Two Lane Blacktop *or* Vanishing Point, *a point of reference?*
I loved all those movies, but I can almost say that any outlaw movie influenced me. *Lonely Are the Brave* was one of those movies that I thought was amazing. Ridley and I watched it when we were working on the film. But I must say, I went about it in kind of a non-academic way. It was a very feeling oriented process. I didn't want to analyze anything too much. I think any time you're in the throes of any kind of creative thing, once you switch over and start looking at it from an analytical point of view, you're going to lose it. So you gotta just keep yourself open, and not trouble yourself with the origins of the idea, or the point even. Just let it be what it wants to be and see what shape it takes on its own. I still feel that way. Anybody will tell you, anybody doing anything whether it's music, painting, writing, the hardest thing is just staying out of the way of it. That's what I tried to do.

Once the script was finished, how long did it take to get around to people, and what was the initial reaction?
Well, as you could imagine, there were as many opinions of it as there were people reading it. It was very positively received in terms of the writing and dialog and all that. But there were people who would say, "How are you going to change the ending? You can't have them die at the end." There were other people that would say, "You can't have your main character murder anybody in the first ten pages and expect anybody to have any sympathy for them." I said, "Wanna make a bet? I bet you can." I was in a place in my life where I just had nothing to lose by sticking to my guns. It wasn't like I even had a screenwriting career to lose; I didn't. I had so much courage and kind of a complete lack of tolerance for anyone who didn't see it my way [laughs]. I wish that I could maintain that. That helps me as much as anything.

At what point did Ridley Scott get involved? Why do you feel he responded to the script and wanted to make the film?
At first he didn't want to direct it himself, he was just going to produce it. I didn't know why he didn't immediately want to direct it. I think that at the time, he was trying to get his company going and they were looking for other projects to produce that he wasn't going to direct. But it happened pretty early on. I was trying to direct it myself. My friend Amanda Temple, who I worked with for years doing music videos, was married to Julien Temple, who was one of the premier [video] directors of that time, and I asked her to produce it with me for me to direct. So we started trying to get financing, and we gave it to Mimi Polk, who at the time was working for Ridley's company. Amanda knew that they got a lot of foreign financing, so we were going to ask her to read it and see if she knew of any companies that might be interested in doing it for some paltry sum. At the time, I figured I could probably do it for three million dollars. I didn't have any reason not to attempt it.

So you approached it like you were making a low-budget film?
Absolutely. I wrote it to be a low-budget film. I was working in production at the time, so I was very clear about how the money was going to be spent and how much it was going to cost to do it. That's what music video producing is. It's not a creative endeavor from a producing standpoint; it's a very nuts and bolts kind of operation. From that standpoint, I was completely aware of what I was getting into in terms of what it was going to cost, how long it was going to take, all of that. And I thought it was imminently achievable. All I needed was three million dollars!

No problem, right?
Well you know what? I figured… I moved to L.A. in 1982, this was 1988, and I had been here long enough to go, "Boy, a lot of people with a lot less going on than me have gotten a lot more money to do nothing [laughs]!" It happens. I was convinced I could rope some poor schmuck into forking over the money! And I also really believed in it. I really thought it was worth making. As a first directing thing for me, it certainly seemed ideal. So Mimi got it, and she asked if I would let Ridley read it. I was reluctant only in that I was so embarrassed to let a real director read anything I had written. But he read it, he liked it, he responded to it very strongly, and we started having meetings. We ended up going through the script a moment at a time and by the time we finished doing that, it was clear that it had a life of its own. We didn't need somebody to come in and reconceive it. It was very much there, he felt, and when other people would come up with ideas how they were going to change it, it turned him off. He liked what it was. We essentially shot the first draft. The only work we really did was to combine a few scenes. The script was 136 pages and we had to get it down. There were a lot of mechanics about why the story was unfolding. I was very concerned that it be logical, that it all worked, and at no point would the audience go, "Why would that happen like that?" Every single thing was explained why it would happen like that, and how this person would get this piece of information. We shortened it, but we didn't re-write scenes or change anything like I've had to do subsequently to everything else I've ever worked on. It was a really magical experience in that way, it was just, "Wow, this is easy [laughs]! Why didn't I do this before?"

Thelma and Louise *has a lot of tone shifts. There's a lot of action, funny scenes, and sad scenes. Was it a challenge to balance the moods and did you want the film to have a lot of different elements like that?*
Yeah I did actually, and Ridley would talk about that: "Do you think we can make this turn now?" There was one scene where they were sitting in this coffee shop after the murder and Thelma says, "Well thanks a lot, I'm really havin' a lot of fun!" And Ridley asked, "Do you think that people are going to be able to do this?" and I said, "Yeah, I do." I think you can pretty much take people anywhere if you have an emotional logic, you can go anywhere. The actress-

es got it, Ridley got it. When you read it, you could see it was meant to do that. I like things like that. I always felt that Jim Brooks was able to achieve that, to have incredibly sad or poignant things happen in the midst of broad hilarity. The tone made sense to me. With anybody doing any of these kinds of endeavors, if the tone makes sense to the person who's doing it, it can make sense to the audience, as long as the person behind the wheel knows what they are doing. So I think I was fortunate that I was willing to let it play.

The first big turning point in the film is when Thelma's would-be rapist gets shot by Louise. The scene where Thelma is attacked and nearly raped is disturbing and shocking. Was it a hard scene to write?

I guess it was not any more difficult than it is to write anything. You hope that it has the impact that it's having while you're writing it. I felt like it was a powerful scene because it's one of those things where suddenly you find yourself in a situation that's turned on a dime. And you, Thelma, are asking yourself, "Am I responsible for what's happening right now? I've agreed to all of this up until right this minute." I think in that way it was difficult for people to watch. I think women especially realized, "Yeah, that's pretty much how it goes down right there." But was it difficult to write? No. Just because it's difficult to watch doesn't necessarily mean it's difficult to write. When you're writing something and you know it's happening, it's just good, that feeling of, "Okay, this is working." I think anyone writing anything from a letter to a grocery list has exactly the same feeling when you're in the zone, it feels really good.

I remember reading that when you saw the movie with an audience, and they cheered when Louise shot Thelma's attacker, that it freaked you out. When Louise snaps and kills him, was the intention that you didn't want the audience to condone what she did but at least understand why she did it?

Right. I wanted them to understand it emotionally and at the same moment, realize that she had made a mistake from which there was no turning back, and she had basically just killed both of them. I always imagined there would be kind of a stunned silence. I certainly didn't realize that people would cheer, and I found that incredibly disturbing, I really did. I kind of understand it now that we've had however many years of Jerry Springer and all manner of gladiator type of revenge fantasy things. But it certainly wasn't written to be that. From my point of view, it was like, "Oh why did you do that?!? Do not do that! Hit rewind right now!" So I was very upset by that. But you know, I've been to other movies, like in *Total Recall* where Arnold Schwarzenegger says "Consider it a divorce," after shooting Sharon Stone in the head. You'd see these things where women get popped in the head and the audience would laugh, and I'd just be like, holy shit. It was like, "Whoah. The audience cheered that?" So I guess I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was.

While Louise's shooting was a big turning point of the film, another turning point is Thelma's sexual awakening with Brad Pitt's character. She has the time of her life

with him, but it quickly turns when they realize he stole all their money. Did you intend that to be a point where the plot turns?

Yes, definitely. First of all, I knew the end while I was writing it, so the idea that Thelma would get to have one insanely fulfilling sexual experience before the end was really important to me. Also, the idea that you could have an experience of great sex and it had nothing to do with rape. They're two very different things. It's interesting because after the movie came out, especially a lot of women, said "How could you? How could you have let her?" And I said, "Because they're two different things. Being attacked by a stranger in parking lot is a different thing than having a wild night in a hotel room with Brad Pitt. They're two completely different experiences."

That's right. Part of the controversy was over Thelma's having a wild sexual experience not long after she was attacked.

I mean, I suppose if you were going to do it in real time, maybe it would have taken a week. On the other hand, there was something about the thrill of dancing with that guy in the first place. She was already looking. She was in an awful marriage with a guy who didn't care about her much, I never imagined the sex with them was that great, and he was probably her first one. There was a whole world goin' on out there that she didn't know anything about. To me, they were two extremely distinct experiences. I didn't connect them in my mind at all, and when other people did, I was like, "I think you need to look at that." You can't take every bad experience that happens to you and apply it to every good experience that happens to you. When people did make that connection, I was like, "That's weird." In so many ways, the movie was a half-full, half-empty glass of water test. There are people who go, "How could you have killed them?!? I can't believe it!" And there are people who go, "They got away! They flew away!"

Thelma and Louise driving off the cliff was the ending you intended from the beginning. If they had made it to Mexico and gotten away with everything, did you feel that would have been a cop-out ending?

Yeah, I definitely did. It wasn't meant to be a literal ending, you know what I mean? It was them kind of flying off into the mass unconscious. We purposely did not show the smoke coming up from the bottom of the canyon or the car tumbling down the side of the canyon. It was like a flying away. If you think about it, what would have happened if they got to Mexico? They'd be these two women in Mexico, like that's getting away? What they were trying to get away from, you don't get away from in this world. You don't still inhabit this world and get away from what they were trying to escape. There wouldn't be any of that, they never would have gotten away. Louise would have still been living in her own private nightmare, and it just wouldn't make any sense. To me it wasn't realistic that they would end up working in a Club Med, or that would even be possible or desirable. I guess if you had to just say what it is, if you had to put a name to it, it got to a point where they were too big

for this world. They weren't ever going to be able to push themselves back down to what was an acceptable form of life for both of them. They were never going to be able to get themselves back. That was the whole thing of Thelma saying, "I understand if you wanna go back, but something's crossed over in me and I can't go back." She'd become so much herself, that there was never going to be another set of circumstances where she was going to be any less than that. Where does a woman like that go?

This is a completely hypothetical question, but what do you feel would have happened to Thelma and Louise if Louise had never shot Thelma's attacker? How would their lives have been different if they had just walked away?
You know, I don't know. I never constructed the story that way. It was interesting because after the movie came out, I got invited to go to a lot of schools and talk to screenwriting classes, and people had very, very, very strongly held opinions about this movie [laughs]! Surprisingly strong and they were very invested in many different outcomes. This one girl said, "Well I thought it was a complete cop-out that they used a gun! Women don't have to use guns! Why couldn't they figure out a way to outwit him?" I was like, "Dude, it's an outlaw movie. If you want to write that movie, go ahead. Knock yourself out. But show me an outlaw movie that doesn't have a gun in it. Go bother Quentin Tarantino for Christ's sake. Go bother somebody else! Why are you talking to me about guns? There's guns in 99.9% of movies made. There's one goddamn gun in the whole movie!" What would have happened if a guy had come out and caught the other guy doing that to Thelma and he shot him? There would have been no movie because it would have been so expected, so completely run of the mill, so commonplace, there wouldn't have been a movie. And it would have been the least surprising thing in the world to have it happen that way. As far as guns go, I wish they only existed in movies. In the meantime, I have made an effort, and certainly not to say I would never use a gun in a movie again, but it's hard not to write a movie without a gun. You can turn everything in a quick snap of the fingers. It's a very simple, dramatic device. Telling a story without one, to me, is the mark of a real writer, because it's really hard.

I think one of the best set-pieces in the film is when Thelma and Louise get the trucker to pull over, they tell him how degrading his catcalls are, then they blow up his tanker. It's a really sharp and funny scene. Is there a particular story behind it?
I think if you talk to pretty much any woman who's ever driven down a road, she's going to tell you that's just about as common an occurrence as you could imagine. Guys making lewd gestures from trucks, it's as common as air. And it's one of those things, you've got to just shake your head in utter disbelief. What, I'm going to pull over? What kind of effect are you expecting that to have on people? And maybe there are people that do, but I don't know any of them! I remember I was driving across the country with my mom and my little brother. This was back in the days of CB radios, and my brother had headphones on

and he started laughing. I asked him what was so funny, he said, "I can't say." He was totally cracking up. Then he said, "Okay, one of the truckers just said, 'Did anybody catch the Volvo with the two beavers?'" meaning me and my mom! He was totally laughing and shaking his head in complete and utter disbelief. Again, it happens all the time. The thing that blows my mind is that a lot of people remember Thelma and Louise killing that character, when they didn't lay a finger on him. That kind of surprised me too. People say, "They murdered all those guys," I say, "What guys? They murdered one guy who was trying to hurt her." To me, it was fairly tame. People remember them being on this murderous crime spree, and that's not the way it went down. I always say it was one murder, one robbery, one destruction of private property! [laughs]

What were some criticisms of the film that you thought were really off-base?
That the film was man-hating first of all. Maybe it's because I'm so completely not that way myself. Again, it's one of those things where people are making very broad assumptions: "Well, this is what you're saying." And it's like: "No, that's what you're saying. I was saying something else altogether, but now I know where you're at." There was an article in *US News and World Report* that was kind of scary; it said that the movie was neo-fascist. You know what's the one that really blew my mind? Joe Bob Briggs wrote an article for *Playboy* that was one of the most scathing attacks on *Thelma and Louise* you've ever read in your life. The last line of the article was like, "I've seen fifteen thousand exploitation films; this one is truly dangerous." The bar where the attack happened is The Silver Bullet Bar, so he makes this whole big thing about: "Why is it called The Silver Bullet Bar?" It was such unbelievable horseshit. My mouth was hanging open the entire time I was reading it. The bar was called The Silver Bullet Bar because the bar was called that, and to let us shoot there, they didn't want us to change the name of the bar. In the script it was called The Buffalo Room or The Idle Hour or something like that. One guy was saying it was some kind of phallic representation when the cop stuck his finger out of the bullet hole (in the trunk). It was making fun of the diminutive phallus or something, this guy's finger sticking out of a bullet hole. It's like, "You guys have too much time on your hands! If you think anybody's got that kind of time to come up with that shit when they're making a movie, you are sadly deluded, man [laughs]." The idea that people would take these minute details and amplify them into these meaningful metaphors was just hilarious. People come up with this shit and I'm like, "How do they do that, man? How do they come up with this shit?"

What about the positive effects of the film? When people find out you wrote the film, has anyone ever told you the film empowered them to change their lives or become more independent?
A lot of people were powerfully affected by it. I think mainly it had the same effect on women that other outlaw movies had on men, in that it validates that there's a side of your personality that exists outside of the social expec-

tations, and it acknowledges you as larger than the perimeters by which you're expected to live. *Thelma and Louise* wasn't setting out to teach anybody. I certainly didn't set out to change the way that people conducted themselves. I was telling a story. I don't think you can start at the result and go backwards when you're writing. Maybe if you're Martin Luther King Jr. you can do that. But me, Callie Khouri screenwriter, I don't think about it like that. I just tell what I hope will be a powerful, moving story that will be entertaining. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll crawl on your belly like a reptile. It will be worth your eight dollars, you'll know that I cared to take the time to spin you a good yarn. And whatever else you attach or don't attach to it, that's your contribution. My sole goal is to tell the best, truest story I can. That's my purpose and that's what I'm comfortable doing.

Subsequently a number of top action films at the box office have had females in the leads. Do you feel that Thelma and Louise *paved the way for that?*
Oh, I don't know. I don't know whether I could say that. I don't know if it really did or not, it's just that the time comes and things change. *Thelma and Louise* was very much its own creation. It kind of came to me in a flash. There was no reason to expect I'd be able to do it, and I could; no reason to expect it would get made and it did; no reason for any of it, just its time had come. I think change takes a lot longer than people like to think, but it does happen. If it did pave the way in any way, I'm certainly happy and proud to have had any part of that. The thing I'm most proud of with *Thelma and Louise* is the quality of the filmmaking. It's fantastic and I would hope that they would all aspire to that as well. Between Ridley and the cast, just the experience of getting to actually shoot the script with all of them, it was really sublime in that way. I think everybody involved with the film felt very strongly about what they were doing and really gave it 110%. If anything, if I had to say what Ridley's biggest contribution was, it was being able to take a risk on a movie that might not ever see a dime, if not the light of day. For him to do that, at that stage of his career, was incredibly brave. For that I am eternally grateful, and the fact that he executed it so beautifully, I am forever in his debt.

David Koepp

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER & DAVID F. GOLDSMITH
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David Koepp, 35, is a difficult man to catch. One of the hottest screenwriters in Hollywood, Koepp moves from produced project to produced project. I initially contacted him over a year ago to discuss his screenplay for *The Lost World*, but Koepp preferred to save our discussion for his original screenplay *Snake Eyes*. We were finally able to speak via telephone while Koepp spent time in New York writing his adaptation of Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* for Ron Howard.

Growing up in Pewaukee, WI, Koepp initially pursued acting, but eventually studied screenwriting at UCLA Film School. His first screen credit was *Apartment Zero*, co-written with brother-in-law Martin Donovan. This Argentinean drama didn't light many fires in Hollywood, but his next screenplay *Bad Influence*, would net Koepp a young agent on the move and serious interest from the studios. One such studio, Universal Pictures, was interested in *Bad Influence*, but wanted Koepp to rewrite the script as a comedy. Although Koepp was hungry for a deal, he turned Universal down and the thriller was ultimately produced at Trans World Entertainment.

Koepp would go on to write the script for *Death Becomes Her* (with Martin Donovan again), but it would be his work on *Jurassic Park* that truly established his position in Hollywood. But that important screen credit didn't come easy. Against the advice he received, Koepp filed with the Writers Guild for sole screenplay credit, even though Michael Crichton had written the novel and the initial drafts of the script. His efforts would be rewarded, however, with shared screenplay credit on the highest grossing film of that day.

For our follow-up meeting in his beautiful Santa Monica offices, I waited as Koepp worked at casting his new film, an adaptation of Richard Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes*. Koepp admits that he's spoiled—most of his screenplays have been produced. But one major factor behind this success has been Koepp's

ability to work with the most prominent directors in Hollywood: Steven Spielberg (*Jurassic Park, The Lost World: Jurassic Park, War of the Worlds*), Brian De Palma (*Carlito's Way, Mission: Impossible, Snake Eyes*), David Fincher (*Panic Room*), Ron Howard (*The Paper*, co written with his brother Stephen Koepp), and Robert Zemeckis (*Death Becomes Her*). He has directed his own screenplays for *The Trigger Effect, Stir of Echoes*, and *Secret Window*.

Snake Eyes reunites Koepp with director Brian De Palma, and centers around an assassination and the ensuing real time investigation. Although Koepp could not recall the exact germination of the film's concept, it seems likely that De Palma, with his predilection for assassinations and shared story credits, might be the source. Koepp's most important contribution to the concept for the film is its Rashomon-like structure: *Snake Eyes* uses point-of-view flashbacks to move its plot as the detective (Nicolas Cage) pieces together what happened. Although the film's production has been marred by several controversies, including problems with the film's overwrought ending and a dispute over the film's rating (an R, finally), *Snake Eyes* looks to be one of the last big films of Summer 1998.

The first words on the first page of David Koepp's script *Panic Room* are "This film is short. This film is fast." And Koepp isn't kidding. It's a lean and mean story about a woman and her daughter who must fend off a band of robbers invading their New York City townhouse in search of a secret bounty. The eponymous panic room, an ultra-secure safe area, becomes both their refuge and their prison. Unlike Koepp's last film, *Stir of Echoes*, there's no delving into the supernatural here. A gritty, claustrophobic tale of greed and survival, *Panic Room* is *The Trigger Effect* stripped down to its bare essentials. *Creative Screenwriting* interviewed David Koepp in 1998 and 2001.

What was your life like between finishing UCLA film school and selling your first screenplay Bad Influence*?*
Well, before *Bad Influence* I did *Apartment Zero*. I was working as an intern for a guy who represented foreign distributors and when I finished school he gave me a paying job. We bought American B movies for release through foreign video companies. I was writing scripts at night and was working with a guy named Martin Donovan, who had a great idea for a story, so we wrote the script together. Then Morrie Eisenman, the guy who I was working for, helped us sell the foreign rights to the movie and we used the money to pay for about half of the film. We didn't get paid for *Apartment Zero*, but I was working on a movie within a year or so of getting out of film school.

How many scripts did you write before Apartment Zero*?*
I think *Apartment Zero* was probably my sixth.

Since you've become successful, have you sold any of those?
No. I think the scripts that didn't get made from that era and a script I wrote recently that didn't get made…. I think there's very good reasons why. I'm

content to learn from those mistakes in private rather than force the public in on it.

You've been represented by Gavin Polone since 1988. How did you initially go about getting representation?

I had written the script *Bad Influence* and thought that was the one which would help get me an agent, so I just followed William Goldman's advice in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*. He says, "Call everybody you know and ask them if they know an agent." From that I got three contacts and people who said they would read my script. Gavin was one of them—an old girlfriend of mine had gone to high school with him. So I got the script to him sort of by hook or by crook, he liked it and signed me. He was at ICM at the time.

In the past you've said that one of the reasons for your success is that you've worked really hard. I'm wondering, do you think people underestimate the amount of work it takes to produce a good screenplay?

I think they find out once they get in and start writing it. I think that a lot of people are unwilling to go beyond a first or second draft, and to really listen to what other people are telling them—including myself sometimes. But if you really listen to what people are saying and you're getting some consensus of response, sometimes it implies a really thorough start-over. And that's not always easy to face. So, I don't know if they're unwilling to accept it, but I think a lot of people are unwilling to do it.

What about the work it takes to create an ongoing screenwriting career? How does that differ?

Well, it depends what kind of career you want. It depends on what your goals are for yourself. To keep a career going you first have to decide what you want. Is your career about money? Respect? Personal satisfaction? Is it about impressing women? The biggest thing is to decide what is important to you.

How have your career goals changed as you've moved along?

Well, it's very nice to have a successful movie. I mean you want to have something that does well so that people want to hire you and you can continue to work. And having a successful movie does feel really good. It feels even better, though, to have a movie that's well reviewed and that people admire. That's important. Because you know, it seems like with the stuff I've worked on that has had success, sometimes it seems like it's almost the inverse: the stuff that is praised doesn't do well and the stuff that is successful gets picked on.

So, where does Snake Eyes *fall in that?*

Well, I love it. I'm really happy with this one. I particularly like it because it's an original. Working on an original is always more satisfying than an adaptation. And working with somebody that you're friends with is a lot of fun too. Brian [De Palma] and I have gotten to be really close over the years. This

is our third movie together, and I like the way it came together. We sort of noodled with it for a couple years before finally deciding to get serious about it, and it wasn't until we felt the script was pretty much done that we went out to get the financing for it. I think there's a lot to be said for solving your script problems in private because when you take a job or go out with a script before it's ready, you're going to have a lot of people who are very anxious to help you solve your script problems. The best scripts always come from the fewest people in the room.

Is that true with rewrites as well? Do they tend to get worse with the number of people who've worked on them?
My feeling is that they get worse or they get different, but they never get better. I think the idea in a screenplay reaches its fruition around the third or fourth draft. Any further improvements strain at the limits of the idea, because the concept always limits how good the script is going to be, and they're not limitless. They are occasionally, but those are classics. After the third or fourth draft you can make it different, but you have an overwhelming chance of making it worse. And that is what usually happens.

Your work on Mission: Impossible *was a re-write. What were your marching orders on that script?*
Brian De Palma and Steve Zallian had worked out a treatment and then Zallian had other commitments, so I came in and continued to work on the treatment with Brian. I wrote the first half dozen drafts or so. And then I came back later, after they had gotten someone else to work on it, and worked on it again for several weeks.

Was that film based at all on the script by Willard and Gloria Hyuck?
No.

How did your work on Mission: Impossible *differ from your work on* Jurassic Park*?*
Not strikingly. In *Jurassic Park* I came in and worked from the book and in this I came in and worked from a treatment. It differed in that I was replaced. That was different, and not so enjoyable. I think *Mission: Impossible* was brilliantly directed but people had trouble following the story. That's what you get when you shuffle different writers' script pages together and hope for the best.

How conscious of structure are you when you sit down to write a first draft?
Intensely.

So, how do you approach writing a new script from stage one, when you just have an idea?
I let the idea cook for as long as I can without doing anything. It's like the germination stage, where I'm just leaving it in the back of my mind. Then I'll start to do research, which can vary wildly depending on what kind of

thing it is, even if it's just talking to people. In the research phase, you're sort of formulating characters. Then when I get serious about it, I'll sit down and outline it on index cards.

I usually do scene cards, but on *Panic Room* I wanted to try something different, so I wrote a treatment, which is something I almost never do. It was about thirty pages long, and it just told the story. And then from that I wrote the script. It was one of my favorite writing experiences ever, because I got the five or six soundtracks that I thought were appropriate, and I wrote most of it with headphones on in a very compressed amount of time. I had the idea, and I thought about it for a couple of years. Then I wrote the treatment, and thought about that for a couple of months. Then I sat down and wrote the script almost as a sprint during a two-week period. A first draft. And then I revised it for a year and a half. But I think first drafts—especially first drafts with this kind of movie—you have to burn through them fast; you don't want to lose your focus. In this case, there are a lot of esthetic boundaries that I made for myself. I wanted to see if I could do the whole thing in one location. And I also wanted to do the whole thing without any dialogue. The one-location thing I achieved in the first draft. There's a little exposition on the streets of New York at the beginning of the piece, and there's a scene at the end that's also on the streets, but it's ninety-six percent in one location. But the no-dialogue thing quickly became artificial. I couldn't get through the first twenty pages without having somebody say something!

What about with an adaptation? You said that's not quite as enjoyable an experience. Well, just because it's not yours. They're fine, you know, and usually when I'm working on an original I wish I was working on an adaptation and vice versa, just because you have something to work from. Especially in something with a science or espionage element or any really detailed field, it's great to be working from source material because you know, you get these techno-geeks who've spent three years researching big government spy stuff, so that's extremely helpful. But in an original the characters are always going to be a little more from your heart. It's more satisfying because it's a little more personal.

In building and maintaining a career in Hollywood, how should a writer divide their time between writing and networking?
Well, if you have a good agent or manager—which I do—that's their job. Writing is so hard to do well that it's a big enough job for anybody. I think that it's good to maintain relations with people you've worked with in the past whom you would like to work with again. But as far as going out and trying to schmooze studio executives, I can't think of a bigger waste of time.

What do you think of the increasing trend towards literary management for writers?
Literary management for writers? Do a lot of writers have managers?

It definitely seems like an expanding phenomenon.
I don't know much about it. I wouldn't want to have an agent and a manager—it seems like one representative too many. I believe in having a good representative. Gavin is a great representative. He's a manager now, but he used to be an agent. So, now I have a manager and not an agent. I'd want him to be my representative if he were a stockbroker. I think it's just getting a good person. And whatever job description that person has, their real job is watching your back.

On the creative side, does he give you input as far as notes and so forth on your work?
Sure. Especially because there's a film I'm directing now, or putting together anyway, that he's producing. So, in that case, yes, quite a bit, to the extent that I ask for it. But I don't really look to him for that because his real responsibility is the business end.

You've said in the past that visual effects movies are pushing the screenwriter into a less important role in Hollywood.
In certain kinds of movies, yes.

What do you think writers can do to fight against that trend?
Well, in the creation of your original material just find better and more organic—although I hate that word because studio executives use it a lot—uses for the effects. When *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park* came out, they were like *The Jazz Singer*—they brought a whole new age of a cinematic tool that audiences and filmmakers alike were fascinated with. And so a lot of the first movies that come from that, from any new tool, they're like porn.

What do you mean?
The first application of any new technology is always pornographic. Like the porno sites on the Internet. When anything new comes along, the first application of it is always going to be base because it's a new toy. You want to see whether we can make a city explode. Can we make tornadoes? Can we make volcanoes? There's that sort of fascination with it, and that's okay because you're trying it out. Those movies are satisfying in their way because what you're going to them for is the kick of the digital effect. It's not necessarily what you call a writers' medium when you're dealing with that kind of thing, it's more a technician's medium, because the writer's tools are too limited to compete when the fantastic thing is the center of everything.

Give me an example.
Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, which I'm adapting, is a case where the story and characters are strong and the application of the digital elements are a natural part of the story and therefore, unfantastic. We have a twenty-page storm sequence in the script. I can't imagine that Ron Howard intends to do the storm without heavy use of digital effects, because they will help him

create a more real and believable world. So they'll be part of the story instead of standing above the story or being the reason for the story. My favorite example of the use of digital effects is adding clouds in *Sense and Sensibility* because Ang Lee thought it made a prettier landscape. That's a great use of digital technology. It helps tell a story.

Yes. The classic model of Hollywood filmmaking is the big backstory with even a fantastic or outlandish premise, but a tight focus on the characters and what they're doing. I'm wondering if that might be a model for writers writing these kinds of stories? You know, have this fantastic situation but don't necessarily focus on the effects, focus on the characters and what they're doing.
Yes, that's one model, and a good one. I could see writing a movie by that model. But another model is, what's the biggest, most outrageous thing we would like to see on screen that we can do with our new toy. That's an okay model too. It's a different kind of movie—you're not going to be moved by the vivid characterizations but you might still have fun.

At the Writers Foundation Forum last year you said that in writing effects-driven movies, you need to write with more of an eye to the audience. Is that what you meant by that?
The point I was trying to make is that there are many different models for movies. People enjoy different kinds of movies and people go to movies to have different kinds of experiences. When you start hammering at a certain paradigm for storytelling, for the construction of a story, you're just being dogmatic and you're being silly. Sometimes people go to movies because they just want to see a great big tornado rip through the countryside. They don't particularly care about the people in it because they went to see the thing because it's the middle of the summer and they wanted to go to the movies because it's hot out. They wanted to get somewhere air-conditioned, you know? This is a valid kind of movie making. It's not necessarily going to win anybody any Oscars. It's not going to make anybody change their life. But they are, after all, in the words of Alfred Hitchcock, only movies.

They're the new B movies.
Yeah, they are. And there's nothing wrong with B movies. Some of our fondest memories of childhood moviegoing or seeing movies on TV are B movies. However, I think there's a real danger, particular with B or genre movies: many of the unsuccessful ones seem to be where the filmmakers felt they were above the material. Or they tried to elevate material that resisted it. Sometimes the best thing you can do in your filmmaking is wallow in its baseness. You know, it's a popular art and sometimes that's called for. And that's okay. Oscar Wilde said when someone tries to do important art it's usually a sure sign that they're doing the most trivial.

You've said that all screenwriters are directors or at least want to be directors. But

haven't a number of really good screenwriters shot themselves in the foot with a move to directing?

Some, but I don't know that they ruined their screenwriting career by trying to direct. It's really hard to direct, and it's a different job. Some screenwriters do it well and some screenwriters don't. And some full-time directors do it well and some don't. It's really hard. I just meant that—especially if you write original scripts—it's very difficult to watch someone else direct them. Because even if they do it far better than you ever could, it's still different. And you prefer your admittedly inferior version because it coincides better with the image you had in your brain.

Finally on *Snake Eyes* Brian and I reached a very friendly point where we admitted to each other that we don't like it when I'm on the set. So, you know, I didn't hang out much. I would go when there was a script issue and I'd go up and we'd rehearse it for a while but even then I wouldn't hang out on the set, because if I saw the door as being on the left side of the screen, he's always got in on the right side of the screen. And that drives me crazy. Whenever he's shooting a scene the first thought that goes through my head is "Oh, that's wrong." And for his part, he says when I'm standing next to him he starts to see a scene through my eyes and it makes him nervous. So there's a little tension that neither of us like.

You don't seem to view the writer as an auteur.

Well, he's not. How could he be? He's delivering something that's going to be thoroughly reinterpreted by someone else. He's the auteur of the screenplay, but not of the film. A screenplay is a half-finished work, it's a proposal of what might be. I don't know a lot of people who check out screenplays and read them for pleasure. We read them to torture ourselves. So it's not really an art form by itself, it's part of an art form.

Do you have any problem with the possessory credit?

Oh yeah, huge. I think it's ridiculous. I don't know what it says that "directed by" doesn't.

Well, it guess it says "this is the work of one person."

Yeah. I think it's preposterous. I think it's ridiculous self-aggrandizement. The only possible argument for it is it helps sell tickets when a director is a star like Spielberg or Hitchcock. But in 90% of the other cases I just think it's the biggest ape or gorilla taking all the bananas because he can. That'll get me work, huh?

Definitely. But, your essay "Trading Places" argues that to be a director you have to be able to consider everything your idea. That could be interpreted as an apology for directors who claim that kind of credit.

Well, that is true. I think film directing is a very psychologically damaging way to spend your time because… out of necessity… you're creating a world.

So you sort of have to end up like that.

Do you think that explains why many directors, even if they don't take a possessory credit, seem to view films as singular pieces of their work?
Yes, I suppose. Also, just because the nature of the job is corruptive. You have the ability to walk into a set, or a space, and look at something and say, "If only that wall weren't there." And five minutes later, it's not. That's just not a healthy relationship with the world.

You made your feature directing debut with Trigger Effect *in 1996. I'm wondering, was that the right time in your career to make that transition, or was it the right script?*
I don't know. I liked it… that was a very personal script for me. And you only get to make your first film once. Even though I kind of knew it wouldn't do well, I wanted to do it anyway, I felt like now's the time I could sort of jam this through.

Right. Being the right time in your career.
You know, I don't know. But I thought it was the right time to get that made.

But you had concerns that the material wasn't commercial?
Yeah, but that's why I did it for like $7 million.

Brian De Palma often takes a story credit on the films he directs. What was his input into the initial concept for Snake Eyes*?*
You know, it's very difficult for me to divide up who thought of what. The only thing I can say is we came up with the story together.

Why did you decide on the political intrigue plot?
Well, part of our initial idea was to see a murder committed and then see it replayed from several different perspectives, gathering more information each time. Brian suggested an assassination because it's a high profile murder and because it takes place at such a striking moment. Something that sparks an investigation and the investigation led…you know if someone is investigating, like a police person, that's good for film because it's an active character who makes things happen. So if you're going to assassinate someone it has to be someone who has some sort of public dimension and it seemed kind of natural that it be a political thing.

Did you consider making the assassination itself about something closer to the protagonist, something that he had more of a vested interest in? Because it's about an anti-missile system, which is somewhat removed from the protagonist.
Yeah. Well, the idea was that the guy…well…you know, that just makes me tired when you say that. Sure, it could have been, that would have been another way to go. I feel like I'm taking notes here. When you write your assassination story you can take the personal angle. In this one it was the

missile thing! [both laughing] I liked that he was this low level functionary who was in way over his head with this thing. I liked that aspect of it.

The script was very tightly written, it really spins along. In your writing of a script how much of your time do you spend on the style and how much on the content of a scene? As far as creating a really readable draft, that is?

It's all content; the style is just the way you express yourself. I talk the way I talk to you. I use certain expressions and I insert jokes or I stammer in certain areas and that's just the way I express myself verbally, so the way I express myself in a script is like second nature. I don't really think about it that much, I just do it. I mean I use certain devices where I feel like we need to draw out a moment—like that double dash thing—just because it seems to make the eye move at the pace that I want it to move. Because I'm trying to simulate the filmgoing experience, the experience of watching a film.

There are times I need to bulk it up with description because I want you to slow down and think about things. And then there are times when I feel like what you need is white space, white space, white space, and just keep flying because you're implying that you're in a section of the film where there is going to be a lot of cuts and a lot of action. There's a lot of things moving quickly. I try to use a writing style that matches the content of the scene. So if you're in an action scene and you don't stop for four five-sentence paragraphs in a row, it reads like action. Screenplays are so unnatural. They're so difficult to read and so mind-numbing that you have to do everything you can to help the reader get through it, to survive it. It's tough.

One of the things that you pointed out that definitely struck me in reading the script was your use of the double dashes. That worked really well in kind of pulling me, the reader, from one paragraph to the next.

Yeah. That's just if you feel like there's a revelation, a big moment or something you want to sustain for a second or let linger for a second. But like anything, overuse it and it gets really sickening. So, you've got to try to restrain yourself.

A lot of writers overuse asides to the reader in their scripts. But I thought that in Snake Eyes *your comments were almost perfect. Do you have any rules that you use in determining when those should stay in and when those should go?*

Yeah. It's just…as infrequently as possible. I mean basically, only what you need for clarity. If you feel like a line is supposed to be sarcastic and people might take it straight and that would cause some confusion put in "sarcastic." You know, just do only what's necessary to help you with your story.

I'm even more interested in the postmodern asides you make to the reader. The one that I thought was great was in the initial scene where your protagonist is chasing after the drug dealer, and your aside to the reader is "This guy's a cop?" I thought that was great use of that device.

Again, you want that moment to be revelation. And you're telling the direc-

tor it would be nice if the audience were surprised to discover that he was a cop. That's just trying to make a suggestion.

Talking about the business side of Snake Eyes. *That script was sold as a package for $4 million with De Palma attached as the director. Do you know how that package was marketed to the studios?*
Well, we just sent the script to everybody with money and sat back and saw who liked it. It was helped enormously by the fact that Brian had just done *Mission: Impossible*, which was a big hit, and he said, "I will make this right away." If there's one thing a studio likes to hear it's "right away." So that certainly enhanced the value of it for the studios.

Why did you decide to tell the story in real time?
Just an esthetic challenge. It seemed appropriate for it, and it seemed interesting to us. We liked the idea of a bottle—a story that's contained in time and place. I mean it wasn't our idea, Aristotle suggested it. But you know, the unities of time, place, and character make for satisfying storytelling, so we thought we'd give it a try and see if that worked.

Was it your idea to use the kind of Rashomon-*like point of view flashbacks in telling the story?*
That was the idea. The first idea we had was to tell the story from several points of view. We thought it would be good because it seemed to work for Kurosawa.

In Rashomon *the flashbacks were presented through the unique perspectives of different individuals, remembering the events based on their own self-interests, with the audience ultimately having to sort out the truth.*
Right.

Now, in Snake Eyes you resolve that quandary for us in the videotape of Dunn shooting the assassin. Is that kind of resolution necessary for a Hollywood film?
Necessary? It's helpful. I mean, it sets up the drama. The last twenty minutes of the movie is running out the drama of this betrayal by his friend, and if that betrayal is not clear to the Nic Cage character, then I don't feel you have any drama to write. The scene that follows in the control room is made possible by the fact that he has now confirmed, yes, his friend is evil and has betrayed him.

So, that's essentially your plot point for the third act?
Yes, it is the third act. Because at that point protagonist and antagonist have declared their intentions toward one another and are in direct conflict—primarily physical.

Could you talk about your use of a superior position for the audience in creating suspense in the film?
Sure, it's the old question, suspense or surprise? We felt that as a whodunit

this story did not have enough possible suspects and was not really that interesting. We thought it was more interesting to watch the tensions playing out between these two characters who were boyhood friends. If we reveal it to the audience first then for the next twenty-five pages we can play the suspense of "will the hero find out in time." Instead of surprise, we went for the dramatic irony that the audience is aware of something that the hero is not.

Why did you decide to make your protagonist Rick so dark, with such a checkered past?
Because he's fun. We did a little scouting trip to Atlantic City and we were so disgusted by the place, we wondered what character would arise naturally out of this environment. We thought that making him someone who is not just corrupt but sort of gleefully, happily corrupt… again, it's looking for drama. If the guy's just a square-jawed hero, well, of course, he's going to do the right thing. What's interesting about that? But if he's a bit of a sleazeball who's used to looking out for number one, then he's got some choices to make that are a little more dramatically interesting.

In the past you've said that in developing a good character you've got to toe the line regarding audience sympathy and identification. Do you still believe that?
Yes. I think we accept characters like Rick if they entertain us, and he's nothing but entertaining in the beginning.

Did you consider or implement any kind of set up in the script that would, at least in retrospect, indicate that Rick might not take that final payoff, that he would save the woman from being killed?
Well, I felt that everybody has a line they won't cross. Everybody's got their moral parameters. I didn't really want to set it up because I didn't want it to be that schematic. I wanted the audience to think his corruption was boundless. And then when he says, almost embarrassed, "I never killed anybody"— that's a huge line. He may beat people up, he may steal from them, he may do this or that, but he doesn't kill people. And throughout the story Rick's all about life. He's celebrating everything, he's just full of life. You know, he cheats on his wife because he's so full of life. He has too much life for one woman. And everything he does is vibrant and alive. He is not about death. So I felt that was consistent for him.

Based on its budget [$68 million], Snake Eyes *needs to find a general audience to make a profit. I'm interested in the circularity of its plot. Do you think that mass audiences have come to the point where that's going to be something that stimulates them?*
I have no idea if people are going to like it or not. I wouldn't have written it if I didn't like it, but who knows? It's my belief that if you think you have it all figured out then you're certain to be wrong, so at least if I admit I don't know then maybe I'll be right.

Did you consider directing Panic Room *yourself?*
Yeah, but I had just moved with my family from L.A. to New York. I wasn't quite ready to go back to work at that level yet. It just wasn't a good time for me to do it. Also, this movie isn't easy to direct. It's really complicated. All that stuff with the monitors. All that inter-cut stuff is actually much trickier than it looks.

Do you know about the banker, Edmund Safara?
Yeah, the guy who burned up in his own panic room. Actually, I found out about that after I had written the screenplay. There were two things that got the idea going in my head, because I think all movies are two disparate ideas that bang together. When you have an idea for a movie, you've got to wait till the second idea comes, and then you've got a movie. The first idea came from an article I read in the newspaper about panic rooms. I thought that might be useful in a movie some day. The second idea came after we moved to New York. We were remodeling this townhouse, and it was taking forever. It had gone way over schedule, like these things always do, and we had to move in while the guys were still working on it. I ended up just being in that house, trying to move along the construction for a month or two. I just spent so much time thinking about the infrastructure of this townhouse that I thought, "Hey wait, this is a great setting for a movie." It has this little elevator because the guy who lived there before us was disabled, like in the movie. I was in that elevator, and I'm thinking, "This house would be great for a thriller." So I put the two together, and came up with an idea for the movie.

Did you sketch out a blueprint of the house in the script?
Yeah, I had to be really aware of where everything was. It's really just laid out like everything in my house. It was very easy for me to visualize because I was living in it.

So you have a panic room of your own?
With that exception. I do not have a panic room. I think a panic room is whatever room I'm in.

Comparing the two drafts that I read [dated 2/23/00, and 2/08/01], there isn't much difference between your spec draft and the shooting script.
David Fincher had a lot of comments, and a lot of ideas, and I think we made the script a lot better. But it's substantially the same movie. There really wasn't that much room to maneuver. First of all, it was constrained in terms of time, place, and character. None of those could really change. So it's not like with a regular script where a director could come in and say, "What about a sequence in Africa?" That just didn't make any sense here. It was more about hammering out the logistics and really trying to make sure all those intercut set pieces worked. I think it got a lot better, but it was essentially the same movie.

Were you involved with the project during production?
They shot it in Los Angeles, and I live in New York. I was there for rehearsal, and I would visit sometimes while they were shooting, but unless there's a problem I don't like to visit a set; there's nothing for me to do, and someone else is making the decisions. I invariably have strong opinions, but it's not an appropriate time to express them. I find it kind of frustrating, so there's no reason to be there, and you just make people kind of nervous. I think the actors feel like you're checking up on them. It's better to just stay away.

So who gets the money at the end? Does Meg get to keep it?
It's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. This is the problem with treasure movies: nobody can get it. It blows away in the wind. I think the guy in the brownstone behind them, the one who wouldn't help Meg, I think he found some of it. Whoever doesn't deserve it probably got it.

What's your next project?
I'm working on a movie I'm directing, and I'm working on pre-production of another movie I'm going to direct. It's called—are you ready?—*The Super-Conducting Super Collider of Sparkle Creek*. It's a romantic comedy with effects, about a small town in Wisconsin that has had a particle-accelerator built underneath it. But the people in the town don't know about it until the physicists start firing it up. Strange things begin to happen.

Your stories are quite different from each other. Do you like exploring various genres?
Yeah! I mostly work on spec now, and the great thing about that is you can avoid getting pigeon-holed. Hollywood's not going to offer you stuff that is different from what you've already done; they're going to offer you exactly what you did before. So if you want to try anything different, you just have to try it yourself.

Do you still write spec scripts that you don't intend to direct?
Panic Room was a great experience. I would do that again. If I can write on spec, and either sell it or have a great director do it, that's okay with me. I'll take that lifestyle.

How has directing changed or influenced your writing? Have you ever experienced moments on your own sets where you said to yourself, "who wrote this thing?"
Oh, yeah. Absolutely. One reason I co-wrote the *Sparkle Creek* script with John Kamps is that directing without a writer is really isolating, and lonely, and hard, because you don't have anybody who's got the same creative stake as you. It's easy to forget why you made certain decisions while you're out there in the heat of directing it. To have somebody around who didn't forget is really helpful. But the one thing that directing does for you as a writer is it just makes you infinitely aware of how important it is to express things visually. Anything you can get across with a picture is ten times better than any-

thing you get across with dialogue. Any setup has to be visual. An important setup must have a visual component. Even if it can only be expressed in dialogue, then at least the camera has to be on that person, otherwise, it just won't register. Any script I write, I'm thinking about ways I can tell it with a picture. As a director, you're just so grateful when the writer gives you something you can do with a picture, instead of just having a bunch of people talking to each other.

So you're grateful to yourself in those instances?
No, I hate myself!

I noticed that clips from Night of the Living Dead *appear in both films you directed. Did it have a big influence on you?*
I love it. I love horror movies, and that's a brilliant one. I'm ashamed to admit that, in part, I used it because the copyright lapsed and it's in the public domain. Both movies that I directed had limited budgets, so when I needed a clip the price was right. But, thematically, it applied to both movies. In *The Trigger Effect* I chose a clip of zombies trying to break into the house, which is a concern in my movie. And in *Stir of Echoes* it's used to terrorize this kid with flesh-eaters. I don't know, people turning into monsters is something that I think about a lot.

It's a powerful visual trope. The construct of Panic Room *is also reminiscent of* Night of the Living Dead*: two people trapped in a house trying to fend off killers that are hell-bent on getting to them.*
I think it's time for me to get over my fear that somebody is going to break into my house and sodomize me!

Neil LaBute

INTERVIEWED BY MARTY NABHAN & DAVID F. GOLDSMITH
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 8, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2001)
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Neil LaBute has garnered the awe of some and raised the ire of others with his first two independent releases (*In the Company of Men* and *Your Friends and Neighbors*, both written and directed by LaBute), *Nurse Betty* (written by John C. Richards and James Flamberg, directed by LaBute), *Posession*, and *The Shape of Things*. LaBute accepts both of these reactions and realizes that the greatest compliment a writer can receive is the passionate reaction of an audience. In an entertainment age littered with high-tech "wizardry," flesh for fantasy, and gratuitous violence, LaBute is part of a minute class of writers who can entertain and provoke an audience with just words.

Granted, those words and the motives behind them are often cruel. Critics have used terms like "morally bankrupt"and "emotional terrorism"to describe his tightly constructed examinations of the darker recesses of the human spirit. Morally bankrupt? Certainly not. Emotional terrorism? Maybe. LaBute simply portrays the reality of people behaving irrationally, and at times immorally, when reacting to issues of betrayal and insecurity. In fact, LaBute's wittiest and most perceptive writing often comes when his characters are at their most despicable. First-time viewers of his films don't know whether to laugh with the characters or cry for them. LaBute offers neither apologies nor answers for the questions his films raise. He understands that the power of ambiguity is that it inspires thought in the individual.

LaBute started as a playwright and staged plays at both NYU and BYU while attending those colleges. He became a grad assistant while working toward his PhD in Theatre and put on several plays, some of which proved to be too racy for the Mormon administration of BYU, who eventually retracted his right to use their facilities. LaBute, who is a Mormon himself, reveals a Biblical, "to be redeemed you have to sin," type of attitude when he talks about showing the

bad to get to a greater good. His response, in reference to BYU's idea of the purpose of art, in comparison to his own, suggests a higher purpose behind the harshness: "My vision of what art was acceptable for Mormons to see differed from theirs. Their mission statement is to glorify through art. I think there can be some glorification by showing things that are less than glorious."

Indeed, the premise of two friends purposely attempting to break the heart of a deaf girl doesn't sound too glorious, or marketable. LaBute started the script for *In the Company of Men* at BYU and eventually decided to shoot the project around his home in Fort Wayne using whatever funds he could get his hands on. (A large portion of the money used for the film came from a friend's accident settlement.) The result of his indie work won him the Best Director's Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1997. Commercially, the film found its audience in the jilted men of the postmodern age who struggle to find an identity between the opposing ends of machismo and sensitivity.

The success of *Company* afforded LaBute a larger budget and a talented ensemble cast for his next film, *Your Friends and Neighbors*. While not as tight or successful as his debut, the film evened the ante in the politics of private cruelty by allowing the female characters some room to vent. *Company* brought the audience into the inner sanctum of male relations. *Friends and Neighbors* juxtaposes personal outpourings from both sexes and then contrasts them with guarded exchanges between the two. Fans were still impressed by the rhythmic, realistic dialogue, but many felt that LaBute's outlook was growing increasingly bleak.

Nurse Betty lets a little light into Neil LaBute's dark body of work. It is the first film he has done where the antagonist doesn't steal the show. The character of Betty is a picture of innocence and goodwill in a world of cynicism and cruelty. Her fantasy-based naiveté provides a moral contrast to the actions of hitmen, husbands, and celluloid hunks. It is also the first time he has directed someone else's script, a gamble that has expanded his stylistic scope as a director. John C. Richards's and James Flamberg's screenplay is a multi-genre hodgepodge that showcases LaBute's ability to effectively blend comedy, drama, romance, satire, and for the first time, violence. Though the film features some graphic blade work as well as plenty of cutting remarks, the heart of the story still lies in the cracked fantasy that Betty is driven to live. Though Betty is not a character from his own pen, the world that LaBute visualizes around her makes her actions all the more honorable and human.

Now, with the screen adaptation of his play, *The Shape of Things*, LaBute tells the tale of a self-loathing schlub who unwittingly allows his merciless girlfriend to transform him into a walking piece of performance art. Conniving, duplicitous, and self-serving, the characters in *The Shape of Things* blur the boundaries between protagonist and antagonist. Human behavior and the depths people will sink to in order to get what they want takes center stage. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Neil LaBute in 2001 and 2002.

Before your success at Sundance with In the Company of Men, *what kept you writing?*
The love of it, the same thing as now. It would be excruciating to do it just for money. It's a pretty lonely process. That's why I try not to do it with a forced regularity, like, "I will write from 10:00 till 2:00," or to just stare into a blank screen or piece of paper—it's useless. I wander around with stuff in my head and think it over. The actual process of putting it down goes rather quickly, because I've thought it out well enough, even if I haven't sketched it in completely A to Z. I know A, K, and Z, and I can wind my way between those points. It's not fun to be at A and say "Okay, where does it go?" I used to have a tough time starting things, because I hated the idea of not being able to finish it in one sitting, and inevitably, I would have to stop and eat, and go to class, and those things. It was very hard for me to say, "I'm going to put this aside and leave this argument unfinished or not know how this is going to evolve." It was the antithesis of writer's block. I had a fear of start-ing, because I knew I couldn't complete a screenplay in a day. So it was a gradual thing I overcame. Though I did have a strange period where it was difficult for me to write anything more than a few pages.

Where did you write In the Company of Men?
I wrote that at Brigham Young University. In fact, I started it at NYU and fin-ished it at BYU. It was inspired by finding a good story. I had been jockey-ing the idea around a bit.

Did you have real-life models at all?
Whether I had models or not, you create such a stew, saying, "This is a real moment, this is a real aside that someone said, this is the kind of person that this is." But there weren't any real people where I said, "This is them and I'm going to fit them into the story." They were dictated by the story. I needed one guy who was pretty alpha and another one who was beta and created them from that.

How long did it take you to write the first draft.
Not very long. Once I'm doing it, I tend to go fast. A week or two weeks.

How much changed as you polished it?
Hard to say because I put it aside for quite awhile. Ten or fifteen percent?

That's not much.
Not a great deal. I had written monologues for [the deaf character] Christine. We would hear in what we would consider a very normal voice her thinking, and I cut all that out, thinking, "That's too precious." We didn't get to know her, because it was all from the guys' point of view. So I kept paring those things out. I had a couple of monologues, things that tended to be more the-atrical, because that was my background. Chad and Howard each had a monologue at the end of the screenplay. Chad's ended up being a little too

revealing. It was good for the actor, it was good for me, but I didn't want people thinking, "Oh, that's why he is the way he is." So I ended up taking that out. It got published recently in *Playboy*, that actual monologue, but it wasn't something that seemed right for the movie.

One to two weeks to write it. That would amaze a lot of people.
Well, that's hard writing. That doesn't include the time I thought about it. I'm not one to spend a lot of time outlining and stuff, the traditional, "here's my index cards and I can paste them up and show you how the piece goes." But I think about it a lot. This is where I want to end up, and how am I going to get there, and the characters. Instead of staring at the computer monitor and trying to do it that way, I tend to let it sit in my head for a bit, and when I finally get down to it, I kind of have a direction I'm going in, where I'm going to end. I'd rather not know exactly how I'm going to get there, because that seems rote. But I know where I want to head.

Does that ever feel contrived, when you plot as you move along to try and reach a predetermined end?
Sometimes, yeah. But you can feel the things that feel right early, and you hopefully take those things out. Occasionally, you write yourself into a corner—I've done that many times—but I'd rather do that than have it feel like it's systematic and a foregone conclusion.

When you were ready to start filming, you had both Company *and* Your Friends and Neighbors *to choose from. Are you glad you chose* Company *first?*
Certainly, yes. I felt I could do a more reasonable job with the money I had with *In the Company of Men*. There was a greater sense of affluence to *Your Friends and Neighbors*, more of the city, and where I was living in Fort Wayne, I couldn't support that. Also I adjusted *Company* so the characters went to the regional office and all of that, so that it would fit even better the situation of that film.

The movie starts with a long talking scene between Matt and Aaron. Immediately I'm thinking it would easily lend itself to the stage. Was it a play to begin with?
No, it was only imagined as a screenplay.

How did you make that scene—I'm calling it a scene even though it took place in several locations—how did you make it work?
Well, you sort of have to rely on the actors to carry the day. When you're doing long takes and have a lot of dialogue, they're setting the rhythm, and they came into it as if it were a play in the sense that they could have sat and spewed all their lines out and done it that way. It was that rehearsed in terms of their dialogue. That helps, because we didn't have a lot of rehearsal time. Having them in a place where they could feel they were people who knew one another, that they would overlap each other. The kind of thing you can do when you're not cutting back and forth a lot. Let them set that rhythm.

You mention rhythm. How do you get that? Is that the actors or is it on the page?
Part of it is in the dialogue. They can feel the stuff that's overlapping each other and cutting each other off. Part of it is going through it a few times and saying, "This should feel like a monologue to you and the other guy is interjecting along the way." But the better the actors you get, the shrewder they are. You don't want to get yourself into an acting coach situation. You really want to direct, say, "What about this, maybe try that." But hopefully you're just getting out of their way.

We enter a lot of scenes after something significant has happened. For example, the first time we see Howie and Chad, it's after Howie's been hit. Chad proposes the seduction plot, but it happens off camera, and we see them talking about it after the proposal. How do you know when to enter a scene?
Part of it is instinct. Part of it is trial and error. Some of that's only through editing. You go, "Oh, we really don't need these first few lines at all, even though it seemed like great character stuff." You run that balancing act of trying not to make everything informational—going from plot point to plot point—and every so often it's nice to just talk about the weather. But then there are those times it sticks out. It just hangs there. So you jump in the scene later. I like that whole sense of the audience being a step behind you and going, "Wait a minute, what just happened?" I like having the audience in pursuit of you.

You put things in your movies that are so politically incorrect that most filmmakers wouldn't go near. Chad makes fun of Christine's deafness by saying, "She sounds like a porpoise," and criticizes the way an African-American intern pronounces, "Ask." Do you find yourself drawn to that type of thing.
Probably less so than just not being fearful of it. That it made sense, and to me—especially like the intern, those types of things—it was a bit calculated to go beyond misogyny and give him something even more troubling.

Do you consciously put the humor in, or does it come naturally?
It tends to just come out, but sometimes it's calculated, because I know the absolute power of it. It allows you into those kinds of characters, and allows you to say things—you can say things that are far more outlandish with humor than you can through straight-on dialogue. So it's more effective to pull people in with humor than lack of one.

In Your Friends and Neighbors*, the characters had rhyming names, but you don't find that out until the end credits.*
No, on the page they didn't have any names. Originally they were Man #1, Man #2, Man #3... But people found that very confusing to read. People can associate more easily with a name, saying, "Okay this is John, we know who John is." But without names, it became harder for them to read it so I slapped them on because they were never mentioned. I used rhyming names and put them in there.

Why are there no names?
That's the way we talk. I mean, I'm not saying your name over and over. I know who you are. That comes with a certain intimacy. In movies we tend to want people to remember what someone's name is, and we continually go, "Well, Marty, what I was thinking was… " But in actual discussion with people you know, you don't do it that much. I liked the intimacy of it. Ultimately, it was a very cold way of doing it, too. To have gone for an hour and a half with never hearing anyone's name. It's distancing as well.

The characters don't communicate very well—a lot of incomplete sentences, pauses, and other people completing sentences.
I like that. That's the way people who know one another talk. They don't mind silence, they're comfortable with it. I like it in films; I like it in plays. I like the Pinter pause, and I like not cutting just on dialogue. People don't always know what they're going to say. They backtrack, or they fumble along. It's more realistic to me than always having some Noel Coward-ish retort.

It seems colder in tone to me than In the Company of Men.
Yeah, it probably is colder, because the women are also cruel. In *Company*, you can look at Christine and say, she's being victimized and she seems nice, and nothing that she does is malicious. And in one way it's funny—different bounds—that *In the Company of Men* is more malicious because it's so premeditated. *Your Friends and Neighbors* feels more brutal because these people say, "We're friends and we like each other and we live together," and yet they constantly brutalize each other. Not in a necessarily cruel, calculated way, but flat-out brutality.

Why are your most mean-spirited guys also your funniest?
Again, it's that device. They're also arguably some of the most attractive people in both movies. Not that I have a vendetta against beautiful people, but I've always felt that they get a great deal more rope than everybody else in life, and that we constantly allow them the ability to do more outlandish things because they have qualities that we all desire. Part of it is that humor that allows you in—to let them do the things they do—because they get away with it with charm and looks and all of that. And the kinds of characters they are, they're more outspoken, they allow themselves to say things that are more humorous.

Is there a fear or danger in making some characters so flawed that people will watch it and say, "I don't have to worry about these people. I don't know anyone like that"?
Sure. Sure. You don't want it to be science fiction where people go, "I have no basis for that in my life, I have no comprehension of that kind of lifestyle." You can't make it for everyone. You can try, but there are people who look at *Titanic* and go, "Ugh, I don't even know what they're talking about there." Apparently not very many [laughs]. It hit just about every pocketbook there.

But I don't think in terms of how people feel. Hopefully people appreciate it and there's enough people like you who will appreciate it as well.

I notice there are some very funny lines in both movies that are almost throwaways, like when Howie says, "They kind of screw you on the meat here," or when Catherine Keener meets Nastassia Kinski while looking at the artwork and saying, "This really is a lovely piece." Am I reading too much into those.
No, not at all. I like to sprinkle doubt throughout them. Again, someone like Chad, when he's dealing with the intern, most of the credit should probably go to Aaron, that to look at him and not know quite what's going through his head—is it a racial thing? is it a sexual thing? is he really trying to give this guy advice? what is his MO? Aaron leaves every thread dangling. If your camp is any of those, and you want to make a case for it, you could. But there's not a definitive one, and I'm someone who does like that vagueness that allows me some room for interpretation. That makes it a richer experience.

Both movies end in a similar way. In Company, *Howie is screaming "Listen," but you can't hear him, and in* Friends, *several of the characters are wanting people to answer them, but not getting a response. Do we not listen to each other as people?*
It's incredibly difficult to make yourself heard and know what you want to say. Yeah, one of our huge difficulties is men and women, men together and women together, beat around the truth. We go to such great lengths to avoid the truth, thinking that we're saving people pain, or it's going to be too painful to say ultimately. Or every time you thought it was a relief to say it and get it out and be done with it, you know, the truth. But we rarely ever take the lesson and use it the next time. It's like, begin the weather scenes one more time.

How has your stage work influenced the movies that you write?
Probably by having very little regard or respect for one or the other. I don't have the innate snobbery that says this is a play, this is a film. I have continually been accused of writing stagy films and cinematic plays and so, that's probably the downside of it. The upside is that I enjoy what I am doing. I like talkie films, I like films that have nothing but pictures, and I love all kinds of things. What I've been doing myself is stuff that's primarily interested in what people say. I'm very interested in the visual too, like shooting *Friends and Neighbors* in "scope" when it was all inside. But I'm not a slave to the camera: what kinds of crannies can the lens slip through, and helicopter shots. I'm always more interested in people. If I have a lot to say then I say it, I don't worry about it feeling or being stagebound. In terms of the film-making process I attacked it in the way I would a play. I tried to get as personal as possible. I also have the actors learn the whole text so they could have literally stood up and done it like a play the first time.

So we aren't going to get the action film any time soon then?
There's action in *Nurse Betty*. It certainly wasn't the part that interested me, though. That part falls in the hands of other people, the technicians. Action has very little of the creative process that interests me. It wasn't about the heart of the scene. Action is about, "Okay, you stand here and then you turn to your left so we can get a good shot of the blood," this is not what interests me.

How did Nurse Betty *come about?*
That came about from the company that I did *Your Friends and Neighbors* with, Propaganda. One of the producers on that, Steve Golan, had that script and he gave it to me to take a look at, and asked if I'd be interested in overseeing what the writers were doing. I gradually got deeper into the process, from helping out with the script, to talking about casting. It came to fruition very quickly. I was interested in the idea of directing somebody else's stuff, because I like to experiment. At the same time, I'm having somebody else direct my play [*Bash*]. So I guess this is my experimental year [laughs]. The play has been generally well received so far. Will the movie be the same? Who knows? But it was very interesting to try a lot of firsts in the film: different cranes, and lenses and action and bullets and all kinds of things I never imagined myself doing. I had some fun, but as I said earlier, I ultimately found out that's also not the thing that interested me the most.

What did you like about Nurse Betty*?*
There's the idea that it is a female character who was the lead, and that there was a certain kind of light and darkness to the story that I hadn't undertaken to this point. Casting was interesting. We were talking about kinds of casting and they mentioned Renee Zellweger, and I said, "You can get someone who may cost you more or who arguably has a bigger name, but there won't be anybody who's better for that sad part." She is how I imagined that character, and she was interested. When Morgan Freeman and Chris Rock showed interest, that said something to me. It was a fresh take on something…but I was obviously drawn to the mix: an offbeat, strange breed of comedy and drama and fantasy, and you never know quite where it's headed. I like that.

Do you see yourself primarily as a writer or a director?
I guess I have to say both, because I've been doing both now, but I certainly enjoy the writing process a great deal because it's vastly personal and doesn't have the kind of histrionic time crunches that directing can. There seems to be a constant clock going when a directing project starts, even if you're in preproduction; there's some sense of "We're shooting in seven weeks…three weeks now." Whereas with writing, until quite recently, there was never anybody beating at the door to get anything. There wasn't that same kind of pressure. It's not that I dislike pressure, but I enjoy the solitude of writing and creating and not having to be "on." There are so many different kinds of hats you wear as a director. Directing is everything from picking wallpa-

per to talking an actor out of the trailer. So many different kinds of job descriptions fall into that category.

Should all writers direct, eventually?
I think all writers can direct. I think all directors should write. I find more directors should act, and writers as well, so they understand what sounds good coming out of people's mouths. I think you have an insight to your own work that's invaluable. I don't believe that putting on a different hat makes you different. I reinforce what I already thought; I don't contradict myself. I look at it and go, "Yeah, that really is good, isn't it?" Or, "That still doesn't seem to work." I don't have this different personality take me over when I do one or the other. You can get too close, but you have insights there that other people can't possibly have, even when they investigate it and they've acted a role. That's what you hope for, but you are the one who created that. You will ultimately know it in a way that nobody else possibly can.

If that's the case, then how do you approach a script that you didn't write, in the case of Nurse Betty*?*
You know, it is quite different. I don't feel the closeness to it. I've enjoyed it, I hope it does well, I looked forward to every day that I worked on it, but I don't have that same feeling that I did writing the other two. Having been a writer, I went into it with some respect, and didn't feel this need to put my stamp on it. Some directors seem to feel that they haven't done anything if they don't change something and put their "auteur" mark on it. But I respect what was already there, and say, "How can I make this better," not "How can I make it mine?" But it still remains somebody else's world that they created. I've provided some dialogue and said this seems to work and this doesn't. But ultimately those characters and situations are all somebody else's.

Were the writers on the set?
They were welcome throughout.

You don't see yourself as a czar on the set?
No, not much. I mean, I sort of have the girth of a vizier or caliph or something like that [laughs]. I'm not a high or low person; I'm pretty even keel. I try not to think of it in terms of "it's only mine." And part of that is that we all go down with the ship if it's bad, and we all enjoy it if it's good. For the last three films now I've had to petition the Director's Guild. The Guild has it in place where it's automatically in print and billboard ads "A So-and-So Film, or "A film by so-and-so," and I've petitioned to have that taken off. I don't like that. I don't believe that whole thing. There are too many people working on something to make it "A Neil LaBute Film." I want credit only for what I do, directing or writing, whichever the case is. I have to make a number of decisions that people either leave up to me or that end up in my lap, but I still don't see it as everyone working for me. It's working together.

I have a very specific job and so does everyone else.

Writing, directing, editing… what's your favorite part?
It's still the writing. Everything's fun—it's all writing in a way. You're rewriting, shifting things all the time. I like it all. It still remains very fresh to me. But I think writing, maybe because it's the thing I feel most comfortable with, or known the longest, but I get a lot of pleasure out of that first burst of creativity that says there was nothing here and now there's something.

Why do you think that you are drawn to particular themes?
Why is anybody? It's either something subconsciously or more overtly in your life that you figure you want to examine or you find appealing about it. I find myself constantly drawn to themes of betrayal and all of that, and I don't try to put a finger on why that is. It's such an interesting emotion to tackle, when intimate people betray one another. That's kind of fascinating to me, and I go back there often. And how very ordinary people can do very extraordinary things—extraordinary bad things—and still sleep at night as they tumble slowly down to evil or badness.

You've characterized Your Friends and Neighbors *as, "film as a contact sport." That sentiment sums up the nature of drama quite succinctly.*
Yeah—under the illusion that it's not happening. That's what's interesting to me. Like those people sitting over there: They could be having an argument, but because they're in public, the decorum is "I better keep this under my breath." That's the kind of thing I was trying to get at. When Jason Patric and Catherine Keener have that conflict in the bookstore you wouldn't know what's going on between them. He never raises his voice. He just lets her have it. I like when people don't necessarily say what they mean but you still get what they're saying.

Your characters never censor themselves. They say what's exactly on their minds.
I actually like that in people. I admire someone like her character. I'd like to be more like her. But I don't see myself as an aggressive person, or one who even sends food back. I tend to get those things out through my writing. I'm interested in what makes a person feel as if they have that right to cross those emotional boundaries we put around ourselves. Like, "I'm going to say exactly what I'm thinking rather than sweeten it in any way."

Which is the essence of Evelyn in The Shape of Things.
When someone tells you, "I want to reconstruct your face," one must pause briefly and say, "Let me assess this." But Adam didn't see it coming; he was willing to go along with her because she was good-looking. I'm interested in attractive people and how much rope we give them, how much we're willing to go with them. To be like them. Or to hang around with them. Both Evelyn and Phillip are attractive people, and so we give them a little more space.

And they play against expectations too. When we first meet Philip he's extremely antagonistic to Adam. And Evelyn presents herself as Adam's savior. But neither character is what they appear to be.

I'm interested in subverting things that are familiar. Like *In the Company of Men*—taking a romantic triangle from a very different point of view. And I think with someone like Philip—or Jason Patric's character in *Your Friends And Neighbors*—there's a throwback that interests me. Jason had a very strict code. Every time he leisurely talks about some horrible thing that he's done—like sending an AIDS letter to a girl—it's always because, in his mind, he's been betrayed. He never strikes first. Phillip is interesting in this way because you know that he likes Adam. He can make fun of him. He can goof around with Adam, but he doesn't like it when somebody else does. He's always protective of his own male sense of morality, no matter what it is. With *Your Friends…* Jason's character didn't like the idea that Catherine's character could be messing around with somebody. But the fact that his friend is—that's okay. I like those strange subversions of codes of honor and justice.

What kinds of revisions did you make to The Shape of Things *to adapt it?*

I did precious little.

The story is heavy on exposition, which was obviously a choice. We don't see Evelyn deface the statue, and we never see her suggesting to Adam that he shape up. We just see them referring to it after Adam's transformation has begun. And we never see Evelyn meeting Phillip to discuss the kiss between Adam and Jenny—which is a very big plot point. The general rule in filmmaking is "show don't tell," but you didn't go for that. Why did you choose to stick with a theatrical construct?

As a viewer, I love hearing something and seeing something and taking it at face value and then learning, "Oh, God! It's not exactly what I thought was going on." I'm very attracted to that. And so, as a writer, I do the same thing. Particularly in this story, I realized that there would be scenes like that along the way. For example, we'll never know what it is that Evelyn said to Adam in the whisper. And we'll never know exactly what happened between Jenny and Adam. Something happened—obviously. I think it was more than what we saw. But how much more happened? I want to guess rather than know. I'd rather imagine those scenes when I realize two people like Evelyn and Phillip get together. Because the last time I saw them she was throwing him on the ground and telling him he was an asshole. So what drove her to go to him? I mean, I know what drives her, but this way the viewer gets to imagine them instead of getting to see it overtly.

You've spoken before about the importance of writing and editing in shorthand to keep the audience involved. Does that mean you hold back when you're writing?

I tend to overwrite. I don't censor myself—I write it all down. When I started *The Mercy Seat* I didn't do any editing. I just wrote it down. And as we went from the first read-through to the first performance we took out eight-

een pages. I did it with the actors. I wanted to see what made sense to them, and what played. They were incredibly helpful in that way. But that's the luxury of theater; you're there with just the base elements of drama—with actors and a script. There's a certain pressure with film that you don't feel in theater. There's the process and then there's the product. And in film they're intertwined. The first week of shooting is not just a practice. It's not, "Okay, okay. Now are you ready? Everybody got their character? Great, let's go!" You've only got a couple of days of rehearsal on them. So when you have the luxury of being there with just the actors, that's when you can really look at the script. Usually the playwright is fighting for every word and shouting, "Oh, my God! What are doing?! Do you know what that means?!" And I'm like, "Fuck, let's cut it." But the thing is as a writer—often I'll be looking at the thing and I'll be agonizing over a sentence. You'll say it a billion ways and think, "Maybe he doesn't have to say 'I mean.'" And then somebody will look over your shoulder and say, "Do you need that scene?" And I'll think, "So that's the problem! I don't really need that scene!" So I keep my ears open to what everybody's saying. I have no vanity about that. I'll say to the stage manager, "What do you think?" That's my best weapon: being open to suggestions. Sometimes I'll stick with something; other times not. But there are instances where I'll say, "I still, to this day, wish I hadn't cut that out." I bowed to pressure, and in the end that was a mistake.

Anything specific come to mind?
There's always something in every movie. In *Your Friends and Neighbors* there was a shot that everyone told me to take out; and I eventually took it out. And I'm still angry I took it out. It was the scene where Jason Patric's character is in his apartment, screaming at the girl who bled on his sheets. There was a shot from inside the bathroom, from where she's sitting. And as he's getting ready to leave he throws the bloody sheets on the glass. And I was like, "Ugh, I love that!" It looked great. But everybody felt it took away from Jason's acting so I took it out. But I'm still sorry. The same for *Nurse Betty*. There was some violence in that, and the studio was just tearing at me to get the violence down. They said, "It's already a weird movie—it's just an odd movie. It's one thing to see a scalping, but it's another thing where you build up this really sweet story, and now you're just gonna blow Chris Rock's head off?! The audience is not gonna watch the end of the movie."

Did you encounter any problems like that with The Shape of Things?
There were a few lines excised when Evelyn and Adam are arguing over the performance artist they went to see. This woman uses her menstrual blood to paint with. People were like, "Come on, that's a bit much." But I kept everything I wanted in there. It seems to be a pattern: once you start talking about blood, people get edgy.

And what we don't see can be just as challenging. For instance, you withhold show-

ing Evelyn at work on her graduate project. She mentions it a couple of times but that's about the extent of it.

Her "thingy." She mentions it twice.

Why did you chose to downplay its significance?

I wanted the audience to feel some of what Adam was feeling. And it certainly happened in the theater—in the stage version Evelyn broke the fourth wall and talked to the audience. The actors were sitting out there, and the audience is looking at Adam as he sits in the chair. And they're thinking, "What's he feeling like right now?" But at the same time they're like, "She's been lying to me the whole time!" So there's really only two ways to go with something like that: one way is to let the audience in on Evelyn's secret, and they inevitably wait to watch him crash. Which is okay. That's legitimate. But to me it's more interesting to be feeling for this character—to be reaching out for him. And at the same time you're holding yourself and going, "Oh, shit!" This way, you have to take care of two people. So there's something to be said about keeping an audience in the dark. Making something unclear is not good, but misleading an audience or surprising them at certain points is fine for me. I like that. I often write from what I enjoy to watch. I love it when somebody surprises me with an ending or a plot twist.

I knew Evelyn was going to do something terrible to Adam, but I had no idea she would use him so callously.

It was misleading. It seemed as if the relationship was going to go bad as opposed to Evelyn eventually telling Adam, "This relationship never existed in my mind. I just used you." And so that's a whole different place to be. Because he acknowledges that he feels better, looks better, all those things—until he realizes that there's no chance of love. But it's hard for an audience because they're looking at him and thinking, "I don't know if you know what you looked like an hour and-a-half ago, but you look so much better now!" But again, Adam has got youth on his side; he's got the lovely Jenny—who made no bones about being interested in him—so you think, "This isn't the end of the line for this guy." So how can Adam argue with her when she tells him, "I know I lied to you, but so what?"

Even so, it's devastating to discover her only motive was to make art!

I hope so. And what makes Adam's transformation surprising for Evelyn is that even she didn't anticipate all the places he would go. As she says in her speech, she was surprised that Adam was also changing internally. As he became better looking he was making more questionable choices. The options open themselves up. Jenny was going, "Hey, you're interesting." And he realizes, "Yeah! I'm kind of interested too." Evelyn was surprised because she was so sure of herself—so sure of her art—that the idea that he would go off with Jenny was a personal affront to her. There's a bit of sting in there that made Evelyn even more vindictive.

Which is ironic considering she displays the quote: "Moralists have no place in an art gallery."
Right. Adam says to her, "You're not a good person after what you've done." And I love the way she turns around and asks, "So what's a good person? You?" You can't really argue that. He has not presented a good enough example to be able to say he is good. I didn't want to tip my hand towards the fact that the story is about more than just relationships. I had to load everything into that last scene where they could talk about what's right and what's not right. "Is everything okay as long as it's art?"

It's a provocative question.
I understand Evelyn; once I've latched onto a story I'm very single-minded. I don't like her methods, per se, but I understand that desire to create above all else. And her character is as much a writer as a fine artist. Because writers tend to be vampiric like that. It's that tendency to use other people's stories and incorporate them into your own work—to look at people and think, "You're a great character sketch for this." Once I've decided on what a story is, my only interest is in seeing that through.

Do you think it's plausible that Evelyn could have kept her project from Adam all that time?
I tend to deal with the realm of possibility rather than probability. Could Evelyn actually pull this off without Adam ever getting a flicker of it down to that point? Probably not, but possibly. As long as it could happen, I'm okay. Because that's what I think people want to go see. Unless they're going to see a documentary, they don't want to see a documentary. They want it to be the most surprising love story or the most funny comedy. They don't want to see all twenty-four hours of someone's day; they want to see the most interesting two hours. I'm dedicated to following through on that. And it's just rare in a story—as it is in real life—that justice is meted out in a clean two hours. That everybody pays for their sins and the right person is put back on the throne. There are so many of those kinds of stories. I don't know that an audience is even desirous of it, but they get it so often that they're used to it. That's the way you're raised: from the first stories you read—from the cleaned up Grimm's fairy tales to everything. It's like, "Good triumphs over evil." But I have no interest in that. I don't mind a protagonist winning and then saying to himself, "I'm not sure it was worth it." I just like it to be a bit closer to my own sad story!

But we can all relate to that. We all have our own sad stories.
Not everybody finds that entertainment.

People who shun emotions don't want to go there.
I think the idea of entertainment in our country has become more to do with fun. Most people don't necessarily want to see something that causes them to really think, or to interact in an intellectual way. They don't want to be

put through the emotional ringer and have their sensibilities assaulted. So I'm sure I'm not their Saturday night choice!

Does writing about happy people interest you?
I don't mind happy people at all. In fact, I like them. And I prefer to be happy as well. But dramatically, they're usually not as interesting to write about. Nice people don't say anything that's harsh or off-color or questionable. Everything is overt. You go, "It's nice day," and they say, "Yeah, it really is." And you're like, "I was kidding." "Oh. Okay…well, I think it's a nice day." There's just no engagement. You can have a hell of a conversation with a contrarian because they're going to disagree with everything you say! So that fuels more interesting dialogue for me—to have people who are at odds with one another.

Is that something you're constantly looking for when you're writing?
I'm looking for a situation that's already potentially volatile. When you look at the stories I've written, the situations are already ripe for trouble. It's in the air. It's electric enough that you don't need to turn on the gas to make fire. And I also often write about people who know each other fairly well, because those people who turn on each other are far more interesting. They know their insecurities. They have a common language. If you watch people who have just met, you see that they go through that dance of, "You know, I don't really know you. Maybe I misunderstood what you just said." Look at *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Death of a Salesman*, or *The Glass Menagerie*. These people know each other. You can't believe that they've been together for how many years, and this is what a day is like with them?! You're like, "Holy hell! How do they do it? I'm exhausted by act one!" For my taste I love people who know each other and turn on one another. The results are much stronger.

What advice would you give writers just starting out?
Write. One of the quotes I used to give the students and keep pinned on my board was one from Gorky to Chekov. He'd write something and then start with saying, "Write, Write, Write." He was encouraging his friends and saying, "Anything you do that is bad is quite soon forgotten, but anything you do even of minor importance is incredibly important." You never know what's going to be great and lasting. Everyone talks about being a writer, but sitting down and actually doing it is a much harder proposition. It's like telling a filmmaker to get your hands on whatever you can. Don't be a snob and say, you know, put yourself in debt for $20,000 for your student thesis film. If you can, get your hands on video or shoot Polaroids for that matter, put something together quickly to make it look like it's a movie. It's whatever you have to do to practice. It's like anything, it's very much a craftsmanship kind of art: You get better at it the more you do it. I've heard people give advice, like hearing Oliver Stone say he writes everyday, even if he throws it away, because the practice of doing it is valuable—getting in that rhythm of doing it. They are not unwise words, really.

Baz Luhrmann

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 5, #2 (MARCH/APRIL 1998)

Baz Luhrmann's first two films, *Strictly Ballroom* and *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet,* blasted a path from the remote outpost of Sydney, Australia, all the way to the heart of Hollywood. Growing up on a pig farm in New South Wales, Luhrmann went on to attend the prestigious Australian National Institute of Dramatic Arts. His debut film *Strictly Ballroom*, initially written and directed by Luhrmann as a thirty-minute play, was produced as a feature film on a meager $2.6 million budget, but grossed more than $80 million world-wide and won the Prix de Jeunesse at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival. In the wake of this startling debut, Luhrmann and his company of collaborators took on an eclectic group of projects: mounting the productions of several classic and original operas in Australia, including Puccini's *La Boheme* and Benjamin Britten's operatic version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*; producing the signature issue of Australian Vogue; and orchestrating the re-election campaign of Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating. Luhrmann told me, "We do a lot of varied things, but it's all about telling a story."

His next feature film script, *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet*, co-written with Craig Pearce, successfully married Shakespearean verse to modern design, music, and MTV-style filmmaking. A hard core modernist version of Shakespeare's classic tale, *Romeo & Juliet* remained quite faithful to the original text. Luhrmann felt Shakespeare "had an amazing genius for capturing who we are and revealing it to us. My job is just to re-reveal it." In opening up that story for a new generation, Luhrmann used a number of innovative narrative and visual strategies.

Subsequently, Luhrmann has written and directed *Moulin Rouge!* Regarding his choice of projects Luhrmann has said, "To thumbnail it, we are not for hire and we choose [projects] based upon what our life needs." He also

provides good advice for aspiring and established screenwriters when he reminds us to enjoy our writing itself, not just the triumph of a sale. "You can't live for opening night alone; the journey there has got to be great, too."

Of all the projects you could have made after the success of Strictly Ballroom*, why did you adapt* Romeo & Juliet*?*
I was in a deal with Fox to make another film, and *Romeo & Juliet* was on a list of a hundred things I wanted to do in the cinema. I'd always thought about doing a kind of funky Shakespeare, telling a Shakespearean story the way Shakespeare would have presented the material when he was at the Globe [Theater]. For all our love and our respect for the Shakespeares that have been done, the way we view Shakespeare, not just in cinema but also in the theater, tends to be really informed by a whole tradition out of the nineteenth century. So it's not an Elizabethan notion at all. I wanted to step away from that and back towards the way Shakespeare had originally presented his story.

When we went to Twentieth Century-Fox with it, under the terms of my first-look deal, I think rather than let me go, they sort of said, "We'll give him $100,000, let him do his little workshop and maybe it'll go away." Well it did not. I was able to get Leonardo DiCaprio down to Australia before he was quite well known, and he worked with us there for several weeks. We evolved the workshop, but no one believed in it at all. In fact, it was extraordinarily hard to get the film made at a major studio. But we videotaped the workshop and when they saw the young lads running around in Latin costumes and suits they finally got it—"It's kind of about gangs." What I really wanted to do is get Shakespeare on film inspired by the way Shakespeare dealt with his own material. That's really how we came to do it.

If Shakespeare was a contemporary filmmaker, what kinds of movies do you think he'd be making?
You can't answer that with any degree of certainty. But what you can do, and what we did, is spend a good year-and-a-half going back and doing a completely fresh research journey about Shakespeare. What you can scientifically look at is the world in which he wrote these plays, and the fact that he was an actor in a company that was basically going broke. So he had to pack the house, a sort of 3,000-foot theater, with everybody from the street sweeper to the Queen of England, in the middle of the day, every day. You know, he just stole stories lock, stock, and barrel. Whatever was popular. He stole *Romeo and Juliet*—it was the popular Italian novella at the time. He just stole it— adapted it virtually in a few days. And the thing about it is, even then people were writing about how bad this nobody poet ripped off these great works of art and put them in his trashy theater. The undeniable fact about Shakespeare was that he wrote non-stop, and he was a hardcore entertainer through his stories. Nonetheless, one of his greatest assets was an incredibly resonant, clever use of language, but it was just an asset to him. His writing also had

incredible spectacle, sword fighting, energy, comedy, and bawdy scenes. So these were the colors in his palette that he used to attack, to absolutely embrace and engage his audience, remembering that they're all selling pigs and goats and ninety percent of them are completely drunk. I mean, the savagery of his storytelling and the absolute intensity of his devices are something that is scientifically existent in the text.

So I guess to answer your question very simply, what kinds of films would he make? We can't be too accurate, but he would absolutely be over the moon, beating Sylvester Stallone at the box office opening weekend. Because packing the house was the primary and foremost concern for him.

Now, looking specifically at Romeo & Juliet, *what is it about the myth of that union that appeals to modern audiences?*
Well, it has always appealed to audiences. You know there is an essential collection of primary mythologies that we always relate to: the individual against incredible odds, overcoming oppression, the ugly duckling structure, or the transformation structure where you reveal that which you are, not that which you want to be. *Romeo & Juliet* is the impossible love structure, and that structure is very primary. I mean, Hollywood does it every year, probably ten times, in different ways, whether it's…you know, I was thinking about the Tarantino-Tony Scott film…

True Romance.
True Romance. That's an example. That's a very pop version of the myth. In a sense, it's reconstructed. But what you've got is…we've all at some point understood the notion of having a youthful, out of control, drug-like love, with someone or something. And someone or something has stood in the way of that being a reality. Now if you're really young, and you're inexperienced, you're likely to expend your life in achieving the next hit of that drug, the next hit of that person, no matter what the odds. Particularly if you have to go underground, if you've got to hide that love. When you're fifteen, you're likely to do something stupid. You know? Most of us survive that and we grow up and we understand that love is really like a dangerous sports car that you've got to learn to drive, otherwise you end up going over the edge of the road on it. And I think those of us that survive look back upon that story with a kind of warm nostalgia. We think, "Oh yeah, I remember that." That's part of the appeal. It's not that a modern audience particularly relates to it. It's the task of the modern storyteller to reveal that myth anew or afresh. The stories don't change. It's about finding a language, whether that be cinematic or theatrical, that can communicate it.

How did you approach finding a modern style appropriate for this classic work?
Well, I guess the question is "appropriate." Everything we did was about being inspired by Shakespeare. So, for example, the use of pop songs—Shakespeare used pop music in his productions. He would just stick the popular

song of the day into the middle of the show. You know, to advance the story, but also to engage people through song. We followed the idea that Shakespeare was really a pop storyteller, that he was absolutely not pressured. So, "appropriate" sort of went out the door for us. Because if you are guided by what a bunch of academics tell you is appropriate, or by some critic whose favorite production was the John Geilgud from 1936, then all you're doing is being guided by an old fashion. So the appropriate manner, the appropriate thing to do, was to go into a really intense research, and as much as possible, address the material in the way in which the author addressed it and also in the environment in which Shakespeare wrote it.

One thing that Craig Pearce has said about your adaptation was you sought to keep as many of the Elizabethan customs as possible.
In a modern context, yeah.

Exactly. Why was that important?
We went down many roads. We looked at a direct adaptation, just translating it into the modern world. But then you get in a situation like *My Own Private Idaho* where you're saying "What's going on here?" The problem is, a bit like a musical—the filmmakers don't have a strong enough contract with the audience. The audience needs a contract about the world in which you're playing to understand the story and translate the language, mores, and customs. So we did a fairly scientific job of creating a fantasy world, which was based on the Elizabethan world: a very small number of rich people, a huge percentage of poor people, a world where young people are armed, and the kind of gun you have, the kind of gun-fighting you do, says something about who you are. As it ended up, the world looked a bit like a hybrid of Miami and Brazil. So why did we do that? Because we wanted to be socially accurate in terms of the world in which the story was playing, but we wanted people to have a direct understanding of it, so they didn't have to decode what it meant to have a large floppy hat skewed to the left of your head, or what a particular type of gesture meant. It was really motivated by the need to reveal and clarify the world for the audience.

How did you approach bringing the characters to modern life? Specifically, the character of Mercutio?
Everything you do in the theater is an interpretation. Everything is text based. First, there's no question that Mercutio's in love with Romeo, which does not mean he's gay in an "out" kind of way. But he's definitely jealous of Romeo's love for Juliet. Second, he's a flash of lightning character whose energy is going to get him killed. So when they go to the costume party, he's the one who's going in a dress, and he was so incredibly flamboyant, so much fun. Why this person tends to be such great fun is he hasn't yet come to terms with his sexuality. Whenever you produce *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio is a non-stop show. Now whether you set a production in the Elizabethan

period or in the kind of quasi-Elizabethan period of the Zeffirelli version, when Mercutio dies, Romeo is upset like he loses two lovers. I'm not suggesting they are necessarily having sex, but is there love between those two boys? Absolutely. No question about it. And the Elizabethan world certainly understood the notion of a homosexual relation or a bisexual relationship or any kind of sexual relationship. It is absolutely present. So, it's not about translating Mercutio into a modern character. He's not a modern character. He's a character in the play. In the film he has a modern image. I don't believe that there really are "modern characters."

That's interesting. You know, you've also said you associated the characters in Romeo & Juliet *with twentieth century icons as a way of freeing the language that they use.* Let me clarify that. In the production we identified different icons and made veiled associations so you have a way of decoding the story really quickly. We're giving you a kind of storytelling shorthand so that some young student from the Bronx goes, "Yeah, okay. I get it." Like they see the sort of haircut—I mean, Romeo is a bit James Dean-like. He's a bit Kurt Cobain-like. They say, "Oh I understand. That's a young man who's so in love with the idea of being in love that he's a bit reckless and out of control and he's very cool and he's very self-obsessed, and he's rebelling but he doesn't know what he's rebelling against. He's anti his parents' choices but he hasn't yet worked out his own. Yeah I know who that is." Subconsciously they're identifying who that person is.

One thing that really interests me about you and your collaborators is how you work together as a team. I was wondering, how does that function in the writing of the screenplay? Say for Romeo & Juliet*?*
Well, there is a very specific process where I generate the ideas. I mean, I'm the team captain. Actually, I'm about to go away now on what we call "a mad raving," which is a period where I go away for a month and I sort of sit around with my silly ideas and I look in my file and say what do I need, to actually create and sustain me for a year-and-a-half? And then I generally go to my immediate team collaborator, Catherine Martin. There are many people who are collaborative team members I either do or don't work with. I've tended to work on screenplays with Craig Pearce, but if I'm doing an opera I might work with Felix Meagher, who is my kind of musical director. In this case, after deciding with Catherine Martin and my team where we wanted to go, I engaged Craig Pearce and we went on a very long, methodical journey of structuring and research. At the same time, and this is unusual, I engaged Catherine Martin, who is a production designer, to work with us. So the design and the music developed simultaneously with the script.

Do you find that approach more worthwhile than starting from the story and then working the other way?
The reason I personally do this, because it's damn exhausting and painful, is the adventure of entering into another life. You take a year actually going

on this quest to really fill your blood with the story and understand, and to be so absolutely a part of it, and be so absolutely absorbed in it, that you are completely and utterly possessed by the storytelling. So that when you come to do it, I mean, whatever went wrong on the shooting of *Romeo & Juliet*, if someone said to me "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah" it certainly was not without a clear opinion. Because I felt that we'd already lived the movie. We were just making it now, you know.

I really want to talk to you about the structure of Romeo & Juliet. *It starts with a bang and then slows down. How did you structure the pacing of the film?*
Well, again, it is actually based on the Elizabethan structure. I mean, it's very traditional for the show to open with a big fight. Then two guys come along and do a comedy routine. Stand-up was the lowest form of comedy, but two very well known stand-up comics came onto the stage of the Globe and said, "Hello, hello, hello. Do you bite your thumb at me?" You know, that sort of traditional English stand-up. Everyone laughed and the next thing was there was a spectacular fight scene that went on for twenty minutes. Some of the fights in the Globe were so violent that the audience actually broke out in riots and people were killed. So it must have been very intense. And then after the fight scene, you introduce a distant, quiet place, and we find our romantic hero writing poetry. It's a big chance. So presumably you've engaged the audience.

When you see what is called a traditional cinematic version of *Romeo & Juliet*, it tends to be a filmed version of the ninteenth century theater. The action is from left to right, progressing very sort of slowly and lyrically. That's not how the play was written. It was written as an outrageously kind of rambunctious, violent, sexy, energetic, comic, tragic love story.

The play and your script have all these different styles and tones… comedy, drama, tragedy…. Were you concerned about that?
Well, you've identified something very interesting—we had to present the audience with some stable software to understand the style changes in the film, because in the Elizabethan world there's no such thing as a consistent dramatic or theatrical style. They just did whatever was necessary for the story. So to follow that, we had to find a cinematic way of making these huge gear changes from really "over the top" stand-up comedy, to quite touching emotional scenes. And to do that, we linked the cinematic style to quotations from other films. One moment *Romeo & Juliet* seemed like a an epic film like *Giant*, then it became a kind of trashy young cult film like *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Right.
For example where Romeo kills Tybalt, that's very much a *Rebel Without a Cause* taste, to a kind of energetic Spaghetti Western in the front. You know? You sort of say, "Get it? It's really like a feud, an armed feud. A society where people walk around with guns, like a Western. This is like a shoot-out." I

mean the cinematic mythology of the Hollywood gunslinger is sort of like the mythology of youthful Elizabethan swordplay… who was the fastest and the quickest….

So you used popular film references to bring the audience into the story…?
To a very great extent, we used it to buffer the extreme gear changes in the style of the text, so we matched that with extreme gear changes in cinematic style. Does that make sense? In the text you're going from bawdy, low comedy to high tragedy within a space of one scene. So the filmic equivalent is going from *Wayne's World* to *The English Patient* in the space of a scene. You know? And that's really happening. We are sort of changing the cinematic style so that gear change doesn't throw the audience around. If it all looks like *The English Patient*, then it's going to be hard when the two guys come in with the comedy.

In the U.S. the young audience was able to decode that very, very well. And since then the film's gone on to do another $90 million worldwide. I'm not ashamed of the MTV tag we've received, because I think MTV provides a lot of cultural reference for young people at the moment.

What challenge did the language of Shakespeare impose on your adaptation?
Well, actually, Shakespeare's always cut, you cut 1/3 to 1/2 usually. I mean, the Zeffirelli film, which people sometimes refer to as the traditional production, is cut as much as ours. In fact, Zeffirelli rewrote extra dialogue. I mean, it's much less an accurate Elizabethan text than the version we handed in. For us it was about maintaining the integrity of the language. The other thing was to embrace the language for poor people, for the actor's own voice. Because the Elizabethan actors spoke basically with an American accent and a rolled "r," you know. What is great is that a lot of young actors, particularly Latin actors, and black actors, they already use simile and metaphor and a sort of a rhythm in their language. "This does not forgive you boy for the injury you have done me," is rap. Shakespeare was a kind of rap, the rhyming couplet is definitely a rap form, you know? So actually I found the young actors took to it really, really easily.

Was there pressure from Fox or elsewhere to cut the language more or to modernize it?
Yes, there was. Absolutely. In the early stages, they were like "Please God, we love the idea. But can you change the language." You know, what a great idea, but just do it without the language. It's kind of like, "We love Shakespeare, but just don't use his script." So we resisted, and you know, we took two years to finally get it made, because we had to do several workshops. We just have our ways of finally wearing people down. It's not arrogance, but once we found something we believe we're real passionate about it. We want to be convinced that there is a better way.

Why do you think most of the films based upon Shakespeare have been independent productions and not studio-driven?
As the studio said to me, "Shakespeare doesn't turn a dollar." Studios don't do big Shakespeare, not since the '30s, because there's no money in it. They love the stories. "Yeah, sure, we do Macbeth every day," you know? But not the Shakespeare takes. And you know, there was a time when I was doing *Romeo & Juliet* when there was all that hype about Hollywood discovering Shakespeare. It really wasn't true. Only the independents really discovered Shakespeare. But that's okay. It takes someone like Kenneth Branagh or Orson Welles, someone who really believes in and understands the material, to find a way to reveal it.

David Lynch

INTERVIEWED BY CHRISTIAN DIVINE
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 8, #6 (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2001)

David Lynch is an audio-visual artist whose primary canvas is celluloid. His enigmatic films are perhaps the closest the American cinema has come to capturing the otherworldly sensation of dreams—and nightmares. His debut feature, the genre-defying *Eraserhead,* features some of the most original and disturbing images since the surrealist masterpiece *Un Chien Anadlou.* Producer Mel Brooks picked him to helm *The Elephant Man*, which put Lynch on the Hollywood map, garnering him a Best Director Oscar nomination. His next project, the flawed, expensive *Dune*, has memorable images, but the movie suffers from a script confusing to those unfamiliar with Frank Herbert's epic series.

In 1985, David Lynch returned to more personal roots, writing and directing *Blue Velvet*, a gorgeous and frightening vision of America under the shadow of Ronald Reagan's America. The film has the technicolor ambience of a '50s Hitchcock film with raw depictions of sex and violence—and even a happy ending. Pauline Kael aptly dubbed Lynch a "populist surrealist." Praised and vilified by critics and audiences, *Blue Velvet* received an Oscar nomination for Best Director.

After *Wild at Heart*, a cult favorite and audacious mixed bag of Elvis and *The Wizard of Oz* iconography, Lynch and collaborator Mark Frost ventured into TV land with *Twin Peaks*, a surprise cultural phenomenon. The groundbreaking series left sounds, images, and phrases embedded into the national psyche, although the second season would be its last. The show's following led to the controversial feature *Fire Walk With Me*, a prequel showing exactly what happened to Laura Palmer. Lacking the series' warmth and myriad characters, the daring, relentless film divided *Twin Peaks* fans.

Lost Highway re-teamed Lynch with Barry Gifford for a complex and confusing tale of alternate realities. Lynch switched gears for the gentle *The*

Straight Story, written by Mary Sweeney, with Richard Farnsworth in a touching final role as Alvin Straight, who crossed three states on a lawnmower to meet up with his estranged brother. Nothing could be stranger than a Walt Disney, G-rated movie directed by David Lynch, but all his films reveal a fundamental humanism and heart-breaking joy at the "mysteries of love."

His latest film, *Mulholland Drive*, was originally a 1999 pilot for ABC, who rejected it for length and content. French investors later financed a feature-length version, with a substantially more open-ended story. The oblique film received a standing ovation and Best Director honor at Cannes 2001. *Mulholland Drive* is similar to *Lost Highway*, featuring a doppleganger universe with an even more abstract climax. This will please some and infuriate others, but the hallmark of Lynch's films is that they look and sound like no other. His scripts are not based on traditional structure, but their own odd, internal logic. He is a genuine artist who follows his own industrial muse. *Creative Screenwriting* interviewed David Lynch in 2001.

Mulholland Drive *has the feel of Nathaniel West meets Douglas Sirk. What was the genesis of the idea and why for TV?*
Well, I'm a sucker for a continuing story. That's the only reason I thought of television.

You're not into the medium though.
No, the picture quality is even worse than the Internet, but I'm very interested in the Internet. I've been working for two years to build a site which we hope to launch in October. There's so much focus on the Internet that the quality will come up. TV is bad quality, bad sound, and it's interrupted all the time with commercials. The only good thing about it is the continuing story and even now TV is shying away from continuing stories. They've done too many polls.

Because of reality shows and the like?
They found out that people skip…. Paul and Sarah are out there in the world, Paul sees two shows a month and Sarah sees another thing. So neither one see the whole month. So the networks feel that people get lost.

Do you like the soap opera genre?
I like a continuing story. There's something about a soap opera that's fantastic because it just keeps going and going. Theoretically, you can get very deep in a story and you can go so deep and open up the world so beautifully, but it takes time to do that.

Why didn't you approach cable?
Cable didn't have enough money to do this.

How did you pitch ABC the project?
It wasn't so hard because of *Twin Peaks*. So it was the same network and some

of the same people, and we read them the first two or three pages of the script, and they said, "Let's go." But they hated what they saw.

Did they give you any reason, like "We gotta change this…" or were they completely uninterested?
Completely uninterested. They never talked to me. They didn't deal with me.

What was the writing process for Mulholland Drive*?*
If I'm working on my own thing, I sit and I dictate what comes to me. It's not a huge long process. I have a friend who used to be my assistant, Gaye Hope, and I feel comfortable dictating to her. So she sits at the computer and I sit in a chair, and I try to catch ideas and say them.

Is it hard to get a narrative going that way or is it a more abstract process?
It's all abstract because little by little you tune into something and it starts to flow. When she comes over here at first it's slow going. Then it starts to flow and so you knock out quite a few pages. So what you finish in a day is like eleven pages of a script.

Does that include dialogue? Are you acting out the parts in a way as you're dictating?
Yeah, they sort of come along and then I say the lines, the name of the character and their line… then some action or descriptions and go like that. Just to make it appear on paper as it came to me [laughs], that kind of thing.

When you transcribe the visions to screen, your images are obviously very striking and vibrant. Do you see them as you're creating them?
Yes, the idea is everything. Whether you get it from a book or another screenplay, or from the ether, the idea tells you how—as you read a book, you picture it, you hear it, and it makes an impression. So you stay true to that impression as you translate it to film.

I still don't completely understand Mulholland Drive*, but I don't mind because when I watch your films it's like going into a different world. Are you trying to convey thought or feeling?*
Both. The world to me is a mixture of the two. Intuition is thought and feeling working together. You intuit things in life, right? The language of film is so perfect for this intuiting; it's just beautiful. So you have what they call an "inner-knowing" whether you realize it or not. Right after seeing the film with somebody else, you could argue and say, "No, no, no, that's not how I see it." You'd be surprised how much the mind has figured out, and by talking, other things come out. Words are a poor way to say certain things. You realize you know more than you can speak.

When you realized Mulholland Drive *wasn't going to be on TV but a film, what was the process of changing that to feature format? Was that difficult?*
It looked like it was going to be impossible. I swear to you one night I sat down and [makes cool sound effect] the whole thing came in. And it was like one of the most beautiful experiences. All the missing pieces came so I had no problem. In a pilot everything is open, and you set little paths in motion, but none of them go to a conclusion. So it's really the opposite of a feature film. It's ideas that you need, and you focus so hard, and they start coming to you.

Do you write down your dreams?
No, it has nothing to do with dreams. There's a certain way dreams can be told in film because they're abstract. So film can tell abstractions like dreams.

And your films truly duplicate the quality of a dream. The first time I saw Blue Velvet *and Dean Stockwell starting to sing "In Dreams," I looked around the theater thinking, "Wow. This is really strange. Where am I?"*
Like I said, there's a similarity. It's the ideas. It's always the same: it's the story and the way it's told. The only way you can hold it together is to be true to the ideas. They may be more full than you realized at first. But if you're true to them, they seem to unfold as you go and you know more and more. If you veer off, you go off into a dangerous area where it can fall apart. You should be alert for new things to come along that still tell the thing in an honest way. A lot of time that happens. It's the original idea that hits you and what you stay true to.

Jean Cocteau considered everything he did poetry, in all mediums. Is it easy for you to jump from film to music to painting…?
I like to experiment in all kinds of mediums. Film sort of encompasses all of it, but you can go to still photography and really get deep into a still image, and the way the paper is, and what you can do with Photoshop, and you can go and go. The same with painting or music. Sometimes when you focus on one particular thing, you get ideas for a different thing, and you find yourself over there doing that. Sometimes you can catch fragments that will lead to a film. It's good to move around; your ideas and desires are moving you.

Do you write to music?
No, I don't like to have anything going on. If I'm working on music, then I just want music. If I'm working on writing then I want it quiet as possible. But I get a lot of ideas listening to music—there's an exception to that: if I know a piece of music has led to a scene, I'll play the music to verify if it's working. That doesn't happen too often. Music is so perfect that way.

Sound is very important to your work. That ambient industrial throb…
Absolutely. You look at the image and the scene silent, it's doing the job it's

supposed to do, but the work isn't done. When you start working on the sound, keep working until it feels correct. There's so many wrong sounds and instantly you know it. Sometimes it's really magical.

How is it to work with collaborators like Mark Frost and Barry Gifford?
It's different with each person. I really liked working with Mark Frost. He and I complemented each other. It was always fun. And Barry, we share enough similarities, we could get into some interesting places, but it's not really that complement that I had with Mark.

How did you write with him?
I can't type, so Mark was always typing. I'd lie down or sit in a chair by him, and we'd just start making up scenes. It just flowed. We would really go fast.

Were you happy with the way Twin Peaks *ended?*
Oh, it could have gone on forever. The problem was we never meant to follow the murder for a long time. The Black Dahlia has never been solved… these things keep pulling you, and you keep thinking about them and it's beautiful. So once it's solved, it really kills the magnet. It's terrible. We were put under so much pressure by ABC and people in general to solve that, that we killed the goose that laid the golden egg.

In Fire Walk With Me*, why did you cut so many of the* Twin Peaks *characters?*
For the sake of the whole. A lot of the scenes with the loved characters broke the flow. They had to go for the sake of the film. At the same time, I know they want me to put those scenes in order for the DVD. They haven't figured out how they can afford to do that. There's about seventeen little scenes that would be interesting for people to see. It wouldn't be put back in the whole thing.

You wouldn't do a Director's Cut?
Well, I did a Director's Cut. It would be nice to put them in order afterwards on their own.

Fire Walk With Me *seemed like* Twin Peaks *from a different angle.*
In my mind it was exactly the same thing, but where it focused was pretty tough for people. Some of the scenes in there, I just love 'em for the abstraction.

People call you a dark filmmaker, but your work is often positive.
I feel it's like two things. You gotta go into a world of contrasts to get a sense of things. Laura Palmer's life was jam-packed with extreme contrasts.

What's your fascination with flickering light?
It has to do with a love of industry, fire and smoke, and I love electricity. Electricity is to me… I just like to think about it. I don't know what is. It's a

magical thing. Lights can give a sense of power or change….

You like to have people who are "different" in your films. Are you attracted to an unusual type?
There's the so-called normal and the so-called abnormal, and we're all together in the world. Sometimes the story comes along and there's many of them in a film. It's not that you say, "I want to work with a midget, I want to work with a giant, someone with broken arms." Suddenly, an idea comes and there is a midget, a midget dancing in a red room…it's just weird.

I think the little man dancing in Twin Peaks *is the weirdest moment in TV history.*
I remember where I was when I got that idea. I was at CFI on Seward Street, and we were cutting the pilot for *Twin Peaks*; I don't know what time of year it was. We left the cutting room and it might have been summer, it was still light, and I was leaning up against the car talking to Dwayne Durham, who's the editor… and the car, the metal was warm, my elbows were on the roof, and it was not too warm to be uncomfortable, and Bango! Here it comes.

Did you hear the music?
I saw everything but the music. I didn't hear anything. I stopped Dwayne from talking…. It led to many things, and that's the beautiful thing. We had to do an alternate ending for the European release, and that's where it first showed up.

Europeans seem to be a more responsive audience to your work, more active-minded.
Yes, but it's changing there too, because the Hollywood machine is moving into Europe pretty heavy. I felt a change already occur with younger audiences more apt to go with the popular thing they're getting fed, and stop thinking. It used to be they went for abstractions, and there were more film buffs there per capita, but things go in waves and it could come to America too. I feel it happening, people getting sick of the giant summer blockbuster phenomenon and looking for something different.

Do people or studios tell you to do something more accessible?
A lot of people. I've never done a straight out-and-out "studio" picture. It just depends on the ideas. You have to be in love to do it. It'd be a dream to find something that you love and that many millions of people love. I think Spielberg truly loves his work, and millions of people love it, so he's making a lot of money and he's still true to himself. That's the key. Otherwise, it's a joke, why are you doing it? Also, studios don't like to give people who haven't made a lot of money with their films final cut. But if you make a film without that, you'd be better off committing suicide.

How do you deal with a film after you've finished, like Mulholland Drive*? Do you move on or wring your hands…?*
You can wring your hands all you want, it's not gonna change anything.

When a film is finished, what happens is out of your control. You can promote it, but it's a smell, a buzz, word of mouth, an abstract thing that happens that tells you if the film is going to be a success and there's nothing you can do about it. So it's a strange time.

David Mamet

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INTERVIEWED BY JEFF GOLDSMITH
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 11, #2 (MARCH/APRIL 2004)

David Mamet continues to be one of Hollywood's greatest and most prolific writers. Beginning his screenwriting career with the remake *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Mamet has gone on to script the following movies: *The Verdict, About Last Night* (based on his play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*), *The Untouchables, House of Games* (also his directorial debut), *Things Change, We're No Angels, Homicide, Glengarry Glen Ross* (based on his Pulitzer Prize-winning play), *Hoffa, Vanya on 42nd Street, Texan, Oleanna* (based on his play), *American Buffalo* (based on his play), *The Edge, The Spanish Prisoner, Wag the Dog, Ronin, Lansky, The Winslow Boy, State and Main, Hannibal, Heist*, and *Spartan*.

MAMET'S THEATRICAL ROOTS

"You gotta put your ass on the line and use the audience. Period. The reason that theatre evolved that way was because the progress of the theatre on the stage aped and recapitulated the mechanism of human understanding, which is: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. And one learns to lead the audience ahead by giving them just enough information to make them interested, but not enough information so that they warrant surprise and punchline. Which is the way a joke is structured."

MAMET ON DIRECTING

"Your chances of making a living or making a better living are increased by writing something that you would want to write badly enough that you would actually go out and raise the money to direct it. You're much better to do that because otherwise you're just going to waste twenty years waiting for the good will of your inferiors. If you really, really want to make a film—go film it for God's sake, go steal a camera and get it done rather than trying to interest some second-class mind to help make your script a little bit worse."

MAMET ON EXPOSITION
"The trick is—never write exposition. That's absolutely the trick. Never write it. The audience needs to understand what the story is, and if the hero understands what he or she is after then the audience will follow it. The ancient joke about exposition used to be in radio writing when they'd say, 'Come and sit down in that blue chair.' So, that to me is the paradigm of why it's an error to write exposition. Then exposition came out of television, 'I'm good, Jim, I'm good. There's no wonder why they call me the best orthopedic surgeon in town.' Right? And now the exposition has migrated or metastasized into the fucking stage direction. 'He comes into the room and you can just see he's the kind of guy who fought in the Vietnam War.' So the error of writing exposition exists absent even the most miniscule understanding of the dramatic process. You gotta take out the exposition. The audience doesn't care. How do we know they don't care? Anybody ever come into the living room and see a television drama that was halfway through? Did you have any difficulty understanding what was going on? No. The trick is to leave the exposition out and to always leave out the 'obligatory scene.' The obligatory scene is always the audition scene, so when you see the movie, not only is it the worst scene in the movie—it's also the worst acted scene in the movie. Because the star has to do their worst, most expository acting to get the job. Leave out the exposition; we want to know what's happening next. All our little friends…will say to you at one point, 'You know, we want to know more about her.' And that's when you say, 'Well, that's what you paid me for—so that you would want to know more about her.'"

MAMET ON CON-ARTIST TALES
"In every generation the cunning rediscover that they can manipulate the trustful and they count this as the great, great wisdom of all time."

PROFESSOR MAMET'S READING ASSIGNMENT
"I suggest that everyone get Francis Ferguson's edition of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Read it once—it'll make the point—and then retire to your typewriters. [Screenwriting's] all about working on it and working on it until it comes out even. There's really no magic to it. There really isn't. They say that Bach could improvise a toccata and I'm sure he could, but I don't think anybody can improvise a screenplay. Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces* is another great book where he goes through the "Hero's Journey" and explains that all Heroes Journeys are alike whether it's Jesus or Moses or Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Dumbo. Every Hero's Journey is exactly alike because that's the way that we understand our own Hero's Journey—which is the story of our own life. We're given a problem, we disregard the problem, it's given to us again, and finally we're called to an adventure and we find ourselves unprepared and we find ourselves in the belly of the beast like Jonah, who's eventually spewed onto a foreign land in the second act and little friends come and help. It's true. Whether it's Mickey the Mouse or whether

it's John the Baptist or whether its Joshua—it's the same thing according to Joseph Campbell. The little friends come and eventually the problems of the second act rectify themselves so that the third act is a reiteration of the first problem in a new form. Not how do I live with the fact that the taskmaster is killing the Jew, but how do I bring the Torah to the Jewish people? So the third act becomes the quest for the goal and eventually the hero achieves his or her goal and that's the end of the movie that started since frame one."

Garry Marshall & Bob Brunner

INTERVIEWED BY ROBERT ARNETT
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 6, #3 (MAY/JUNE 1999)

A s a producer, director, writer, and actor, Garry Marshall found suc-
cess first in television, then in feature films. He has worked with many
partners, but Bob Brunner goes back with Marshall not only to *The
Odd Couple* TV show but to the '50s when they both worked as copy boys at
the *New York Daily News*—an experience that both Bronx natives contend
still influences their writing today. Marshall went on to become a gag writer
for stand-up comics and made frequent appearances on television as an actor.
He wrote for Jack Paar and then Joey Bishop. In Hollywood, Marshall teamed
up with Jerry Belson to write for such classic shows as *The Danny Thomas
Show, I Love Lucy, The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and *I Spy*. As producers, Marshall
and Brunner were a part of the team that made hits out of *The Odd Couple,
Happy Days*, and all its spin-offs (including *Mork and Mindy*). In 1982, Mar-
shall directed his first feature film, *Young Doctors in Love*. Since then he has
directed a string of successful films, including *The Flamingo Kid, Nothing in
Common, Beaches, Pretty Woman*, and *Frankie and Johnny, The Other Sister*, and
Runaway Bride. On all of these films, Marshall involved himself deeply with
the screenplay, rewriting most with partner Brunner. *Creative Screenwriting*
met with Marshall and Brunner in 2002 at Marshall's recently renovated Fal-
con Theatre in Burbank.

GARRY MARSHALL: What's the name of your publication?

It's Creative Screenwriting.
MARSHALL: *Creative Screenwriting*? Oh! We can't talk about *Happy Days*.
[beat/rim shot] We used to say on *Happy Days*, "Some day we'll write a screen-
play." Right?
BOB BRUNNER: Sure. Let's get out of this business and into the movies. No. I

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loved TV when I was in it.

MARSHALL: In TV, you always got paid. TV was always the best business. But every TV writer has a screenplay in his drawer. I know when I was on *Murphy Brown* as an actor, they had them!

BRUNNER: I meet young writers coming out here and they'll talk to me for advice. I'll say, "Get a job in sitcoms. Get into television, it's so good." They say, "Ahh, I don't want to whore out." I say, "You'll get very rich. Then come home and at night write your screenplay; weekends, write your screenplay." Why not live comfortably? You don't have to live in a garret in Paris. Garry wrote for stand-up when we were copy boys and then he got a job on *The Tonight Show* when Joey Bishop used to fill in. He used to ask the boss for time off when we were taking home $42 a week. He was going in to write for *The Tonight Show* and what was it $1,500 or something?

MARSHALL: $400.

BRUNNER: $400 versus $42.

MARSHALL: We could add. The first things we wrote, other than these jokes for someone else, was when I came home and told him I got a job on a show with Shari Lewis. He [Brunner] didn't like that, writing Lamb Chop and Hush Puppy jokes.

How do you write jokes for comedians?

MARSHALL: For Jack Paar you wrote five pages of jokes a day. You come in at three o'clock and you read the paper.

BRUNNER: He liked daughter jokes, too.

MARSHALL: Not really jokes, anecdotes that sounded true. I think jokes are the juxtaposition of words that create a surprise.

BRUNNER: Jay Leno does the same thing, you know.

MARSHALL: It's the same. It's more wit than wordplay. "Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side!" "Del Harris was fired by the Lakers and as he walked out with his pink slip he saw Dennis Rodman coming in wearing one!" It's the same balance of words. Phil Foster, who I remember, changed a lot of it. He started to tell not just jokes, but incidents of his life. Now all the comics do that. They would preface every joke with "This is the truth." It wasn't the truth! I was trained with nightclub comics that yelled in your face. They screamed at you. But they're ready to go on the stage, so if you take affront at their screaming you don't write anything. While they're screaming, you've got to come up with three more lines to give them when they stop screaming. Then they can go out there. When we wrote at the *[New York Daily] News*, there was noise, people yelling, carrying on. It never bothered me. I was a journalism major at Northwestern. I got a Bachelor's, which was very nice, but mostly I learned to write at the paper. It was good background for screenplays and rewriting—a lot of people can't rewrite at all.

Did the journalism training give you a nose-to-the-grindstone attitude?

MARSHALL: No question about it. Those were damn good years! We sat togeth-

er and we saw men come in drunk, people typing lines and creating under pressure. Pressure, deadlines, and no walking-around-looking-at-the-moon. If you're serious, you sit there and write, come three o'clock you got to hand in the jokes.

With a lot of writing teams you can have somebody who writes and somebody who hustles. I always had other guys hustling. I didn't hustle so good. That's why we wrote *The Other Sister* on spec. We couldn't sell it to anybody, because we didn't pitch it and ourselves very well. Once we got it on paper, then we sold it. So my advice is always if you're not a good talker, a pitcher, if you don't have the pizzazz to dazzle studio heads, write it! Our strength, as a team, a lot of times, is that we put it on paper. Then we didn't have to talk anyone into it. Certain stories you can't pitch. *Life Is Beautiful* won an Academy Award. No one's going to say, "I've got this slapstick idea about the holocaust." Because they'll say, "What else ya got?" But that's what they said when I told them it *[The Other Sister]* is a wonderful love story about a family dealing with this kid. "What else ya got? What else ya got?" So we had to go do it on spec. Once we wrote it, they got it.

Sometimes, with screenplay writers, you write it and the studio still doesn't get it. But then you get it to a star and the star gets it and then they say, "Oh, well, it must be brilliant!" and they bring it in. We couldn't even get it to a star, so we just wrote it. We did 92 rewrites! I don't know how many. We ran out of colors! We'd start all over again.

There are three different drafts of a screenplay in the development process. The first screenplay is for the studio, when they say, "Okay, we like this." The second screenplay you write so the actors can read it, or so you can get an actor to do it. You change the screenplay so one part is better, so you can get a better actor. Then the third screenplay is, "You can't shoot this screenplay on this budget!" You've got to rewrite the whole screenplay again, for the budget. So, we have the studio screenplay, we have the actor's screenplay, then we have the budget screenplay, and then, finally, we have the shooting screenplay, which is a whole other screenplay. We just did a picture that takes place in California, but we wrote *The Other Sister* for Chicago and then they said, "You're shooting in San Francisco." So we rewrote the whole thing again.

Who decided to shoot it in San Francisco?
MARSHALL: The man giving you the money, you see? They said, "You can shoot it in Chicago, but you can't shoot it for the budget we're giving you."
BRUNNER: We were dying for snow.
MARSHALL: We wanted snow. Our idea was, a very filmic screenplay idea, that in the middle of the snow—first of all, not only did she have a cheap, little wedding, but it snowed on her wedding. So we had this shot where there's snow coming down and through the snow come the red uniforms of a marching band. It's a beautiful shot. They said, "Yeah, very good. You can't do that. It costs too much money. Why do you got to go to Chicago? Make it San

Francisco! Everything looks the same." We finally found a hill in San Francisco—it's not as good as the snow, but it was a good reveal. The reveal was over the hill and it still got the audience teared up. So, the shooting script is a whole other script.

Do you ever find that you lose the story in those rewrites?

BRUNNER: I try not to. You try and keep the story and then give them their silly little changes. Moving it to San Francisco, that didn't change the story. We still had the love story and the drama.

MARSHALL: I think if you're clever, you can protect a lot of your work.

BRUNNER: Trick 'em!

MARSHALL: It's subtle. Sometimes, the actor reads it and says, "I'll do it, if you change this," and sometimes no actors read it but you know this part is not a part an actor is going to want because the agency tells you it's not big enough. So you make it actor-desirable as a rewrite; you make the part so interesting the actor will do it. For getting Diane Keaton for *The Other Sister*, we wrote in a beautiful wardrobe, because she hadn't had a good wardrobe in a while. That's an actor's rewriting. The great sadness of the great artistic form of screenwriting is many stars base their choice of doing your movie on one scene. You want a scene that gets them. You never know what scene that is. I think Juliette [Lewis] liked the scene where she broke down at the Christmas party, because she felt she could do that. She's a great dramatic actress. The comedy, she was nervous about. Giovanni [Ribisi] liked *The Joy of Sex* scene, the love scene, and some of the comedy scenes, that's why he liked it. He got to play this kind of character and be funny. She was afraid of the funny. So, again, you never know.

BRUNNER: There weren't a lot of acting notes on this script.

MARSHALL: All of Diane's notes were, "If I send the kid away for no reason, I'm a mean mom and you've got to help me show that she was destructive in a subtle way. Sending a child away is one of the most difficult things a mother can do, so, at least, motivate me." But I've had rewrites that were… Ohh!

BRUNNER: Actors try to tailor a script to their talent, because they're afraid that what you've written might be too much for them. They're not sure they can act this or that.

MARSHALL: You always get it into the rewrites. We did rewrites on films I directed, we didn't always get credit, but we got paid very well. A lot of the big guys, the Bo Goldmans of the industry, they make much more money on rewrites, and they get no credit.

BRUNNER: When you're rewriting you have to respect the writer who broke the page. If it wasn't for that, you wouldn't be doing those rewrites. A blank page, that's the toughest thing in the world.

MARSHALL: Yeah. We had written a nice scene where the daughter has to stand up to the mother, but I kept worrying, wearing my director's hat, that the scene was not interesting enough. You know, they're just screaming at each other, just back and forth. I thought, directorially, we had the country

club, so we had the golf course, so that's why the water went off, to give it a little something. So, a lot of times, when you write the screenplay you write things that the director might like. A director might direct a film because of just one or two scenes. So you've got to make every scene as great as you can make it, because you don't know which one they're going to pick, which one they're going to fall in love with.

When a script comes across your desk can you see a writer writing a scene appealing to you? A Garry Marshall scene?
MARSHALL: Well, I don't know if he's writing to appeal to me, but they can write it to do things to directors. They'll say, "Oh, this is a scene I'll know how to shoot." I remember, nobody would make the movie *The Flamingo Kid*. They said, "Who'd want to shoot people playing gin rummy? What is that? That's not visual." Me, I saw a whole scene, because I was at that job. I saw that movie, and I think all directors see something in a screenplay that makes them do it. When you're writing, you can't think of it, because you'll go crazy. I think I used the example because we trained ourselves to write. He was a producer, I was a producer. We know what it is if the writing's not there. In *Nothing in Common*, it said in the screenplay, "Tom Hanks, whatever his name—David—walks into his office and goes into all the cubicles and has a witty line for everybody and gets to his office." There are no witty lines written! It just says witty lines and glib remarks.
BRUNNER: Ad-libs.
MARSHALL: Ad-libs! And now Tom comes and says, "Where are my ad-libs?" So we went in the back and wrote twenty-five so he could use seven.

That sounds like your stand-up writing experience kicking in.
MARSHALL: Yeah, we can punch stuff up. Movies are so different. Movie actors will say, "I don't want to do it with dialogue, I want do it with a look." Well, some can't do it with a look. The studio wants the dialogue. You know, you say it in TV, you see it in movies, you think it in theatre. All of it is just pretentious. They say that because they don't have much to say, but there is an element of truth to it. I don't know, I think lining up the story is the hardest thing.
BRUNNER: The story's tough. The easiest humor is character. Take *All in the Family*. Archie came in every night, held out his hand, and said, "Edith!" And she ran and got him a beer. If you have him come in and hold out his hand they'd laugh as long as he sat there. It's not a joke. It's just that character.

I remember seeing that set, Archie's chair at the Smithsonian in DC, and, in a way, that's funny too—just seeing that set.
MARSHALL: Fonzie's jacket is right next to that chair. You didn't mention that! You didn't see it? It was right there! [laughs] I think it's that we started in 1959 and we worked out a shorthand. Because we come from the comedy world, we think we can write anything funny. It's how to make it special that's rough, you know? If it's too general, "So they go out on the date!" "On

a date? What is it?" "So we do a funny date, da dah, da dah." And I'm the big guy that says, "What date is it?" They say, "The date?" "What is it?" "Is it Christmas?" "Is it New Years, or something? What?" "Halloween! I got it!" Boom! Then you don't have to talk anymore. You know what to write.

BRUNNER: Look how charming that love scene was because we had a Halloween dance. The dog and the swan kissing, I think it was charming.

MARSHALL: The script said, "And so the boy in the dog suit kisses the girl in the swan costume." That was in the directions. And the cinematographer [Dante Spinotti] saw that and said, "I love this moment. I'm going to make a thing there." That inspired him! It didn't just say, "The boy and the girl kiss, ha ha, funny."

BRUNNER: We just sold the stage direction.

MARSHALL: To me it's very tricky, because words are so important in a screenplay—the words, the pauses—there should be a pause class: Pause 101. In TV, you've got to keep the pace moving. In movies, there's nineteen different ways you can make it happen: with the camera, moving the camera, without the camera, with dialogue, without dialogue, with noises, with music, bop, bop, bop. It's great that you have so many tools in screenplay writing, but you've got to know which ones to use.

In your experience, is there a clear line between TV and movie ideas?

MARSHALL: It's hard. A lot of people we pitched *The Other Sister* to said it was a TV movie. And we were aware that it could go that way, because they do those kinds of things—disease of the week, murder of the week. We felt we could make it a little more special because they never do it with the humor we wanted to do this with. On the other hand, we know that unless we got a movie cast they wouldn't want to do this.

BRUNNER: That really helped, the cast.

MARSHALL: There's something in the movie that's different from a TV movie. It's cloudy lines between TV and movies. It didn't used to be, but now because Showtime and HBO put up so much money for a TV movie, you can't tell with those things. They make TV movies for more than they make Independents. Again, I believe you have to combine your efforts as a team. You've got to get the screenplay out of the way early or you don't know what to shoot. There's no star until you get that screenplay going. With some screenplays we see there's, like, nine writers credited. We know the nine writers didn't work together, like they write in TV, where they're all at the table. I don't know. Somebody just better do the rewrites. This thing I just shot *[Runaway Bride]*, it had six writers. All women.

BRUNNER: That had been kicking around for a while.

MARSHALL: Yeah, years. Again, this is interesting. They sold *Runaway Bride*, you got to remember, facts of life, *The Other Sister* cost $30 million, *Runaway Bride* cost $73 million. They sold a $73 million screenplay on one scene and it was pretty obvious. The opening scene of *Runaway Bride* is of a girl riding madly on a horse through the woods in a wedding dress. That was their opening

scene. Everybody that read that first scene said, "We've got to make this picture." Then the rest of the script is a little thin, so it took about seven years to get it right. That opening scene, I could tell you they were going to make that movie. And the title, *Runaway Bride*. There it is, you got a movie! That's what you call a high premise. Mentally retarded other sister, a little lower premise. There are no rules, you can make each a great movie.

I think what's gotten us through is that a lot of screenplay writers quit. They just can't take all the notes and all the nonsense. But we've been friends a long time and doing different jobs, and this and that.

BRUNNER: It's that TV training.

MARSHALL: Yeah! And we have a sense of humor about it. We go, "Thank you for your notes," and then we go out in the parking lot [mimes a tantrum], "What!? What did the suit say? What is this!?" We just take it and roll with it. If you get too serious as a screenplay writer, go write a play! Forget it!

We were talking earlier about ageism. How does it feel when you walk in and the writers are so young?

BRUNNER: You walk in with a good screenplay, they don't look at gray hair or anything. I know a guy in his early twenties, he sold a script for a million dollars! That was his first shot. They didn't say, "Oh, he's only in his twenties, what the fuck does he know?"

When you come onto a film, you two become the writers?

MARSHALL: Well, no, we don't become the writers, we do some rewrites. I have some writers in there, I have punch-up writers that are all Guild jobs. It's not literally punch-up, they just call it that. Set writers!? They've got names, they punch up the drama. Additional dialogue writers, whatever you want to call it. You get no credits, you just write. But they have to have a category so they can pay you. I welcome writers on the set, if they don't get in my way. He [Brunner] came on the set of *The Other Sister*, and on *Runaway Bride* I had the two original writers on the set; they flew to Maryland, they hung around and gave me a couple of notes.

BRUNNER: On *The Other Sister* we never stopped writing.

MARSHALL: Really! In the trailer, we'd go, "What the hell, this isn't going to work! See if you can fill in here."

BRUNNER: It's funny, because in the movies they depict writing as such a glamorous thing—and there you are, leaning on the honey wagon, writing a scene.

Do you write general description or do you prefer to write with asides and commentary?

BRUNNER: I don't do that because I watch that Actor's Studio interview show and Christopher Walken says, "The first thing I do is cross out all the stage directions." It's the writer trying to be a director. Directors say that too. But sometimes you've got to put some indications in.

MARSHALL: Sometimes it's good to write, "We go here, we go there," because

you're probably getting read by a development person, who is bored, with nine scripts, and you've got to wake him up. So we've done that to wake someone up, but we're not so much for that "We are" school. You don't want to say to the actor to accent here. Many times I've said, "All right, we're sending it out to actors? Give me that!" We do a whole other rewrite. When you underline a word, you accent it in a sentence—we did that very rarely. Once Tony Randall leaped up, threw the chair across the room, threw the script up in the air and walked out. We said, [whispering] "Maybe we shouldn't underline." So we didn't underline after that.

BRUNNER: What I do is take out the acting things and put in fourteen exclamation points. And after the dialogue, about three.

Some people don't know what to make of screenwriters.

MARSHALL: The rule of thumb is the producer is the king of television, the director with film, and the writer is the king of the theatre. And that has pretty much remained the same since the caveman. There are exceptions when people move around. It's tradition that the writer is not heralded enough in the movie business. You know, the old style of movie writing where the dialogue was premiere is a little past now. The first twenty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* was more of man with a camera than a man writing words. He had to have a story, but a lot of films don't even have that. Then there's those films where they have Uzis and they just yell, "Yo! Over here!" And that can be aggravating. I think there are some literate screenplays, but the literate screenplay, unfortunately, is not as popular as it used to be.

BRUNNER: It really starts with the page. No matter what it is. You can't act a blank page. You can't direct a blank page, I don't care who you are. It starts with the words.

MARSHALL: I think a lot of times when we've done rewrites on stuff, they don't tell us, "Make it darker, make it sicker, make it grosser." It's just the opposite: "This is a little too sick, this is a little too gross. Can you lighten it up a little bit?" We did a film, *Beaches*, with a wonderful writer, Iris Rainer. She wrote on *Odd Couple* for us, then she wrote this book and a screenplay about an actress dying; anyway her ending was too much. The one friend got sick and they wanted to show the reality of it all. I mean I admire that and all, but the one friend got sick and was throwing up and having diarrhea and the other friend is cleaning it up. It works fine in a novel, but it doesn't work so well in the screenplay, so we had to call them and say, "See if you can do something graceful for the screenplay, because it's ten feet tall on the screen." Vomit ten feet tall on the screen is different than on a page!

That worked out pretty well, so they said to do the same thing with *Pretty Woman*, which had a much darker ending. The original writer [Jonathan Lawton] came in, then Barbara Benedict. Lawton wrote a screenplay which was terrific and he got credit, and he should have. But Barbara Benedict saved some of the moments for me. Action is not character. You have to have character. We grew up on character. We kept saying, "He's this, he likes march-

ing bands, she likes this kind of music." That's character. We sat in a room and thought that out. "He rides a bike, he has a home, he has this on the walls, he has blah, blah, blah." A lot of times you don't get that, or you don't get enough. *Pretty Woman*, to me, the break came when Barbara Benedict said, "You know, they keep saying he's a businessman, he's a mogul, he's involved with hostile takeovers—no one knows what that means exactly. But they know he has no vulnerability." We are pitching this around, you know, and she finally says, "Make him something human, like a person." And she said, "Make him afraid of heights." I'm afraid of heights, too, and as soon as she said that I had five scenes all set. I knew how to play all the scenes, how to write all the scenes, and I had the end. But that was it, one characteristic, one part of him, that made it so easy.

I mean, we do the sports, we do the that, we do the this, that's why we analyze what they wear, their favorite color, what makes them nervous, what doesn't make them nervous—this is what we go through with a screenplay, down to literally taking the alphabet and putting each character's name next to a letter and saying, "Look at this! We've got four Cs! Four people with a C-name!" They'll get mixed up.

BRUNNER: They do.

MARSHALL: Then you say, "Let's have one L, one C." We always learned to do it that way. A lot of people just write. That's great. We don't do that. We've got to find a way to do it, to make sure certain things are in the character. So, they're usually asking me and Bob to lighten something up.

Did you do that with Frankie and Johnny *too?*

MARSHALL: First, Terrence McNally wrote the screenplay after they said he couldn't write it. I said he could. I said, "Why don't you think he can write it? It's his play, why wouldn't he want to write the screenplay?" I said, "It's his own play, he'll figure it out." So, there are only two people in the play; in the movie there were fifty. I thought he fleshed it out very well. We were accused of hiring too pretty a girl to play the part, but I don't think so, I thought she was right. And I think the point was a pretty girl who gave up on everything was as sad as an average person. People thought Michelle [Pfeiffer] was too pretty for the job, others didn't, that's their opinion. People categorize too much. We like Joe DiMaggio, so we write those kinds of noble characters!

I think, to be a screenplay writer, or any kind of writer, unless you can master late-night, kitchen table writing, you should get out of the business. Once in a while, a rich lawyer can take off a few months and go write something, that's okay. But the average guy coming along, you've got to get a day-time job and you've got to write there, late at night. Yeah, we did a lot of that writing. I wrote with Fred Freeman, two screenplays. God knows where they are. I wrote a screenplay with Jerry Belson that he lost. Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, I think, are two of the funniest screenwriters. They just like doing that. They don't direct. They produced, directed…they did everything for me in TV. But you know what? They said, "We're just going to be screen-

play writers." So they go and do that. They're wonderful page-one writers and about the best on-set writers you can find, because they know how to do it from working for us in television.

Can this type of writing be learned?

BRUNNER: As far as comedy, you can learn plot and character, but you should have some flair for it. Like Neil Simon said, "I can't teach a sense of humor."

MARSHALL: I use Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. If you can find that book you can make some sense of screenplay writing, but then you have to add talent. But that book makes sense of how to break down characters and everything.

BRUNNER: Neither of us studied screenwriting.

MARSHALL: Yeah, we didn't get to study. I was a journalism major and he was a cartoonist.

BRUNNER: I read in a *Newsweek* article, I don't know who said it, but they're teaching this act one, act two, act three—bullshit! It'll ruin them, because these guys will start thinking that way. Just write, get a flow.

MARSHALL: Some people need some structure, some people don't, so, those who need some structure, find one of those books. There's teachers—but funny is funny. It so easy to say it's good enough, it really is. Ten screenplays and it never gets different. We start here and it's 2:30 in the morning and we're sitting here. Well, we're not kids any more! We're sitting here at 2:30 in the morning and saying, "Why does it always end up that we're sitting here at 2:30 in the morning?" And they're out there waiting for the script. You're in there because you try one more time, then one more time. The first thing we worked on when we lived in New York—2:30, 3:00 in the morning.

BRUNNER: Then, we could go to 4:00. We were a little peppier then.

MARSHALL: 2:30, 3:00 is about as far as we can go now, but we still do it all the time! To this day! We still put in those hours to finish it in a way that we think is the proper way you hand in a script.

Steve Martin

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INTERVIEWED BY CATHERINE CLINCH
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 9, #5 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2002)

There is something wonderful about the notion of being able to trace the entire essence of who you are to a single influence. For Steve Martin, the moment of his creation happened when he took a teenager's job in the Magic Shop at Disneyland and met a man who made animals out of balloons. "Wally Bogue was an entertainer at Disneyland that I used to watch. He was a very funny, likable guy, and I thought that's what I want to be—a funny, likable guy. Well, I got funny…" and funny led him on a circuitous route to writing, and writing enabled him to create stories imbued with such charm and wit that he is known to be one of the most likable men in the entertainment industry.

Being a philosophy major doesn't normally lend itself to anything as mundane as marketable skills, so Martin found his way into stand-up comedy. There he had "this horrible revelation that if I was going to be successful as a comedian, I'd have to write everything myself. Otherwise, it was going to be derivative." He began, as most comedians do, by writing down funny things that happened to him throughout the day. "In college, I wrote some essays that eventually became a book called *Cruel Shoes*. This little book of essays became my entrée into writing for television."

Writing jokes for television enabled Martin to learn his craft "because it's all about the bare bones of something. The way a joke's structured, it can't be too elaborate." After a couple of years of writing for television, "I decided I was going nowhere and quit. I went on to do my comedy act and that became successful. Then I started writing screenplays. I co-wrote *The Jerk*, which was based on a lot of material that was already in my act."

As Martin's career expanded, so did his creative options. He envisioned a project that would blend classic literature and romantic comedy. "With *Roxanne*, I was searching for a screenwriter to write it because I didn't feel up to

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it. I searched and searched and nobody wanted to do it so I thought, well, maybe I'll try. I learned a lot from it. I did about forty drafts of this thing. I started by copying Cyrano de Bergerac, and eventually it migrated into something that was *Roxanne*."

In 1991, he wrote and starred in *L.A. Story*, one of the few American films to successfully venture into the literary conceit of magical realism. As the adventures of a funny and likable weatherman named Harris K. Telemacher unfold amidst the insane and inane cacophony of Southern California, viewers were led to wonder how much of what they were watching was autobiographical. Indeed, the parallels were striking—right up to the point where the movie's romantic interest became the real-life Mrs. Martin. In a most unusual way, this film established him as a new kind of auteur—the writer who puts his imprint on the film as the true author by performing the character he has created on the page.

Martin's next exploration was an original stage play that drew from his philosophical roots—*Picasso at Le Pain Agile*—enabling us to eavesdrop on an imagined Socratic dialogue between Picasso and Albert Einstein. Excited by the expansive opportunities of writing for the stage, Martin ventured into yet another format for his next work, the novella.

Shop Girl tells the story of the relationship between Ray Porter, a wealthy older man, and a delicate young artist, Mirabelle, who sells gloves at Nieman-Marcus. It has been suggested that there is a sense of loneliness weaving through all of Martin's writing, yet a more accurate term might be longing. Where loneliness implies a sadness at being alone, Martin's writing enables the viewer to accept characters who have created a comfort zone around their solitude, yearning for true companionship and love with the earnest hope that it will eventually arrive.

The real power of Martin's writing comes from the fine detail that he devotes to moments and the emotions that envelope them. "I think everything that is not political—that is personal—happens in moments. It's the moments that change everything—the look on a person's face, the gesture." There is one particular passage in *Shop Girl* that seems to define his entire technique: "It's not the big moments that really affect you—it's the upturned syllable at the end of a word that can kill you."

Martin believes that the ultimate power of writing comes from accessing the artistry inside. Invoking David Mamet's theories on acting, Martin explains: "No art comes from the conscious mind. You always want to challenge that, to quibble with it, but—I so believe it—the conscious mind is about structure and editing and the subconscious mind is solving all the creative problems." Where does this inner artistry come from? "I think you have to cultivate it," he explains. "First you have to trust it and trust that it will come. It didn't happen to me for forty years, but…one thing is, you have to have something to say. That's why I never wrote what's called seriously until later—because I didn't think I had anything to say."

Given that he has danced among a variety of formats from essay to screen-

play to stage play to novella, Martin has discovered that it serves him best to let the story guide him to where it belongs. When Martin is writing prose he says, "It's almost like a crashing wave. It's in the ocean and it's nothing, but then as it approaches the shore, it's rising out of the water! It's just this momentum you feel you're heading toward—that there are problems to be solved. In writing *Shop Girl*, I actually felt that I didn't know what I was going to write, and yet it felt like it was taking shape inside my head—as if there is this black hole where everything just filters through your consciousness and it takes shape."

On the other hand, he believes, "Screenplays are more scientific—they really do need a beginning, middle, and end; they really have to be concise. In terms of comic screenplays—for example *Bowfinger*—I visualized three or four funny scenes and I thought, I know what I want. I want three comic scenes in the movie that are funny because they have been set up, and I want one big comic scene at the end. And that's the way I structured the screenplay."

Perhaps the best way to describe Steve Martin's agility with the written word is to note a playful romp that comprises approximately thirty seconds of a BBC documentary about the man. The scene exists in one shot—a seemingly endless field of banana peels with Martin at the farthest end. Suddenly, he bursts into a joyful dance and maneuvers around the banana peels—without ever slipping. It serves as a metaphor for the playful effortlessness of his writing. With sincere humility, Martin suggests, "Everything I do starts with ineptness—and I have a lot of beginner's luck—because you don't know the rules yet. So what comes out is more precarious, more crazy, less normal, and sometimes it just works."

Although he goes to great lengths to refine the details of his writing, he insists: "I don't feel like a perfectionist, but that's the great difference between a screenplay and a novel. In a screenplay, the actors go in in the morning and say, 'What if I said don't go instead of why not stay?' and I say, 'Yeah, okay, I don't care, whatever.' In a play or a novel, everything matters—every sentence, every verb, every word—to me…I think, to the author—to know exactly why everything is there. It doesn't mean you plan it out ahead of time. It means it came from a genuine place when you were writing it and it's followed compellingly from the previous thing."

Although he is famous for his extensive art collection, Martin claims that if he were given a full palette of colors he wouldn't know what to paint. "I have no idea—it's like a blank. It's the one area I have absolutely no skill in. But I'd love the life of a painter—a master in big airy rooms, hefting paintings around and painting and meeting girls… I mean just the idea of saying, 'All right, once you've got your clothes down… Great!'" He once wrote an aborted essay for *The New Yorker*, called "Steve Martin, Nude Photographer." It began with the sentence, "First, I'll need a camera."

Christopher McQuarrie

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID KONOW
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 7, #5 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2000)

When *The Usual Suspects* came out in 1995, it was a movie that took all the rules of film noir and turned them upside down. The film's success was a hell of a big break for Christopher McQuarrie. Not only did it immediately establish him as a hot screenwriter, it also won him the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. However, it might not have been. McQuarrie almost chose a career in law enforcement, and was about to enter the police academy when he got a fateful call from his childhood friend, director Bryan Singer. The feature they wrote, *Public Access* (1993), tied for Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Yet even after their success it was tough to get anyone interested in financing *The Usual Suspects* until a trio of European financiers called Trinity gave Singer enough money to approach actors and put a cast together.

The money fell through after the cast was set and Polygram/ Spelling Pictures picked up the negative costs. Singer and company worked fast and shot *Suspects* in thirty-five days on a $5.2 million budget. McQuarrie and Singer clearly had the last laugh. *Variety* called the *Suspects* screenplay "one of the most elaborate, tangy, and solidly satisfying original crime scripts in a long while." As the *London Times* put it, most of the studios turned it down for being too complex and clever, which is exactly what the critics and the public loved about the film.

If McQuarrie never wrote anything of merit after *The Usual Suspects*, his place in the screenwriting pantheon would be secure. Thankfully, he's written and directed a new film that is sure to have people taking again. *Way of the Gun* is a tough, violent, and very clever film that pulls no punches and takes no prisoners. Watching *Gun*, it's evident that McQuarrie hasn't rested on his laurels, and that his writing chops are still keen. *Gun* has terrific dialogue, a lot of twists and turns, of course, and a gut-wrenching climax that

will have you running for the Pepto-Bismol.

I found McQuarrie to be engaging, hilarious, and brutally candid, especially when recalling the heartbreaking experience of trying to get his dream project, *Alexander the Great*, off the ground. Taking a break from his hectic schedule of writing two screenplays back to back, he was also kind enough to answer our questions. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Christopher McQuarrie in 2000.

You've said The Usual Suspects *was the eighth script you had written. What did you learn from writing the first seven?*

It was actually the fifth. Only one of the others got made and the other three are all projects I have abandoned or outgrown, though one of them I worked on for years and lifted scenes from for *Way of the Gun*—the torture scene and the card game. I would say I learned more from that script than any of the others because I never gave up on it. I can read the different drafts and see how much my writing changes over the years, how I come at the same story over and over as a different person every time. But I learn from everything I write. In fact, I learned more about writing by directing *Way of the Gun* than in all the writing I did previously. The most important thing I learned was this: everything can always happen much sooner, much faster, and with much less said about it.

Do you outline when you write?

I only wrote index cards for *Suspects* after the first thirty pages or so because I was losing track of things. I never did an outline and just followed the question from scene to scene as I went. The first draft of *Suspects* was two weeks. It was miles from finished, though. The subsequent drafts took about five months. That was before I saved drafts. I would just go in and make changes. But we were exhaustive. Bryan Singer and I gave the script to everyone we knew and addressed every question no matter how inane. We had to be certain we covered our asses.

Suspects *is obviously a very intricate film where many of the pieces fit like a puzzle. Was it a blessing that you wrote a film that was so complex that it would be hard to be re-written by others?*

Well, it was never for sale, so it was in no danger of being rewritten. I have yet to put myself in a position where I would be re-written, though I am writing several projects for studios now that I can see ending up like that. But your question gives me comfort. Maybe I can make such a mess of things they can't get anyone else. Time is certainly on my side. They all have strict start dates.

Suspects *hinges on the ending; did you feel you were taking a big risk with the end?*

We never stopped to consider risk in those days. We simply talked about all projects as if they were already getting made. We were very naive. That is the real strength of *The Usual Suspects*. We were so oblivious to the rules, we didn't

know we were breaking them. Only when it was getting made and I started to take meetings for other jobs did I understand what we had done. I was told no one used flashbacks anymore, that it had been a bold choice. Our line producer pointed out to us in pre-production that our narrator was lying. I went to see *Romeo Is Bleeding* when we were cutting the film and said to a friend how much I wanted to write a film noir someday. We were completely ignorant then. We just wanted to make movies that filled an empty space; that satisfied us.

A lot of the film can be left open to interpretation, the entire thing could be a lie, parts of it could be true…. Is there a definitive version of what really went on or do you want the audience to come up with their own ideas and theories?
Singer and I fought about that until the very end. He has one scenario, I have another. The film would not work if it answered all of your questions. I have heard many theories about what happened and some of them are so good I wish I had written them. To me, a film that answers all of your questions is pointless. People are paying a lot of money to support your bullshit. If you don't give them something to take with them, you are a thief, a lousy storyteller. To that end, you also have to take something away from them, rob them of some fulfillment. Without mystery there is no love affair. That same thinking made *The Sixth Sense* the hit it was, a movie you had to stay with and watch again. Or *The Blair Witch Project*. Like it or hate it, it is a movie that relies almost entirely on the imagination of the viewer, active participation. It proves that the best films are interactive. *Suspects* is what it is because we never stopped to consider the audience as anything but people who loved film as much as we did, who were meticulously anal about detail and ripped films to pieces. We were too busy making the movie to realize we had done anything of interest to anyone but ourselves.

When the script went around and people read it, was the structure ever an issue? Did anyone say, "This is too confusing," or ask you to change the script at all?
Every studio, major and minor, rejected it. Miramax said they would distribute it if someone else footed the bill. No one understood a word of it, except Kevin Spacey, for whom we had written it. Our commitment to an actor at Kevin's level at the time coupled with a convoluted script meant death. Even when the financing came in, they urged us to get rid of Spacey and find someone with foreign value. But we saw him as crucial. At the time he was relatively unknown in the mainstream, and we knew that casting him as Keyser was key, that an educated audience would see a name actor coming from the first act. That is the real trick behind *Suspects*, I think. People subconsciously dismissed Kevin. An actor they didn't recognize would never be revealed to be the villain behind it all. "No matter how much it might look like that, I can't believe it. Movies just don't work that way." You never fool the audience without their consent. Try explaining that to Sony. It came back to me that one exec watched the film and said: "Remake it with Mel Gibson in there and you'll have a hit."

You've obviously had tremendous success with Suspects. *What was it like to struggle then have such a big breakthrough like that? And how did it feel to win the Academy Award?*

Bryan Singer and [Producer] Ken Kokin did the struggling. Bryan called me after graduating from USC when he got an offer to direct his first feature for some independent financiers. I was only in town three months before he had the money together. That film, *Public Access*, did well at Sundance and got independent money interested in *Suspects*. As for the Oscars, I knew Kevin would win. I bet several of my friends that he would. Oscars always go to the guy who is crippled or crazy, in this case he was both. And Kevin was a better actor than anyone was giving him credit for. But I was certain it would be Randall Wallace for *Braveheart*'s script. Just certain. We were sitting next to each other that night and when *Braveheart* won its third or forth Oscar, I turned to him and said, "Ride the wave, motherfucker." Hearing my name, and hearing it pronounced correctly no less, just sort of shut me down. When I woke up, I was back in the lobby with this thing in my hand, and everyone was looking at me very differently.

Then I recalled the night we first screened *Suspects* at Sundance and the reaction after the film. The lobby was packed with people and everyone had questions, and we knew we had a solid film. Benicio Del Toro came up behind me and whispered in my ear: "All glory is fleeting," the last line from *Patton*. When I turned around, he was ducking out the door with people chasing after him. He had gone into the theater almost anonymously. Now, suddenly, he was "that crazy guy in *Suspects*." I went home after the Oscars to find that no one had let my dog out all night. He had shit all over the rug. I stripped down to my underwear and started cleaning up this mess with my dog just staring at me and an Oscar on the living room table. I went to the phone and put the last speech from *Patton* on my outgoing message and got out of town. I saw it as a victory for all of us, something we could use as a weapon to make more of the films we wanted to make. But the doors it opened weren't the doors I wanted to go through. They don't want to make your films, they want you to make theirs. You feel like your career in independent film, truly down and dirty independent film, is over. Don't get me wrong, it was a great honor, and I am grateful for it. But you can't go back after that. You're never the same writer again. Or so I thought until *Alexander*.

Before Way of the Gun *you were going to make* Alexander the Great *[from Peter Buchman's script], your directorial debut. What happened?*

My former agent, Jeff Robinov, left ICM to work at Warners and asked me to bring a project to him. I brought him the 200+ page draft of *Alexander* almost as a joke. He didn't flinch. He just ran it through. Buchman, Ken Kokin, and I developed the script ourselves as equal owners of the material. We all get paid the same, and have mutual control; no one party can make a move without the other two. It was a great system. It prevented anyone from getting out of hand and forced us to work through everything. It was a refined ver-

sion of what *Suspects* had been like without all of the screaming. We refused to take a standard development deal from the studio. Instead, they had to pay us month by month for as long as they had it. Thus, we were protected from turnaround and development hell. With Jeff, we trimmed forty pages and refined a lot of what was wrong with the material. Warner's flew me to London to meet with their physical production guys. We did hundreds of pages of storyboards along with Roger Deakins, who was attached to shoot it. We could never agree with the studio on two key issues: when it should end, and who would be Alexander. None of the stars that guaranteed the movie were right, and Warner's had a different number one guy every other week, depending on who had just had a huge release. We loved Jude Law, but at the time, he was another Spacey; they insisted he would never, ever open a film.

At the end of a two-year process, it got as far as Terry Semel, who told us to come back in a week and we would talk about moving ahead. A month later, the meeting finally came and Semel never showed. Lorenzo DeBonaventura came into the room and told us they could not say yes. It wasn't no, just not yes. We were welcome to take the project anywhere and come back to Warner's anytime, implying it would meet the same fate everywhere else. He was right. We shelved it that day. Now Jude Law is opening *A.I.* for Steven Spielberg. We knew it was folly, but it was the only thing I wanted to make. I had to try. Now that I have directed a comparatively miniscule film, I am grateful. It would have been catastrophic, no matter how much support I had. I was not the fluke director I had been as a writer. It may have been the one wise decision Semel made in his last years at Warner's.

What would your vision of Alexander the Great *have been like? With the recent success of* Gladiator*, could the project be revived again?*
It is hard to say what it would have been like. Having now directed a film, I am going back to the script in the fall with Peter and doing a massive overhaul. The development of the script crippled it. We worked so hard to make it something they would make but still be our movie. But we overlooked the story it should be. Warner's wanted *Braveheart*. What else does a studio ever want but the most recent boat they missed? Warner's is still not interested in *Alexander*. The money it would cost vs. the money *Braveheart* made simply does not add up. I was recently told, "There is not an audience for this sort of movie." Two weeks later, I had to wait for two hours to see *Gladiator*. Who knows? Our new approach to the movie might be somewhat cheaper to make; it is certainly better. And I have learned about directing, writing and, above all, diplomacy. I'll most likely die still trying to get it made, still looking for an actor who is the right age, the right type, the right clout. I'll also probably still be waiting for Semel to personally say no.

How soon after Alexander *fell through did you start working on* Way of the Gun*?*
With the end of *Alexander*, I hit bottom. I knew I had to make a film with some commercial success to be taken seriously. Suspects, despite its recep-

tion, was never widely released and made very little money domestically. A friend at Kopelson asked me to look at an article they had, which they thought would make a good movie, but no one had been able to crack it. I loved it and I pitched it to Fox. I told them I would write and direct it for scale, take no back end and live on craft service while I shot it. I simply wanted the opportunity to make a film now, to get in the game. I told them to find a figure they were comfortable gambling on me and I would bring the film in. We made *Suspects* for five million, *Public Access* for $250,000. I was willing to accept whatever budget they were throwing out, so long as I could make something that was mine. I was not off the lot before my agent called me. Fox told me to get fucked. No money. No control. No nothing. They didn't want my input, they just wanted me. For nothing. I went right from that meeting to have coffee with Ken Kokin and Benicio Del Toro. All of us had been having similar experiences. Benicio asked me why was I not making a crime film? I had to make a crime film. It was cheap and it was the one thing they were sure I could do.

I had been resisting this since *Suspects*, not wanting to be pigeonholed as a crime guy. But what did I have to lose now? I was back to where I was when I wrote *Suspects* in the first place: unemployable and ready to make trouble. I wrote down ten names, actors that any studio would make a film with. I told Beno to pick the one he most wanted to work with. He did. He picked an actor who had expressed great interest in working with him. I then set out to write *Way of the Gun*. The first thing I did was to write a list of every taboo, every thing I knew a cowardly executive would refuse to accept from a "sympathetic" leading man. The first ten pages of the script were originally a prologue, a trailer to another movie starring Parker and Longbaugh, aliases that were the real names of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. It was to be shot as slick and hip as possible. Guy Richie and Michael Bay but with horrible, unspeakable acts of violence and degradation. Four minutes of glamorized but unqualified brutality. We cut it in preproduction, realizing this would get us killed. If I failed in perfectly mimicking the films I was sending up, it would just be a spoof, and the message would be lost. It was also taking an enormous amount of time away from the shooting of the actual story. We cut it in preproduction, despite the fact that it was everyone's favorite part. This fact was not lost on Ken Kokin, who pointed out it would have been even worse if the first four minutes were everyone's favorite part of the finished film.

I had heard so much crap during *Alexander* about what a sympathetic character could and could not do, what was not right, what would "lose the audience." Not that your character couldn't do whatever he liked, mind you, it just had to be made palatable. People he killed, commandments he violated, women he abused had to "deserve it," an utterly contemptible side effect of political correctness. No matter what Hollywood says, we are making no effort to tone down violence, only make it more presentable. If Hollywood has anything to do with Columbine, it is that. I was raised on *The Man Who Would Be King*, a film about two completely likable guys who betray the faith of an

entire nation and end up shooting into a crowd of unarmed priests. They never apologize for what they have done, they only apologize to each other. Each suffers a terrible fate, and for one it is far worse than death. Basically, I was bitterly angry at the system and had something to prove. This would blow up in my face later on. The actor Benicio picked from the list was very excited about working with him. He came to Beno's house personally and picked up the script. We never heard from him again. After his last film, I take it as a godsend. But we never heard from a lot of actors again. Only Ryan Phillippe was willing to meet it head-on and without hesitation. Here he was at a point in his career when he had to choose very carefully what he did next, something of which he was very much aware. Whatever you think of Ryan, he has enormous balls. He was besieged with choice offers, and we didn't want him, but he would not take no for an answer. Ken Kokin pointed out to me that more than anything, we wanted to be working with people who wanted to work with us, and that I had once been vehemently opposed to another actor for *Suspects*: Benicio Del Toro. Ryan took the role and Artisan funded the film, the only studio who responded to the material. We were back.

In the film, there are a lot of rules and codes laid out for the criminal life, an order of how things should be (Can't do business with a bagman, "Superman never gets the girl"). The Usual Suspects *played with the rules of what audiences expect in a mystery. Is the criminal code you've come up with for the film along the same lines?*
I suppose so. I am not interested in characters who are evil or cruel for cruelty's sake. To that end, the characters in this film would prefer to avoid violence. It is messy and even, God forbid, consequential. A great deal of effort is made by the characters to avoid killing in this film, as well as to focus on the effects of it. As the characters came together, they all seemed to understand this. They saw themselves as something better than just hired guns. They have dignity, self-respect, and restraint. A code.

There are some really terrific one liners in the film such as "A plan is a list of things that don't happen," and "Karma is justice without the satisfaction." What's the key to writing a good one-liner that isn't cliched?
Truth is never a cliché. The plan line was all about the certainty of Alexander going to hell. The Karma line speaks to my hatred of revenge as reward, of immediate gratification and what it has done to story. There is no poetry in an eye for an eye, no real irony, and no lasting satisfaction. Thus, no justice. Movies tell us that justice is for the victim, but not for the offender. I believe otherwise. You may not agree, but it is my truth. You'll get better lines if you write from that place every time.

Like the end of Suspects, Gun *has some great twists. What is the key to coming up with an unexpected turn of events that the audience won't be able to guess?*
If it's the first thing that occurred to you, it will be the first thing to occur to them. Guaranteed.

Having a pregnant character in the film really gives a unique twist to Gun *in that it adds a whole new sense of danger.*

We knew that we wanted to make a crime film, and we all agreed on a kidnapping. But we were stuck as to one that would be original, or that presented an interesting challenge. My biggest problem was the ransom. Getting it was always the hangup in the "perfect" kidnapping scenario. My wife suggested a story she had heard about a wealthy couple who had hired a surrogate mother to have their child. They had hired bodyguards to watch her twenty-four hours a day, not only to protect her from any possible harm, but to watch her as well. What she ate, drank, etc., essentially protecting the baby from the surrogate. The implications were immediate and compelling. You have the solution to the ransom. We hand over the baby, but we keep the girl. A two-stage kidnapping, if you will, two-ply protection. It just all flowed from there. I loved it. She's a genius.

The middle of the film, where we find out what everyone's stake in the child is, gets very complicated. When you were writing, were you ever worried that it would be hard to make all the complications resolve themselves?

I was actually determined to write a very straightforward, twistless story, knowing that no twist I could come up with would match the end of *Suspects*. It was only as I was rewriting the script that the relationships between the characters began to occur to me: she is related to him and he is his son, etc. The relationships were fairly unremarkable in and of themselves. What interested me was the situation in which these people were now entangled, and when you found out who they were. The resolution remained almost exactly the same, it just had a deeper meaning, greater implications.

Why did you want to direct? Do you get more control over the material?

I have realized you never have control over the material. Nothing ends up like you think it will. The director's "control" is bullshit. You are at the mercy of the fates. Originally, I wanted to direct to make a movie that would allow me to make *Alexander*. Now I just want to make movies.

Do you plan to direct again?

Absolutely. Now that I know that I have no idea what I am doing, I expect to do a much better job.

Way of the Gun *is being released by Artisan, an independent. What are the advantages of working with an independent company as opposed to a major studio?*

We never even tried to make *Way of the Gun* at a studio. We knew they would never do it. It was dead from the first words out of Parker's mouth and I wasn't about to change that line. Artisan—Bill Block, Amir Malin, and Andrew Golov [their head of production]—understood one thing better than anyone: common sense. With Artisan, there was no battle, there was no war, there was only the film. They honestly reaffirmed my faith in filmmaking.

If you could explain to them your reasons for why you wanted something, you got it. If they didn't want it, they had a good reason why. I went on a three-week honeymoon in the middle of post and offered Bill Block the cutting room when I was gone. He and Andrew Golov made excellent changes and many are in the film. Not one was imposed. Would I do that at Warners? Not if you cut out my liver with a rusty shovel.

Way of the Gun *is a very unsettling and violent film. Some filmmakers feel that violence in films should be brutal and unflinching to show the realities and cost of violence. Do you agree?*
I agree that violence should never be without consequence. However, I think it is a lie to say that all violence meets its "just reward." The world is just not that simple a place. To say that every wrong is met with a definitive right, or that vengeance is a noble pursuit, is infinitely more irresponsible than any act of violence you could portray. Hollywood's response to political correctness is sanitized violence; cause and effect, eye for an eye. Essentially, the rules that govern violence and make it presentable in film today are no better than a lynch mob. Do I believe that violence influences people? I think film's influence is overrated. Movies might teach you how to dress, or how to hold your cigarette, but I have to believe human beings are more in control of their actions than whatever group scrambling to make its political point would have you believe. I am certain I saw more violent movies as a child than your average kid, and I still let cockroaches live their lives. Movies do less to influence one's intentions than one's actions. *Taxi Driver* didn't make Hinkley shoot Reagan, it simply helped determined the fashion. And if you argue that the fame, the glamour that is associated with the act, is some sort of motivation, which I agree with, then CNN and *Time* did more to make Harris and Klebold household names than all of Hollywood ever will. At least as cartoony and ridiculous as Hollywood violence is, it has consistently conveyed the message that good triumphs over evil and psychotic, gun-wielding losers just end up dead and forgotten. And that's not because of a million marching moms. It's good business. It's what people want to hear.

Can you tell us what you are currently working on and what your plans for the future are?
Right now I am writing four projects back to back. The first is an untitled script for Ed Zwick that we have been tinkering with off and on for a few years now. Ed has given me a great deal of room and let me find a script from the vaguest of notions. It has been a great experience, actually. It is about police corruption in Washington, D.C. and the influence it has on one cop's family. I am also writing *The Green Hornet* and *The Prisoner* for Universal, two projects I have loved for years. Finally, I am writing a script about an LA beat cop for director Adam Ripp, co-producer of *Public Access*. It follows one man through the academy to his untimely demise. When all of that is done, Peter Buchman, Ken Kokin, and I will all go back to the drawing board for anoth-

er stab at *Alexander* while I consider another project to direct, possibly a script I am working on about a private detective. By the time that is finished, Jude Law will be a huge international star. And too old to play Alexander.

John Milius

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 7, #2 (MARCH/APRIL 2000)

S tepping into John Milius's Writers Building office at Warner Bros., I can't help being struck by the different influences that have shaped his life—a "Bear" surfboard, model soldiers refighting the Spanish American War, Soviet military regalia, a poster from *Conan the Barbarian*, Cuban cigars, and guns, lots of guns. But most powerful of all are the twenty-two volumes of John Milius's produced screenplays, each bound in leather. This man has authored a real body of work. Not only as a director, but as a writer.

Born in St. Louis, Milius moved to southern California when he was seven and found a true passion in surfing. "It was like a religion," he once told interviewer George Hickenlooper. "We were all living at an intensity which couldn't be substituted by any drug, or job, or even women." Named "Yeti, the abominable snowman" by his beach/surfer friends, Milius hoped to become a career Army officer, but was rejected by the military because of an asthmatic condition. He entered film school never expecting to do anything more with his life than catch the big wave.

Emerging two years later as part of the USC Film School Mafia (including Coppola, Lucas, and Spielberg), Milius began writing an impressive body of screenplays including *Jeremiah Johnson, Dirty Harry* (uncredited), *Judge Roy Bean, Magnum Force*, and *Apocalypse Now*. Those screenplays gave him enough credibility to direct his scripts for *Dillinger, The Wind and the Lion, Big Wednesday, Conan the Barbarian* (co-written with Oliver Stone), *Red Dawn, Farewell to the King, Flight of the Intruder*, and *Rough Riders*. His screenplay for *Apocalypse Now* (credit shared with Coppola) would be nominated for an Academy Award.

Milius has been considered "the hottest screenwriter in Hollywood" four times in his career. After selling his screenplay *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* for $300,000 (an almost unprecedented amount in 1971, especially for a writer whose asking price was $85,000), Milius told *Esquire*, "I make terrif-

ic deals. My hole card on this one was I didn't particularly want to sell *Roy Bean* anyway. I had written it for my own pleasure." But more interesting than the amount of money this script sold for was the emerging writer's voice within it. Called "the gifted barbarian" by Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael recognized Milius's singular voice early in his career in scripts under two different directors (Sydney Pollack—*Jeremiah Johnson*, John Huston—*Judge Roy Bean*), and attacked his apparent fascination with "fascist" violence and his glorification of lawlessness. The recognition of his voice as a writer provided an early crack in the interpretive lens of the auteur theory and put a gun-toting face to the Hollywood writer of the early 1970s.

John Milius has a definite vision of the world that he expresses through his screenplays and films. His characters make a commitment to a moral code and then stand by themselves against the winds of society. Martial combat and violence with a purpose are honored as his characters become larger than life, touching myth. Aptly summing up his own anachronistic perspective, Milius says, "The world I admire was dead before I was born." In rejecting "the hypocrisy of the Writers Guild," Milius has placed himself among his characters as God's lonely man in the Industry, and he reminds us that writers pay a high price for "going along to get along." Milius writes in the September 1999 issue of *Written By*, "I've suffered loss in my career for not being obedient. Believe me, the loss was little compared to the fear all you elite [writers] stomach every day. When the sun sets, I can sing 'My Way' with Elvis, Frank Sinatra, and Richard Nixon. What is your anthem?"

John Milius will direct his script *Manila John* (based on the Medal of Honor recipient) this spring as a feature for HBO. He has just finished his script *LeMay* for Robert Zemeckis and will soon begin work on the script he owes Warner Bros. True to form, Warner Bros. would like Milius to update *Dirty Harry* for a contemporary audience, while he hopes to sell the studio on an adaptation of *The Iliad*. Good luck, John. *Creative Screenwriting* interviewed John Milius in 2000.

You've just decided to have your script Texas Rangers *bound. What does that mean to you?*
It means it's number twenty-three, just another swastika on the fuselage. But we won't have it bound unless I get credit [at press time Dimension Films has Milius sharing credit with Ehren Kruger *(Arlington Road, Scream 3)*]. I wrote the script years ago for Frank Price at Columbia. I was going to make it; I got pretty close to making it. But they wouldn't approve Tommy Lee Jones as the star, so I left it to go do *Vikings*. Another guy worked on it, the script was rewritten, but they were never able to get it made. They couldn't attract the cast they wanted. So now these other characters [Bob and Harvey Weinstein] bought it.

How close is the finished film to your script?
I heard from Frank Price that it doesn't bear any resemblence. *Texas Rangers* was one of my best scripts, and I wasn't willing to sit there and proceed to

dismantle it. [The Weinsteins] were really arrogant. They called me up and acted as if I should feel priviledged to come back and ruin my own work. I told that asshole Bob Weinstein he was lucky to have it the way it was.

Going back to the beginning, what did you learn about screenwriting in your two years of film school?

Well, I learned everything I need to know. I had a wonderful teacher, Irwin Blacker, and he was feared by everyone at the school because he took a very interesting position. He gave you the screenplay form, which I hated so much, and if you made one mistake on the form, you flunked the class. His attitude was that the least you can learn is the form. "I can't grade you on the content. I can't tell you whether this is a better story for you to write than that, you know? And I can't teach you how to write the content, but I can certainly demand that you do it in the proper form." He never talked about character arcs or anything like that; he simply talked about telling a good yarn, telling a good story. He said, "Do whatever you need to do. Be as radical and as outrageous as you can be. Take any kind of approach you want to take. Feel free to flash back, feel free to flash forward, feel free to flash back in the middle of a flashback. Feel free to use narration, all the tools are there for you to use." I used to tell a screenwriting class, "I could teach you all the basic techniques in fifteen minutes. After that, it's up to you."

I used *Moby Dick* as an example because I think *Moby Dick* is the best work of art ever made. My favorite work of art. I used to point out the dramatic entrance of characters, how they were threaded through…. *Moby Dick* was a perfect screenplay, a perfect example of the kind of drama that I was interested in. Another great influence on me was Kerouac, and a novel like *On the Road,* which has no tight, linear narrative, but sprawls, following this character. *Moby Dick* and *On the Road* are completely different kinds of novels, yet they're both extremely disciplined. Nothing happens by accident in either of those two books.

Would you say that your original screenplay for Apocalypse Now *followed more of the Kerouac approach?*

I don't know. You could say it's very much like *Moby Dick*, too. You start with this character who's given up on life, and suddenly they haul him out of his shower and take him to the ship. They tell him you're gonna hunt white whale at the end of the river. I don't know. I never thought of it that way.

I was kind of thinking along the lines of its flowing with the character.

Yeah. It's very influenced that way. But the basic idea is that this thing is out there that you're going to have to deal with, you know, that somewhere there's going to be Judgment Day, somewhere, you know, you're gonna meet Moby Dick.

How far did you get on that script in film school?

Not very far. I wrote two real scripts in film school, but when I came here

and really started writing, I rewrote every bit of them. Neither of them were ever made, but I was able to option them. I had them rented out for like $5,000 a year.

You left film school with a new wife. How did you work at getting into the industry?
Well, I was just happy having any job at all. I was very lucky. I did very, very well from the beginning. I went to the first job I had, working for AIP for Larry Gordon, and I was amazed that I actually got paid to do this, I mean for something other than lifeguarding. Then I worked for Al Ruddy over at Paramount and I wrote a script called *The Texans,* which never got made and wasn't very good.

Was that an assignment?
No, I just thought it up.

But you got paid to write it.
Yeah, not very well. But it was enough. I didn't need a lot. And then after that I wrote another bad script. I didn't do a good job and I realized the reason I didn't do a good job was because in both cases I was influenced by the people who had hired me. They said put this in and put that in, and I went along with it. Every time I went along with something in my whole career it usually didn't work. Usually there's a price to pay. You think of selling out, but there is a price to pay. Usually what people want you to do is make it current. They want you to make it relate to people in 2000.

To have "cultural resonance."
Yeah, "cultural resonance." And of course, that's always the worst shit. Cultural resonance is dated instantly. When I did *Big Wednesday* my first impressions were that I was going to do this coming-of-age story with Arthurian overtones about surfers that nobody took seriously, their troubled lives made larger than life by their experience with the sea. And that's what the movie is. It never strayed from that. There was a lot of pressure to make it more like *Animal House*, but the movie has a huge following now because it did have loftier ambitions. It wasn't just a story about somebody trying to ride the biggest wave or something. That's not enough.

What place does the use of myth have in screenwriting?
Well, people talk about it all the time…you know George Lucas talks about it all the time. He doesn't know how to use it at all. He doesn't understand myth at all. As illustrated by *Phantom Menace*. Writers who really understand myth don't use it consciously. There are very few things that are truly mythical. There's a lot of stuff that's famous, but very few things that are the stuff of myth and legend.

I'm thinking more of classical mythology. Do you think that can empower a script in a way?

Yeah, I think there's something there. See, myth is something where you feel an importance. The writer is relating something to an important story. If the hero has the heel of Achilles or something, then you might create a slight resonance to *The Iliad*—then in your gut you feel that this is important. I think the reason that *The Iliad* works is because nothing's real clear. You know, it's a story about war in which nobody is really sure what they're fighting for, which makes it like all wars. Therefore it becomes myth.

The Mafia is myth. The Mafia is one of the great American myths. There are two truly great American myths, the myth of the Old West and the myth of the Mafia, and they're both the same story. They're about promise, about coming here with nothing, and the promise over the next horizon. They're the same story, told in different ways. One's told in the city, one's told in the country. That's why we love the Mafia. We never tire of the Mafia.

Are there any rituals that you put yourself through in your writing?

No, I just like to write at the end of the day because I like to think about it all day. And usually, I'll try to avoid thinking about it, I'll bullshit and talk to people all day long. I'll do various acts of procrastination and then as the sun starts to get low and the shadows lengthen, guilt wells up.

Do you still try to write six pages a day?

Yeah, at least six. If I feel like going for more, I go for more. But I write no less than six—in longhand.

Keep away from the computer.

Yeah, it's too easy to change things on the computer. You don't have to hand-fit it, you know. And basically, this is hand work. There is no way to make precision parts and put them together. Every screenplay is different so it must be made by hand.

Now, you were able to option two scripts right out of film school.

Yeah. I lived pretty well on $15,000 a year back then, so $5,000 was a third of my income. If I went up to Malibu and shot a deer that cut the income down even further. I think the first year I made about $25,000. The second year I made about $40,000 or $50,000. I mean, I was as rich as a rajah.

So, the early scripts that you wrote attracted attention in the industry, they got you some small assignments and decent options.

I never got any assignments. I never got assignments from them. I had an agent sending me to their offices—I guess what they call "pitching" today. I hate "pitch" because it's such an ugly term. It really describes the demeaning of the writer. Writers are treated like garbage, just stepped on and spit on. In my day, when I was hired as a young punk writer to write *Apocalypse*

Now at Warner Bros., no one would dare think of hiring another writer. John Calley said, "This guy's a genius. Leave him alone. He's going to do this brilliant screenplay and most of all, he's cheap." Nobody knew what it was going to be. He didn't know whether I would turn out to be a good writer. But that's the way they treated writers then.

A lot of that probably goes back to the demystification of screenwriting through all the books and seminars and tapes…
It is mystical. All creative work is mystical. How dare they demystify it? How dare they think they can demystify it? Especially when they can't write. These guys who write these books, what's their great literary legacy to us? What have they done? They don't even write television episodes.

A writer's greatest fear now is not that he's going to be no good when he sits down to write. A writer's greatest fear is that he's going to be brilliant and that no one will read it, that no one can read it, that no one knows the difference because they read these stupid "How to write a screenplay" books. It's made people into idiots. In the old days the writer's greatest fear was always, this time out, it just isn't going to happen. I just won't have the stuff. Now the fear is that I'll have it, but those little jerks from Harvard Business School won't be able to understand it. Because these MBAs can follow instructions, they read these books and say your script has to have these characters and those turning points. They ask questions like, "Who are you rooting for at the end of the first act?" I was never conscious of my screenplays having any acts. I didn't know what a character arc was. It's all bullshit. Tell a story.

When I got in, you had to write all that stuff like "ext," "day," all the stuff that's necessary, and then writers actually wrote, "we see so and so coming down the hall, she is a beautiful woman in her thirties and by her walk we can tell she's a certain type…" I threw it all out. I said, "I don't want to write that. That doesn't tell you what the story's about." With *The Wind and the Lion*, the first line was "A gull screams, horses hooves spattered through the surf." I actually wrote it in the past tense because it was in the past. But I wrote *Apocalypse Now* in an active tense because I wanted it to have a crisp, military feel to it. Plus, Vietnam was still going on when I wrote it.

I remember fooling with the form a great deal then and I was respected for it. Today, you fool with it and they say, "Well this doesn't follow the form." They don't know what's good. They don't have any judgment. This isn't just sour grapes. Look at the crap that's made. I'll put my titles up against anything these jerks produce.

Have you had to change the way you think about your own writing to try to get it past some of these people?
Never compromise excellence. To write for someone else is the biggest mistake that any writer makes. You should be your biggest competitor, your biggest critic, your biggest fan, because you don't know what anybody else thinks. How arrogant it is to assume that you know the market, that you

know what's popular today—only Steven Spielberg knows what's popular today. Only Steven Spielberg will ever know what's popular. So leave it to him. He's the only one in the history of man who has ever figured that out. Write what you want to see. Because if you don't, you're not going to have any true passion in it, and it's not going to be done with any true artistry.

So is it that passion that ultimately sells and makes people interested in a project?
Not necessarily. It's that passion that makes for good writing, but a lot of tricky writing, a lot of gimmicky writing sells. That doesn't mean it's good. Most of the people who talk about how wonderful they are, about their great reputations and their great careers as writers, and being able to write what sells, don't have very many credits. They may do rewrites and work occasionally, but they don't have a body of work or a voice because nobody cares. There's a million other people just like them.

In those initial scripts, were you developing your perspective, your voice as a writer?
The real breaking point where I knew—and it was almost overnight—that I had become a good writer with a voice was *Jeremiah Johnson*. When I started working on that, it was called *The Crow Killer* and I knew that material. I'd lived in the mountains, I had a trapline, I hunted, and I had a lot of experiences with characters up there. So, it was real easy to write that and there was a humor to it, a kind of bigger-than-life attitude. I was inspired by Carl Sandberg. I read a lot of his poetry and it's this kind of abrupt description— "a train is coming, thundering steel, where are you going? Wichita." That great kind of feeling that he had, that's what I was trying to do there. I remember there was a great poem about American braggarts. You know, American liars—"I am the ring-tailed cousin to the such and such that ate so and so and I can do this and I can do that better than Mike Fink the river man…" I just realized that this was the voice that the script had to have. It was as clear as a bell. I knew that writing was particular to me.

Sydney Pollack and Robert Redford didn't trust me very much at first, though. I wasn't really housebroken in those days. I was a wild surfer kid, you know, and they preferred their writers to be more intellectual. And so they would get the intellectual writers to try and rewrite it and they'd have to hire me back because none of those guys could write that dialogue. None of those guys understood that stuff. They didn't understand the mountains. They didn't understand what a mountain man was. I love mountain men. I'd love to write a mountain man story today.

Was that based on an historical figure?
Yeah. Though it changed a great deal. That was when I really realized I had the voice. And I think what gave me something there that I didn't have before is that I allowed a sense of humor to take over, a sense of absurdity—that was the spirit of the thing. "I, Hatchet Jack, do leaveth my Barr rifle to whatever finds it. Lord hope it be a white man."

So you wrote Jeremiah Johnson*, but then you weren't able to sell it.*
No, I wrote it for nothing. I wrote it for $5,000. And then I was offered a deal to rewrite a Western script *[Skin Game]* for $17,000. But Francis [Ford Coppola] had this Zoetrope deal at Warner Bros. and asked me, "How much do you need to live on?" I said, "$15,000." He said, "Well, I'll get you $15,000 to do your Vietnam thing. You and George [Lucas]," because George was going to direct it. He offered that wonderful fork in the road where I could go do my own thing rather than just rewrite some piece of crap that would probably be rewritten by somebody else. That was the most important decision I made in my life as a writer. That sort of steered me onto the path of doing my own work and being a little more like a novelist. Today I see writers making the exact opposite decision, taking the $17,000 again and again.

Two grand more.
I see them always taking the two grand more because it'll help their careers, they'll get to work with a real big producer, they'll be in a big office, they will be working on a greenlit movie, and it's going to star someone who's hot. They always take that job, every time. Whereas I tackled an unpopular subject that no one was going to make a movie about where the chances were really slim that I could pull it off. There was no book, nothing but me and the blank page. And that was wonderful because I had followed my heart. One of the nicest times in my life was writing *Apocalypse Now*.

What kind of guidance did you get from Coppola or anyone else in writing it?
None. Francis was very good about that. Francis wanted us to be artists, like him. He didn't want to interfere with anybody. He wanted you to go out and write your scripts and if you couldn't do it, if you went to him and whined and said, "Gee, I need some help," he didn't have much regard for that. You know, he expected you to be independent and he was giving you a wonderful opportunity to be independent of anybody else. But people did go to him and complain and whine all the time. All the time.

Had you thought about Apocalypse Now *at all in the interim?*
Yeah, somewhat. I never think about any story too much. I sort of know where they're going and I know specific things are going to happen to them along the way, but I don't know when they go do this andwhen they go do that, because if you do know all that, for me anyway—I mean other people write it all down on little cards—I don't want to know what's going to go on. I want the people to surprise me each day. I have no idea how I'm going to make transitions from one scene to another. I have no idea where they're really going to go and the thing I just wrote. On my latest script, *Manila John*, I had a voyage of discovery because I had my own ideas on who this character was and what he did and in the middle of writing it I found the man who knew him and who saw him die and idolized him back then, and he completely changed my mind about what I thought the script was really going to be, and that was wonderful.

How do you approach getting inside the heads of your characters?
You get to know them and perceive the way they'd say things and view things. Like *Manila John*, he comes from New Jersey, so he's always going to call a girl a dame. You know? A dame, a broad, or a doxie.

Did you go back in then on Apocalypse Now *and rethink what you had written?*
I didn't need to because I had left it open. I knew what the beginning would be. I knew sort of what the end would be, and I knew certain things would happen in the middle. It was the same with *Apocalypse Now*. I knew where it was going to end, I knew Kurtz was at the end of the river, but I didn't know how we were going to get to him. I knew somewhere along the line there would be the first obstacle, this character Kharnage [Kilgore in the film] who was really like the Cyclops in *The Iliad*, and then there are the Sirens, who are *Playboy* bunnies. But basically I didn't know where I'd find them, or what would happen. When I was writing *Apocalypse Now* I wanted them to meet people and become involved in the war, but I could never think of anything that was appropriate. Every time I would get them into a firefight or an ambush or something it would degenerate into just another meaningless Vietnam war scene. They had to be thrown into the war at its most insane and most intense.

Did Coppola just tell you to go for it, pull out all the stops and realize your vision? Be out there as far as you can be?
Absolutely. Absolutely. You have to also discipline yourself to pull it in afterwards and make sense of it. But you've really got to go for it. The worst thing about today's films is the complete lack of ambition. I mean, look at all these independent films that should be interesting. Most of them are about a bad dope deal in the Valley. The rest of them are about a homosexual love affair that's misunderstood. There's really just not a lot of ambition there.

   I find the violent films to be particularly onerous. There's a lot of shooting and killing, and people turning on each other and they're kind of supposed to be the film noir of the '90s, but they're not. They're all about punks. Everybody gets killed and you sit there and say, "God, I'm glad that person got wasted," you know. "At least I got to see it."

Some brain on the wall.
Yeah, at least you got to see that guy get knifed and that bitch get shotgunned to death. You know, I got my money's worth.

So, did you do any rewrites on Apocalypse Now *with Lucas after your draft was done?*
No. People didn't do that in those days. They didn't sit there and interfere. They took things for what they were, and when Francis and I rewrote the script it was when it was being made. The script remained the same 'til Francis really decided to make the movie, and then we went in and reexamined everything. That was part of a process.

Do you think you've gotten enough credit for your writing on Apocalypse Now*?*
Oh, yeah. I get full credit for the movie. I mean, I get credit for writing the movie. And Francis gets the credit for directing, which he certainly deserves because no one could have—if I'd have made it or anybody would have made it, it would have never been as good as that. But I get the credit and it's a Milius movie. It's not a Coppola movie. A Coppola movie is *The Godfather*. He was the one who said very early on, "I will make this movie more like you than you are, you know? I made *Mario Puzo's The Godfather* more like Mario Puzo than he is." There's a thing that Francis did in this movie and in *The Godfather*, a sense of the theatrical. A sense of grand, epic storytelling that none of us could have done. So ultimately, he gets the full credit. I mean, I get credit as the writer, I get the credit like Mankiewicz did in writing *Citizen Kane*. But what is *Citizen Kane* without Orson Welles making it?

It just seems to me that the perception is out there, perhaps fanned by Bahr and Hickenlooper's documentary Hearts of Darkness, *that Coppola was out there in the Philippines writing the script and essentially improvising what he didn't write.*
No, I think I get enough credit. Hickenlooper's just trying to kiss Francis's ass all the time. When the movie first came out, Francis tried to hog all the credit, but not any more. He gives the credit to me and to everybody else, because everybody who worked on that movie suffered and has credit for it. It stained everybody's lives. We were messing with the war and war is sacred. There's something about that war. It's just, you know, obscene and sacred. You mess with it, you're going to get your life fucked with.

In the past you've called Apocalypse Now *a young man's film. Do you think you could write its equal today?*
I'd be different, you know. I'd be a lot different. *Apocalypse* had a certain outrageousness to it. It went headlong into things. The worst thing I could do now would be to try to do something like *Apocalypse*. You can't go back and recapture that power.

It seems to me a real tragedy that Hollywood has such a focus on youth and young writers in touch with today's culture, but they aren't looking for those kinds of powerful stories. They want Big Daddy II *or something.*
Well, those people are mostly not capable of delivering real power either. Youth today has a sense of rightful entitlement. They don't have ambition. They don't have a draft. They don't have a Vietnam. They don't have any of this. They're not going to face that kind of stuff, and they don't want any part of it. So they don't make it for themselves either. Their idea of great adventure is extreme sports, diving off bridges with bungee cords. They don't go off and do something real. There are no youth movements. There aren't any revolutions being fought today. They're all interested in getting their piece. You know, being where it's at. Being hip. Looking good. Getting that BMW.

You're sitting in an interesting position in the debate on violence in our society. As both a board member of the NRA and also a filmmaker—the liberals are shooting one way and the conservatives the other. And it would seem like you're in the cross-roads there.
Or in the crossfire! Any way I move I get hit, but I'm used to that.

What are your thoughts on that issue?
I think that they're absolutely right about the films. I think there's nothing you can do about it except embarrass these people into not making these films that are cheap exploiters of violence. I think it's part of the decay of our society. You could look at the Roman games as something similar—they started out as admittedly brutal athletic contests, where people went to see great skill, and then they turned into sadism. And that's what's happening to us. There is no doubt that the approach to violence in most movies and in video games desensitizes children and turns them into heartless killers. A lot of that has to do also with the society the media has perpetrated: the cult of celebrity.

I make violent films and I'll continue to make violent films. But my films have a strict code of morality, as strict as the Code of the Samurai. There are extreme consequences for action in my films. I mean, my characters pay terrible consequences for doing certain things. For example, *Jeremiah Johnson* goes through the Indian graveyard and he loses his family, he's cast into the winds for the rest of his life. He may be a legend but he has no place to sleep. And, you know, there's a tremendous consequence for violence. There's a tremendous consequence for action of any kind, good or bad. That's what the world is. But in movies like *Eraser* or *Die Hard III* or even *Die Hard*, there's no consequences for actions. It's all bullshit.

It's clear from your past interviews that you've been concerned about this issue for quite some time.
Yeah. I think it's a cheapening of human life. These filmmakers deserve what they're getting. They deserve it much more than the gun lobby. We had all the laws. Those kids at Columbine broke the law.

What did you bring to the rewrite you did on Dirty Harry*?*
Oh, I brought the whole thing.

But you didn't get credit.
I should have gotten the full credit. That's another one of my great Writers Guild complaints—I didn't send in my letter for the arbitration. I didn't even know in those days that if you didn't consent to the agreed credits that you should send in something. And that's why I didn't get credit. I was off making *Judge Roy Bean*. Clint [Eastwood] always asked me, "Do you want to take your name off?" That's what he always thought. You know who else did a draft after me and probably should have gotten credit? Terry Malick.

With that film and Magnum Force, *were you being pulled along in your storytelling by the public consciousness or did you feel that you were out there leading it a little bit?*
No, I felt I was leading, definitely. Because that's what was fun about it, writing this outrageous story of Dirty Harry, you know, who breaks the law and is a criminal who's on our side. He will commit murder, if necessary, to get the job done, you know. And then you do the next one that's the reverse of that. You've got a whole bunch of young guys who are sort of a death squad who are going out and doing that and where do you draw the line, you know? So it was fun to do the flip side of that.

Do you think the character Dirty Harry was consistent through both movies?
Pretty much. The thing that I liked about him was he was God's lonely man. The way I conceived him was his only relationships were with hookers, and that he didn't have too many friends. He had partners, you know, who usually got killed. When he went to his apartment, there was nothing in his apartment except a couple of awards on the wall for meritorious service or something, some old food in the ice box, and a bed to sleep on, and maybe another room where there was a bench to clean his gun. That was all Harry had.

You've said that in Hollywood it's okay to fuck people over and to lie to them. How do you think someone should approach working in this industry?
It's okay to fuck people over and lie to them once you've established the ground rules. But you know, you must have a code of behavior, a code of honor. If you don't have a code of behavior, you will not be strong. You know, you don't have that code of behavior because there's an absolute morality or because the other guys can even respect it. It's because if you don't have something to measure yourself by, you have no way of gaining strength. If everything is permissible, if it's situational ethics, there's no way to gain any strength of character. And it isn't for Hollywood. It's for you. It's so you can survive. They don't give a shit. It's just so you can survive and do good work. It won't get you anything. No one else will ever recognize it. They'll think it's a pain in the ass. But it gives you strength of character and you have to have strength of character to finish what you start.

   You know, you can steal somebody's work, but sooner or later you have to face the blank page. And when you face the blank page, you'd better have the right stuff. As a writer, that's the most important thing. There's nothing else that I could say about writing that's as important as that. I mean, you can sit there and you can talk about technique, you can talk about feelings of people, you can talk about being smart, clever, you can talk about these guys like this guy Ron Bass who has all these people writing for him. All that shit means nothing because when you face the blank page, when you're sitting there and looking at the pad with those lines across it, you've got to have the stuff to call upon. And you have to build the stuff, little by little, out of something. Out of human experience, out of a lot of other things. That mad confidence has got to come from somewhere.

I like that. What does a screenwriter owe his audience beyond a satisfying tale?
A certain honesty. A screenwriter has to be able to put it on the line. I didn't have another agenda. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to make me rich. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to make me loved. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to be hip. I did the best I could and put out something that I believed in.

Not the code of society.
Absolutely not. I mean, the code of society is almost always wrong. You know, the code of society is the code of the lemming. The lemming or the Yuppie. The stinking bureaucrat.

You have a certain flamboyance. Do you think that helped you in building your career in Hollywood?
Yeah. I think that all the people who are successful in Hollywood have a flair for flamboyance. Francis certainly does, he's the most flamboyant of all. And I guess you could say Spielberg has a flamboyance in a way. If you don't have that kind of flair for being a showman, for being an entertainer, then you're not going to live with this business very well. But to be truly flamboyant you have to be about something.

It's interesting that you bring up Spielberg because many of his films have been about very little.
You mean like *The Lost World*… yeah, I don't like those movies and I've never really understood the success of those "roller-coaster ride" movies, but he's amazingly good at that. He's really skilled as a director. For example, *Saving Private Ryan* is filled with scenes that just don't work. But he makes them work.

You did some rewriting on that, didn't you?
I did a little bit of stuff on it. But Spielberg makes it work through the power of his skills and you've got to give him credit. I was absolutely stunned by how he was able to take things that on paper were just disastrous, even boring, and made them exciting. And, of course, the best parts of the film, where he really let himself loose, were the battles.

The scripts of yours that I've read have an interesting style. It's very much cast against the current Hollywood style where writers are warned against long, descriptively detailed passages and long speeches that are meaningful. Did that style just flow out of you, or is it something that you saw elsewhere?
No, I suppose it came from a real desire to do novels. Yeah, today is minimalist, isn't it? I don't know how they do it. Michael Blake does it, but it's very poetic the way he does it.

Well, he's a very good writer. That's the difference there. There are not a lot of writers anymore who have any kind of career longevity.

That's true. That's what I've been saying. I've got twenty-three, twenty-four credits. I'm probably the last writer that'll ever have twenty-four credits. Because the system is such that it just isn't going to happen anymore.

How do you think the Hollywood system has changed to deny writers a body of work?

The writers are part and parcel to that. It's like Kruschev said, "We'll sell you the rope with which you will hang yourself." The writers have done that. They've bought the rope and proceeded to put it around their necks. You know? Kruschev was absolutely right. Capitalism has brought this about. We pay you a lot of money for your spec script and then we're going to pay you to go away. And we're going to pay me or Robert Towne to come in and rewrite it, you know, and you guys will do it because we're going to pay you so much. You know, that kind of thing. And it's evil all the way around. It's evil because the guy who wrote it is never going to get his work done and it's evil because Robert Towne and I should be doing something better than rewriting some jerk's fucking spec script.

Do you find the anonymity of rewrite work exasperating?

I don't even think about it. You take the job because it's money and then hopefully within the job you get to do a couple of scenes where you can really, you know, you can do good riff. Like a musician, you get a couple of good riffs and it feels good, and then you just take the money and go off to another gig.

Can you think of any writers who are building a body of work that's discernible as their own?

Paul Thomas Anderson.

The writer/director.

Writers… no. None at all. Many writers in this business are afraid to just write, to do different things. Because the business is such a prestige-oriented, posturing enterprise, people feel that everything they write has got to be special. The idea is that every time I write I should be in terror because of how good I'm supposed to be. Instead, my attitude that is I should go out and write more. I'm doing a lot of different things now. Because they're not letting me make *Manila John* as a theatrical feature, I'm going to have to do it on HBO as a two-hour cable movie. I'm probably going to make *The Alamo* at HBO, but I might have to go somewhere else. I had to do *The Rough Riders* at Turner because nobody at Warner Bros. would let me make it. I'm not going to be held prisoner to the studio pecking order of who's cool and who's not cool.

Does writing and directing a movie on cable give you currency in the Industry?

None at all. Absolutely zero. Nobody in the business saw *Rough Riders*, and I don't really care. I'm nearing the end of my career, so I don't really give a

shit. You know, I've got enough to get me through, and I'm more concerned with the work I do, whether or not I get to tell a sacred story of the Marine Corps, whether I get to tell the Curtis LeMay story.

You've rewritten a lot of screenplays by other writers for the films you've directed. How do you go about making the material your own?
You have to find something in it that you really like.

Because something like Red Dawn*, which is very much your movie, was written by…*
An original writer…and he was very nice throughout the whole process and then he slammed the movie when it came out. So I just wrote him out of the human race.

Was that just a script that you had a chance to see and it…
No, they came to me from MGM and said, "We want you to direct this. So I brought the writer in and said, "This isn't going to be easy for you to take because, you know, you're kind of full of yourself, but I'm going to take this and I'm going to make it into my movie. And you're just going to have to sit back and watch, and it may not be too pleasant. My advice is to take the money you have and spend it on a young girl. Enjoy getting laid and write another script. Because this isn't going to be fun to watch."

Did you change his script significantly?
A lot, yeah. His script was kind of like *Lord of the Flies*, and I kept some of that, but my script was about the resistance. And my script was tinged by the time, too. We made it really outrageous, infinitely more outrageous than his vision. And to this day, it holds up, because people ask, "What's that movie about?" And I say that movie's not about the Russians, it's about the federal government.

A little subversion there [laughs]. Have you ever worked "in the room" with another writer on a script?
Years and years ago when I did *The Devil's 8* [with Willard Huyck]. And then I work with young writers. I give them ideas sometimes if I'm overseeing a project, but I haven't seen very many writers who ever can really deliver.

What's the best atmosphere for a writer to work in?
Well, I think Francis was right. I think that you've got to say to the guy, "Go out and do your best and I'll be here to help you. You can bounce stuff off, but I'm not going to be here to pick you up. I'm not going to be here to tell you what to do." Because the minute you start telling them what to do, you've lost. [John] Huston told me something that was very interesting. He said, "You have a very strong personality and you can impose that on other people." He said, "You can destroy people right and left by imposing your personality on them, because you just have a dominant personality." He said, "I have a dominant personality and I destroy actors all the time. And I enjoy

it because I'm a sadist. But it's not a good thing to do to get the best creative work out of people." As he got older he became less tolerant, you know? And as he said, he was a sadist. He enjoyed torturing people, you know, and so that's what he entertained himself with sometimes.

Is there enough mentoring done in Hollywood?
No. Hollywood is a very lonely place. It's such a competitive environment. I started out with a bunch of friends who went to school with me, but it became a very competitive place. Who has got the biggest grosses, who gets the biggest salary, who is on the "A" list, who's hot and who's not? So much so there is no dialogue among artists. We're totally out there like the mountain men, looking up every little crevice to see if there's somebody waiting with a rifle.

The Writers Guild should encourage more of a community among writers.
Everybody hates the Writers Guild, me most of all. The Writers Guild has treated me throughout my career as a non-person, deliberately denying me credit. They can see me as some sort of right-wing character that's a threat to western civilization, a threat to good liberal western civilization anyway. And I know that. I know that for a fact. They were always sort of that way. I probably did my part. I probably shoved it in their faces, you know. And I do love the fact that I'm not an intellectual. I mean, people ask, "Where did you go to school?" I didn't go to Harvard, you know. I went to USC. I remember on *The Wind and the Lion*, Candy Bergen said, "I can't believe that just some surfer wrote this." I said, "Smile when you say that."

You would think the Writers Guild would want to encourage writers who have a voice, who are out there saying something original.
I would think that the Writers Guild should take me, first of all, and say, "This is an endangered species. We should do everything we can to save and protect John Milius, the Yeti. There is only one Yeti and we should save and protect him. We should form a committee to save and protect John Milius."

Well, they might form a committee. I mean, they're big on that…
They'll form a committee to lynch me. Right now they're trying to do an outreach thing to me and Francis. I said, "It's a little late."

Trying to bring you back into the fold?
Yeah. I said, "What we've become is exactly what you've made us—rogue males. We don't need the herd. We can get along without it."

You've said that you've felt blacklisted from the Industry. Do you still feel that way?
Like I say, I'm the only Yeti they've got. I'm still at large.

Are you still a dangerous man?
I don't know. I'm getting old. But I'm still a Yeti.

Christopher Nolan

Thirty-year-old Londoner Christopher Nolan gained critical notice in the U.S. with his debut feature *Following*, which premiered at the 1999 New Directors/New Films co-sponsored by The Film Society of Lincoln Center and New York's MoMA. Picked up for distribution by the aptly named Zeitgeist, it went on to successful engagements in New York and Los Angeles. Nolan returns now with *Memento*, an ambitious "dis-linear" (Nolan's term) thriller dealt to us in reverse chronology by a protagonist (Guy Pearce) coping with a trauma-induced condition that prevents him from making new memories. *Memento* also stars, in abrasive counterpoint, Joe Pantoliano as the wily Teddy, who's capable of conjuring up enough memories to go around; and Carrie-Anne Moss in an uber-noir touch, a babe who forgot to play either dumb or blonde.

Based on a short story by his brother Jonathan ("Memento Mori," published in the March 2001 issue of *Esquire*), Nolan wrote *Memento* as a film that could be shot on a low budget, and principal photography was completed in twenty-five days. The script made quite an impression while circulating in Hollywood, but Nolan never intended it as a writing sample. As he told interviewer Debra Eckerling in *Scr(i)pt* magazine, "A lot of people in town were very interested in the script, but were afraid to make it…. It was always intended as something I absolutely had to make." *Memento* would be accepted into dramatic competition at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, and at press time Nolan had won the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award.

Since moving to Los Angeles three years ago, Nolan has written one screenplay on assignment: an adaptation of Ruth Rendell's novel *The Keys to the Street* for Fox Searchlight. And then, of course, there's *Insomnia*. Nolan is directing Hillary Seitz's adaptation of the 1997 Norwegian thriller, which will once again plunge Nolan into noir territory. This time the director is follow-

ing sleepless homicide detective Will Dormer as he tracks a murderer in Alaska. When Will makes a fatal mistake, he soon finds himself blackmailed by the very man he's trying to catch. Nolan has also co-written *Batman Begins* (with David Goyer).

Having already stirred up a vigorous barrage of chat room discussion through a cleverly manipulated promo web site www.otnemem.com (memento spelled backwards), and generating a lot of positive buzz at the 2001 Sundance film festival, *Memento*—though something completely different—is the first thriller since Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* to qualify for the "smart and smarter" genre category. Like Singer, Nolan began his career with homemade mini-epics at the age of ten. Later, while studying English literature at University College in London, Nolan experimented with numerous three- or four-minute 16mm films. Of *The Usual Suspects*, Nolan says, "I enjoyed it a lot. Actually, it's a film that my brother and I have had many spirited debates about. I was surprised that so many people have compared *Memento* to it, until someone explained what it is: it may not be the same type of story, but it's the kind of film that you see with friends and want to talk about afterward." We'll all be talking about *Memento* for some time to come.

Bryan Singer has said of The Usual Suspects *that he'd cross-referenced his characters' interactions and plot twists on a computer. How did you keep* Memento*'s complicated plot under control?*
I tend to do most of it in my head. But what I found particularly useful—since I had read the script in the order that everything appears on the screen, because I wanted it to have a somewhat conventional underpinning beneath the complex structure, or actually wanted a fairly conventional rhythm to what happens when—I wrote it from page one to page 125, and when I finished it to my satisfaction, I would go back and reorder it the way it is on screen to check the logic of it. Then when other people got involved, particularly the actors, they provided a very tight logic filter on the script. Guy Pearce in particular, because he's an incredibly meticulous performer. He won't do anything that doesn't make sense to him, so if there was anything that didn't quite add up he would question it, and if we discovered an illogicality, we would come up with a solution for it together. He helped enormously with the detail of the logic of the piece.

Well, it's so tightly wound, and there's the narrative displacement.
There's certainly the unreliable narrator.

What about the short story that it was based on?
The short story was written by my brother Jonathan. I think he had a rough draft of it, but he told it to me verbally while we were driving from Chicago to L.A. I asked if I could go ahead and write a screenplay of it, while he kept writing his story, because it was taking him a long time to get it into the form he wanted, and he said fine. We both agreed that the most interesting

approach to his concept by far was to tell the story from the first person point of view, putting the audience or reader right into the mind of the protagonist. My solution to that, which took a while to come up with, was to tell the story backwards so that it denied the audience the information that the protagonist is denied. I asked myself how do I tell a first person story through the eyes of someone who, when he meets someone, does not know when or how they've met [before] or whether that person should be trusted? The answer was to put the audience in that position.

Jonathan's short story takes a slightly different approach and makes for an interesting comparison to the screenplay. In narrative terms, one of the things that I found very satisfactory with what we've done together was convincing him to do the web site for the film and to try to provide some further information for the world of the film, a kind of three-dimensional narrative where people can view the information in whatever order seems most interesting and follow threads of thought, using items and objects from the film and incorporating some of the ideas for the backstory from the short story that we weren't able to use in the film. The web site provides an interesting link between the world of the film and the world of his short story.

Let's go back and talk about your previous film, Following. *Did you have a completed script when you started shooting that film?*
Yes, I did. One of the differences between the two films was the approach I took, because they're both non-linear, or dis-linear, structures if you like, because *Memento* is pretty linear, it's just backwards. With *Following* I determined the structure that I wanted to use, then I wrote the script chronologically and reordered the scenes according to the structure I wanted. One of the reasons I wrote *Memento* differently was that I had to do a tremendous amount of rewriting in order to get the flow that I wanted within its fragmented structure. With *Following* I had a pretty tight script in terms of dialogue, but if you compare the original script to what we filmed, the script was developing all along to accommodate the way we had to shoot it. We knew this going in, the film was shot sort of documentary style: 16mm, using mostly available light, and we shot one day a week. It took us about a year to finish all of it. The dialogue is very close to the finished film, but a lot of the stage directions and indications of locations have been changed because quite often we wouldn't find out where we'd be shooting until the day before. So it's kind of fun to go back and look at the way the script was written to accommodate that production method. I guess you'd call it a modular script, since it was very easy to cut scenes from it because they didn't connect in a conventional way, but that was always my intention in putting the film together: to accommodate the spontaneous way that we were going to have to shoot.

What was it that attracted you to the story of Memento? *And is Leonard's "condition" a real condition?*
It is a real condition—anterior grade memory loss—but there are other names

for it. What attracted me to the initial concept was the metaphorical potential that this condition provides, where you have someone who can't make new memories but knows exactly what he's looking for and what he's trying to do. And the concept of revenge; what the inability to remember does to the whole idea of revenge. To me, it raises all kinds of very interesting ideas about whether revenge exists in any real sense outside of your own head, or whether it's your own personal satisfaction and whether it has any value outside of that.

I was interested in taking this extreme situation and using it as a filter or prism through which to view some familiar tropes of film noir, because, as you say, it's very difficult to write a fresh thriller these days. Combinations have been done, but I felt that we had a situation here that would allow us to freshen up and re-awaken some of the neuroses behind the familiar elements. You know, the betrayal, the double-cross, the femme fatale—all of these things function very powerfully in the way they were intended in the old film noir by exaggerating our fears and insecurities. I felt that by taking this particular approach and filtering it through this concept, we would be able to reawaken some of the confusion and uncertainty and ambiguity that those types of character reversals used to have, but lost because we've come to expect these kinds of surprises. I think what we've managed to do, certainly what we were trying to do by using that structure, was to try to see things through that perspective. I think that allows us to exaggerate the confusion and fear and uncertainty that any good noir protagonist needs to go through. Allowing that to be created by his own mind was a very exciting concept to me.

You've talked about Memento *being about the futility of revenge. That theme is brought to the forefront when Leonard asks, "How am I supposed to heal if I can't feel time?" Can Leonard heal, or is he trapped in the cycle?*
I think maybe the answer to that is contained in the question itself. To a certain extent Leonard can feel time, but not consciously. One of the more challenging aspects of the film is that while it embraces Leonard's view of his own condition, the events of the narrative question those as well. His view of the narrative is very, very simple. It's the one-line pitch you would give of the film: the difference between short-term and long-term memory. Short-term memory you absorb an habitual behavior that you translate into unconscious routine. The story presents Leonard's view of these things as being simple, but then the events of the narrative call those things very much into question.

The issue of his feeling time is very much one of those areas where it's probably not as simple as he's saying, or as certain psychologists would say, about how the brain works, because at some level he is able to feel a certain staleness to his situation. If he is aware on some level of the degree to which he is tattooed and not completely surprised by this, there must be some awareness of the passage of time, even though consciously he has no awareness of exactly how much time has passed which is why he's an interesting character. That's one of the challenging areas of the film: the disparity between his view of his

own condition—which is how we present it in the film—and what we see unfold, and the tension that creates. Which suggests a more realistic degree of complexity to his situation and to these issues of memory and identity.

If Leonard Shelby can't form new memories since his head injury, how does he know he has "this condition"?
He knows he has this condition through what he refers to as conditioning. In the course of my research, I found out that there are all these different types of memory in different parts of the brain, used to store different types of information. One of the most powerful is habitual memory—learning through repetition. Somebody like Leonard has to have enough focus to make himself continually and habitually concentrate on the idea that he has no short-term memory. That's where the "Remember Sammy Jankis" tattoo comes into play, in order to remind him of that story. [Protagonist Leonard investigated Jankis's insurance claim prior to becoming injured.] It was very important that the tattoo be in a place Leonard was constantly seeing, so it was on his hand rather than on his body as the other tattoos are.

For example, if you have no short-term memory it's possible to learn how to play the piano—you just wouldn't remember taking the lessons. And you wouldn't remember you knew how to play the piano. You would just sit down and start to play. What we aimed for in the film was a balance for when Guy [Pearce, who plays Leonard] takes his shirt off and sees the tattoos. There is this moment of discovery, but it's not totally fresh. He kind of knows the tattoos are there: when he's in the bathroom and he sees that it says "THE FACTS" on his wrist, he kind of knows what that is. But he doesn't know how he knows. What I liked about having that assumption of instinctive behavior, that assumption of knowledge, is that it implies quite a lot. It implies that what we're seeing is a later stage, a later cycle, in his story.

Do you think the genre allows for more three-dimensional characters?
Certainly the crime story does. Looking back on, say, the novels of Jim Thompson and how that's been applied to film, for me, there's a very strong form of characterization in the noir/thriller genre. It relates back to the historical model of character always having to be defined through action. In all other genres of cinema it sort of comes down to people expecting characterization to come through dialogue, or, you know, characters talking about who they were ten years before, or what's happened to them in their lives. The thriller is the one genre where it's absolutely demanded that character be defined through action. You want to be surprised by certain characters. You want to be finding out through what somebody does who they really were. To me, that's a strong approach to characterization and it's quite attractive.

What about the non-linear structure? Do you find that better suited for the noir and thriller genre than others?
It's funny; that's another reason I've worked in this genre. Certainly the

thriller is the genre in which the audience is most accepting of non-linear devices such as the flashback, such as a character sitting down to tell a story and flashing back within that. It's familiar in that genre and it works very well there, so the audience is very accepting of it, whereas it's probably harder for an audience to accept it in, say, a love story or a drama just centering around a person's love life.

I've seen Betrayal *on stage but not the film made from it, and I know that certain things can be done in theatre that would put a movie audience to sleep.* Betrayal *isn't fragmented or non-linear. It's simply told in reverse chronology, and it works very well on stage.*

In film terms, I think the thriller audience is looking for that kind of unconventional structure or experimentation more than in other genres. I can't speak for other filmmakers, and I've no idea how it would apply to someone like Bryan Singer, but I know from my own point of view, I'm only thirty years old, so I haven't experienced all that life has to offer. The thriller provides a very effective genre for someone a bit younger to work with, because you can take the fears, insecurities, and hopes from your everyday life and make them interesting enough to write about, and you can elevate it to a more universal audience by pushing it into the realm of melodrama and into the thriller genre by exaggerating all those fears that you feel.

How did you keep Memento*'s complicated plot straight? Talk some about your writing technique here.*

Unlike *Following*, I wrote Memento on a computer, which certainly made it easier to keep things in check as to how it would read in the chronological sense. Basically I felt that the strongest approach I could take, once I'd figured out the structural conceit, was to sit down and imagine what I wanted to see on the screen, as it would appear on the screen. One of the reasons I was able to do that was that even though the film is seemingly very complex, the story is actually very simple, and that's part of the point of the movie: we're taking a relatively simple story and filtering it through somebody's very unusual way of perceiving the world. That perceptual distortion of not being able to make new memories was always very interesting to me, far more so than a conventional amnesia story whereby somebody is making new memories, but they don't know who they are. They could be anybody and they don't know what's happened in the past. This is kind of a complete new version of that, where you have someone who knows everything about himself, all the objective information that's supposed to tell us who we are, but he can't connect that with his present self. That was a fascinating conundrum, something I hadn't really seen before. So the whole dynamic of the script is aimed at taking a really very simple story and putting the audience through the perceptual distortion that Leonard suffers, thereby making this simple story seem incredibly complex and challenging, the way it would be for someone with this condition. Which isn't to say that

there aren't all kinds of complexities at the end of the story, but the basic plotting is actually very simple.

At what stage did you start showing it to producers?
I had a very long first draft. I wouldn't even call it a first draft because it wasn't really something I was prepared to send out. This working draft was very long, about 170 pages, and it was a lot more complicated.

This was based on what your brother had told you while driving cross-country?
Yes. He'd sent me an early draft of his story, a very short draft, but I sat down and wrote the script from it. I showed it to my wife and brother and a few people, and a guy named Aaron Ryder, who works for Newmarket Films, which actually wound up making the film. He's a good friend of mine, and I showed it to him, saying this isn't the real first draft, but can you give me your thoughts on it. He gave me some fantastic notes, which made me realize that it definitely had to be a lot shorter. I kind of knew this anyway—shorter and simpler. I got it down to about 127 pages before I officially showed it to any agents and producers. I got an agent through it and talked to various producers, but then Aaron stepped in and New Market optioned the script just as *Following* was being shown at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1998.

Then you've been working on it a long time.
It seems like a long time. Actually, compared to most films, it all happened pretty fast. I moved to LA in July of 1997, that was when my brother told me the story in the car. I then took another six months to kind of think about it and start writing, then I guess we first optioned it in 1998 and started looking for who we could cast in it.

It must have gone through a few drafts. Talk about the rewrite process.
It was good, because I had a big bulky first draft, and I felt like I'd cracked a lot of the more challenging issues, particularly the structural issue, so I felt very solid in terms of the bigger issues. It was really a process of combining things, taking two scenes and putting them together. The film deals a lot with hotel and motel rooms, and I think in the first draft I had him staying at three different hotels and all the different rooms that he'd gone through and come back to. I wound up having to combine these and get it down to one motel in which he's been conned into renting two different rooms. That kind of simplification and continually trying to make it simpler and simpler, because as a writer, particularly in the thriller genre, you have so much advantage over the audience. You have a year to write the thing, whereas the audience has ninety minutes to digest it. You have such a tremendous advantage, you have to be a little careful about not putting too much in there. I mean, I think *Memento* is an incredibly dense film, and people are certainly finding it very challenging. The finished film is the simplest version I ever had.

Did the producers have any significant notes?

Yes, they did, particularly in regards to the end. We wound up talking a lot to the producers about how much exposition we really wanted at the end of the film and how much detail we wanted to go into in terms of the bigger questions, because in my brother's story and in certain earlier drafts of the screenplay, I did not go too far in addressing certain questions that the film does address at the end.

In talking to the producers it became clear to me that I could actually enhance the concepts I was dealing with by providing more information about some of the big questions—you know, who killed Leonard's wife and that sort of thing. What became clear to me in talking to the producers and the actors—I talked a lot with Guy Pearce and Joe Pantoliano about the final scene—is that because of the film's structure, because of the terms of the film in which the audience is really forced to make a lot of decisions and to question everything they're seeing, providing exposition at the end actually makes it less clear and more complex in an interesting way. At least to me, interesting, because the audience is being given potential answers to questions, but really isn't in any way able to judge the truth about any of it.

As a result of talking to the producers and thinking about the issues, the final scene between Guy and Joe became more and more like the conventional scene at the end of a thriller where the bad guy essentially says to the hero, "I'm going to kill you anyway, so I may as well tell you, et cetera…" To me, it's great because he can tell Leonard whatever he wants, because he's not going to remember it anyway. It's the perfect reason to give out all this exposition, because the audience is put in a position of hanging on Teddy's every word and saying, "Do I believe this or not?" What's interesting is that we take this character that Joey has done in other movies—the unreliable, mischievous friend: Do I trust him or not?—and he becomes the character the audience is focused on in terms of do we trust him? Do we believe what he's saying or not? For me that's a very frightening concept and really a kind of interesting one. It's a great way of taking those things you've seen in other thrillers and making them important. I love what Joey did in that scene, in a way that it's usually not played, and is absolutely crucial to the audience's interpretation of the end of the movie. He tells Leonard a lot of things he doesn't remember and isn't necessarily going to want to believe.

You also use a healthy dose of black comedy to leaven Memento*'s darkness.*

These situations are inherently funny, in a very, very dark sense. And hopefully, in creating the reality of it, the things you might find funny about that situation will naturally emerge, without your really having to push them. I'm very pleased that people see the funny side of things. It seemed essential to me—and I talked with Guy a lot about this before we started shooting—that this had to be a guy with some sense of humor about his own situation, otherwise he just wouldn't be able to function. That seemed an essential survival mechanism. And that Guy is able to push us in that direction so that

we don't feel, ever, that we're laughing too much at him, that we're viewing him from a cruel perspective. We're laughing with him. That's very important. That makes it funny rather than tragic the whole time. You need that lightness in the script, because it's such grim material.

We're shown little of Leonard's past, other than the fact that he was an insurance investigator. We see little of his wife before she's killed. What is the drug-dealing connection? Is that just a red herring?
It's a question of putting the audience in sync with the protagonist because this is a criminal activity, a nefarious activity. [Teddy] is creating a suspicious appearance that Leonard is misinterpreting. He's questioning and misinterpreting connections between [others] that he can relate to his own story, but as we find out at the end, they probably don't. So it's kind of a red herring, but a very important one.

What does the use of repetition add to the story?
On a very prosaic level, we use it to express structure and try to orient the audience. As the film progresses, what I've tried to do with some of the repetition is try, either in a humorous way or in a more serious way, to show how the same situation can be viewed very differently, depending on what information you already know up to that point. One example of that would be where he's searching for a pen and Natalie comes in with a bruised face, and he offers to help her out. We see him searching for a pen and then reacting to her entrance in two very, very different ways. I felt that was an important way to express the absolute confusion and uncertainty that he's going through, because the same scene could be interpreted in so many different ways. This is where my interest in the why rather than what, or the relationship of why-to-what, is really fundamental to the movie. At the end of the movie you can show exactly the same thing that the audience has seen before and have them interpret it differently. Like when he skids to a halt in front of the tattoo parlor, and also through the repetition of content, like him looking at his tattoo "Remember Sammy Jankis": that can play very differently from the first time the audience sees it to the final time. And Teddy provides another interpretation of why he keeps referring to that tattoo from the one that Leonard has given us.

Another example of my use of repetition is Leonard's constantly saying that he never said that Sammy Jankis was lying. The first time he says it, it clearly relates to feelings of guilt, and we interpret those feelings in a particular way relating to the story. Later, when he says it to Teddy, we interpret his feelings of guilt rather differently. Repetition helps to highlight the cyclical nature of the story, and to me, that's what the film is aiming toward. It's a way of emphatically pointing something out within the story to help prepare the audience for larger repetitions relating to the murders. [The idea is] to draw the audience to an understanding of the story as being essentially cyclical in nature, so there are exact repetitions, and then there are echoes which suggest the cycle, and

they are intended to work together so that what happens at the end doesn't come as a complete surprise, but seems logical given the terms of the story.

What about the story of Sammy Jankis? Aside from providing us with information about Leonard's past, what is the purpose for the use of this device?
I had always seen the Sammy Jankis story as providing a parallel to Leonard's. It also provided Leonard with the information he would need to cope with his condition. When I conceived this character to exist as he does, it seemed to me that Leonard would need a lot of knowledge about his condition before he actually succumbed to it. So I constructed the a character who had investigated somebody else claiming to have it, and, therefore, had researched it and had knowledge relating to what it was somewhere locked up in his memory.

There's a quote early on in the film regarding memory not being perfect or even reliable. What does this set up for the audience?
For me, it sets up things that come into play later in the film, which is that it's a very bald statement from the protagonist whose memories we are trusting. He himself sits there and says "You can't trust memory. It's an interpretation, not a record." I felt that as the script was almost bound to start calling into question certain aspects of memory, including his long-term memory and his visualization of things, which blurred the distinction between visualization and memory. To play fair with the audience, you had to have somebody say this in a bald way—not just to have somebody else say it, but to have Leonard himself say it. Which is a nice irony, because once again, it's the disparity between his awareness of himself and his reliance on his perception of the world, so [it seemed like] a nice way of playing fair with the audience, in a sense. Just saying here it is: he's saying it himself.

You've studiously avoided giving away what I call the "objective truth" to the questions the film raises (i.e., Who killed Leonard's wife? Has Leonard found the murderer? What, if anything, of what Teddy discloses at the end of the film is true?). Is there an objective truth in the film that can be derived using strong logic and/or repeat viewings? Or are there only subjective truths?
It's very important for people to understand that I had to know, in my own mind, what the supposedly "objective" facts were, and that I be able to talk to Guy about that. I wouldn't be able to create a subjective experience that contained multiple interpretations without hanging it on a consistent story. But—and we felt this very strongly—the ideas, the terms of the storytelling, are very extreme. They have to be justified, and have to be supported, by the entire film. The terms of the story are that we try as hard as possible to put the audience in the position of somebody with no short-term memory. I felt very strongly that we had to remain true to that for the whole story, and not do what so many films succumb to: twenty minutes before the end of the film they sell out the terms of the storytelling and resolve things in a conventional sense, however daring they've been to that point.

It was very important to never fully depart from the subjective terms of the storytelling that we set up at the beginning. What that means is, the film does not present objective truth. It presents subjective experience. And the audience is left very much in the same position as the protagonist: the audience is in possession of all the facts by the end of the film, but it's very much open to subjective interpretation. Just like real life. What's interesting about that is that films in general are so often used for the cathartic experience of seeing a universe, or experiencing events in a controlled universe, where the objective truth is presented in a way that we never have access to it in everyday life. In everyday life, all trust and objective truth is a complete leap of faith, as it has to be for Leonard. And that's what makes Leonard interesting: he is all of us, and he is a very useful character for highlighting this very human dilemma. We have to take so much in life on trust. We have to trust our own assessment of what objective truth is. Films are comfortable to watch because the filmmaker plays God and presents the objective truth of everything—if not the whole way through, then certainly at the end. And what we were trying to do was not do that. Present the facts, but present them in such a fashion that you have to interpret them very much through the eyes of the protagonist.

You've mentioned that you have a visual memory, and sometimes the truth in Memento *is the matter of action versus words. Is this visual vs. verbal aspect something that you consciously brought to the script while you were writing it?*
It was probably subconscious. By the time I finished writing *Memento*, it was apparent that the different devices I was using to make up for Leonard's memory were either visual or verbal, either written or photographic or tattoos. So you present those to people when the devices are at odds with each other and see what people choose to believe. What divides people along the question of whether Teddy is lying or not is whether they favor their visual memory or their verbal memory, if you like. By visual I mean you've spent the whole film seeing this photograph that says, "Don't believe his lies" underneath it. That's continually hammered home to you. What he says at the end [about Leonard's quest, and Sammy Jankis] is clearly at odds with that. It's a question of which type of memory you favor, which you think has more weight. It seems to be an element in the way people sift through the information of the film.

Does following one of these paths (visual vs. verbal) lead to the objective truth in Memento?
[Laughs] I hope not. Certainly we were trying to construct it in a way so that it isn't that simple. I guess that's all I would want to say on that.

There seems to be no deciding evidence one way or another.
Yeah…we've tried to keep that balance. Personally, I think the way the film sits is this: there's a lot of factual, or supposedly factual, information in the

denouement of the film that suggests different interpretations to different people. It's become clear to me that my view of what happened is definitely contained in the film. Certain people watch the film and tap into that very easily. It was important that, on some level, my view of the facts be in there, but that the terms of the storytelling be such that it never supersedes the viewer's own interpretation. So it's not a question of anything can happen—something did happen [laughs]. And that's a crucial distinction. The degree to which you believe it's imperceptible to the protagonist affects the degree to which we wanted to present it to the audience. My view is in the film, but I as the filmmaker never attempted to put any authoritative stamp of approval on that one view.

That sounds like something that you picked up in your work as a cameraman on the corporate training videos, when you told Newsweek that the videos taught, "The first rule is you never lie. Obfuscate? By all means."
[Laughs] Yeah, well, that's absolutely true. No, you can't lie. That's just the thing. You have a narrator who is questionable, and the terms of his story-telling are questionable. That's fascinating. But it's only fascinating if he is unreliable for an interesting reason, and for a reason that's organic to the story. In the case of Leonard, that's very much the case. If I as the filmmaker am lying to the audience—if the protagonist is lying or dreaming, and that's the reason for his unreliability—that's not really very interesting. But in the case of Leonard, he can't form new memories, and he's been cast adrift in this very peculiar way, and that's what distorts his narration.

There is a touch of the potential dream in the "I've Done It" shots toward the end, which you've said may or may not be something that Leonard is imagining.
Dream and imagination are very different things, you know? It's not presented as reality, necessarily. We were very careful with this. All the images like that are presented very clearly as things that pass through his mind. Which is an important distinction: they're not scenes in the film, they are presented as mental images. It was very important that the film be clear about the terms of the storytelling.

   I'll give you an example. Toward the end we present the same image two different ways: we present the image of him pinching his wife's thigh, and injecting his wife's thigh with insulin. And both, cinematically, are given the same weight. They last the same length of time, they're shot in exactly the same way, they're cut in exactly the same. So we quite explicitly specify that we're showing a mental image. They can't both be true [laughs]. We're pretty clear about our terms. If you view the film with that in mind, you come up with some interesting relationships between the mental images in his mind and how they're used there in the story. Particularly the images of his wife.

In one of the last shots of Leonard he's bare-chested and looking in a mirror and has just a few tattoos—that's the end of the film, the beginning of the story. The

tattoo reads "I've done it," but this tattoo doesn't seem to exist in the rest of the film. This has caused a lot of chat on the Internet, a lot of discussion about the tattoo, and what's interesting is the different ways people interpret it. What interests me is that [many of them] in their own minds, have put together two different parts of the film, which, in a way, is perfect, because what actually happens is that earlier in the film he's bare chested looking in a mirror with Natalie, and she says, "What's that space on your chest?" There's no tattoo, and he says, "That's for when I've found him." At the end, we see an image of Leonard with his wife on the bed. He's not looking in the mirror—it's completely different. And there's a tattoo saying "I've done it." I don't want to go into too much detail about what that is, but different arguments have centered around whether or not it's in his mind or whether it's a memory.

What layers did you add as a director that you felt shouldn't or couldn't go in when you were writing the script?
Some of the mental imagery to which I was referring was specified in the script. But it was very clear to me that it was going to require a good degree of experimentation in the edit suite to determine exactly the rhythm and the frequency of those visual elements that represent Leonard's attempts to remember things, or his flashbacks, or imagination.

We also did quite a lot of experimenting with how we shot those little moments—his wife, for example—because we were looking for odd spontaneous details, and things that you might remember. In films, all too often the concept of memory is represented in a very unrealistic way. I was looking to my own memories and trying to determine, if you remember a person, what is that process? What do you call to mind? As far as I was concerned, it was these odd little moments that were hard to predict. It wasn't necessarily the important moments, or the key moments in a relationship, it was odd little details. We did quite a lot of experimentation in terms of how we worked that into the fabric of the film. There are visual elements that suggest a relationship of Sammy's character and Leonard's recall of that story and his relationship to that character, and those aren't really specified in the script. That was a slightly more experimental thing I needed to do, in terms of presenting those things visually. So there are details like that that aren't necessarily in the script.

The script does have the basic structure. We didn't go too far from that, ever, and we couldn't; it's a very rigid structure. One thing we didn't specify is whether the repeat footage [the shots that provide the beginning- and end-of-scene overlaps in the reverse chronology] would be an identical repeat or would be slightly different in some way. What I wanted to do was present the same thing in a slightly different fashion, because the context in which these repeats are presented is very different—they're either starting a scene or ending a scene—and it seemed like they should have a slightly different approach as to the way they're being used. So some of the repeats are identical and some aren't. That was something that was too detailed to incorporate into the script.

There's also such an enormous element in the performances, particularly in Guy's performance, that you couldn't get into the script. I wanted to leave the script a little more blank, if you like, to allow him to interpret on which level he would be presenting different aspects of the dialogue. As it turned out, he was able to present all the various levels I had in mind, which was great. If I'd specified too closely in the script how he was meant to be, saying how he was meant to be thinking about something, then it would have limited him. He was able to get much more into the performance than was suggested on the page.

One of the key elements in Memento *is that Leonard can lie to himself, as first seen in the prostitute scene.*
It always felt essential to demonstrate in an extreme manner that Leonard can manipulate himself. It was interesting, talking to Guy about the character, because once you start thinking yourself into the mindset of somebody who is living with this condition, fairly early on it occurs to you that there's a liberating element to it. It allows you to forget, as well as makes you forget. We all have things we'd very much like to forget, so it's a blessing as well as a curse. As soon as you start thinking along those lines, you realize that [self-manipulation is] a key element in somebody who is so adept at living with this condition, and has been doing it for some time. They can forget any behavior. They can lie to themselves. In "Memento Mori" my brother very strongly gets across that notion [of the "dialogue" between the present self and the future self]. Right from when he first told me the story, that was very clearly an element. Any time you have a character leaving notes to himself, you very quickly come to the idea of "How much do we trust ourselves? Do we lie to ourselves?" Of course we do. This is a character who can make this really incredibly clear, through his story.

Leonard can make the lies truth, in his particular world.
He can take that to its extreme, taking it beyond the notion of subjective truth and specifically misinform himself for a deliberate purpose.

Following *came out of your personal experience of being burglarized. Did you draw upon any personal experiences when writing* Memento*?*
Everything, really. It was very important that Leonard not be a character who is a medical freak. The whole thing that's interesting about the character is that he's such an Everyman. He's a wonderful means of examining our own process of memory. Research gave me a grounding in memory and the way it works. Then I just looked at myself, and the way I store things in my mind. Once you start examining that process, you rapidly realize how inefficient that system is, and how interpretation is involved; how many different devices you use, such as notes and photographs. It's one of the things that people who enjoy the film tap into, because it makes them think about that in themselves. I realized I use habit and routine. I always keep my keys in

the same pocket. I write things on my hand. Leonard is very much an extrapolation of my own behavior.

These would be the tactics we'd take, the reflexes we'd develop, to adapt if we were struck by this condition.
You would if you'd seen the film [laughs]. If you go to the doctor after suffering a head injury, one of the things they will suggest you do is to systematize your life, to use different types of memory to replace the deficient ones.

With an American mother and British father, you've said you've spent your whole life "trying to be both." You grew up in England, but spent years eight through eleven in Chicago. How did this kind of dual identity and early uprooting inform your philosophies about things like friendship and trust?
I'm not sure, to be quite frank. Growing up in two countries and having parents from two countries has had me think more than I would have otherwise about notions of identity, particularly notions of how we identify ourselves in relation to other people. Certainly *Memento* is very concerned with that notion: somebody looking at the things around him and the places he finds himself in order to identify himself. When my brother told me the notion of the short story, that was one of the things that I was immediately drawn to: the notion of somebody who knows all this objective information about himself—by which we identify ourselves, we're supposed to be able to identify ourselves—but he can't. Viewing the faults in that system, the exceptions to those rules, seemed like a fascinating jumping-off point.

I understand you read magazines backwards, back to front.
Oh, yeah, that's true. I read magazines left-handed. That came up in a conversation I was having with somebody for an interview for a magazine. I'd never really thought of it until that moment, but they said, "Well, that could be an explanation for the whole structure." I thought, "That could be quite right." Because I'm quite used to leafing through magazines back to front, and piecing it together.

The dual national identity, the different ways of processing the world, these seem to define a sense of "otherness" for you.
It's definitely the case that I'm drawn to characters who have an outsider status in the story. They don't quite fit in with the world in which they're functioning, which is very interesting. That may well come from some sense of dislocation; I don't know.

Subjective truth, in one fashion or another, seems to be your forte. With Following, Memento, *and now* Insomnia, *you've focused on shifting allegiances and, sometimes, shifting identities, as well as the slipperiness of the truth. Why investigate those concepts through noir, instead of another genre like drama?*
The noir genre has several key elements that interest me in terms of present-

ing a strong point of view. I'm interested in storytelling that takes place with an intriguing or interesting point of view. What I find about the film noir genre is that it really lends itself to a more extreme storytelling approach. Flashbacks, subjective truth, the genre's not just tolerant of those things, it demands them. You have to be able to present subjective truth to the audience so that you can turn it on its head and surprise people. What that also means is that character winds up being defined by action, which to me is the strongest form of characterization. That's much stronger than a more modern psychological characterization, where you treat your characters as wind-up toys, create a psychology for them, and go off and see what they do. It's more interesting to have character defined through action. And it's more like real life. We don't judge people in everyday life by what they say so much as what they do. So noir is a very strong genre. Narratively it's a fascinating genre, because it allows you to be a little trickier with things. In character terms, film noir demands a very strong form of characterization.

With your most recent protagonists—Bill from Following, *Leonard from* Memento, *and now Will from* Insomnia—*we're following them on this tragic trajectory. Do you find tragedy more interesting than a situation where the characters would have created or found their salvation along the way?*
[Laughs] Well, I'm not sure I would necessarily put Leonard in that category—I think that is open to interpretation. I think there is a way of looking at the story as more positive than that, at least in terms of the notion of agency with that character. He's a very active character; he plays a very active part in his story. But yes, I am interested in the tragic side of things. I'm interested in these stories of increasing psychological intensity, increasing psychological pressure on the protagonist. That's very interesting as an underpinning for a narrative.

How long did it take to get financing and distribution for Memento?
To be honest, it actually came together very quickly. I was very fortunate, and I think a lot of that had to do with just sending the script to the right people at the right time, namely Aaron Ryder at Newmarket, and getting their enthusiasm. I think what was also fortunate was that actors found the script very interesting. They seem much more able to tap into the subjective nature of the story than producers and executives, because they read it from the point of view of a character that they would play. We got much more interest from agencies in terms of actors.

I'm told that Steven Soderbergh told an interviewer that if Memento *couldn't find a distributor, the independent film movement was dead.*
That's such a great thing for him to say. I know him a little since he saw my film and knew we were having some trouble getting it out there [at that point]. Without telling me anything at all, he phoned up a lot of studio people and told them they must see this film, which was great and really help-

ful to me. Soderbergh seems to have the incredible ability to straddle that line between the personal and the mainstream with his films.

Your next project will be a remake of the Norwegian film Insomnia *for Warner Bros. What attracted you to work on the American remake of* Insomnia*? And after you became involved, what changes did you and screenwriter Hilary Seitz make to tailor the script to your strengths?*
I was drawn to this very compelling, original situation, and I immediately saw the opportunity to take it in a somewhat different direction. Hilary had done a marvelous job producing a screenplay that translated the original very effectively into the realm that I was interested in exploring the story—the Americanization of it—and then the scale of it. It's on a bigger scale, and the character [Will Dormer] is very different. When I came on board, we saw eye-to-eye on the direction in which the project could be pushed. A lot of the changes that we made together—I supervised her writing, giving her notes, suggesting things—were along the lines of trying to get inside the character's head, to see the story from his point of view. That is the essential difference in what we're trying to do with the remake and what the original film was. We're really trying to keep the audience with him, keep them complicit in everything he does.

In what direction did you two push the story?
Of putting the audience into Will's shoes as he goes through the story, creating a more subjective experience for the audience. I pushed Hillary in the direction of allowing the audience to understand Will's actions more as he goes through the story, instead of keeping them as surprises. I wanted to take the audience with him more. You're introduced to Walter [the antagonist] very much from Will's point of view, for example.

Did you play with the structure of this script?
No. I thought Hillary had done a marvelous job with the structure. Really, it's the only way to tell a story like this. Structure to me is all related simply to what best suits the particular story, and this story very much is of this character who is on this descent, if you will. It's a very linear descent—because this is a guy who's not sleeping night after night—so you really have to follow that in a relatively straightforward fashion.

When did you start playing around with structure?
I always have, in a way. The short films I was making as a teenager didn't have any dialogue. They tended to be just images connected in an interesting way, crosscut, very often for their graphic relationship but also for their narrative relationship. That immediately is a structural relationship, in terms of parallel action. It's always been driving my filmmaking instincts, so I put that into my screenwriting. Even in *Insomnia*, it's a very linear project, necessarily so—because of the point of view of the character [who gets progressively more

exhausted as the film goes on]—but there's a lot of parallel action, crosscutting, that I enjoy and drives what I do.

I know that the Following *DVD is supposed to have a "linearized" version of the film, unfracturing its structure, but I was shocked to hear that the English* Memento *DVD would include a linear* Memento. *As reticent as you are to discuss* Memento*'s objective truth, you'd been even more zealous with your actors, asking them to refrain from re-ordering ("linearizing") the script. Why a linear* Memento *now?*
This is the problem: once it's done, all kinds of other people get their hands on it. The linear version is an interesting idea; it's an interesting way to view the story. It was very important that we never do that while we were making the film, because there's so much of the film [in terms of narrative momentum] that it's essential to view the story in the way it's going to appear on screen. But there's such an obvious device there for the DVD to do that I can see why they would want to do that. It'd be interesting. I haven't actually watched the film that way. It'd be a first for me.

Alexander Payne

INTERVIEWED BY GEOFF JORDAN
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 4, #3 (FALL 1997)

How did you sell your script for Citizen Ruth*?*
I went to graduate school at UCLA, came out with my Masters degree in 1990 and had a nearly hour-long thesis film that did well in the way you want your student film to do well. It played a lot of festivals, won a lot of awards, and got the attention of agents and producers in Los Angeles. I never really had to promote it. If you make a decent product it all comes to you.

On the strength of that, I got an agent and an offer from Universal to write and direct a film. So, I was offered movies; not very good ones, you know, but on a level maxed-out as far as what you could do coming right out of grad school. Among the many producers I met was Cary Woods, who made an offer to "come and write and direct this movie for me." Cary Woods is a former agent who takes credit for discovering Gus Van Sant. Actually, he saw a very tiny film Gus Van Sant made called *Mala Noche* and took the script for *Drugstore Cowboy* to Nick Wexler, who got it made. The guy claims to have good taste. But I didn't because I took this Universal deal. I wrote a script for Universal and they paid me a bunch of money and they hated it. They had said, "Write whatever you want. If we like it you can direct it." The Velvet Coffin: you get a studio deal, they give you money, and you never make a movie. I mean, it's great. They gave me money to live off for a couple of years after that.

The script Universal hated is about an old guy who retires and then realizes how much he's wasted his life. I was going to rewrite that and try to raise a million dollars somewhere, but my buddy Jim Taylor and I got the idea for *Citizen Ruth*. This was in '92. We started writing it, got together with another producer, and tried to shop it around. Everyone said, "It's just too hard. It involves abortion, etc." At one point I'd nearly given up on it, thinking, "Fuck it! I'm gonna have to write something now that's two people in a room, that I can shoot on 16mm reversal film in my living room, just to get something

made!" Because otherwise I was gonna fuckin' shoot myself, if I couldn't shoot a film. Then at lunch in Culver City I bump into this producer [Cary Woods] who three years ago had made me this other offer, and we schmooze….So the next day we go out to lunch… "Whatta ya got?" "Oh nothing, just this abortion comedy that everyone hates. You don't want to read that."

Are you serious? That's how you pitched it?
"Yeah, you know, it'll be just like all the other abortion comedies." So he called up my agent, got it from him, read it over the weekend, and on Monday said, "Let's make it." It took a long time—another year and a half—to get the thing made. It's been a hard sell.

You've written a couple of scripts set in Omaha, Nebraska. Why?
Because I kind of "get" Omaha's world. If you're going to make movies in whatever country you're in, you want to somehow "capture" it. It's kind of a cliché that early in your career you always go to your roots. It's all about what you know, or think you know, even if you don't. I just like Omaha. I've always lived here. I mean, my grandparents were here; my father was here. My whole life has been here. Even when I left to go to college at eighteen, I've always come back here. So, there's a kind of constant thread that now, as I'm starting to make movies, it's kind of fun to go back.

Besides writing about Omaha, why did you choose the subjects of abortion, homelessness and drug addiction?
It's not really the subject. I couldn't have cared less about doing something involving the abortion world. I'm not terribly interested. But the story and the characters lent themselves to that. *Citizen Ruth* was partially based on an article we read in a newspaper and we just started embellishing it. It just kind of came out. Jim Taylor and I have a real weakness for realistic, pointed comedy.

I don't quite understand how a script with this content would come across as funny.
Comedy means a million different things. Some people could watch the film and not laugh at all. That would make me happy.

It seems like such a serious film.
It is very serious.

So the comedy comes from exaggerated absurdity which counterpoints the seriousness?
Humor comes from the most painful situations you can think of. If comedy is not based in pain, then it's not really funny. Who laughs harder than people at a wake? You know at the meal you start laughing about things you remember and you hurt so much, but you laugh so hard and it's great.
 In this movie Ruth slugs a kid, huffs paint while she's pregnant, says very vulgar things, and is unrepentant about any of it. And she's funny. But then again, what is a sympathetic character? Or does she just have to be interest-

ing? Is Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* sympathetic? I don't know. Is Michael Corleone sympathetic? I don't know, but you'll watch him do anything because he's so interesting.

How do you think you did as a first-time director?
I did okay. I got it all done. I got some funny stuff and I had a lot of fun.

Do you see yourself more as a writer or a director?
Probably a director who writes. But, I'd really call myself a "filmmaker," which includes writing, directing, and editing. I want to do all three so the final product is consistent.

So you have ultimate control over your art?
I don't look at it in terms of, "I want to have control over it." That's just what I want to do.

How much does the producer come into that? Being the funding source, etc.?
My producer never told me anything about the script, never said to change a word. I had a very good experience, very little artistic interference.

How do you feel about the democratization of the filmmaking process?
Hey, *Hoop Dreams* was shot on Hi 8. To me, the cheaper means of production is what empowers people to make films.

I've even heard of people using those old Fisher Price "tape" cameras.
Yeah. In fact, I want one. It's supposed to have a great look. They don't make 'em anymore. You can record a video image on the cassette tape and it's supposed to look great.

I think it's revolutionary that when we grew up, only a select few had the resources to make films and now literally anyone has access to the means.
Look, a guy who worked as an extra came up to me after the wrap party and said, "I wanna be a filmmaker too. What should I do? I'm stuck in TV." I just said, "Don't tell me your medical problems, pal. No excuses. Make a film. And you have to be free to make a bad one." I said, "Look at this motherfucker who made a film for $23,000 in his 7-11… Just carve it out! If you don't have the wherewithal to make a feature, make a short. If it sucks? Great! Who cares? You made a film. Just do it. On weekends, with short ends, with 16mm reversal film, on Super 8, Hi 8." Like I said, *Hoop Dreams* was shot on Hi 8. There are no excuses any more. You have to have the freedom not to fear failure, but welcome it. More often than not you don't fail.

Did you feel that way all along, even before you got connected?
No, most of my time was spent overcoming depression.

Prozac really changed your world?
No. The weird thing about making a film is that on alternate days you believe you're either Orson Welles or you're the most talentless piece of shit on the planet. You believe both with equal conviction, so you have no perspective at all. You're just groping in the dark.

Alexander Payne
& Jim Taylor

INTERVIEWED BY STEVE RYFLE
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 11, #5 (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2004)

During the final half hour of *Sideways*, a happy-go-lucky ladies' man named Jack (Thomas Haden Church) gets his comeuppance after his motorcycle-riding girlfriend finds out what a womanizer he is. She takes off her helmet and proceeds to bash his face in with it, and for the rest of the movie Jack wears a ridiculous-looking bandage across his nose, even as he continues to pick up and bed more women. Welcome to the comic world of writer-director Alexander Payne and his collaborator, Jim Taylor. It's a world where characters routinely suffer humiliating disfigurements—from the big, lumpy bee sting on Matthew Broderick's face in *Election*, to Jack Nicholson's neck affliction in *About Schmidt*, to Church's busted nose in *Sideways*. Because Payne's films are bitingly comic and sometimes satirical, you might assume that these grotesque injuries are visual metaphors for the characters' abundant shortcomings as human beings. But you'd be wrong about that. "I just think it's funny," Payne says. "If people want to assign deeper meaning to it, that's fine. But I just think it's funny."

So much of what happens in an Alexander Payne film is hilarious, but it can also be poignant and sad, and it's that mixture of laughs and emotion that makes *Sideways* so enjoyable. It's the story of two fortyish buddies, Miles (Paul Giamatti in an Oscar-worthy performance) and Jack, who take a week-long vacation to the Santa Ynez Valley wine country to celebrate Jack's upcoming wedding. They're best friends, but these two guys couldn't be more dissimilar: Miles is a failed novelist and wine snob who revels in self-pity and pines for his ex-wife; Jack is a part-time actor and bon vivant who just wants to "get his nut" one last time before the wedding. The two pals' misadventures among the vineyards of Central California tests each man's character and the limits of their friendship, and leads the protagonist Miles on a soul-searching journey to climb out of his emotional depths and start over.

"I like stories that are human and funny and, I guess, all the stuff that's said about my films," Payne muses. "Flawed protagonists, human situations. I look for books that are somehow closer to life than to a movie. It would be interesting to work in other genres someday, but so far I've been most interested in questions of the human heart and the human spirit. We're not so interested in questions of three-act structure; we like our films to find their own structure, but rooted in and stemming from human character."

Adapted from a little-known book by first-time novelist Rex Pickett, *Sideways* is easily Payne and Taylor's most accomplished work. It's also their most faithful adaptation, closely mirroring the book's story arc, scenes, and sometimes even dialogue, whereas their screenplays for *Election* (which earned an Oscar nomination) and *About Schmidt* (for which they won a Golden Globe) took greater creative license with the books they were based upon. *Sideways* would bring Payne and Taylor their first Academy Award in 2005.

"I can remember exactly what made me want to do *Election*," Payne says. "There's a moment in the book when the principal smells his watchband—he's got a stinky watchband. I said, 'Whoever writes that kind of detail has something going on.' But what attracted me to *Sideways* was the whole milieu—it was a kind of buddy comedy, and I liked that it could be kind of a small movie," Payne says. "I liked Miles's constant depression. And it had really funny set pieces. Basically, it's a comedy. Yes, there is some sadness in it, but there's a scene where Miles has to steal a wallet and a naked man comes running after him. It's stuff like that—that made me want to do it."

"The book hadn't been published yet, so it was going through some revisions, and we read different versions of it," adds Taylor. "What hooked us were the characters and the situations, and we loved those two guys." Neither Payne nor Taylor claims to be the kind of know-it-all vino aficionado that Miles is, but they confess they were attracted to the story in part by the wine-soaked world in which it takes place, with the characters imbibing bottle after bottle of expensive grape juice and Miles waxing poetic about various varietals. If you pay attention to the locales in the film, you can hit the road and take the same tasting tour that the characters do. "*Sideways* has great verisimilitude to the novel, and then to reality. Because the places where they stop and have wine, where they stay, the restaurant they walk to—it's all exactly as you will find it. You can go up there to Buellton, stay at the Windmill Inn, and walk to the Hitching Post," says Payne.

As with any screenplay based on a book, *Sideways* required Payne and Taylor to chip away at the story until it fit the confines of a two-hour movie. Their screenplay contained a few scenes that were written and shot but left on the cutting room floor, such as a hilarious bit where Miles runs over an old dog and then can't decide how to dispose of its body. And there were other scenes from the book that they loved but couldn't find a way to include.

"In the book there was this boar-hunting incident that made us laugh and was a lot of fun," Taylor remembers, "but it just didn't fit in, because we were making more of a romance out of it. The book was kind of inspired by *With-*

nail and I, which is a movie that we love." Payne and Taylor managed to save one of the funniest scenes from the book, even though the rules of Screenplay 101 might have dictated otherwise. Toward the end of the second act, after Miles has lost his new girlfriend and has bottomed out emotionally, Jack has an affair with a waitress and forgets his wallet—containing his wedding bands—at her house. Trouble is, she's married and her husband is home. The ensuing scenes are some of the film's funniest moments.

"The fact that Jack goes off with the waitress at the end—it took a certain amount of determination on our part to get that in, because, in a way, it felt like the movie is already over," says Taylor. "At that point, Miles just wants to go home, and there was a version of the script that would have ended there, but we really loved the whole idea of Miles and Jack going back to retrieve the wallet, and this extra level of degradation that Jack puts both of them through."

In some ways, Miles emerges as a richer character in the movie than in the book. Pickett's novel portrays him sometimes as maudlin and sappy, but the film version of the character is darker, more bitter. There's a gut-wrenching scene that occurs after Miles learns that his ex-wife, whom he's never really gotten over, is now remarried. After a few glasses of wine at a restaurant, Miles leaves Jack and two female friends at the table. In the book, he heads for the restroom, finds it occupied, notices a pay phone and calls his ex-wife. In the film, Miles leaves the table and heads straight for the phone, and his drunken call to his ex is darker and sadder.

"The author [Pickett] has been very enthusiastic about the whole process," says Taylor. "I got an email from him recently where he tried to encapsulate what he thought was different about Miles from his book to the movie. But I'm incredibly grateful to the book for giving us so much to work with, as opposed to starting from scratch and having to come up with everything. From the beginning, I felt this was going to be less work for us than the other books were, which is not to denigrate them, but this was closer to being a movie to begin with. Ultimately, it took us less time to do this adaptation than any of the others."

Sideways begins on a series of comic notes, with Miles oversleeping and making lame excuses for arriving several hours late to go to pick up Jack to start their road trip. But it's the emotional core that really makes the movie resonate, and the first hint of that core appears in an early scene, when Miles and Jack stop off at Miles's mother's house, ostensibly to wish her a happy birthday. During dinner, Miles excuses himself to the bathroom. What happens next is the first indication in the script and film that this protagonist is deeply flawed in ways that beg to be explained.

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INT. MILES'S MOTHER'S HALLWAY – NIGHT

Miles heads toward...

INT. MILES'S MOTHER'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

... and goes directly to her dresser, opening a drawer
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filled with bras, panties and stockings.

He burrows through his mother's lingerie until
locating a CAN OF RAID. A can of Raid?

He twists open the bottom and pulls it apart,
revealing it to be a SECRET STASH for valuables
disguised as a common household product. Inside are
stacks of ONE-HUNDRED DOLLAR BILLS.

                    MILES
               (quickly peeling
               some off)
          Seven, eight, nine, ten,
          eleven, twelve, thirteen,
          fourteen, fifteen...
```

"That scene where he steals the money from his mother was on the chopping block a lot of the time," Taylor remembers. "But I always felt that's where it gets interesting because it gives the character this humanity. I was always concerned, because the script had so much vulgar stuff in it, that it would seem cheap or flippant. It's a real testament to Alexander and the actors that they really elevated it, because I think there could have been another version of the movie, with the same script, that wouldn't have felt the way it feels. I was very grateful when I saw the finished product, because it is a very sweet movie."

Like Matthew Broderick's weary high school teacher in *Election* and Jack Nicholson's Winnebago-driving widower in *About Schmidt*, and perhaps even more so, Giamatti's Miles is a self-loathing man, obsessed with his own failures; at one point, he compares himself to "smudge of excrement" on a piece of toilet paper flowing through the sewers of life. Not the sort of inspiring, sympathetic chap you'd see in a mainstream film, but Payne and Taylor work far enough outside the mainstream and have earned enough autonomy to avoid questions of character likability.

"I think these characters are likeable, because they're human," Taylor says. "I think anybody who understands that they're flawed, or that they are struggling in life—that's immediately sympathetic to me, no matter whether they're screwing up or not; in fact, especially because they're screwing up. It's just a given for Alexander and me, that these are the kinds of characters we're interested in, so we don't worry about it that much. Other people worry about it when we're making the movie, but essentially we feel, 'These are real people, so why wouldn't you care about them?' It's a question that does come up, but we've been really lucky not to have to modify our scripts to make our characters likeable, so we're very grateful for that."

Payne concurs. "I think in other films, when they whitewash people's flaws, they're being more dismissive of them and showing more disdain for people's flaws than when you include those flaws. I never worry about [likability] because, first off, these movies are comedies, and comedy is somewhat based in pain. And second, sympathy is about casting—it's not about how the character occurs on paper; it's whom you cast that makes the difference."

Miles hits rock bottom after Jack's wedding, when he bumps into his ex-wife outside the church. Already depressed that she has recently remarried, Miles becomes downright devastated when she tells him that she's now pregnant. Miles deals with the news by grabbing an ultra-rare bottle of wine that he's been saving for an ultra-special occasion—presumably, reconciling with his ex—and takes it to a greasy spoon, downing it in big gulps with a burger. The moment is both funny and utterly heartbreaking.

```
INT. IN & OUT BURGER – DAY

His bowtie undone, Miles sits at a booth eating a
DOUBLE-DOUBLE. He washes down a bite by draining the
contents of a big wax-coated soft-drink cup.

He brings the cup to his lap and refills it from a
BOTTLE OF WINE hidden next to him. As he sets the bottle
back down, we glimpse the label: 1961 Cheval Blanc.

He takes another sip. As the camera MOVES CLOSER, all
the complex emotions inspired by the wine ripple
across Miles's face.
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In some ways, *Sideways* feels like a film from another era. Giamatti's self-flagellating and physical bumbling bring to mind *Annie Hall*-era Woody Allen, without the nebbishness. The long conversations that give the characters room to breathe, and the absurdity of their situations in general, perhaps recall the films of Hal Ashby. Payne, a self-described film buff, says that while shooting *Sideways* he referenced Italian comedies of the '50s and early '60s, particularly a buddy comedy titled *The Easy Life*, as well as American movies of the '70s.

So much of what makes *Sideways* hilarious is dialogue—not only the lines within the conversations but the rhythm and cadence that the characters speak with. It all sounds so natural, even improvised perhaps, but with very few exceptions, every line in the film was scripted exactly as it was read.

"We write with rhythm in mind," says Payne. "Rhythm, increasingly, is becoming the most important thing to think about for me, in writing and directing, editing, how music is used. Often I'll give an actor a line reading, not so much to say, 'this is how you say it,' but to give an idea of the rhythm of that dialogue. And I direct a lot by saying to the actors, 'what you're doing is just great—now do it faster.'"

```
                    JACK
          I am going to get my nut on this
          trip, Miles. And you are not
          going to fuck it up for me with
          all your depression and anxiety
          and neg-head downer shit.

                    MILES
          Ooooh, now the cards are on the
          table.

                    JACK
          Yes they are. And I'm serious.
          Do not fuck with me. I am going
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          to get laid before I settle down
          on Saturday. Do you read me?

                    MILES
          Sure, big guy. Whatever you
          say. It's your party. I'm sorry
          I'm in the way and dragging you
          down. Maybe you'd have a better
          time on your own. You take the
          car. I can catch a bus back.

                    JACK
          No, see, I want both of us to
          get crazy. We should both be
          cutting loose. I mean, this is
          our last chance. This is our
          week! It should be something
          we share.

   The older WAITRESS comes over.

                       WAITRESS
             Can I take your order?

                       JACK
          But I am warning you.

                       MILES
          Oatmeal, one poached egg, and
          rye toast.

                       WAITRESS
          Okay. And you?

                       JACK
             (glaring at Miles)
          Pigs in a blanket. With extra
          syrup.
```

"I have very little rehearsal, and I like the dialogue spoken exactly as written," Payne says. "Although in *Sideways*, I was a little bit looser. For example, there's a montage where the characters are having dinner. I just set up cameras and told the actors, 'have dinner.' So that's all improvised. Those four actors (Giamatti, Church, Sandra Oh, and Virginia Madsen) became good friends and just started talking.

"Also, Thomas Haden Church is a very good improviser and he came up with a lot of funny things, like 'get your bone smooched,' but most of those things appeared before shooting began, and I put them into the script," Payne continues. "So, from time to time there is improvisation, but in general, we really sculpt our dialogue. I've been fortunate to work with actors who like our scripts and treat them seriously."

Payne and Taylor have known one another for thirteen years, first as film school roommates and as writing partners soon thereafter. They live on opposite coasts now, Payne in Los Angeles and Taylor in New York, but they continue to work the old-fashioned way, writing together in the same room (sometimes in a rented cabin in upstate New York) rather than sending pages back and forth via email. They've done a couple of gun-for-hire studio rewrites, including a draft of *Jurassic Park 3* that they received screen credit for, but which was not used, and an uncredited rewrite on *Meet the Parents*.

They insist their films were never really political, even though their first one, *Citizen Ruth*, lampooned the abortion debate with great comic effect, and *Election* seems like the perfect satire of the 2000 presidential election, even though the movie was made well before it. For their two most recent films, however, Payne and Taylor have dropped the politics and gone for something more personal and universal. If *About Schmidt* was their examination of what it's like to be an old man in America, then maybe *Sideways* is their midlife crisis film. Not that they would ever call it that. Both men say that when they're writing, questions of theme and subtext never enter their minds.

"If we're interested in a piece of material, themes just emerge of their own accord," says Payne. "I'm actually curious to find out what the themes are. The other thing is that sometimes you have to make something in order to know why you wanted to make it—it's not like you had it all figured out in advance. I just like the stories and the characters, which is not to discount theme. Also, I feel there are many themes going on in anything that's interesting. A lot of writing instructors want you to state your theme clearly from the get-go, but I feel that trying to state the themes will diminish them. Kurosawa used to say, 'If I could tell you the theme of the film, I wouldn't have had to make the film.'"

"We never thought of ourselves as being political in the first place, so it doesn't feel like a departure," adds Taylor. "But it is true that both those first two movies had a major political angle to them. We were just interested in the characters and what they were doing, rather than making some kind of political statement." Payne concludes, "In this day and age, we have to have cinema that is, if not political, then human, to counteract the inhumanity of so much governmental and corporate policy, including other films whose messages are only, 'We need your $10.' We have to work hard to restore humanity to film, and to make films about Americans. That's really important, now more than ever, not to do bullshit movies."

Robert Rodriguez

— ◆ —

Although known for the kinetic, blood-soaked genre films *El Mariachi* (1992), *Desperado* (1994), *From Dusk 'Till Dawn* (1997), and *The Faculty* (1998), writer/director Robert Rodriguez also has a flair for antic humor as evidenced by his wonderful segment in *Four Rooms* (1997) featuring a brother and sister trapped in a bizarre hotel room with a dead body. The children rush from calm to carnage in about fifteen minutes and this celluloid comic stands as one of the best short films of the '90s. Rodriguez has the skill of Spielberg and Shyamalan when it comes to eliciting honest child performances.

His gift for presenting the world through wide eyes serves him well in *Spy Kids*, an honest-to-God family action movie that satisfied all kids, young and old. Although a sequel was certain, Miramax had actually greenlit *Spy Kids* 2 before the first film's release, as Rodriguez's original draft already contained both stories. *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams* is a wonderful title for what promises to be an even more exciting adventure tale.

On the other end of Rodriguez's busy cinematic spectrum (and from a PG to an R rating) stands *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*, the second sequel to his famous debut, *El Mariachi*. Shot on Hi-Definition video, *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* represents Rodriguez's loving tribute to Sergio Leone's mythic and classic "spaghetti westerns." Rodriguez has subsequently written and directed *Sin City* (with Frank Miller, based on his comic book of the same name), *The Adventures of Shark Boy and Lava Girl in 3-D* (story by Rodriguez and his son).

More importantly, Rodriguez has developed his writing skills over the past eight years; his triumphs and struggles on the page mirror the growth of any scribe. Writers will find his book, *Rebel Without a Crew*, an honest, fascinating, and inspiring diary on independent filmmaking. *Spy Kids* established Rodriguez as a rare writer/director who can create a true fantasy world for children, avoiding the cynicism of the recent *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

While he admits that his screenplays are rough blueprints, Rodriguez's innate sense of plot and character complement his directorial prowess. The amazing output of two large-scale action films in one year proves that Robert Rodriguez is one of the most dedicated storytellers around. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Robert Rodriguez in 1995, 2000, and 2001.

What did you get out of going to film school?
I made *Bedhead* in the first class I took in film school. Mainly I wanted to get into the class to get hold of 16mm equipment for free so that I could make the movie, but the movie ended up costing $800. It would have been a lot cheaper and easier just borrowing or buying a camera and doing it on my own. I could have bought that same camera for $100. I was reluctant to go to film school. I really thought I would learn more there than I did. Once I got there I realized I was better off teaching myself.

What was your original intention with El Mariachi*? Were you targeting a general or limited audience?*
Mariachi wasn't supposed to work out that well. I hadn't really set a firm plan down. I didn't expect that to be the movie to get out and make everything. It was in Spanish, it was very low-budget, it was designed to teach me how to make a movie. I had planned to make three of them at the same budget level, that's why the movie ended the way it did. I was just going to make three in one year. I was hoping maybe the third one would be good enough to get me work on a real film, not be the one that went all over the world. I never expected that to be released, much less for people to see it. It's good to map out a really decent plan that actually makes sense, that has opportunity for you to learn, because if it takes off from the start like *Mariachi* did, then that's good too, but if not, you have to realize it was a learning experience. You have to keep learning and keep making movies.

You never thought of doing anything else?
I knew I wanted to do something that I liked. I was a cartoonist, and I loved that. I loved to make movies. If I went into something I really enjoyed, I knew I would work a lot harder than the person next to me. I'd rather do that than get a safe job and work half-assed at it. Let me go do something that I really love, and I'll work all day, all night.

The first thing that happens when you decide to do that is, you don't have weekends anymore. Those days are gone. Everyday's a Monday. You're working really hard but you don't care because it's something you really love. I was making movies and I was killing myself doing it, but it was fun. I had a smile on my face and you end up getting somewhere a lot faster because you love what you're doing.

How did El Mariachi *get to Sundance?*
They wanted it. We already had a distributor. We showed it at Toronto and

they (Sundance) said, "We'd like to have that movie. We like it. Don't show it at any more festivals and we'll play it." It wasn't looking for a distributor like most of the films there. We already had a distributor and the movie was going to come out a few days later. We didn't expect anything. We didn't expect to win, that's for sure.

How did you become involved in From Dusk Till Dawn *and how did you hook up with Quentin Tarantino?*
I was already shooting him in *Desperado*. We were working on *Four Rooms* when the script for *Dusk* came back to him. It's an old script of his, he never intended to direct. He wrote it for someone else [Robert Kurtzman] so when they brought it back to him to control he said, "I'll do it if Rodriguez directs it." I said, "I'll direct it if he rewrites it." So we got together, cranked it out, and here it is. It was a really fast thing to put together.

What do you think of Quentin as an actor?
Quentin is great in *Dusk* as an actor. We had a test screening and it was pretty unanimous. People thought George Clooney was amazing and Quentin is really, really good. Really twisted. He plays a psycho, and we all know how twisted he can be. We really played that off in here—you never know what he's going to do next. [Quentin's] always getting ragged on for his acting, but he's always wanted to act and this film will shut the critics up because there's nothing bad you can say about him in this.

Did you ever disagree?
That's the thing in movies, or in any art—there's no right or wrong. It's really subjective. He has his way of doing things. He wrote the script and it was my job to make it my movie. He wanted me to direct it my way, which is different from how he would do it. So we had an understanding as filmmakers. We had a great time. He would inspire me to do stuff and was always wondering what I would do next.

How difficult has it been to remain in control of your projects?
It helped that the first movie was *El Mariachi* because both the studio and the public liked it. After that, it was easier to tell them: "Guys, I was the whole crew on that, so you got to let me do that again." When *Desperado* came, it was a struggle for them to let me edit the movie and I told them, "Well, who else will you get? I'm free." They just didn't want me to have that much control, but they let me do it. That was a big mistake because it sets another precedent. I'm about to do *Zorro* with Steven Spielberg, for instance. This is a big genre movie and they already know going in that I'm going to edit the picture, that I'm going to be operating the Steadicam, that I'm going to be doing all this carny stuff. I got my mixing card, so now I'm a sound mixer. It's something you have to do in small increments.

    If my next movie hadn't been *Desperado*, if I had done one of the really big

budget movies they were offering me, I would have lost that control. That's why after *El Mariachi* I did *Roadracer*, which is a small cable movie, then I did *Desperado* in Mexico for $7 million rather than the $30 million action movie they offered. I made *Desperado* with much less and I did it on my own terms. Successes like that make precedents for yourself. You've got to be really smart and really persistent.

How did you hook up with Spielberg?
They've been looking for a director…. Antonio [Bandaras] really wanted to do *Zorro*, but I was getting ready to do my own project with Miramax. I didn't really want to do a big movie but Antonio was really into it and *Zorro* was one of the only Hispanic action heroes around, so I knew I had to be involved in it somehow. Or at least try to be involved. They're letting my wife and me produce the movie so we can make it cheaper. We're going to shoot it in Mexico—they'll let me do it my way. It'll be fun. It'll be a big fun movie.

Do you think there is a future for Latin heroes?
I think people support any hero. Luke Skywalker and Indiana Jones could have been any color and people would have liked them because of the way they were presented. That's what I learned the most from John Woo movies. When you see a John Woo movie you want to be Chinese, you want to be one of those guys. I knew it wasn't because they were Chinese, it was how he presented his heroes. I think a hero can be of any color, or any race, if the filmmaker treats him with a lot of respect.

From Dusk Till Dawn *cost $12 million to make and some say half of it went for blood. Is that true?*
We tried to put most of the money up on the screen and since the movie is pretty bloody, a lot of it is in blood. It looks much bigger than $12 million. What I like to do is have more creative freedom. That's why you see my name so much in the credits. It's not that I'm a control freak, it just saves money if I'm the Steadicam operator, camera operator, the editor, and the sound mixer. You get more freedom that way. Miramax gave me final cut on this picture and they left us alone. We got to shoot anything we wanted. We put Tom Savini and Harvey Keitel in it. By doing it for less you have a lot of freedom and that's what I like.

   People have offered me really big budget movies, but there's no point because you're just working for them and it's not as fun. This was a lot more fun because you really have to scrape to make it look big. You have to shoot really, really fast, which nobody does in this town. It really makes you an elite kind of group where you do your own thing. Do it your way and I think people will enjoy it more.

How did you come up with the idea for the Aztec Vampire?
The script didn't specify what the vampires were and Mexico is such a vam-

pire-rich culture. No one's ever made a movie about the Aztec and Mayan vampire cultures. Selma Hayak plays the main vampire, the Aztec goddess, and she rocks. People's favorite scene is when she comes out and dances with an albino snake, pours whiskey down her leg, feeds it to Quentin and kills everybody.

Have you always enjoyed horror movies? Which ones are your favorites?
Near Dark is one of my favorite vampire movies. I really like the night. That one really brought out the seduction of the night. It wasn't fangs so much. It had a different tone. Anything you can do differently in a genre is always interesting. Ours is really two movies in one. The first half is almost like *Desperate Hours/Silence of the Lambs*, a really intense psychological horror and then it turns into a vampire horror by the second half, so it's two movies in one. Quentin is used to doing that.

How were you able to get such an eclectic cast?
It was easy to get people like Harvey Keitel and Juliette Lewis, mainly because of Quentin. Quentin wrote the script and everybody wants to be in his scripts. But we were also looking, at the same time, for some really B-movie actors. Guys you've seen in *Dawn of the Dead*. We put them in roles next to Harvey Keitel and those other guys, so that people who aren't familiar with them would also become fans. Tom Savini is incredible. He has to do all kinds of stuff. He's flipping around and killing vampires. He's like the only one really enjoying killing the vampires.

Is it true that you are working on Predator 3*?*
I am writing a script for *Predator 3*. It was something I was going to do before *Desperado*. *Desperado* was taking a while to get going and my agent put me out to get writing assignments to make some money. Fox was interested in another *Predator* so they asked me for a story and I pitched them something really quick and they said "Go ahead and write it." It's actually pretty cool. We'll see what happens with that.

What else are you doing?
I just got a record label. I'll be signing bands and putting out music. The *From Dusk Till Dawn* soundtrack will be the first thing off the label. I put out a book called *Rebel Without a Crew*, so I got into publishing. It's how to make movies with no money. I'm working on a TV show idea. It was a feature film idea I had that might turn into a television series. It's pretty twisted. I like dabbling in different things. If you just stick to movies you can get stuck doing them for a long time. Each movie takes a while and at this age you've got a lot of creativity. You really want to spend it while you're young and you still have the energy.

Let's talk about your influences, but before you mention anyone, let me bring up two

names, Sam Raimi and John Woo.

I was influenced a lot by John Carpenter and Sam Raimi starting out, because both those guys were making low budget movies with a lot of imagination. If John Carpenter hadn't had a lot of money he still would have made *Escape From New York*. That kind of big idea with small money and more imagination really inspired me to do my own movies. Much more than the big movies I liked. You never feel you can do those because you need so much money and so much crew. Those movies aren't as inspiring.

When it comes to making action movies, the Hong Kong action films were always superior to what we were doing here. While we were filming *Dusk Till Dawn*, Quentin came up one day and he was so pumped and excited because he saw this really cool movie and I said, "Let me guess, it's a Hong Kong film right?" And he said "Of course, what else would it be. I sure wouldn't be excited about something we're doing here." Sure enough, it was a Jet Li movie he had seen. That stuff is just inspiring to filmmakers.

Tell me about your audio track on the laser disk for El Mariachi*. I'm working on a really low budget movie right now and I found it very inspirational.*
Thank you. That's something that's really tough to do. I almost missed the opportunity on *Desperado*. Whenever I go get a laser disc and I see that there's no voice commentary, I figure the filmmaker doesn't care about the movie.

Where did you come up with the idea for the gadget guitar cases in Desperado*?*
I guess I'm just a disgruntled musician. You should see the gadget I have in *From Dusk Till Dawn*. It's a leftover from *Desperado*. The crotch gun shows up on Tom Savini. I was trying to come up with gadgets so that if you had your hands up you could still shoot the other guy first. I came up with the crotch gun, which is a barrel that pops up from the cock piece you're wearing and these two cylinders pop down on the sides like balls. It shoots the other guy in the testicles. I'm glad we got to use it in *Dusk* because we had to cut it out of *Desperado*. It was just too funny.

Do you want to stick with action films?
Four Rooms comes out at Christmas. It has as much energy as *Desperado* but it's a family comedy. That's my favorite movie I've done so far. My movies will still have energy, they just won't have guns and action. With the *Four Rooms* piece, people laugh and no guns are pulled. There's a body count but it's in a different kind of way.

I hear there are about 600 cuts in your twenty-minute segment of Four Rooms*. Can you watch a movie like* Bullets Over Broadway *where there are very few cuts?*
There are about 600 cuts because it has children in it and children can exhaust you. Twenty minutes with those kids and you should be dead tired. That's what I wanted to bring across with the movie. I also wanted to cram a lot of information in my short piece. It's just a style. It's not always going to be like

that. There are some long takes in *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Sometimes these guys are talking for a long time and then all of a sudden it shifts because the action begins and it goes into a *Desperado* kind of cutting. So it's a real mix.

How do you feel about the violence in action movies?
I don't know why I wanted to make action pictures. I guess it was like using red paint when you make a painting. Ever since I was a kid, whenever I'd go sit down and draw there would be shots of people's chests bursting out and artistic gore flying all over the place. Everyone thought I was going to be a serial killer, but it's just artistic expression. I just knew I wanted to make a strong action picture. I made *Desperado* because there really wasn't a Latin action hero. I wanted my action movie to be just as strong as regular action movies, but with Latins in it.

Has your writing changed now that you have access to a Hollywood budget?
It changes in that you can do so much more. You can really free your imagination. It's hard to get used to actually. When I wrote *Four Rooms* I knew we could burn the place down. We had the money to destroy everything so it changes how you write. Before I would have found a more subtle way of doing things.

Has it been difficult directing another writer/director's work?
Not at all. Quentin's not there as a writer. He's there as another actor.

And you had complete control of the final edit?
Yeah. I'd show it to everybody else and they'd give their opinion. Quentin would say, "You know, you can take out those lines, those aren't that important." I wanted to keep as much of his dialogue as I could, but if he didn't want it in, I'd take it out.

Has the original draft for Dusk *changed a lot?*
It's been altered a lot, not all by Quentin. Everybody added stuff to it.

Did you always want to be involved in independent filmmaking?
I didn't really want to be an independent filmmaker, making tiny movies no one would see. Now I can make big-small movies that everybody can see.

Is there any added pressure or responsibility being a successful Hispanic director?
Not really. It's an open territory. There's not many role models for Hispanic directors out there so you end up being one of the few.

Do you have a problem being tagged as a Hispanic director?
It's not a bad thing. It doesn't interfere with business. For Hispanics it's important to have role models. It's something for them to latch onto. I know it was important for me to claim someone who had Spanish blood in them as a role model. It's good for people.

What was the genesis of Spy Kids*?*
I've been wanting to do a family film ever since *El Mariachi*, one based on a comic I had done about my family. People who saw my short *Bedhead* have been saying, "When are you going to do a movie like that?" I was trying to figure one out. I thought I would do a movie of that, that kind of action and adventure. Then I did *Four Rooms*….

That's one of the best short films I've ever seen.
I couldn't even come up with a short film! I always fall back on the kids. Making *Four Rooms*, I thought,"Man, they look like little spies!"

So you started developing the story?
The initial idea I had was basically the logline: Parents are spies and the kids don't know. The parents get captured and the kids have to save them. I thought I could have the bad guy be like Willy Wonka, imaginative and childlike.

The Fooglies and the Thumb Thumbs are crazy.
Thumb Thumbs! It can't get bizarre enough. Thumb Thumbs are something I invented when I was thirteen, and I won my first art contest. It's so cool going back to ideas I had as a kid and seeing them come to computer-generated life.

The old stuff always comes back.
So cool finding old drawings and you wonder what you were thinking, but that's the mindset. I wanted this to have the feel like a kid wrote it, shot it, edited it, directed it. What a kid would do.

The impressive thing about the script is they're not typical smart-ass kids.
Exactly. Not like the kids in movies you want to smack around [Laughs]. It has to do with the age. If they're a little older, twelve or thirteen, the awkward stage, we all remember that terrible stage in our lives, and we want to hate those kids, not like them.

Do you find it easy to write and direct for children?
Yeah. I'm still a kid. My poor wife. I have three little boys, a five-year-old, a three-year-old, a one-year-old, and me.

What was your writing schedule like?
I had the worst schedule on *Spy Kids*, and I didn't figure it out until the rewrite. I kick myself for not having figured this out years ago. I'd be so much more prolific. I have a writing system now that works fantastic. What threw me is that I'm a night guy. I can't get up early in the morning. I love waking up in the afternoon. I would always write at night, and ideas get worse and worse because you're falling asleep. When you go to sleep, you say that's great! When you wake up you say, that sucks! I thought I was a bad writer.

But I would read different interviews in *Creative Screenwriting* and it seemed like the most successful writers were morning writers.

It's an acquired habit.
You'll clean your toilet before you write. I'm a total procrastinator. You get so distracted. I came up with a method that works great and kills all these birds with one stone. I get to be a morning writer now, and get to avoid something I hate more than writing—which is hard to find. Worse than writing? I hate getting out of bed. It's so warm and cozy.

What's your system now?
That first eye-opener is when I pull the computer onto my lap. You can't even spell your name. But man, talk about focus, all this stuff comes your way. I get great ideas. And your Negative Guy is still asleep. The trick is not getting up to get coffee or other distractions. Hours will fly by. I would put my computer away and the rest of the day would be great. For writing, it's a better subconscious stage to be waking than falling asleep.

Did you have an allotted number of daily pages?
I was shocked at how much stuff I got done. Stories, dialogue, characters, all this was coming out. If I had been doing this since *Desperado* I could have had five novels…. One hour in the morning would turn into three, and I would get more ideas all day long.

In your book, you mention that Quentin Tarantino gave you the best advice on writing you'd ever heard. But you didn't say what that advice was…
I did that on purpose. [Laughs] I didn't want to put it in there because I thought it would be such a letdown. You thought it was going to be milk and honey. I don't know if Quentin even does this any more, but he told me, "If I'm writing a scene, I quit before the end and I'll come back the next day to where I left off." One of the secrets!

Do you read any scripts to get inspired?
I read a lot of screenwriting books, anything to get in that mode. I probably have every screenwriting book. The ones that are better are usually interviews. I came across so many writers who said, "I write in the morning, I write in the morning…" [Laughs]

How do you approach the script knowing you're going to be editing and directing? Do you underwrite the scenes since you know how they're going to play?
Right. I'm trying to make them a little more skeletal as I write 'em, because I'm not trying to sell them. I have animatics, storyboards to show everybody what's going on…so I try to work on the story and dialogue. I started with so much more in there that I was writing part one and part two.

Did you have an outline or treatment?
I started with a general structure. I had cards, an idea file. It took a long time to organize the ideas. I wanted to have an origin story for the kids, but at the same time I wanted it to be condensed. The first draft should have been part two. It took awhile.

Did you ever let your wife [producer Elizabeth Avellan] read any of the drafts?
No, I never show [it to] anybody until I'm happy with it. If I can't sit through it, it ain't any good. I'll just write and write, print it out, and then read through it, cover it with ink.

What are your favorite spy films?
I love James Bond movies. The first thing I wrote was the opening scene. There came a point that I wanted the bad guy to be real imaginative. Instead of making him evil, I made him good and his assistant the bad guy. Having your cake and eat it, too.

It's great that nobody dies.
Somebody read it and said Dad should go *mano-y-mano* with Minion. What for? He's not gonna beat up anybody in front of his kids. Let Minion do himself in. No one has to lay a hand on anybody.

Having kids now, how does the controversy about Hollywood violence affect you?
I didn't want any guns or violence. I wanted it to be action/adventure for kids. A guy told me his son loved *Desperado*. I said, How old is your son? He said, six. Fuck, he shouldn't be watching that! I can't make movies like that anymore. You don't feel like it's your responsibility, because I never had the intention for kids to watch that. But the reality is they do. Even in *The Faculty*, I didn't want to gore it up. I had everybody alive at the end.

You shot almost all the film in Austin. Was it hard pulling off the global vibe of the screenplay?
Just from shooting *Bedhead* in my backyard, I knew it would be easy to create my own reality. There's a lot of wacky locations in Austin that feel like they're someplace else. We shot some exteriors in South America. A friend told me, "Kids? Green screen? You'll be shooting for a hundred days." We finished in forty-eight. I don't like to shoot for the long haul, because the energy goes away from everybody.

Has Miramax been supportive?
Yeah, they had never done a kid's movie. The bargaining chip was that if I did *The Faculty*, I could do *Spy Kids*. Once I got going, they're more excited about this than anything I've done. I have a good relationship with Miramax.

Is there going to be a sequel?

I'll know next week. I was writing the script this morning to turn in. For the next one, I want to do a hybrid that doesn't really belong in the spy world.

How do you feel your writing has progressed over the years?

I never considered myself a writer even though I'd written everything I shot. I wrote so I would have something to direct. But I started the struggle to face the blank page. I think the next script will be less of a reading experience. Like I said, I'm not trying to sell the script. It's going to be a blueprint.

Do you want to write all your projects?

Yes. I like the freedom of not having to wait for that magic script to come in.

Did you ever think you would get confused while writing and shooting two completely different scripts like Spy Kids 2 *and* Once Upon a Time in Mexico*?*

I thought I would. I shot them back-to-back. But it worked out great.

I really did love Spy Kids*. You nailed it.*

Thanks, I appreciate that. I was so inspired by those kinds of movies when I was growing up, and they weren't making them anymore.

What kind of response did you personally get from the film? Did you ever talk to kids after?

Just going to the theater and seeing how many kids were dragging their parents to it. I was at a mall, and I heard a kid saying, "Oh *Spy Kids*! Let's go see that!" and the Mom says, "Oh not that again!" [Laughs] That was a good sign. It's still opening overseas. It opened in Mexico already, and while we were filming there, we had a screening with the cast, set up an outdoor screen in the plaza like *Cinema Paradiso*, and the whole town was there, like 4,000 people. Very cool.

When we talked last year, you said you already had most of Spy Kids 2 *done since it was incorporated into your original draft—*

Right. I had written a lot for *Spy Kids* that didn't make it. It became one and two all by itself.

When you knew they were going to be two different films, how did you restructure the scripts?

I pushed stuff over and added more scenes. Basically, I wanted them to already be spy kids, and have all the gadgets, be cool agents, but that wasn't that first movie, it was the genesis of how they become spies. So all that stuff where they were a little too savvy, too pro-active, that went into *Spy Kids 2*.

When you wrote Spy Kids 2*, was it a complete script or a series of scenes?*

I had a lot of ideas for the first one that were never developed, so I put those

aside. I had a lot more than I thought. After *Spy Kids* I went off and wrote *Desperado 2*, ran out and shot it, came back thinking I had to write *Spy Kids 2* from scratch. You know, you go back to the files, and I said, "Wow, there's already sixty pages there! I don't even remember writing that much!" So I was thrilled because my mind was on such a different project that I couldn't think about it while I was down in Mexico.

What were the sixty pages?
It was the whole movie blocked out in scenes. It was all pretty much there and I just filled it out.

Was the screenplay more skeletal since you had a better grasp on the story and characters, and knew you'd be adding things on the set?
Yeah, I did that a lot. Just the casting changes things, so I wrote very vague because I didn't think I'd have time to find really good actors like I had last time. I had six months the first time, and this time I had three weeks. So I thought if I don't find terrific kids to be their nemesis, I don't want to have all this dialogue, then break their hearts by cutting it all away. But sure enough, I found great kids. The little girl is Haley Joel Osment's sister and she's amazing. I kept giving her pages every day and writing more for the boy. Their parts just grew. Originally, there was a spy grandpa, but I didn't really have a part for him, so I decided to cast Ricardo Montalban. That part became much bigger [laughs]. He is so cool in this.

He was so fantastic in Wrath of Khan *and it should've opened more doors for him. That was an Academy Award performance.*
Me and Quentin [Tarantino] were talking about that. I got the idea at Quentin's film festival here in Austin because he showed *Khan*. It was sci-fi night at the fest and Quentin went on and on about Ricardo and how amazing he is; what a compelling performance it was. He hadn't done anything since 1990 because he had a bad back for awhile, so I said, "Man that's fine. You'll be in a flying wheelchair and you won't have to go anywhere!" He came down and he said all he remembered about *Khan* was William Shatner coming up to him at the premiere and saying, "Thank you so much for your performance. It really guided me in what to do." And Ricardo didn't have anything but a wall, since he shot all his scenes first. He didn't have Shatner to act against. He did that whole part in a vacuum. Here, he's got a great Khan-type part.

How did you develop the kids further in the sequel?
I knew they would go beyond the antagonistic relationship, and they would be working together more. I based it on the relations I had with my siblings; like my younger sisters, if they were dating a guy I thought was rotten to the core, but I couldn't tell them anything. They have to make their own mistakes. You can't ever warn anybody in your family about anything until they

come back later and say, "You were right." [laughs]. I gave Carmen and Juni another set of rivals. Even though they were the first, they're not considered the top spy kids. Carmen has a crush on the other spy boy, and Juni thinks he's bad but can't convince Carmen. So that's really fun.

Did you have a bigger budget?
No, it was the same budget [$35 million]. I shot on Hi-Def. That amazed me that I could shoot two movies back-to-back. I shot the second *Desperado* in the same schedule that I shot the first one even though this is a much bigger movie, more epic, like *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. It's unbelievable how fast it was. I was the DP and the Production Designer on both, so it was more like making a home movie, a lot more personal. We shot it more like *El Mariachi*. It was the same kind of camera George Lucas used for *Episode II*. When you're shooting on film, you're basically shooting in the dark. Now you can really see your work at the end of the day, so this changes everything. You're in charge, excited, and you can see everything you did. It's like the difference between vinyl records and CDs.

Did you use storyboards?
I would as I needed to. I used to be a cartoonist, so I would draw something quick on the spot, and it would look like a doctor's prescription. All the more reason to trust me [laughs].

Do you still write in the early morning?
That's the only way… writing in bed.

Is that how you wrote Once Upon a Time in Mexico*?*
I wanted to test out this HD camera, but the actors' strike was coming up. I thought if there's a way to write something quick…it can't be *Spy Kids 2* because it's too complex. Antonio Banderas was available, so I thought we'd try another *Desperado*. It gave us the chance to do everything with the camera: motion, action, outdoor, blistering sun, dark interiors… I said, "Oh, let's do another *Desperado*!" Antonio said, "Do you have a script?" I said, "No, but you'll have it Sunday!" So I called Columbia and said, "Do you want to make a movie?" I finished the script in five days. That's the way to get anything done—set yourself on fire. The last thirty pages wrote themselves in such a flurry that I was shocked at what was happening. I didn't know how it was going to turn out. It was like writing real time. I don't even think I can take credit for the script—it was all done subconsciously.

How does this film differ from the other two?
El Mariachi was *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Desperado* was *For a Few Dollars More*, and this is *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. This has got tons more characters; it's more epic, a bigger story. I showed it to the studio and they were surprised how big it is, that I took it that much further. This script was the reverse of

Spy Kids in that I had been doodling with it for years, and I thought I had so much more written than I did. I only had three cool scenes written for the Lee Van Cleef-type character, and the idea that the *Mariachi* was hiding out in the town with the guitarists, but that was all I had. So I started from scratch.

Did you study the Sergio Leone westerns for inspiration?
No, I was trying to do it more by memory. I just wanted to take the idea that he was involved in the Civil War and all that, and give it a much bigger backdrop. Yet the personal story between the main characters was still tight and focused. I took that idea and thought, "What could happen? A coup d'état in Mexico!"

How long was the first draft?
That's real funny. The first draft was sixty-five pages. It was all I could muster, so I grabbed a short story I had written about a banker whose daughter is kidnapped by the cops, who tell him to go steal from his bank for the ransom. It was a whole ten-minute short. I grabbed that and shoved it into the structure of the script so it would be seventy-five pages, even though I knew next week I would take the sub-plot out once I got the rest of the script filled out. It was just so that I wouldn't see this anemic sixty-five pages. There were so many action sections that just said COUP D'ÉTAT! ALL THE INDIANS COME OVER THE HILL. BIG BATTLE! The studio called and said, "It's everything we want, but we don't know about that banker sub-plot." I said, "Yeah, I was thinking of taking that out." [laughs]

Does it seem like a long way from the $7,000 El Mariachi *to the $36 million* Spy Kids*?*
Yeah, I've learned so much. Amazing.

David O. Russell

INTERVIEWED BY CHRISTIAN DIVINE
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 7, #1 (JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2000)

Noneof David O. Russell's three independent films, the uncomfortably amusing *Spanking the Monkey*, the oddly hilarious *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), or the philosophical *I Heart Huckabees,* seemed to pave the way for *Three Kings*, a $50 million Warner Bros. summer movie starring George Clooney. Best described as a political action black comedy (based on a high-concept script called *Spoils of War* by John Ridley), *Three Kings* deals with a quartet of US soldiers attempting to steal millions in Kuwait gold during the Gulf War. In the course of their thievery, they realize that much more is at stake as they witness the brutal aftereffects of our hypocritical foreign policy against Saddam Hussein, once our friend and the heroic centerpiece of a *Life* profile in the late '60s. Times do change.

Mixing humor, pathos, and violence, *Three Kings* is reminiscent of '70s films such as *M*A*S*H, Little Big Man*, and *The Long Goodbye*, where black humor and moral complexity are the order of the day. Russell also let his visual imagination run wild, filming the movie with a saturated stock, shooting action scenes in quick slow-motion cuts or depicting the effects of a bullet inside someone's stomach. Certainly not a typical action movie, and producer Lorenzo Di Bonaventura deserves much credit for giving Russell the freedom to make a brave and impressive film. At the time of this interview, conducted in 1999, Russell had just returned from the White House after screening the film for President Clinton. David O. Russell proved to be generous with his wit, time, and honesty as we discussed *Three Kings* and more.

How did you get invited to the White House to show Three Kings *for Bill Clinton?*
It was out of the blue and a real treat, quite frankly. It was the day the test-ban treaty had been vetoed so when we met, [Clinton] was all on fire about that. He was really eloquent. Then we went to see the movie in the screen-

ing room—which needs to be updated; it's not state of the art. There were about thirty or forty people, people they probably feel they owed invitations. We showed the movie and it was a real quiet house. I was dying. The humor is not like *There's Something About Mary*'s humor in big block letters: HEY, LAUGH AT THIS! LAUGH AT THIS! The material is as disturbing as it is funny. So I think people were self-conscious about laughing at stuff in front of the President so they wouldn't commit a faux pas.

Like the note in the ass. I was curious how that went over…
Right. There were a couple times where Clinton guffawed really loudly and my wife elbowed me and said, "Bubba likes that." After the movie, to my pleasant surprise, he held a two-hour impromptu seminar about the history of Iraq policy going back to the 1920s when the artificial borders were created. He's a bright guy and he was cool. He said, "Apart from being a fabulous movie, this is an important movie because people need to know how this war really ended." He's not shy about that shit.

How did you set up Three Kings *at Warner Bros.? It's a very brave film for a major studio. Did they come to you?*
Yes. It was a very odd and serendipitous process: David's Adventure in Studio Land. I thought, what would this be like, to work with something from their candy box? They opened up their logbook to me and this one log line jumped out at me, which was a heist set in the Gulf War, a script by John Ridley. A pretty straight action movie. I couldn't stop thinking about it. In fact, I was researching another script, a turn-of-the-century story, and I didn't feel I had cracked it, so I started buying books about the Gulf—photojournalist books that had amazing images in them like hundreds of soldiers being stripped in the desert and Bart Simpson dolls on grills of cars. All this incongruous stuff. There was once a scene where they ate animals in the zoo…

So you found the log line—
It took me by surprise and eventually to everybody's surprise, I said, "I think I want to do this." And everybody's eyebrows went up. Including my agent's. They were all like, "What?" I said it's going to be crazy textured, with all the politics and everything. To me, the heist is the least interesting part. So I went off, researched, and wrote it for eighteen months. It was a fun scriptwriting process, like no other I'd ever done. I would make columns of things I found fascinating, and then I would build the script that way. So it's not character-driven, which is obvious from the movie. There was very volatile material which hadn't been put in the face of Americans about what really happened there. I read papers, talked to veterans and Iraqis. Then I sewed together the quilt of this script. It was liberating, because it was blank as the desert, a palette where I could do a lot of different things, including action, which I hadn't done before. I wanted to click on lots of information, like click on their day jobs, click on the wife at home, click on how this punk

sees violence as opposed to how violence really is. I'll do it and see how it works in the editing.

John Ridley has been vocal in his displeasure over credit…
He certainly has. I thought we had an amicable agreement. He was all friendly when we made the credit agreement.

You just used his premise of the heist in the Gulf.
That was all I took from his script, and frankly, that's the most boring thing about the movie. Which in a way was an albatross, because I thought it was going to help me write faster. It was sort of the opposite.

Ridley was part of the process in the beginning?
Yeah, he sold his script. Like every other writer. I don't understand what his whining is about because it's the most common experience in Hollywood. You write a script, you sell it and get paid. Goodbye. You're lucky you're not rewritten 700 times. If he wants to direct his own scripts, he should control them a little bit. If he thinks it's such a work of genius, I think he'd let me publish my script. I even offered to publish both scripts in one volume.

That's a great idea.
He won't do it. He got paid, he got co-producer credit, he was all amicable. I wanted to publish the screenplay and then he started playing the jilted writer.

Did he see the film and have a problem with it?
Not to my knowledge.

Was there WGA arbitration at all?
No. He decided not to. I was happy to go either way because I knew I had a very strong case. I think what is truly accurate is screenplay by me, and story by him and me. With him getting first position. He said he wanted sole story credit. I said okay and he got co-producer credit.

Is this going to make you wary in the future?
Oh yeah. [laughs]

You used to be an activist, so did you purposely set out to spotlight our foreign policy?
Definitely. That was one of my main motivations. It wasn't dealing with characters so much as I did in my other movies, it was being driven by the political charge of the material. I couldn't believe that no other filmmaker had gone after this and I couldn't believe that Warner Bros. was going to let me do it.

Why did they?
They were hungry to work with independent filmmakers. They've done it

before. Joe Gerber and Lorenzo Di Bonaventura were all jazzed about working with me. They were happy to let me do my thing.

In terms of action movies, are you a fan or was it new territory?
I'm not a huge action movie fan, although the other idea that was a big motivator was violence. There hadn't been a war film since *Platoon*, so I thought, "Great! I'm going to explore this territory in a totally different way." So while I'm writing it I find out that Spielberg and Malick are doing these epic war movies! Yet mine was contemporary and nothing like theirs. The whole process of resensitizing violence cinematically captivated me at the time. I felt that bullets had become glib and cartoonish, even in really smart independent movies, so I wanted to render their impact more real. Sometimes I write in friends' homes, and I have a friend who was a doctor in an emergency room. I was writing and I said to him, "What exactly does a bullet do?" We talked about it and I thought, "I'm going to write this, show this, and if it doesn't work we can cut it later."

I thought that was a brilliant moment. Where did this rumor come up that you used a real corpse?
This researcher from *Newsweek* was talking to me and saying, "How you going to market this anyway? My friends don't get the trailer. What about this fight you had with George Clooney?" He was being really aggressive. I got annoyed and decided to take my revenge. I said that we used an actual corpse…and we had only one take using a high-speed camera to get that bullet going right through and the toughest thing was getting a light in there. So he writes the thing up and the next thing the morticians' association is calling Warner Bros. and protesting the unethical use of a corpse. It was kind of fun. Harmless.

There's a great scene where they destroy the helicopter with the armed football. It's a cool action scene, but you cut away to the aftermath of the crash and it's not a triumph at all. There are human beings in there.
That's a scene I debated right up to the shoot, whether I was going to keep that. There were some who wanted me to nail home the point about black quarterbacks or give skin to the Iraqi guy. I was like, "No way."

In the script they do high-five each other.
I think that was a draft with Troy and they punch their fists together. Then it's something you get close to and realize it doesn't feel good.

You took the least obvious approach. In a typical action movie, the characters would blow up the chopper and say "Spike!"
Right.

In the script, you also indicate a lot of visual directions.
That took a lot of work to translate that to the camera department.

So when you're writing, you see exactly how you want to shoot the scene.
Yes. Then you have to make that technically happen. You have to experiment. Definitely with the shootout. When we looked at the first cut of the shootout, I didn't think it was going to work. I said, "Thank God, we covered this normally." And the editor says, "But you guys didn't cover it normally." I was shitting my pants thinking we were going to reshoot!

There are lots of cool visual touches in the film.
I'm totally a beginner filmmaker, and I'm learning. My motives were political and informational, but also visual. I'd never been so visually motivated in any screenplay I ever wrote. Any flaws in the film are attributed to this, as well as its assets. I was experimenting with being a more visual writer. We studied these photojournalists, like Kenneth Jarecke's book *Just Another War*, and it's amazing—haunting black and white photos of the Gulf War. A brilliant book. We strove for that look in the film: a big, blank empty landscape with a person here and a truck way far away, that kind of thing. It was a little bit film school for me, so I'll take a lot that I learned and go back to something that's closer to my ballpark.

I think the dark heart of the movie is the interrogation scene. You get to hear the other side's version of things. It's horrifying what happens to Mark Wahlberg, but you can't hate the interrogator.
One of the things that inspired me was that the war was like a computer picture from an airplane. So who are the people? It's a dangerous thing because you can dehumanize the enemy. What would it be like to meet an Iraqi who didn't want to serve in Saddam's army—which most of them don't want to-and bring him face to face with an American. That was exciting to me.

Did you interview any Iraqi soldiers?
We did. A lot of the people in the movie were Iraqi and we cast them out of Deerborn, Michigan, where's there's an Iraqi community…. I met a lot of them after I finished the script and asked if this was right, or this. But as a writer, you'd be surprised at how many of one's instincts are right, strictly from intuition. I don't know if it was Henry James who said as a writer, you should be able to walk by a house, and if the door opens for a moment and you get a glimpse into the kitchen where people are eating, then when the door closes, you should be able to write a story about that house.

Do you have certain habits to get yourself in the mood?
I have to write down all the things about an idea that excite me and I have to have the whole menu at my disposal. Sometimes I have charts on the wall. Once I outline—and I outline and outline—I have to insist that I write eight pages a day, otherwise I'll never finish the script, or I'll go over a couple pages a million times. Then I give it to another friend of mine so I can't go back. You have to keep marching forward or you'll never get it out of your head. I

write longhand and then I transcribe onto the computer.

How long did it take to write Three Kings*?*
I had about a 200-page script after six months, but I wasn't happy with it. I put it down for a few months before it became closer to my own version.

You gave it to the studio and they said go ahead.
At the beginning, they said, "Where's the script? We paid you the advance and we normally expect a first draft in twelve weeks." And I said, "That's why most of your movies suck."

What was it like going from indie to studio?
Warner Bros. had this great Steve Roth tradition of giving artists a lot of room. Once they got how I was going to be, they just let it be. I hope that tradition lives on now that Terry [Semel] and Bob [Daly] are gone. It may become more corporate. My next film will probably be far more independent. But I'm loyal to Lorenzo because he was completely supportive the entire time.

Three Kings *has done pretty good box-office. Is the studio happy with the outcome?*
They're very happy with it. Of course, everybody gets all pumped up when the tests are good and the advance press is good. Before that, we had more realistic expectations because the movie is provocative. It's going to make money for them, I think.

Did you make any changes after test previews?
They wanted me to take out the bullet in the cavity if the audience didn't like it. But the audience loved it. We moved around the Nora Dunn sequences. At the White House, Clinton told her, "You were a good nail-spinner."

What are the film or script influences on your work?
Definitely the films of the '70s. I'm a big fan of Wes Anderson and Paul Anderson. All those Andersons. I love Alexander Payne. *Chinatown*. I watch a lot of movies. But I tend to watch movies I like over and over.

Do you have any ideas for the next script?
I have a lot of ideas, but I want to let the dust settle before I talk about them.

John Sayles

INTERVIEWED BY MARY JOHNSON, RENFREU NEFF,
JIM MERCURIO & DAVID F. GOLDSMITH
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 3, #2 (SPRING 1996)
& VOLUME 9, #4 (JULY/AUGUST 2002)

I nterviewing John Sayles is like having office hours with a brilliant pro-
fessor: you don't chat, you listen. Ask him a question and he'll launch into
an enthralling discourse that answers a half-dozen other questions in the
process. But Sayles is no didact; he's simply a natural-born raconteur with a
stunning faculty for narrative discourse. Few filmmakers are as adept at dram-
atizing the intermingling of personal conflict with social strife as he is.
Whether the story is about a World Series scandal, striking Appalachian coal
miners, or the tangled history of a Texas town, Sayles's films are, first and
foremost, character-driven dramas. The broader social world, with all its real-
life contradictions and contests, is brought to life through the struggles of
individuals. Sayles's real talent lies in his ability to focus on the particulars
of those individual struggles to bring clarity and meaning to the big picture.

With the release of his first feature, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, twenty-
five years ago, John Sayles established himself as a leader of the American
independent film movement. Although highly regarded as a writer-director,
Sayles entered the film business as a screenwriter for hire. Finding a place
with Roger Corman's New World Pictures, Sayles wrote *Piranha, The Lady in
Red*, and *Battle Beyond the Stars*. Subsequent screenplays, characterized by
inventive dialogue and a witty use of genre conventions, include *The Howl-
ing* and *Alligator*. While directing his own films, Sayles continued to work as
a screenwriter for Hollywood, doing uncredited rewrites on films such as
Mimic and *Apollo 13*, taking the money he makes within the system and pour-
ing it back into his own idiosyncratic movies where his uncompromising
vision makes him sort of a folk hero to independent filmmakers. As a
writer/director, Sayles's movies include: *Return of the Secaucus Seven, Lianna,
Baby, It's You, The Brother From Another Planet, Matewan, Eight Men Out, City*

of Hope, Passion Fish, The Secret of the Roan Inish, Lone Star, Men With Guns, Limbo, Sunshine State, Casa de los Babys, and *Silver City*. *Passion Fish* was nominated for two Academy Awards, one for Best Original Screenplay.

Whether he's writing a screenplay, directing a movie, or giving an interview, Sayles aims for the heart of the matter, and his aim is true. He instructs, he entertains, and he illuminates. And like a great teacher, he inspires. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to John Sayles in 1995, 1999, 2000, and 2002.

Did you read much as a child?
Yeah, I did read quite a bit. Children's books like the *Freddy the Pig* series or Dr. Seuss, but at the same time I'd be reading adult books like *The Caine Mutiny*.

So you had a lot of books in your house?
Yes. Both of my parents were teachers.

When did you recognize you loved stories so much that you had to write your own?
I probably started writing stories when I was in the second or third grade. Sometimes assignments but sometimes for the fun of it. I didn't know anybody who was an author, and I never met anybody who was an author until after my novel was published, so it wasn't a thing to be, it was a thing to do. I do remember being very struck by *The Black Stallion* by James Farley. I think it was the first time I noticed technique—that book is told very much in a kind of omniscient but very emotional point of view, but at the end it switches to the point of the view of the old man who was the handicapper of the race the Black Stallion runs. Not only did I feel it really worked as a method of telling the story, but I noticed technique for the first time. I certainly wasn't noticing it in movies, but I noticed it in books.

Who were some of your cinematic influences?
Well, there are just so many, conscious and unconscious. I watched a lot of TV and read a lot of books when I was a kid, and I'm sure all of that information is there. Certainly as far as filmmakers whom I like, Kurosawa has been very influential but not at all in terms of style. Just in terms of what he can get into a movie—good storytelling and emotion, and his movies are usually about something. To be able to accomplish that! And I've watched a lot of Rossellini movies. There was a kind of spiritual simplicity, without even being religious or necessarily pious, about some of his early movies that interested me. I've watched a lot of Italian neorealist films over time. That's one of my favorite periods in movies, but I like all kinds of stuff. When I have to talk to acting classes, the model I usually use is a scene from *Enter the Dragon* with Bruce Lee.

When you conceptualize your ideas for a script, how do you decide which ideas are worthy of your attention?
It's usually not a matter of lots of ideas, it's a whole subject matter that I'm interested in. What I need to do is really think and condense it. Really think

about what do I want to learn about this subject. So it's not so much getting rid of ideas as kind of condensing them. When I'm writing a script for myself, my rule of thumb is it's my story, I focus on what interests me the most, what I want to explore. I think a lot of what fiction is for people, whether a book, movie or play, is a way to organize or focus what goes on around us. When you run into somebody on the street and they tell you a story about a friend that's funny or shocking, they're doing the same thing when they're telling the story—they're choosing details, omitting some things and highlighting other things that make the story better. So it's really not omitting things, but focusing them, to get a sharper picture of what it is I want to say or talk about.

When you have an idea for a story, how do you decide the best form for telling it? Most of the stuff I do is fairly complex, and I think some of it has to do with the kind of complexity that it needs. Most of the novels I've done have been told in a real mosaic of points of view. Each chapter might be from a different character's point of view, and there might be fifteen or twenty characters who get at least one chapter from their point of view. I feel like in a movie, even if the movie is complex, I'll tend to limit it to two, or, at most, three points of view—the Omniscient point of view, which is the wide frame, and then, classically, there's a protagonist and the antagonist, you know, in thrillers, but usually there's a bunch of protagonists, and usually I pick one or two. So generally, we're seeing the world from either the Omniscient point of view or that of one of those characters. In a two-hour movie I don't tell the audience here's a character, okay, here's another one, now see the world the way they see it. In a book you can do that. Then with short stories, they're a little more in one tone, usually from one person's point of view or from the Omniscient eye, and I don't switch within the story.

My first novel, *Pride of the Bimbos*, started as a fifty-page short story from different characters' points of view, and to their credit, the editors at *Atlantic Monthly* magazine said, "Aw, this is a novella." We'll send it over to the Press, and the people at the Press said either you want to make this into a bunch of short stories or expand it into a novel. They thought it had too many points of view. And then there's just the scale of the story. In fiction, generally, it's the scale of the story. I've written very long short stories, thirty-five-page short stories, but they're not novellas. Their scale is much smaller. There's usually just one incident or one mood, whereas novels can wander all over the place. What you generally find in adapting fiction for movies, is it's easier to adapt a short story than a novel, and big novels are very hard… generally they make very good miniseries, but with movies they lose too much.

Your movie career began with writing scripts for Roger Corman's New World Pictures, which may explain the versatility and resourcefulness of your own films. You've made films about aliens and coal miners, corrupt politicians and baseball players, lesbians, an Irish folk tale, student activists—always about relationships… I really don't think genre is that important. It's more what am I going to do

with this? What are the genre rules? So you look at the genre rules and decide whether you're going to keep them or break them. What are the genre expectations of the audience? It's kind of like theme and variations, the way a musician would say, "I'm going to write a waltz; okay, what am I going to do with this waltz? Or I'm going to use ethnic music to write a symphony, but what am I going to do with it?" I'm not the only writer who writes in a lot of different genres. I've been lucky, though, because writers do get typecast very quickly by the people who hire them. I was lucky, because I started out by writing creature features for Roger Corman, but I started directing movies about human beings, so I would get offers to do movies about both. Generally, the minute you write a movie, the next six offers are in that genre. After *Eight Men Out*, I got baseball things and after *Mimic*, which I didn't even get credit on, I started to get more offers about crawling insects. After I did *Piranha* [for Roger Corman] I got a lot of things that were set in water. "Hey, he's the guy who does water!"

What kind of advice would you give to aspiring screenwriters?
Write a lot. When I first came to Los Angeles, I was able to get an agent through writing two novels and having a short story published. What she found useful about the way I worked was that I didn't just have one screenplay, I had three or four. Some were contemporary, some period stories, so that when somebody asked for a writing sample she could send them the one that seemed to resemble what they were looking for the most. Plus, I got the exercise of having written those scripts. I didn't obsess about one story, I just kept moving on and wrote about what interested me.

Do you feel it's necessary to begin in Hollywood?
As a screenwriter for hire? Yes.

So you were able to finance some of your earlier work in Hollywood.
Basically I had been writing novels and wrote a screenplay and sent it to a film agency that was representing my novels as possible movie subjects. And the first thing they said was "we like your screenplay but we can't do anything for you unless you come out here."

My agent has said the same thing.
The people who hire writers tend to want to look at them in person. So unless you have a lot of frequent flyer miles you have to be in the area. We lived in Santa Barbara, so once a week when there were meetings, I'd go down there and show my face.

In your book, Thinking in Pictures, *you mention that the impetus for your novel,* Union Dues, *was your frequent adventures hitchhiking through West Virginia and listening to the stories of the people. You also said you happened upon the story of the Matewan Massacre while researching the novel. Do you think you find stories*

or do stories find you?

I think you hear stories all the time. You hear them on the news, you hear them from other people. Occasionally you might hear them in a book or a movie. And what happens to me is my mind grabs onto the ones that really interest me. The other ones just kind of roll past. I've gotten ideas for movies from things that happened to me, from things I've read in a newspaper, and in the case of *The Brother From Another Planet*, from dreams I've had. I've had lots of dreams that haven't turned into movies—but something about that dream, something about that story—my mind reacted to the story that was there. I think that people organize the world in different ways. Someone who's a graphic artist may be looking at a situation and think of things in color or in shape. When I look at a situation I start thinking about what the story is. Like those psychological tests where somebody shows you a picture and tells you to come up with a story… I could go on for days with that picture.

You've said you essentially make your living by rewriting other people's scripts. How do you approach rewriting another writer's work?

Depending on the mandate from the producers hiring me, I either forget about the previous drafts and go back to scratch with the original concept, as in *Piranha* or *Alligator* or *The Howling*, or I try to improve or change the existing script in the direction they want to take it. I'd say the most common problem with scripts I'm asked to consider rewriting is that they aren't sufficiently dramatized—the characters explain who they are and what they're doing rather than revealing it through their actions. This doesn't mean you don't use dialogue, only that the dialogue is revelatory rather than expository.

Let's talk about writing and doctoring screenplays for other directors. Is it a different mind set?

Well, the whole philosophy of what you're doing is different in that you're trying to help them tell their story. The only time I've written something that somebody else made was a spec script called *Breaking In.* Bill Forsythe made the movie of it, and he did a very good job, but it was something that I didn't feel I needed to direct. All the others have been assignments where I've been helping others tell their story, so there you're much more a carpenter than the architect. Sometimes they just give you an idea, and sometimes it's a newspaper or magazine article, sometimes it's a book. Sometimes it's a bunch of screenplays that have already been written and you say, "What do you like about what you've already got? What do you envision this thing becoming?" Then if you think there's something you can help them with, you take the job, but, as I said, you're much more like a carpenter. You're not saying, "Oh, I envision a window over here and this and that"; you're saying, "Do you want windows?" Then they say, "Yeah, we want windows in front of the house and here and there," and then you try to do a good job. Very often I'm hired by producers who are trying to get a greenlight from a studio or a financier, or in some cases, from an actor. I've done things where it

was just working on this one actor's part and leave the rest of it alone. Or where they need an actor to say he wants to do this movie by Monday, because there's going to be a Directors Guild strike or something like that, so they want to improve the script enough so that the actor says yes.

Like just cut the bangs…
Yes. Then I may come back later and do more work after they've said yes. I've done rewrite jobs as short as two days. So you're given a mandate, whereas when you're writing your own things, you're using some of the same muscles and techniques and everything, but you're starting with what's my story? What's the story I want to tell? In a story conference about a movie I'm writing for other people, when somebody says, "Well, we'd really like to set this in Japan instead of China," then I say, "Well, you know the martial arts are very different, the cultures are very different. If you're going to Japan, it's very linear and straightforward; in China it's very circular." They say, "Yea, yea, yea, whatever, we can get you Toshiro Mifune." You say, "Okay, I can do that." Whereas, if it's my story, I often will just say, "That's not the story I want to tell," and that's the end of the conversation. So it's a very different thing, even if you're using the same muscles. But I end up working harder when I'm working for other people; more drafts and so on. I won't do something that I wouldn't want to see, and very often I don't take a job because I don't see any potential in the project. In that case, you're not the writer for that particular project. I don't think it works very well when writers condescend to material, to say, "Well, I wouldn't watch this movie, but those people would, so what would they like?" I can't do that.

Ron Howard has said you rewrote the entire script for Apollo 13, *but didn't get a credit. How did you become involved with the* Apollo 13 *project? What problems existed in the script and how did you address those inadequacies?*
I was asked to come onto *Apollo 13* fairly late in their preproduction—they had already cast the lead and had started building the spaceship sets. The process was not so much one of damage control as bringing the story back toward the source material. The director [Ron Howard] and actors were much more involved than in any of my other rewriting experiences, as were the consulting astronauts. Scenes were reworked over and over, even after all the writers were off the picture.

When you are up for an action movie rewrite, do you find yourself suffering fools in dealing with Hollywood?
Not really. What you tend to do is talk to people very carefully, before they hire you, about what the story is they want to tell. I'm there to help them tell that story. If you think you can help them and you know what kind of movie they are talking about, you start thinking about other movies like that which you like. What was it you liked about them? What rhythms? What kinds of characters, situations? Every movie has its own world or rules, and you just

enter that world as a writer and you try to fulfill the expectations—without being totally predictable—of the audiences entering this kind of world. If it's a monster movie, or a horror, or if it's a romantic comedy, there are different rules. If it's a romantic comedy, the dog doesn't die. In a gross-out comedy, the dog gets run over six times and gets served for breakfast.

Do you believe the WGA's credit arbitration process is fair? Are there ways in which it could be improved?
Arbitration of writers' credits is an extremely inexact process, but I have no idea how to make it better. At present it is based on percentages of change (not necessarily improvement.) I wouldn't have the first idea of how to apply percentages to dramatic work, and therefore am not on the arbitration committee. At least the process is in the hands of writers and not producers, who have a completely different agenda.

When you write a story do you begin with core characters that interest you, or is it a certain attraction to a specific time, place, or event?
Very often it's just in my mind for a long time. I get interested in a place or a situation or a kind of interpersonal dynamic, and I think this is something that might be interesting; it might make a good story. I'll knock it around in my head, sometimes for years—which is one of the reasons I write so fast when I actually sit down. My first drafts are often a week and a half or two weeks, because I've been thinking about it so long. Generally it starts out with a character in a certain situation or a certain kind of dynamic tension or moral situation, and then it may connect with a place or time, and that jells into a plot line. Sometimes I will have a theme looking for plot, but rarely do I have a plot looking for a theme.

With the story arc of *Lone Star*, you might describe it as a guy who is doing detective work, and the suspect is his father. So it's kind of like an Oedipus thing except, in this case, he's not trying to clear his father's name. He actually wants his father to be guilty. And he finds out more than he bargained for. And then it was going to take place in Texas. The next step would be to think about who are the characters. Who are the people in this world, who come from the different communities that I want to have come together? Who are the players? Then you say, "Well, it would be interesting to have this kind of character." You think about what the relationships among them are, and what their ties with each other are. You're always trying to have as many ties as possible so you don't have too many characters who are only tied to the story by one thread. The final thing I do is I start thinking about what scenes of confrontation I would want to have. Let's say it's this detective story: who is he going to go interrogate to find out about the past? What stories are they going to tell him? Then I make an outline and I start putting those scenes in order. I get an idea of the kind of temporal arc of the movie. Is it the kind of movie that takes place in one day? The movie I'm about to shoot takes place in basically one day and the next morning. *The Return of*

the Secaucus Seven was a three-day weekend. The first day people show up, the second day they party and pair off, and the third day they say their good-byes. *Sunshine State* is based on about a five- or six-day period during this thing that happens in this town in Florida called "Old Buccaneer Days."

I'm working for Ron Howard right now, doing a rewrite on a thing about the Alamo. But it's not only about the Alamo, it's about how people got into the Alamo, and what they did at the Alamo all the way through the Battle of San Jacinto. It takes place in an eight-month period, so how you do you handle time? How do you get rid of all the true but not very streamlined things that happened? All the back and forth, and people traveling from one town to the other. You really have to figure that out, and decide how much do you want people to know about time. That's one of the most important things in a script: where are your codas? Where do you let the audience take a rest and say, "Okay, this sequence, this whole day—even though it may be made up of several days—is over." Then there might be a fade-out. The audience is thinking, "Now they're going to have to face the music, and we're going to find out who's going to run the Alamo."

Structure is so important in movies, and especially how you handle time, that I try to figure a lot of that out before I start a draft. And then after I finish a draft—especially for other people, but even for myself—I'll do a very detailed outline of what happens on what page. I may flag certain things. Let's say it's the Alamo script; you've got these main characters: Travis, Bowie, Crockett, Sam Houston, and Santa Ana. I'll put their names in capitals, and whenever they show up in a description of a scene I'll mark their names. I can look at the thing graphically and say, "Oh, I see. Sam Houston has disappeared for forty pages. Maybe he should disappear for only twenty, or else people are going to lose track of him." So you put a scene in somewhere. You get some kind of graphic feeling for it. And then when you go into your second draft you can look at it structurally. But I never start until I have the outline. I don't just start writing scenes.

Do you ever find yourself stuck, staring at a computer screen with, dare I say it, writer's block?

No, because I work for hire, and there are deadlines, so it's not a luxury I can afford. Someone told me that there are two kinds of writers. There's the ones who write until they can't find a word, and then they sit around for two days until they get the right word. And there's the kind who will leave a blank and go back and fill it in. I leave a blank. I will sometimes write a page or two and make a note: "Better stuff than this." I know it's not very good as I am writing it, but I'll move beyond, and eventually I'll figure out what I need to do to fix it up.

Do you hole yourself up for a couple of days when you are working on a script?

When I can do this I tend to write in sprints. Because I have a bad back, I have a one-hour timer, so every hour I get up and walk around; then if I've been writing sitting down, I'll write on a kneeler or stand up and write to

change whatever position I am in. Then I can work eight to ten hours a day when I am on a roll.

How do you find the spine and structure of a story?
Well, in screenwriting, structure is the most difficult thing. I'm not a classicist about structure. I don't think there's a set number of acts that a screenplay has to have. I think each screenplay has to have its own structure. Sometimes the structure is very simple and can be seen graphically. For example, *Matewan* lent itself to a graphic representation. Because it ended in a shootout on a street in a small town, it kind of manifested itself in the classic "V" that you see in a lot of gunfight movies. Throughout the movie you have these little skirmishes, but everything's coming together to one point. In another movie, it might turn into an inverted "V." *Eight Men Out* very naturally broke into thirds, the first third being about the fix, the conspiracy to throw the World Series, the second third the games themselves, and the last third being the trial—what actually happened to the ballplayers. But before I start writing scenes, I'm very careful to do a step outline where I try to find what the structure of that particular movie is going to be.

I think that's really helpful. Do you have to kill the editor in you to push out the first draft of a screenplay?
Especially when I'm writing for other people, the first draft is the most fun, because I'm almost always hired to do more than one draft, and the first draft is my chance to lay everything I think might be cool on the table for the people who hired me.

How many drafts do you typically write, when you write for yourself?
When I write for myself, there are usually two and a half drafts.

How do you know when you're ready to shoot?
Pretty much when I like the script. When I can sit down and read it, and kind of imagine the movie. One thing, I was an actor professionally before I was a writer or a filmmaker of any kind. One thing I always do with my scripts is to play all the parts. I read it through a couple of times just for the characters, and feel if I had to play this part, man, woman or child, do I have enough ammunition—do I have enough evidence to know who I am and present my case within the story? I'll show it to Maggie Renzi, who has produced many of my movies. She may have some questions or whatever, and I may write some new stuff based on that.

Do you write each script with the intention of making the movie right away?
I've never gotten to make movies in the order that I've written them. *Lianna*, which was the second film I made, was written before *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*. Both *Matewan* and *Eight Men Out* were written before either of those scripts. It just took us a long time to raise the money. So, yeah, you

hope that it's the next one but you're never sure. I never write something just to put it on the shelf; we always make the rounds and try to raise money for it. The lucky thing is, I've had more than one or two ideas for movies, so that if we can't raise money for one thing I can eventually come up with something that's cheaper to make or, for whatever reason, more likely to get financed. And then we go to that. When the money fell apart for *Matewan* I wrote *Brother From Another Planet* in about six weeks.

Do you also think from an industry standpoint? Do you consider whether a role is going to attract a high caliber actor?
Not when I write for myself. When I write for other people I've often been asked to throw in some big, juicy speeches so they can interest a higher echelon actor.

When you're writing for yourself, do you imagine certain actors in the roles?
Usually what happens is about a third of the way through the first draft I start feeling like, well I know the actor who can play this. I think acting the parts out is also one of the reasons why the movies I make myself, tend to be a little more ensemble in nature—the characters a little more complex and three-dimensional, and the background characters a little more foreground. In the typical Hollywood movie, there are two stars, two supporting actors who play their best friends, and everybody else is an extra. One of the problems we have selling our movies is that potential distributors ask, "who's the hero?"

Is budget something you always have in mind when you're writing?
If I'm writing for myself. And it certainly was in the early days, when I was writing for Roger Corman. He would always say, "Oh, don't worry about the budget." Then the poor directors would come squealing, "I've only got $800,000 to shoot this thing!" I wrote a science-fiction movie for James Cameron. The fun with that was that anything I could think up, if he liked it, he would invent it. Even if the technology didn't exist. He's so good at that stuff that there were no restraints in the storytelling. When I'm writing for myself, though, it's different. For instance, the movie I'm about to make in Mexico is half in Spanish. The minute you have any subtitles in a movie, you're talking about a much smaller potential audience. So you have to worry about what it's going to cost. The minute you have any kind of action or adventure in a movie you probably increase your chances of selling it overseas, and so you can think about a little bit more of a budget. Of course, action-adventure usually costs more to make.

When you're writing, do you think as a writer or a director or both? Is there a time when that dichotomy of roles is problematic?
Actually, I wear three hats. I've edited more than half of my own movies. The way I've always felt about those three jobs (writer, director and editor) is that those are the three drafts I do writing a piece of fiction. I was a novelist before

I was a filmmaker, and usually I'd do two or three drafts of something before I'd send it out. The screenplay is the first draft. You change a lot of things while you direct it, so the fact that you're directing the film changes the way you write, the fact that you're editing the film changes the way you direct.

Does the process of developing characters of a different gender, ethnicity, or age group involve a different consciousness?
Having done a lot of fiction before I even started writing movies, it was fairly obvious to me early-on that all writing that's not autobiography is pretentious. You are pretending to know how somebody else sees things. Even someone who's your same age, sex, race is different. So, going back to being an actor, the main thing you do is try to get into the head of the character you're going to play.

That's the main thing I try to do when I'm making films. Why are people acting this way? What's going on in their heads? So for me, the most important thing I do when I start creating characters is a lot of observing—listening and reading. If you're talking about people who have put their lives on paper you go to those sources. If the character is a ten-year-old girl, you basically think of yourself when you were ten years old—talk to the women you know about when they were ten years old. With Fiona's character in *Roan Inish*, I wanted her to be somebody who had never seen a TV show or a movie. So in her imagination when she illustrated a story in her mind, her references weren't Disney movies, they were things in the natural world that she had seen.

With every character I write in every movie, I'm very aware of the specifics of how that person thinks, of how they see the world. What do they know? When you go back in time in a period movie, you have to think, are we before or after Freud? The way people thought about the world changed after Freud. The way people thought about the world changed after Darwin. The way people thought about the world changed after the Civil War. But depending on who that person is, they may have changed more or less. To be a socialist in 1920, like the lead character in *Matewan*, is very different from being a socialist today in the United States. So, very much like acting a role where you have to learn a dialect, what I try to do is get inside the head of my characters and really think like them as I'm writing their parts.

My novels are all told from multiple points of view. Very often a character will have their own chapter, from his or her point of view, then just become a character described by other people for some chapters, then come back five or six chapters later, once again telling the story from their point of view.

As in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*?*
It was among my influences. I read a lot of Faulkner.

Do you write character bios?
I'll usually do character bios for other people after I've done a draft, just for their enlightenment. Especially if I'm writing about historical characters. If

they're not historical characters, I don't do that for other people. When I'm writing my own scripts, I do character bios for even the smallest parts, and then I send them to the actors before they show up on the set, just so they don't fill it in themselves and get off the track. It helps them think about the character because I don't actually do much rehearsal. Pretty much we get to the set, and we'll go through the blocking. I expect the actor to really have thought about who the character is. But I prefer to get the shock of the new, so we don't sit down and read through it. I want the camera rolling when they say those lines for the first time. Some people find readings invaluable but I don't.

Do you feel the temporal aspects of writing are purely dramatic considerations?
With movies you assume—even though people don't necessarily do it at home—that people are going to sit down and watch the whole two-hour movie in sequence. One of the things that I notice when I'm editing is that if you change what came before a scene, you change the scene. You might not have made a single cut within that scene itself but if certain things are missing it's not going to play as well. Or, if you've already told that story, it's not going to have the same impact.

Writing is only the first draft, and directing is the second draft, and the editing is the third draft. Because sometimes you realize, "Well, on paper I needed this scene. I needed these five lines to explain something that I could not have done without them on paper. It was good that the actor knew them. But the actor had done such a good job in the first three scenes of letting us know who that character is, that I don't actually need this scene. It's been done. It's redundant." Just think if you've written some script, and you have to prove that the hero is a tough guy. You have a couple of scenes where he kicks ass early in the movie. The minute they hire Clint Eastwood you probably don't need three scenes to do it. He brings thirty years of movie history with him, mostly of him being a tough-ass. What they did with *Unforgiven* is that he basically had to spend twenty minutes falling off horses and shooting badly to make people say, "Maybe he isn't such a great killer." He had to undercut his own movie legacy.

Your dialogue tends to be naturalistic, very true to the characters. Do you study any dialects? There were so many different dialects in Matewan. *Did you research dialects for* The Secret Of The Roan Inish*?*
Quite a bit. It helps to have some kind of ear for it, but if it's a period film, I tend to do a lot of reading. Especially writers who were writing novels in that time, and who lived in that era. For *Eight Men Out*, I read a lot of Ring Lardner, James T. Farrell, and Nelson Algren, all of whom were from Chicago and knew the people in the story. The dialogue was based on people very much like that.

Did you also read Studs Terkel?
Actually his stuff was much later. For *Roan Inish* I read all the island writers—people who lived on the islands off the West Coast of Ireland who mostly

wrote in Gaelic and were translated in English. I read Liam O'Flaherety, who was from the Aran islands and wrote in English. And once we got to Donnegal, where we shot the movie, I also had both Irish- and English-speaking people read the script and check over the dialect with me.

Was the story original? In terms of narrative structure it's framed as a story within a story. Was the inner story yours?
The movie is based on a children's book by a woman named Rosalie Fry that was actually set in Scotland. But myths of seals turning into people exist on the Western coasts of both Ireland and Scotland.

The seal shedding its skin to reveal a woman was a magical moment. Was it difficult to achieve that realistic effect? Being a mother, it struck a chord. It was so evocative of natural childbirth. It was incredible.
It was difficult, especially because we decided to do the transformation in a fairly mechanical, simple way, rather than use high-tech special effects. We did it about the same way they would have done it in the silent movie days. It was very labor intensive. A lot of KY Jelly.

It seems like often your theme and form are intrinsically linked. I think of Lone Star *and the clever changing of time and location within the same shot.*
In that particular script, I said, "We trade off." That's the essence of the theme. In *Lone Star*, it was about the link between the past and the present, so we would do these 360's which would bring you back to the present. I'll write that kind of transition in for myself and also for the production design people just to give them an idea. I actually don't do a lot of description, but if I know I am going use a song in the movie, I may write some of the lyrics just to give the actors some flavor of what's going to be going on. The stuff I write is actually pretty thin as far as description is concerned. If I feel like I can finance the movie without hyping it, I leave the hype out.

Speaking of hype… Although you've done various types of movies, one thing indicative of your style is a muted approach where you don't milk a scene for, in the pejorative sense, melodrama. It's part Cassavetes and it's part Neorealism.
I like movies that are melodramatic and well done; movies with great big John Williams scores that underline everything. But even in my fiction that's just not my style; I'm a little more oblique. Someone may ask a question in a scene and then you get to the answer six lines later rather than right away. I think I'm more interested in complexity than most screenplays want to be. I'm more interested in the twists and turns of something and the ways people are ambiguous and complex. When I am writing for someone else, and it's clear that this is meant to be an action-thriller with very clearly defined good guys and bad guys, that kind of complexity will get in the way. When you're going for that complexity, it's tough to hit those big moments and to hit those major chords without its seeming kind of fake.

I heard you say that Springsteen can put as much texture in one of his songs as you do in one of your movies. I agree, and it's a compliment to both of you.
That's the thing with great songwriters: they encapsulate an emotion. Some of Bruce's songs, like "Meeting Across The River," are entire movies. Or even a Richard Pryor stand-up routine…he could riff off one character and it's like a short story.

I use the Springsteen song "The Line" from Ghost of Tom Joad *in my screenwriting classes to explain story structure. If a three-minute song can have a theme, subplots, and a Central Dilemma, then a screenplay definitely should.… It's a testament to the power of concise writing.*
Which reminds me of a great line in a Raymond Chandler story that I always use for an example of how to do description in a movie script without going into all the detail. The line is "He gave me a drink of warm gin in a dirty glass." From that one line, you can see the office you're in; you know what it looks like, what it smells like.

How much time do you invest in research for your current project?
I'm still doing it. Very often I'll woodshed an idea, carry it around in my head for two or three years. So I was thinking about it for two or three years before I actually sat down and wrote about it.

Because you've done the conceptual work ahead of time, do you write quickly?
I always write rather quickly. It takes me about a week or two to do a draft. Sometimes out of pressure I've written faster. And sometimes it's amazingly okay because I've done the preparation. But sometimes if I haven't thought it through, it becomes apparent really quickly that I'm not ready to write that story, and I put it aside until later.

Along with what you were just saying, do you have any particular strategies you use for creative problem solving when you're up against the wall?
I think what's very useful for me often is a total change of point of view. In fiction, I've sometimes had stories where it wasn't working, and I've sometimes sat back and said well, what if this character was the one telling the story, or what if this one was suddenly changing the story—that frees up another way of looking at it. In screenwriting, once again to use an acting technique, the most important thing about naturalistic acting is not to play the end of a scene during a scene, it's not to play the end of a story during a story. So often when something seems stale, you remind the actors, wait a minute, this time instead of going right, go left; remember that you have to wait for the other person to say their line, you don't know what's going to happen next. As a writer, sometimes when you're stuck, it's because you've already outlined the ending of a scene or the ending of a movie, and that's your problem. You're doing everything you can to force the action toward that ending, and really what you might want to do is say, "what if it went in a totally different direction?"

How much freedom do you allow yourself to play with those tangents?
In a case where I'm making up the story, I give myself a lot of freedom. In the case where I've chosen an historical story, very little. I'm not going to change the story, and I rarely get stuck in those. It's really a question of what part of the story interests you.

Are you usually satisfied with your work?
I tend to work on so many things that I'm only interested in them until they're done. Then I'm onto something else. I'm thinking about something else.

Is there any one film you're most proud of?
Not really, no.

Do you approach each project with equal enthusiasm?
Yes. I'd say that in each writing assignment for other people, I try to be as energetic and professional as I can be and help them tell their story. I think that one of the positive things about how hard it is to finance and get independent, low budget movies made, is that it means that you're not going to make something just to make a movie. To work that hard you're going to have to really care about the story you're telling.

Was The Brother From Another Planet *meant to be a political statement?*
Brother From Another Planet, to me, is not so much a political statement, but about America and our life in this country and about waste. The waste of human potential caused by racism and classism. So, by the end of the movie, you've realized what an extraordinary guy this visitor from another planet is, but because of what he is he's going to have to hide a lot of those talents.

How true was the story for Matewan*?*
In *Matewan*, the story is very accurate as to who shot whom and why, though I made up some characters. The character of the labor organizer and the woman who runs the boarding house and her son are composite characters from the whole era. Whereas, the characters of the sheriff and mayor and the gun thugs and the agent provocateur who worked for the company and spied on the miners are all historical.

I love how you captured the beauty of the Bayou State in Passion Fish. *Before writing this story, how much of the characters May-Alice and Chantelle were already developed in your mind? Do you ever make any important discoveries about characters as you write them?*
I had been thinking about that movie for probably close to fifteen years. I had seen Ingmar Bergman's movie *Persona*, and I had worked with hospitals and visiting nurses and heard a lot of stories about their patients and their families. I had always felt that if I was going to make an American version of *Persona* it would have a white woman in a wheelchair and black woman pushing

her around, and it would be a comedy. I had been trying to think of where it should be set, because I wanted the place to be part of what drew the woman who was paralyzed out of her shell, and was traveling through Louisiana listening to zydeco and rock and roll. When I got to Cajun country I felt it was the perfect place to set it.

Where did the germinal seeds for Men With Guns *begin for you?*
The idea for this particular story came from two different friends. Both had family who had been involved in international programs in Latin America. One was a doctor who trained other doctors, and the other was an agronomist who trained people in growing corn. Both had these experiences in helping people out. The very people they helped became suspect in the eyes of their own government, basically because they were helping Indians, and that was something that only a Communist would do. They discovered that most of the people they had trained were murdered within a few years.

Let's talk about language, which is so important in Men With Guns. *You wrote the screenplay in Spanish.*
The first and third drafts. I wrote the second draft in English, the third draft in Spanish again. Then I got an actual native Spanish-speaker, a Mexican writer and director named Alejandro Springall, to go through and translate it into the way people would really say things instead of the way someone who had learned Spanish fairly late in life would speak. It was totally understandable in Spanish, it was just that the dialogue wasn't the way someone would really say it, with idioms.

There are also some indigenous Indian languages [Nahuatl, Tzatzi, Maya, and Kuna] along with the Spanish dialogue, and you seem to use them to define the characters rather than a means of communication.
One of the reasons I wrote it in Spanish, aside from good practice, was because my Spanish is simple. In *Los Gusanos* [his third novel, written in 1991] I wrote the Spanish characters' conversation in Spanish, because that's what those characters would think in. One of the main things I was trying to do in that book was to find a new way of presenting characters who are not speaking English and not just say *por favor* every once in a while. In the case of *Men With Guns*, because it's going to be a subtitled movie wherever it goes—even in Mexico and Spain at least one-third of it is going to be subtitled because the Indian languages are as foreign as English—I wanted a subtitled movie because I didn't want audiences to feel that they were missing a lot of the action. That's my problem with subtitled movies. They're made in their own language, and often there's overlapping dialogue and the subtitles can't keep up, so they whittle it down to something very simple. This move is written in very simple Spanish, and it was a very interesting exercise, because I was trying to get stuff that sounds like people would say it. Conversation moves at the pace that it should be moving, so you don't lose anything, and it's very one-to-one.

And the scenes where the Indians are speaking?
What I did with the Indian languages was give those scenes in Spanish to the actors who were going to play them. In most cases their first language was that indigenous language, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to have to trust you to do the translation here. Keep it simple." And it was fairly simple dialogue. Often just "what-are-we-going-to-do," very, very simple declarative sentences. There was no poetry for them to translate, and then they would come back to me if they had a problem and say, "What exactly do you mean here?" But I really had to take their word for it with the translations. The woman that you see at the very beginning is speaking Kuna, which is spoken only on a Panamanian island that was never even under the Spanish. It's more of a Polynesian language, and the little girl doesn't speak it, but she learned it from the woman who plays her mother, so they're both speaking Kuna in their scenes.

The Spanish dialogue was probably easier, but that must have entailed some work there, too. It's not all the same.
For the Spanish, I worked quite a bit with the guy who did the final translation and with the actors: Is the person speaking real Spanish? Are they educated or not educated? Is it someone speaking Spanish as a second language, and, if so, how do those people speak Spanish? When I go to Guatemala or Mexico I have a much easier time in the small villages speaking to Indians who can speak Spanish, because for both of us it's a second language. When I go to the capital city I'm a little behind. So I took more care than I usually do. I'm very comfortable with the American vernacular in all fifty states. I have a pretty good ear. Where I've had actors speaking Spanish in my movies before, in *Lone Star* and in *City of Hope*, I'd usually work with the actors, and I'd say "Okay, here's my textbook Spanish: Puerto Ricanize this." Or when we went down to the border, border Mexican is different from the Mexican spoken in Mexico City or in Chiapas or wherever. So we'd talk to people at the border about the slang there. Some of our actors were Chicanos from L.A., or Cubans or whatever, who had never been down there, and we really wanted it to sound like border Spanish.

Your films are always character driven, and they're always "about" something. What inspired Men With Guns?
This movie is kind of a combination of a couple of things. I heard a friend of mine, Francisco Goldman, a writer, whose uncle was a "barefoot doctor" in Guatemala who tried to start a school for "barefoot doctors." Not at all like the doctor in the movie, he wasn't innocent or willfully ignorant, he just didn't think the army would go that far, but they ended up killing most of his students during the '70s and '80s. It was the basic story of somebody doing something they think is going to help people and it ends up getting them killed. I started thinking, "Well, who's the guy who invented Thalidomide? Or who's the guy who first built housing projects?" A lot of good intentions wind up being subverted, or just weren't such good ideas in the first

place, especially if they condescended to the people they meant to help. At the end of the day, when the smoke clears, maybe a few missionaries actually said, "You know, we messed up. Maybe it wasn't what God wanted us to do, or if he did, he's got a pretty nasty sense of humor, because we really messed these people up." So that started the basic arc of a character who discovers that his legacy is not something wonderful, but something pretty awful, and that he should have known better. That's because he didn't want to know. Because his life was so comfortable. He dies at the end, because he can't go back. There's no going back.

The other thing that I connected with was during the Gulf War I heard about a poll taken in which 65% of the respondents said they didn't want more details about the war. They didn't want to know and thought it was a good idea that the army was censoring the press. To me that was like the reaction to Vietnam where it was complex, the war wasn't just our side of the story. Maybe the Vietnamese had a point too. Maybe we should have questioned the whole war; we certainly should have questioned some of the things that went on in that war in our name. But the American public didn't want to know, and that kind of willful ignorance interested me, because eventually there's a price to pay for it. In this case, the doctor's students pay for it, and he does, too, in the end. As a culture, I think you pay a price for ignoring things. Think of all the people in Germany who said, "I didn't know about the death camps."

There are also class and cultural differences in this movie.
Absolutely. That's also one of the reasons for the woman in the beginning with her daughter. It's not just class that separates the people in this movie, it's not just rich and poor. It is absolutely culture, in that culture is not just clothing or language. The doctor has more in common with the American tourists, who don't even speak his language, than he has with people of his own country who don't speak his language. He doesn't speak theirs either. It's a way of looking at the world. It was important for me to have that wrap-around of that woman who sees the world in a very different way from any of them.

How does she know that the doctor and those traveling with him are coming to Cerca del Cielo, the mountain where she is?
She's clairvoyant. She has a different way of seeing the world, but it's not a practical kind of way: she didn't see the mine three feet in front of her before she stepped on it. The priest who tells the story about the village where the people have to sacrifice themselves in order to save their village, he misses the point in a way, because he thinks it's about his own cowardice. He still doesn't quite get it, doesn't see that their religion is synergistic, that even though they call themselves Catholic their religion is not portable. Portillo, the priest, is a good Catholic, he does the right thing wherever he is, but if the Indians leave their land, their spirituality is also left behind. They become those Indians we see in the beginning, sitting on the sidewalk with their hands out, lost.

If they leave the land, they lose their past as well as the future for their children, because their spirituality is so embedded in the land, in that way of life.

You present the Salt People, the Corn People, the Coffee People, and so on, establishing their identities within agrarian societies.
As I thought about the story, many of the incidents in the movie didn't happen in Latin America, but in Vietnam, in Bosnia—in the beginning Fuentes's [the doctor] son-in-law tells him something like, "You don't know these people. We've lived with them." That kind of attitude is something I heard verbatim in Georgia during the civil rights movement. It's fairly universal stuff. As I was thinking about the people Fuentes would meet, one of my first ideas, if we had more money, was to start in Buenos Aires and go to the Dominican Republic and then to Bolivia; you know, shoot it all over Latin America and have not just Indians, but Africans too. We just didn't have that kind of budget, but I did want that feeling there was something generic about these indigenous peoples. The Salt People or the Charcoal People everywhere have more in common with each other than they probably have in common with the Cane People, who live maybe fifty miles away. And the same with the cane cutters, whether they're Jamaican or Cuban or whatever. Their livelihood revolves around the crop, so there's a rhythm to their lives. They've built their houses from cane stalks, the smells are the same, and the animals who live among them are the same. They aren't even like the people from the nearest town. They really are the people of whatever crop is their livelihood, and they live a certain kind of life that's not based on the name of a town or religion or how dark their skin is.

One of the points in using names like the Lotecs and so on, which may seem like puns, is that I didn't want to place them exactly, like saying they're real Indians—Incas or Mayans or Olmecs. Then you're giving them an exact place. I knew the kinds of locations I wanted, and it was let's go find those places and hope that we can reach them all within six weeks and on a two-and-a-half-million dollar budget. That's why we ended up in Mexico, because it has all those places, even if they're pretty far apart; we didn't have to cross borders with equipment and get passports and stuff. The other thing was that Chiapas actually reminded me of West Virginia, where we shot *Matewan*; it's a larger city with everything six-and-a-half hours away on bad roads and switch-backs and things. You don't get from one place to another very quickly.

There are Portillo, the priest without faith, and Domingo, the soldier without bullets, and the doctor.… What about these ironies?
Yes, and the doctor is basically without his society. He's got his bag, but he doesn't have his society. He makes you examine yourself, and I think that's why people who have these conversions of faith feel really good. When they don't have those things that they need, it makes them examine things, and if people act well, they feel good about it.

What about the American couple? They're tourists; they're naive and self-absorbed, but they mean well.

Yes, a lot of what I was trying to get at with those tourists was they're not "Ugly Americans." They're not despicable at all, but emotionally they are the Teflon tourists. They take the same geographic trip that the doctor is taking; it's a parallel trip, and they keep running into one another, but Fuentes is changing and learning things that affect him deeply. He's not the same person at the end of the trip, not because of the physical things that happen to him, but because of what he's learned, whereas they can hear the same stories and say, "Oh, God, that's awful. That's really awful." They're Americans and there's that way that Americans, even if it's not a political thing— it could be a hurricane—say "I'm an American citizen," and feel like all of a sudden they're going to be whisked away.

What sparked Limbo*?*

I was thinking about the difference between the perception of risk and real risk. Alaska is where you could walk ten minutes out of the capital city and be attacked by a bear. You can take two hours off and go do your hobby, which may be kayaking or climbing the ice. Then one thing happens and you're in a life-death situation alone. In our society, except for car accidents, there aren't many places where you can so quickly go from this is fun to this is a life-threatening situation.

Limbo *is set in Alaska. Can you talk a bit about the writing of it?*

I've been to Alaska a couple of times, about ten or eleven years ago and then I went back before I started writing the script just to check on where we were going to shoot and see how things had changed. One of the things that's gotten into the script is it's about that last generation of people who knew a certain way of life. There will always be commercial fishing in Alaska, and there will always be logging, but the towns themselves, at least in southeast Alaska, the towns that used to be about just that and have that character are giving over to industrial tourism. So often now they'll be fishing, but it's like "I'm still fishing because a big tour boat is going to come by, and they'll want something to point at and photograph." At one time, you know, Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco was still a working wharf and a tough place to be. Now it's boutiques. That's just starting to happen in Alaska, and I'm interested in the changeover and what it is doing psychologically to the people there.

Limbo *is, once again, a story about storytelling. Why do you keep returning to that in your films?*

I am interested in the ways we use stories. I am interested in the difference between the oral tradition, when stories came out of the community and culture and were part of how you defined yourself. Certainly with the Native American people we met in Alaska, the older people still tell their creation myths, which are about how they got here on our planet, who they are, how

they define themselves, as opposed to the Eskimos, the plains people, or the white people. But in nontraditional societies—which is what most everybody else is living in—you go into a video store and you choose your hero for the night: "Tonight I feel like Arnold Schwarzenegger" or "I feel like a quirky British comedy." You rewind it and forget about it. I am still interested in places where stories mean something to people and are a part of how they define themselves.

In *Limbo*, characters use stories to do things they can't do directly. The songs Donna sings and how she sings them tell the world where she is at the moment: she's breaking up with her boyfriend, she's feeling good about her performance, she misses the guy she just met. Her daughter is telling these stories that are cries for help. By telling stories that are ostensibly about other families, she can have a confrontation with her mother without having to look her in the eye and say you make me feel this way. Certainly the movies are something we tell about ourselves. If you look at them, a lot of them are fantasies, because people don't want to deal with the real thing.

Only in small doses.

If you think about the Yugoslavian conflict right now, the stories Serbs tell about how they came into Kosovo and made it their own, and the stories Albanians tell about that, are part of why they are in that situation. Just like the Middle East is full of those stories. They may be written down in the Koran or Bible, but they are stories and they are part of how people define themselves. And they turn into life or death pretty quickly.

What drew you to Florida and the theme of real estate development for Sunshine State*?*
I've spent a lot of time in Florida. I set *Los Gusanos* in Miami partly because I used to go down there as a kid. I've been back a bunch of times, and I had written a short story called "Treasure" that was in *Esquire*. I was thinking of making that into a feature film, so I went scouting on the Gulf Coast, where it would have taken place, and it just wasn't there anymore; that Florida was gone. It had only been about fifteen years since I had been there. It's kind of a precursor of the rest of the country. It's always been up for grabs. I came back and felt like, "Well, I can't make this treasure movie anymore. Is there anything else I can do about Florida?" I was looking at the Lonely Planet guide and it had a little box about Amelia Island, up near Jacksonville. I had heard of American Beach. It's a black community beach that some friends of mine had gone to as kids. It was the big holiday place for them. But I had never been there and I didn't know if it still existed. I thought it had probably been totally sold-out. I went down to Amelia Island and saw that all the things that interested me about what was happening in Florida were also happening on this one little island. Also, it was a good centralized location where I could get all the things I wanted in one place. So I wrote scenes with all the things they had there, like an old fort. Basically, I incorporated whatever they had into the script. The only real problem was they started tearing things down!

A pirate ship aflame on a beach provides the opening image of the story. Ironically, it's revealed to be a parade float. I thought that was a pretty succinct commentary on the way history is transformed into a culture of commodity.
Tourism is such a double-edged sword, because it is good for business in some places. Sometimes it is relatively clean compared to a factory or something that's going to pollute the river. But you lose your own town, and in some cases you lose your own soul. You end up selling your own history. But to sell it you have to Disneyfy it. Buccaneer Days, the big festival in the movie, is based on a thing they do in Tampa where they celebrate this pirate who may not have even existed. It's a huge Mardi Gras celebration. Basically, pirates were slaving, raping, murdering, nasty bastards, and we're celebrating them and making them cute. Eventually, you end up spending the night at the Jack The Ripper Inn. If it were the Ted Bundy Inn—because it's more recent—people would think that's in bad taste. All these roadside attractions that have a pitch-and-putt type thing are often at the scene of some horrendous human atrocity. Just enough water has gone under the bridge, and enough years have passed, that it becomes kitschy.

And then these places get named after the natives who got wiped out.
Take Pontiac, he was the guy who was in a protracted battle with the United States of America. He was no picnic. He was finally assassinated and they named a car and a town after him. Or sports teams—the Redskins or the Seminoles—these are names that are no longer politically correct. Nobody thought at the time that they were making it into kitsch.

The ways in which people interpret the past seems to be a big theme in Sunshine State.
What do we do with our history—whether it's our family history or our national history—to make it palatable? To live with it or just ignore it? To say it didn't exist? Certainly, there was a big effort during the Reagan regime to say Vietnam didn't happen. Or if it did, we won. So there were a lot of those movies about Chuck Norris or Stallone going back to POW camps in the middle of North Vietnam and springing these prisoners and killing a lot of North Vietnamese. It was just like, "Oh, yeah. We won." History gets rewritten to suit the moment. At first, I think it's just to make people feel okay about these awful things they've been through or did. It makes their part in it look more heroic. But then eventually it's just to sell tickets; to be a theme for a ride. And that's usually when it's been devalued so much that you wonder what can you learn from this stuff anymore. It's been made into something that has nothing to do, really, with the original event.

The only shared history in Sunshine State *is between Desiree and Miss Delia.*
Theatrical history. The history, if you go back, is that the place used to be called Plantation Island. That the descendants of the slaves are living with the descendants of the owners, and the poor whites who wish they were owners. It's that weird complicated history. You could make a million movies

in Florida because it's so schizophrenic. Such a weird mix. It's a county by county, and district by district mix. Take the presidential election. It's no surprise that one district went this way and another went that way. There are people from the Midwest, people from the North, people who have been there for ten generations. There are Cubans, and other kinds of immigrants. It was under six or seven flags before it became American.

And then there are the developers.
It's hard to say that a developer is ever an outsider in Florida. They're kind of the state bird. Certainly, they are the people who have the most distant view of it. When Alan King's character talks about "when we bought this land," he's talking way back to Flagler's day. He basically sees it as this potential development-theme park. The day-to-day stuff isn't that important. To him it's about creating land that you can dredge and sell. Half of Florida real estate didn't exist—it was under water.

So the developers see themselves as doing a positive thing?
The way they see it, this was a wasteland. Mosquitoes lived here, and now people live here. They're proud of what they built. I find that's generally true. There are very few people walking around the world who feel like they're a villain. Sometimes they're cynical—that's a lot of what *City of Hope* is about. I felt like the New Jersey state motto should have been "What are you gonna do?" with the mayor running for reelection from jail. But generally, they just feel like they have a positive world view. And a lot of what I talk to actors about—and what I try to do in my writing—is to realize that characters just don't speak differently, though I certainly make an effort to give them a different rhythm of speech. Even with some of the black characters, depending what situation they're in and who they're with, they'll speak a different way. But you also have to say that people see the world differently. That's why there's a lot of conflict. Even people who are living in the same place don't see the world the same way.

The way you see the world is going to affect how you react to any situation.
Certainly, if you have a scene where a southern white guy is talking to a black person it's different today than it would have been in 1963. So that scene Ralph Waite has where he talks about integration; he's gotten past it. He's learned some things, and he hasn't learned others. He's changed some of his opinions and he hasn't changed others because he's kind of stuck in the past. His daughter doesn't have that baggage.

He's learning to accommodate.
He's always had some kind of personal affection for people, but he had his prejudices which complicated them. He thought things about people before he even knew them based on their color. His daughter really doesn't have that shit. Marly's got other problems but her world view is not complicated.

So when James McDaniel's character says, "Is this an okay place for black people to go into?" he's never been in the South before. He just remembers seeing the civil rights things on TV, and all those movies where people get lynched. As far as he's concerned, he's in enemy territory. And what Angela Bassett's character knows is, "Well yeah, you can go into this place and get served. And I'm desperate to go pee, so I'm gonna go in. They got a problem with it that's their tough luck. We've got the legislation to back us up now."

It's a great dramatic setup because the audience expects a racial confrontation.
And Marly just says, "Oh yeah, it's in the back." Whereas with the father it might have been, "Oh, shit. If it's not bad enough we have to serve them, now they come in and use it as a public restroom."

And he's going blind. That's a great poetic touch. He can no longer judge a person solely on appearance.
But he still has his prejudices. At one point Jane Alexander says to him, "How do you know they're colored if you can't see the TV?" And he says, "Have you ever heard of a white boy named Deeshon?" He's very aware of those indicators.

But don't some later scenes show that even a prejudiced person like Furman can come to an accommodation?
It has its limits, but it is accommodation.

What about Marly and Desiree? What kinds of accommodations are they making?
When I came up with the idea for *Sunshine State* I knew it would be about two women who are from this little place, and one of them realizes she has to leave, and the other realizes she has to come back. For personal reasons Desiree realizes she's not going to stay here, but she's going to have to get back to her roots and face the music. Deal with this part of herself. Edie Falco's character realizes she's been living other people's dreams and not her own. There's nothing for her here, and she's going to be a sorry character if she stays. She doesn't know where she's going, or what she's going to do, but she probably has to get out.

They've both gone through a mid-life crisis.
The Return of the Secaucus Seven is about people who are thirty, and they're just starting to realize that the world is not necessarily going to change the way that they wanted it to change. Their life might not be exactly the way they dreamed it would be. *Baby It's You* is about people who are just turning twenty and getting that first little inkling that everything's not going to turn out fine. There is a world out there that doesn't necessarily do what you want it to do. *Passion Fish* is about people turning forty and realizing that there are things they will never do.

What I think is happening with the characters a lot more in *Sunshine State* is that they're coming to a self-realization about things they've left undone.

They really still have some potential. They've already had a lot of disappointments, and they've already learned that there are things that are just never going to happen for them. But it ends on a pretty nice note, even if you feel it's no picnic for them.

Paul Schrader

P aul Schrader has written some of the most seminal and controversial movies of the last twenty-five years (*Taxi Driver, Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*—each directed by Martin Scorsese) as well as the adaptations of Russell Banks's *Affliction, The Mosquito Coast*, Harold Pinter's play *The Comfort of Strangers, Obsession* with Brian DePalma, and *Bringing Out the Dead*. As screenwriter and director, Schrader's films include *Blue Collar, Hardcore, American Gigolo, Cat People, Light of Day, Patty Hearst*, *Light Sleeper, Affliction*, and *Forever Mine*. Although the films he has directed have hit and missed with critics and audiences alike, Schrader has been responsible for an edgy, uncompromising cinema which he started years before the term "independent cinema" arose. His directing has been criticized for being too intellectual and calculating to the detriment of emotion. But like the European art cinema he so admires (he was a former film critic), his style, at its best, challenges viewers, forcing them into an active role, fully experiencing his films.

When working with Martin Scorsese, Schrader has been fortunate in that they are both of a like mind. In the book *Scorsese on Scorsese*, the director recalled that after reading the script for *Taxi Driver*, "I realized that was exactly the way I felt, that we all have those feelings… so this was a way of exorcising those feelings. People related to the film very strongly in terms of loneliness." Schrader says, "I know how Marty thinks. When he starts to say something, I can usually finish his thought, so that allows both of us a lot of independence. He knows that I'm going to come back with something that will fit right into his wheelhouse. And I know when he goes off with my script and makes something else of it, it's going to be something good."

For *Affliction*, Schrader adapted the Russell Banks novel of the same name. The film stars Nick Nolte, Sissy Spacek, James Coburn, and Willem Dafoe.

Like *Taxi Driver, Affliction* deals with a character who is near a breaking point, ready to explode into violence. And like *The Sweet Hereafter*, the other recent adaptation of a Russell Banks novel, the setting is a stark and cold land, which adds to the story's immediacy. Told after-the-fact by his brother, *Affliction* is a story of a man who gradually loses himself as each of his roles are stripped away: father, husband, public servant, son, lover. The force of his existential and psychological breakdown is buttressed by a mythological resonance as Schrader shows that it is the affliction of a legacy of domestic violence which leaves him somewhat unresponsible for his predetermined fate. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Paul Scrader in 1998 and 2002.

Tell me about your idiosyncratic path to becoming a filmmaker.
I was forbidden to see films as a child as an article of degree of the (Calvinist) church. Because I didn't see films as a young man, I came to films as a college student. Essentially I came to the European cinema of the '60s. I was really attracted not only by the films, but by their forbiddenness. In many ways it was a luxury that I could be both a rebel and an artist. I didn't need to go out and vandalize buildings; all I had to do was see movies. In order to see many of the films I had been reading about, I took a course at Columbia University in the summer of '66. There, through luck and coincidence, I ran into Pauline Kael through someone I had met, and the upshot of all that was that she became my mentor and got me into UCLA film grad school and on the road to becoming a film critic.

Before that I had been a pre-seminary student at my church college. Then I was in Los Angeles, writing film criticism, writing a book of film aesthetics, editing a magazine, and becoming one of the first fellows at AFI. Then I hit a point in my life where nonfiction wasn't really addressing my concerns, or rather, my needs. I knew I had to make the switch from nonfiction to fiction; I had to tell these stories before these stories started telling me.

How was film school different then from now?
It wasn't just film school. It was film school at a certain time and place. The social hits just kept on coming. You had civil rights, you had the women's movement, gay liberation, the sex, the drug revolution. It was an enormously churning social environment all wrapped up in the rubric of the counter-culture. And heated by the anti-war movement, which made everything seem real rather than theoretical. People's lives were actually being changed by the reality of the draft and the conflict. It was a wonderful time to be alive. It's like that famous Wordsworth poem: "Oh, to be alive in the morning." It was a nice time to be alive in the morning. So it wasn't just film school. This film school generation isn't being informed by the social issues anymore, because the culture isn't being informed. The driving factors behind storytelling at this time are commercials and music videos. In my generation, it was film study. For the generation before me, it was live television. Before that it was theater. Before that it was newspapers. There's always a background influence.

How did coming to films as an adult change your perspective? How does the way you look at or make movies differ from, say, Spielberg's?
A filmmaker, like anybody, never forgets his first love. And my first film love was intellectual cinema: Bergman, Antonioni, Bresson, Godard, and Truffaut. In a way, the rest of my career circles around my first love and is informed by it. For many other directors my age, their first love was musicals, Westerns, and other forms of films aimed at kids. This doesn't mean that they are lesser or more trivial filmmakers. It just means that they just have a different referential base. I don't feel the need to make the movies I loved as a kid because I didn't see any.

There seem to be recurring themes of redemption and martyrdom in your work. How does your religious background inform the stories you tell?
No matter how fast or far you run, you never outrun your childhood. I was raised with certain concepts, that life has meaning, actions have moral consequences, that you will be called into judgment for the value of your life. And that there is a difference between the right and wrong thing to do. That stuff never leaves you. You can be living in a monastery in Tibet, and you'll still have that computer program [in your brain]. You can't reprogram yourself; it will always be there. I try not to put it in an obvious manner, because I know it will be there anyway. In the film that Scorsese is shooting now *[Bringing Out the Dead]*, I intentionally took out a lot of the religious references of the book we adapted, because I knew Marty and I had done this so much. It was time to lay off it, because it was going to find its way in anyway.

How did you make the jump from critic to screenwriter?
I was doing part-time reading for Columbia—picking up a little extra change at the time doing coverage. At that time, it was $5 for a script, $15 for a novel. So I had an idea what a script was. I had written a sort of practice script that went nowhere, so I had given it some thought. I had an argument with Pauline Kael at her home at Christmas time. She had wanted me to take a reviewing job on a paper in Seattle. When I asked her for some time to think about it, she said no, and then I made the decision that I had to start thinking about being a screenwriter. Then a number of things happened in my personal life, and it collapsed. My marriage broke up. I had a contretemps with the people who were running AFI, and I had to leave. I was broke. I didn't have any place to live. In this period I started drifting and wandering about in my car. It was out of this, that the metaphor for *Taxi Driver* was born. I wrote it all very quickly. I wrote it essentially as therapy.

I had to move into fiction to express these fantasies I had, for fear that these fantasies would define me if I didn't isolate them and objectify them in fiction. And then once I started writing, I realized that I was caught in a kind of shadow world where I wasn't a real writer; that is, my words weren't standing alone. And I wasn't a filmmaker, so that's when I said, "Well I guess I need to become a filmmaker." Not because I was terribly upset with what was hap-

pening to my scripts, it's just that I didn't feel complete. So I either had to write separately from scripts, I had to find an outlet like playwriting or novels, or I had to be a director and be able to create works that I could define completely. Once I started directing, then I didn't mind writing for others as well, because I didn't feel I was being diminished as a creative person by having to hand off my product to someone else's final vision. When I actually came to writing the *Taxi Driver*, all elements of calculation were put aside, except that element of calculation that says you must communicate. But the other elements of how to be commercial or how to sell something I wasn't thinking of. I wrote a couple of drafts in ten days, just wrote continuously.

So in many ways I came to screenwriting for all of the best reasons. I came to it as a form of self-therapy, I came to it because I had no choice, I came to it because I needed to do this to save myself. *[Taxi Driver]* came out very, very quickly. I didn't know it was crazy at the time I wrote it. Then after I wrote it, I left Los Angeles for almost eight months; I drifted around the country and got my equilibrium back. But I wrote that to get it [out]. It was like an animal that was crawling out of my chest, and I had to get it out and cauterize the wound. And I'm very thankful I walked in that door. I always bear that lesson in mind that art and screenwriting are functional. They can help you see certain life crises in perspective. They can help you see your life in perspective. And you can take this and show it to somebody else. And they too can have the same awareness that you were brought to. I really believe that art is functional in the same way that the tools you use to build a house are functional.

Your films go into dark, tough places that a lot of people don't want to go to. A lot of writers are scared to go to those places as well. What should writers do to break down those walls when something's really bothering them, so they can put it in their work and get it out of their system?

Going there isn't a problem, because that is a natural healing process; it's just like going into a primal therapy. You know it's going to be painful, but you know it has to be done. The problem in films, of course, is there's little or no support for that. No one is out there saying, "We really want to make your dark movie." So you are running against the current, the economic current of the medium. The only thing that keeps you going is you don't have any choice. You don't want to be that other person. I mean, I don't want to make *The Fast and the Furious*, and I wouldn't know how to make it. So the fact that you have no choice makes it easier to get up and do it every day. Also, in the film business, you need to have a personality that thrives on obstacles. When you get up in the morning and you know that nobody wants you to do what you want to do, that has to be your cup of coffee. That has to jolt you where you say, "Great, another day I get a chance to try and fight against the wall." You have to meet some success in order to keep at it, but if you meet some success, you keep at it, and strangely enough, these films do get made.

Did you think Taxi Driver *would be a hit? What was your feeling before the movie came out?*
I remember we had a dinner before the film opened, because that film was not tested. We felt that nothing good can come out of testing such a movie. So we had a dinner, Marty, Michael and Julia Phillips, and I, and we all just said, "Look, tomorrow could be a bloodbath. But we all know we made a good movie, and no matter what happens, don't let any of us say that we didn't." So there was a kind of inner confidence that would not have been swayed if the film had not been successful.

When the film turned out to be a success, how did that feel?
It felt right. In retrospect, I realize what a fluke it was. But I just felt it was right. I recently read an interview I did with Robert Bresson in Paris on my way to Cannes, and Bresson asked me in the interview, "Do you think you'll win the big prize?" and I said, "Sure!" [laughs] And we did, we won the Palme d'Or. I mean, [laughs] looking back now after many years of experience, I realized, Jesus, what was I thinking?!?

You wrote the screenplay for Taxi Driver *in about ten days, and I know you're of the school of thought that the faster you write a screenplay, the better.*
You have to understand that the gestation period could be months, or even years, and the idea of writing fast is to keep from writing as long as possible, so that it just endures time and obstacles. By the time it comes out, it comes out almost fully formed. Then you write in approximately a time frame that's like viewing a movie. You can sort of feel the experience as you're living it, it doesn't get attenuated, it doesn't get threshed out. But I'm also of the school of I'm not going to write unless I know what I'm going to write. I pretty much know what's going to happen on page seventy-five before I sit down and write.

So you have to have the whole thing in your head before you write it?
Yeah, and outlined. It moves and shapes itself as you go along, but it is pretty well worked out, and it has endured numerous tests before it is written. By tests, I mean the oral tradition, telling people. You sit down and you tell people the story. You say, "Look, I wanna tell you a story. Man walks into a bank. There's a robbery going on.…" There you are, you're off and running, and you can watch people. It doesn't really matter what they say, it's what they do with their eyes and how they sit. You can see whether or not this story has a resonance, and as you tell it, sometimes you have to make changes. Because like a stand-up comedian, you realize you're losing your audience, you gotta do something drastic. I think it was Chandler who once said, "If you ever get in trouble, introduce a character with a gun. Your reader will be so glad he's there, he won't ask where he came from." The same thing with telling a story; you realize you're losing your listener, then you say, "All of a sudden, a red car pulls up, and these two guys in black coats come out." Boom! You got your

listener back. Of course, you've also got a red car and two guys in black coats, but that's one of the things you do when you work the oral tradition. By the time you write that script, you're pretty confident that it's worth writing because you have seen it work. If you can tell a story for forty-five minutes and keep people interested, you have a movie.

Who would you use as a sounding board?
Anybody. The more ordinary someone is, the better, because they're not going to give you arcane points, you're just going to see if they're interested. It's like telling a joke—you know when it works. Obviously, certain material is very sophisticated, and it's not going to work that way. I'm not going to sit and tell *Mishima* to somebody at the 7-11! But in general, if you're dealing with a kind of a narrative, you want to get that kind of feedback. Also, another good thing about it is it stops you from writing a lot of scripts, because you see them die, and you see yourself getting stuck. It is very discouraging to write scripts that don't get sold or made. If you can stop yourself from writing those scripts, you can prolong your career. Because all you have to do is write five or six of those scripts, and you're about beat up. So if you have a bad idea, you can catch it in time. You haven't lost a script, you've saved yourself four months. I lecture from time to time on screenwriting, and when I lecture, it's a five-point program. It goes from theme, to metaphor, to plot, to oral tradition, to outline. That's the progress of an idea. It all begins with a theme, and another word for a theme is a personal problem. In *Taxi Driver* it was loneliness, the metaphor was a taxicab. Bing-Bang-Boom, it starts to move.

When you sit down to write an original screenplay, where do you begin?
At any given time in your life, there are a number of problems running around. Problems that have a lot to do with where you are in your life cycle, whether it's a mid-life crisis, problems with parents or children. You're always looking for metaphors that will somehow address that problem. And once you find that metaphor, particularly if you've written as much as I have, it's like a factory is standing there, fully manned, ready to go. All it needs is the raw material. The metaphor is the raw material. Once they get that, they can go to work.

But your last few projects have been adaptations?
About four years ago, I ran into a little dry period. Like so many others I turned to books. I did some adaptations where I originated the projects: *Touch* and *Affliction*. For about a year now I sort of fell back into the groove and have been doing a lot of writing again. That feeling of not having anything original to say has sort of gone away. I think I'll be good for a couple more years.

It goes through cycles.
Yeah. I don't think anybody has something fresh to say every year. You just don't have an original script every year.

You adapted The Last Temptation of Christ, *which was not an easy novel to turn into a film. How did you approach that adaptation?*

I do the same process in terms of problem/metaphor. You look at the book, and you say, "Where's the problem?" And it's not necessarily the problem in the book, it's your problem that you find in the book. "What part of me exists in this book that I can address?" You have to personalize it, and therefore in a book like *Last Temptation*, there were probably five or six different scripts that could have been written from that. You have a 600-page philosophical novel, and it's going to become a 110-page script. What I did in that case was I listed every single thing that happened in the book—there were probably 400 or 500 things that happened in the book—then I did columns. Did they address my problem? Were they important for expositional needs? Did they address any of the sub-themes? I went through all the scenes and put checks behind them to the degree that they were useful to me. And then I just took the top fifty scenes, because only between forty to fifty-five things happen in a movie anyway, and said, "Okay, what do I have to add?" Or, "How do I make this meld all together?" That way I was able to take three-quarters of the book, and just wipe it off the table in one grand stroke and reduce the size of the book. Then I went back and picked up from those pages I had swiped off, whatever little bits and pieces I might need.

You did a rewrite on the film Raging Bull, *and Martin Scorsese said that your version of the script was the breakthrough that helped get the film made. What exactly did you bring to the script for* Raging Bull?

Well there was no Joey La Motta. Jake La Motta had written a book called *Raging Bull* with Pete Savage, and he cut his brother out of his book because he didn't like his brother! So I started doing research, and I started hearing about the fighting La Motta brothers and that they were boxers together. I interviewed Vickie [Jake's ex-wife] and Joey, and I realized you had a sibling story. The movie was about these two brothers who had this contract. Basically the contract was, they were both boxers, but one of them had the gift of gab, and the other one didn't. So Joey basically said to Jake, "Here's the deal. You get the beatings, you get the fame, I get the girls, we set up the bookies, and we split the money." Well that contract is fraught with dangers [laughs]! That was the implicit contract between these two men. Jake would be the headliner and take the beatings, and Joey would be the pretty boy who got the girls and they would split the money. You know that there's going to come a day that someone doesn't agree with that contract! So without Joey, you didn't have a movie. And the same way with *Auto Focus*, I greatly enhanced John Carpenter's role. I wrote three scenes for Willem where he got to be on the screen without Greg, because without that, you don't have one of these implicit contracts that is due to come a cropper.

Something I'm curious about: I read in a book about Bruce Springsteen that your screenplay Born in the U.S.A., *which later became* Light of Day, *is where Bruce*

got the title for the song and the album. True?

Yeah. I had written it, I was going to do it at Paramount, and we wanted to get Bruce to do it. I met with Bruce, he was flirting around with being in movies, then he decided he didn't want to do it because of the whole control issue. Bruce is nothing if not a control freak. So he gave up the idea of being in a movie, it fell out at Paramount, and I went off to Japan. So now I'm in Tokyo, I go into a record store, I pick up an album, and sure enough there it is, *Born in the U.S.A.*! I looked inside and he credited me. When I came back to the U.S. and was trying to get the film going, Bruce called me up and said, "I really apologize." We had dinner, and he said, "You know, I never read that script. But it was on my coffee table for almost three months, and every time I walked by it, it said "Born in the U.S.A." And I couldn't get that title out of my head! Look, if you want the song for your movie, take it. If you want a new song, I'll write you a new song." So he wrote "Light of Day"; that's where the title came from.

What attracted you to Affliction*?*

I picked it up at a bookstore. The first line of the book grabbed me right then and there and I made it the first line of the film. I was very much captured by the narrative gimmick of it, the complexity of the characters and the use of the language. So I optioned the book, wrote the script, and over a period of six years, I was able to raise the money.

There's a point in Affliction *where Nick Nolte's character is at the lowest point of his existential crisis, and then the film immediately leads him and the audience back to the mystery subplot. It occurred to me that that parallels your entire relationship to genre. I don't think of you as the guy who does boxing bio-pics* (Raging Bull) *and horror flicks* (Cat People). *What is your relationship to genre?*

Genre is a very, very useful tool, because it sets in motion a certain set of expectations that you can use and that you need to respect if you are going to use them. There is a little bit of the mystery genre in *Affliction*: a small-town cop thinks a hunting accident is a murder. I use it to get the audience to a place so that I can drop what has seemed to be the plot and reveal it to be irrelevant, so what had seemed to be the subplot can take its place.

As Nick Nolte's character loses touch with reality, the demarcation between what's real and what's in his head begins to blur. How did you deal with this stylistically?

There were several levels of reality. There were his conspiracy theories, which were in black and white, and there were his memories, which were in a highly grainy color, but those were the only things technically.

But isn't there a point where the POV changes?

The important thing to remember is that it's a story that is being told to you. And the teller is as important as the story being told. In many ways, the narrator is the main character. He tells you right at the beginning that in telling

this story he tells his own story as well. But he never tells us his story. His story is left up for you to surmise. But it is a story of both brothers.

But what he doesn't tell is as important as what he does tell. You can see there is a certain denial about mistakes he has made.
Like his complicitious role in his brother's decline.

In an essay you wrote years ago, you quoted one of your favorite filmmakers, Bresson, and I'm paraphrasing: "In art, there must always be a transformation." What is the transformation in Affliction*?*
In films I have written, I tend to end with a grace note. There is no grace note in this film for the Nolte character. It is kind of a predetermined world, predetermined from the first line of narration. The one whose life is left in flux is the narrator, who tells you why he can't let it go. He hopes his brother died, but he must go on. In fact he reveals himself as the one character of the piece who is capable of transformation.

What's the new Scorsese project with Nicolas Cage, Bringing Out the Dead*?*
I'm done; they're shooting it. It's about a paramedic in New York City. A fellow who drives around at night on the cusp of social decay. He's not unlike the taxi driver, but he's different because he's on God's team now. He's out there trying to save lives, but he's still going crazy. It takes place on a long three-day weekend. He's hallucinating by the time we meet him. Certainly Marty and I am aware that it will be compared to *Taxi Driver*, so we tried to make it a bookend rather than a remake.

Did Scorsese bring you into the project?
Marty and I decided about ten or twelve years ago not to work together anymore and just to remain friends, and not press a situation which was becoming increasingly unpleasant in terms of ego clashes. We'd have dinner once a year and keep in touch. We were having dinner a year ago, and he brought it up to me reluctantly. And as soon as I read the book, I realized why he had. It was a natural for me and rather natural for us.

Tell me about your collaboration with him.
It's not really that much of a collaboration. There are a number of conversations, but at this juncture, and with this kind of material, we can pretty much finish each other's sentences, and we know how we're each thinking. It's just a matter that if we feel we're on the same page, I take off to work. He was in post-production on *Kundun*, which was fortunate for me, because he didn't have time to micro-manage the writing, so after a short discussion at dinner and one ten-minute phone conversation, I just went off and wrote it.

How are writing and directing different?
Literary logic and visual logic are very different. An image is an idea in a

much different way than a word is an idea. When you write, you think of the traditional rules of writing: theme, plot, character, dialogue. When you come to direct, you have to transform that literary logic into visual logic. The word chair is not the same as the image of a chair. You have to translate one form of logic into the other. That's why, when I write a script, I never think of the visual logic. I try to stick to the literary logic.

You've dealt with pornography in several of your films. It's been in Taxi Driver *and* Hardcore, *and now* Auto Focus. *Why do you feel it's a subject you've explored several times? Do you feel there's good dramatic possibilities in a story about pornography?* Well it all comes from character. Movies, like literature and all forms of storytelling, tend to deal with exaggerated behavior; movies in particular because they're kinetic. When behavior gets exaggerated, the two most kinetic forms it takes are sex and violence. That's why movies have traditionally worked in these areas even more than literature. I don't feel that I am particularly driven by sexual themes. I don't even know if I'm particularly good at them. I don't have a singular fascination with them the way that someone like Jim Toback does. But when people's behavior starts to get distorted, sexuality is a way to visualize it. And if your characters tend to be internal, often pornography gets involved. Bob Crane is not as internal a character as some of the others I've written, but I do tend to gravitate toward these character studies and patterns of improper thinking, where characters do the right things for the wrong reasons, and the wrong things for the right reasons. So it makes interesting characters when the motive and the appearance of the act don't line up.

I wouldn't say that porn is, in particular, one of my themes. What first drew me to *Auto Focus* was that it seemed to be the midwife, American, heterosexual, TV star version of *Prick Up Your Ears*. That's what drew me in. I do not have the kinds of fascinations you have in *Boogie Nights*, with the birth of porn and all of that. It's more character driven. Dirk Diggler in that film is one figure in a tapestry, it's not really about getting inside him.

You've said that the title of the film Auto Focus *is really a reference to being self-absorbed and that in the film Crane is a destructive person and the worse his behavior gets, the more oblivious he is to what it does to people. That also made me think of Jake La Motta.*
Absolutely. It's a good parallel because they're both semi-public figures. People sort of know who Bob Crane is, but they really don't. And they sort of know who Jake La Motta was, but they really didn't. So you have the license to go in and find the artistic truth of the life without people getting knocked out of their seats because some holy writ has been violated. It's not like Richard Nixon and you're looking at the screen saying, "Is that really true? I remember Richard Nixon, that's Anthony Hopkins!"

Both Raging Bull *and* Auto Focus *aren't exactly puff-pieces on their subjects. Jake La Motta cooperated with* Raging Bull*, and for* Auto Focus *you spoke to members*

of Crane's family. Did that ever feel uncomfortable for you?
In the case of *Raging Bull*, Jake was so forgotten, and he was so tickled that we were making a movie about him, that he was completely hands off. I could have had him out in the backyard banging sheep and he wouldn't have complained! That didn't present a problem. And in both films, all of the events are based on things that happened, but did they happen this way? Were these words used? Did this confrontation exist exactly the way it was portrayed? I don't know. Scotty Crane [one of Bob's sons] has said, "This wasn't my father," and all you can say to that is Greg Kinnear is not Bob Crane, Bob Crane's life did not last an hour and forty minutes, and you set personal boundaries of what kind of license you can take. I don't think anything goes. It is not only a form of storytelling, it's a form of shaping a life into a dramatic purpose so that it can hopefully elucidate, as well as entertain.

When you're making a film based on someone's life, do you feel it has to be as honest as possible?
As honest as permissible. Like on *Mishima*, everything in that film happened, but then I also used his books to get into his real psychological life; his fantasy life, which is important for a writer. Patty Hearst was another biopic, and I went into her mindset. Here she was, locked in a closet. What does she see? Well she sees whatever I want her to see. She sees what I imagine she sees. And *Last Temptation of Christ*, which is not really a biopic, but Nikos Kazantzakis used artistic license to go into this fantasy-temptation sequence.

Obviously people have to understand that a movie can never be 100% accurate, but you can get pretty close.
Everything in *Auto Focus* is based on real events; nothing is made up. Scotty, for example, gets very upset with this whole penile enhancement thing. It's not quite clear whether Bob had a penile enhancement (or not). The autopsy wasn't clear about it, some people say he did, some people say he didn't. The truth is, though, he told others, in particular John Carpenter, that he did. So that's what the movie says, he tells John Carpenter that he did.

Jake La Motta is not exactly a savory or sympathetic character. Do you try to make characters like him more sympathetic?
That's where the beauty of acting comes in. The right actors bring an enormous residue of good will to the screen. Nick Nolte, you like Nick, he's the sort of guy you'd like to be around. And so you let Nick get away with things. You cast somebody else in that role that you don't like, and you can't watch that movie; it's just too unpleasant. In this case, Greg Kinnear, who is extremely personable and likable, and has that glib affability just like Crane did, he gets away with murder. And you see that in the film. Even though he didn't do particularly likable things, people always let him get away with it.

When you're ready to direct your own script, do you take the same approach that

you would with another piece: sitting with it a while to find the architecture of it? You look at it and you say, "Who the fuck wrote this? And how can I possibly save it?"

M. Night Shyamalan

M. Night Shyamalan approaches life with a quiet confidence. He knew he would marry his wife after their first meeting. He knew which house he would buy as soon as he saw it, on the first day of house hunting. And he knew that *The Sixth Sense* would sell for over $2 million dollars and would star Bruce Willis—before he'd ever written the script. The script sold for $3 million and was greenlit without a rewrite. Willis stars in the film.

After attending film school at New York University, Shyamalan arranged financing for his first film, *Wide Awake*. When financing collapsed, he wrote *Praying with Anger* (a story about an Indian-American sent to a university in India for a year to straighten him out). Then he took part of the *Wide Awake* financing, roused some new investors, flew to India, and shot the feature-length *Anger* for $750,000. The twenty-two-year-old Shyamalan was the writer, director, producer, and star.

After *Praying with Anger*, Miramax funded *Wide Awake*, a film about a fifth-grader who searches for God because he wants to make sure his grandfather made it to heaven. After *Wide Awake* was stuck in post-production purgatory for two years ("We had a little conflict, Miramax and I, with regard to the tone of the piece," Shyamalan says), Shyamalan wrote *Labor of Love*, about a widower who decides to walk from Philadelphia to California to prove his love for his late wife. *Labor* sold to Twentieth Century Fox for $750,000 for Shyamalan's writing and directing services, and led to an interesting showdown between the twenty-four-year-old writer/director and a room full of suits.

After Labor, Shyamalan used his daylight hours to adapt E. B. White's classic children's novel *Stuart Little* for Columbia—the studio greenlit the picture off his draft; at night, in Philadelphia, where he lives and works (he refuses to move to Hollywood), he wrote *The Sixth Sense*. *Creative Screenwrit-*

ing first met with Shyamalan in 1999 before the opening of *The Sixth Sense*. Fourteen months and $293 million later, *The Sixth Sense* was the tenth highest domestic grossing film of all time, and *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Shyamalan again as he readied his next film, *Unbreakable*.

Unbreakable is the story of David Dunn, sole survivor of a devastating train wreck—a tragedy from which he came away without a scratch. But David is not unscathed: his marriage is on the rocks, and the one-time college football player now watches the gridiron action from afar, as a security guard at the local sports stadium. Then David is approached by Elijah, a comic book art gallery owner afflicted with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, a disease that has cursed him with extremely brittle bones. Elijah claims to know why David survived the accident: just as Elijah is more fragile than the average human, David is on the other end of the spectrum, stronger and more resilient. David, Elijah contends, is *Unbreakable*. Thus begins Shyamalan's story of a modern-day superhero. But David Dunn is no Superman eager to claim his cape, rather he's a man trying to grasp the threads of his unraveling life, holding on to his life and family as he fights against, then struggles to understand, his place in this new world order.

What idea sparked The Sixth Sense*?*
Well, there are two scenes. The first scene isn't even in the movie; it's fantastic. But the other scene is somewhat in the movie. I saw a wake at a house, and the food's out, and people are walking around in dark clothes, and this child was sitting on the stairs talking to somebody, but nobody's there. How intriguing that was, what that child was feeling, and who he was, and that perhaps he was talking to the person that everyone was mourning, and that the people were looking at this kid like, "Wow, that's one weird kid, he's not handling this very well," and going out from there. And so that became the Collins scene at the end of the movie, when Cole goes to the house with the box.

What was the scene that wasn't there?
Well, *The Sixth Sense* started out as a serial killer movie [laughs]. Malcolm was a crime scene photographer, a burnt-out one at that, and not a great dad. It was Parents Day at the school, and the parents are in the classrooms looking at the artwork, and his kid's in there, and Malcolm's outside, smoking in a non-smoking hallway, and he's staring at a wall of these kids' drawings, and suddenly his attention becomes focused and he walks towards the wall and stops smoking. More and more we get focused on this one particular drawing, a crayon design, a star of some kind. We've seen it before, it's a design that's on the victims of a serial killer, and this child has drawn this same exact design in crayon. So Malcolm lifts the paper that's folded over it to see who drew it, and it's his own son. That's the movie; it's about Malcolm realizing that his son is seeing the victims of this killer.

You said in an interview, "Once I see how they can sell the story, then I can write

it." How did that work with The Sixth Sense*?*
This, again, is one of those things I've learned over the course of films, because I've written so many films and some of them are impossible to market. I tried to write very different pieces that don't feel like other movies. That's a great thing and a bad thing, because when they get to market they're lost. The studio doesn't know what it is, doesn't know which audience it's for. *Wide Awake*, for example. Long ago when I started to write it, I thought, "Wow, the one-liner of 'A child looking to meet God' is a very interesting one." At that moment I didn't realize all the different criteria involved in selling a movie. Writing *The Sixth Sense* was the first time I sat down and said, "Now how are they going to sell this?" And I said, "In the end I think they're going to sell it as classic, old-school horror." So I said, "I need to have enough of that in the movie for that [selling point] to be a legitimate representation of the movie, and when I make all my choices in the directing and execution of this screenplay, and the choices of what scenes to keep, I have to make sure that when in doubt I'm always leaning there. 'Cause I gotta know what film I'm making, what audience I'm making it for, so in the end I'm not worried about the studio saying, "Let's do a platform release." That stuff was great back when I was making small films, but my heart can't take it anymore. I wanna have 3,000 screens, and make the top, intelligent films that a mass audience can see. It's paid off right now 'cause I put that much thought in early on. Last night we were watching *Jay Leno* and we saw the TV ads for *The Sixth Sense*. It's really exciting. I would go see that movie. The film's starting to be sold, four weeks out from opening. But it earned its way into that slot by the forethought. So it gives me comfort as I sit down to write this new one. Two years from now, when I'm watching *Frasier* and the commercial comes on [for the new film], I'm gonna know that it didn't just happen. And of course, *The Sixth Sense* isn't a normal movie, but that even comes up in the trailer. It says, "Here, this is close enough to what you guys recognize, but it's new."

What were the specifics of the sale of The Sixth Sense*? You had some very special conditions.*
It was an amazing deal—it seemed too good to be true—but it turned out to be as good as it seemed. It's a wonderful thing. The deal [with Hollywood Pictures] ended up being $2.5 million up front versus $500,000 deferred. So it was $3 million total for writing and directing services. The start date had to be within six months of the sale. I had cast approval, and a whole bunch of approvals—tech approvals, all that—if the budget was under $10 million.

So the studio protected themselves, and you protected yourself.
Right. It was the first time ever, that a spec screenplay had been green-lit without a rewrite.

How did you manage to get that blue chip?
They just offered it. A whole bunch of studios were offering it. They had to

get okays from the higher-ups, because you have to get someone like the chairman to greenlight a picture. So slowly, New Line greenlit it, and a whole bunch of people were greenlighting it upon offering. That was the most amazing thing, they read the script and said, "This is at the level of the screenplays that we greenlight; to show you our commitment, we're going to greenlight it." That's an amazing thing, because I was going to add a rewrite clause to it, whether one rewrite or no rewrites or whatever. But we didn't even have to get into it because they offered a greenlit script. It's essentially a writer's final cut. And nobody's had it. That, in itself, was the single most amazing factor of the movie.

How did Bruce Willis get involved?
We offered it to him. We had a whole bunch of actors who wanted to be in the movie. We took a long time before we went out to somebody, probably a month, and we ended up going to Bruce. We offered it to him, and he read it over the weekend, called up, and said he was really interested and wanted to see *Wide Awake*. So that took a while because he was shooting *Armageddon* at the time. I didn't know what the hell he was going to think of *Wide Awake*. This guy's guy comes off of *Armageddon* and I'm going to show him this little movie about a kid looking for God? I said, "We'll know if he's the right guy, that's for sure." And he watched the movie and he came out and he said to Frank Marshall, "This kid knows what he's doing." And that was it. He was on. And when I heard that he loved *Wide Awake*, I was like, "Wow."

Strangely enough, Bruce was the guy I was thinking of from the beginning. He had shot *Twelve Monkeys* here in Philly, so he was on my mind when I was writing the script. Before I wrote the screenplay, I wrote down the title of the movie. I said, "*The Sixth Sense*, that sounds like a great title." And I put down Bruce Willis's name, and I said, "You know, that might be somebody to think about." A little dream world.

Before you wrote The Sixth Sense, *you told people that the script would sell for $2 million. How do you do that, how you know something before a script's even written?*
You know, I don't know. You play basketball? A basketball hoop's ten feet high. And I'm 5'10", 5'11". And I look at the rim, and I just know that I can dunk a basketball. [Laughs] I haven't done it yet, and I've gotten very close, but you just look at it and go, "I am physically capable of doing this. I'm not sure why I know that, because I haven't been able to do it yet. But I know I'm physically capable of doing this." It's a lot of self-fulfilling prophecy. You make it happen yourself. That's why I was so uncomfortable during the whole *Wide Awake* experience. I wasn't feeling comfortable, during the whole two years I made the film, for a whole bunch of reasons. I wasn't feeling, "This is all going to work out, I think the movie's going to be a success."

You hear a lot of writers say they weren't confident until they had a success, a big sale, or a hit film. Yet you started off confident. On Labor of Love, *after Fox paid*

$750,000 for your writing and directing services, the studio decided they didn't want you to direct. You had a quiet showdown with Fox execs in a conference room. You told them to take 100 men and women off the street, and have another director tell the story of Labor of Love. *If even one person would agree that the other director had written* Labor, *you would step away from the director's chair. [Shyamalan lost that battle, and Wolfgang Petersen was later attached to direct. Recently, on the strength of* The Sixth Sense, *Fox offered* Labor's *directing reins back to Shyamalan, who declined. The project is currently without a director.] Where does that confidence come from?*

Don't know how quite to answer that one. Say you're writing a scene and you go, "Wow, I nailed that." But if you're honest, and you go, "Well, the dialogue's excellent in that scene, let me look at it. Wow, that has the same essential message as a scene earlier in the movie. Well, screw it, 'cause the dialogue's great. Move on." That happens not in a conscious way, but it happens in every moment as a writer. But for me, I'm very cool with being able to go, "Shit, it's the same meaning. One of the scenes has to come out, and you have to have the earlier scene to intro the characters. All right, I'm gonna chuck this great new scene with all this great dialogue." You have to be able to continually be that brutally honest, every moment. The moment you stop being honest, you're screwed. When I talk to my agents they say, "How's the new script?" and I go, "It's awful, God-awful [laughs]." They're like, "What?!" They can't believe what they're hearing. I say, "I'm not joking. It sincerely is awful. It's [at the level of] a bad TV movie right now. There's a handful of inspired moments, four or five of them, but that's where we are. No joke."

Have you found the moment in the new script that's going to allow you to lock into it?

I've been streamlining and throwing out everything that was too much, going down to the basic character. What was great about *Labor* was that it's essentially a two-hour version of this character doing this one thing. It's feeling so wonderful to strip everything away. Finding wonderful ways to express the same thing over and over is a great thing and so it's been working out. I've been keeping the main character, his dialogue and his actions, very clean and clear, and I usually don't do that 'till way later. This is only the second pass, but it's feeling clean and wonderful, void of garbage. Now, the negatives are, it's not exciting yet. It doesn't have enough movement in it yet to merit a studio's interest. Doesn't have enough humor. The last part of the movie feels like a different tone. I do want to take it there, but I haven't done enough to incorporate it yet. But I'm happy. What I've done is the basics, and the basics are very strong. And that's a cool thing, because usually you're working all around. "Okay, now I have to work outward. Okay, now that I've got the plot right, let me go back and fix what's wrong with this character," all that stuff. I'm doing it the textbook way that people should do it, which is ground-up, from inside out. Given, I started with what is a really intriguing idea for a movie, so that was there, and I feel confident with that. But then I went and said, "Okay, let's work on the characters and make them clean, smooth. Don't worry

about the plot yet." The plot is too thin right now, too clean and thin. The script's going to be 106 [pages]. It's very, very thin. I don't think you could make this movie at the level that I want to make it. Yet.

What's your process for writing a screenplay?
I outline. I spend months outlining. And by months I mean, I outline it, and then I go, "Okay, that's the movie. Can you picture it in your head? Okay, that's—that's not very good" [laughs]. You're also doing other things, you're finishing up your last movie, and while you're doing that you're going, "Let's look at that outline again. Hmm, this part here, I can definitely do this. And let's add that. Oh, I've got a great idea!" Then you're suddenly always thinking about this particular subject. Everything you read, everything you see, everything you do, gives you ideas. And you go, "Oooh, that's a nice line for that character," or "That's a nice moment for that character." So you have fifteen moments. Okay, gotta incorporate that into the next pass of the outline. Boom, the outline changes again. And then, eventually, you have to commit. You're reading the outline and you go, "Yeah, I'm going to be able to commit the next two years of my life to this." What was interesting was that I had been outlining a totally different movie for three months. Totally different movie. Totally. Has nothing to do with the movie I'm writing. Then all of a sudden I got this idea. And I told my wife, "How about this idea? Isn't that a great idea? Damn, I'm gonna have to do that next." Then I sat down and I thought, "Oh man, I can do this and this and this" and immediately I had an outline [for the new idea]. Immediately. And then I said, "Well, let me think about it, we'll keep that away, now I have an outline," and then I did it again. Two weeks later I told my wife again, "Remember that idea, how 'bout this happens?" and I told her the whole outline. And she said, "Oh my God, it's amazing." And when she said that, with that emotion in her voice, I said, "This is the movie I need to be making." It's coming so fast and so exciting, and the other outline I've been working at for three months I still haven't solved yet. I wanted to broaden the [next movie I do], make it a little bigger than *The Sixth Sense*, but that other movie wasn't it. And so pretty guiltlessly I made the switch.

The interesting thing about [the new script] was—I knew it was the right one, because it's been hit so many times. By "hit," I mean I've read in the trades that there's something remotely similar to it being developed. That usually sends me into a depression, and then I go do something else, right? But I thought, "No, screw that. There's no way anybody's going to do the take on it that I'm going to do. In the end it's not going to feel even remotely like it," so that didn't even bother me. And then the huge, huge event that this movie was originally based on, Kathy Kennedy [producer of *The Sixth Sense]* was sitting with me, and she didn't even know—nobody knows [about the new script], right?—so she was sitting there telling me about a huge movie that's being made, about the opening sequence, and I was thinking, "Oh my God, they're almost identical." But even that didn't send me into a tizzy,

because I immediately said, "Well, I can do it in a different way." It didn't bother me. Those are all great signs. Those are all signs that the basic idea, the spirit of this piece, cannot be defeated, and it will come out in a form, no matter what. It's like taking a sip of some energy-boost drink and saying, "Is this going to be able to sustain me for the whole run?" But once I'm sure, I'm off. I just want to run. And that's where we're at.

Do you always fall in love with your main character ?
No. I did on *Labor*. And I did—I am—on this [new script]. But I don't, usu-ally. [Which is] a bad thing. You need to. I don't think I wrote *The Sixth Sense* the appropriate way. I did a little bit of outside-in. But I did Cole's character correctly, and eventually I got all the other characters to where they needed to be. But I didn't do them the right way. Especially Malcolm's.

What would you have done differently?
The twists and turns in the movie—the ghosts, all of that stuff—put that all aside and say, "All right, we got those. What movie are we making? Forget all that, you can't use that as a description. You can't use any of the twists and turns or the ghosts or any of that stuff as a description. What's the movie about? Well, this movie, *The Sixth Sense*, is about a man, Malcolm Crowe, who's looking for redemption in his work because he failed a child. Or, sim-ply, he's just a man looking for redemption." That's what the movie is about. Had I started the process the way I started this new project and said, "You know what, I'm not feeling that in my life right now, so that's not good enough for me," I would have sat down and found another meaning for this movie. If I had done that, I probably wouldn't have made the movie just about redemption. I might have made it about him wanting to be a father and the irony of his being a child psychologist but not having kids, and how he uses his patients in a self-serving manner—as a parent—and when he failed one, he failed as a dad. But I would have had to work that in every-where… into every scene.

You have a very distinct, sparse, quiet writing style. How did you come to that place?
Every day I'm going through the same struggles and re-learning everything I thought I knew. It's all re-learned. If you don't look at it that way, you end up doing a cheesy version of yourself. For me, writing a screenplay is an important thing, it is a thing unto itself, as opposed to a blueprint for a movie. I take pride in those 120 pages, that the screenplay can be a piece of art all by itself, a thing you can sit down and read, as opposed to just connecting the dots, which a lot of screenplays are.

So, you're giving the reader a starting point, then you're letting him grow toward where he needs to go, but you're not micromanaging every step of the way.
You're assuming certain movements on their part. You don't want it to be your description of what [their path] should be—you're assuming they're

gonna go from Point A to Point B in their own emotional movement, but they'll take it themselves. Let's say this scene is a young woman seeing her mother for the first time, they've been estranged for a long time. Rather than describing her as my mom, or how I feel emotionally about a mother, I might choose the bare bones, so then the daughter turns around and her mom is at the front door. I might describe her very sparsely and let the reader fill in their own mom or their own emotional person. I've given them enough to lead them right to the doorstep of emotion. The holding back is always important with regard to emotion.

You have to trust your characters to go to that next step, wherever you want them to go. Do you often find that you write a scene and the character goes somewhere else and you have to deal with that?
Well, the characters used to always sound like me. That's the biggest mistake that young writers—or new writers—make. It always starts at that first level where they're "generic me," whether they're old, young, everybody's "generic me." And with each script that I've done, I've gotten better at not doing that on the first pass. The characters fill out as the drafts come, and you find a particular line [that hooks you into that character]. In *The Sixth Sense*—this isn't even in the movie, it was lost early in the process, but it made me hook onto something—it's when Cole was sitting with this little chubby boy at the birthday party, they're separate from everybody, and they had this conversation. What was happening was, they're both freaks who have been ostracized, so when Cole sees this boy suffering in his own quietness, he takes on a healer role, and I had a dialogue there. That was the first time that Cole's character appeared for me. I really went pretty far with it, with him trying to make this boy feel better. Months later, when the film was written and up to the level, the thing he did there was too adult, too in control of himself. But it was the right spirit, and that was the first time that I caught the character, that I realized, "Oh, Cole is this hypersensitive individual who by nature would help someone who's suffering." That's why he's the perfect person to see people who can't move on with their lives in the spiritual form. He would be the perfect one, because he sympathizes, he empathizes so much. That was midway through the movie, so then I went back and rewrote every scene that I had written so far.

That's the scene where Cole talks about God choosing the strong ones to make them different.
Right! Right! Right! But that was totally me. I didn't even shoot that, because I had never established this kid [that way]. It was a combination of too smart and too innocent. The dialogue was too extreme for me. It wasn't delicate enough for the movie, for this character. What Cole was saying was so profound it was beyond his years. The other thing was, what he was saying was so naïve and innocent that it was almost a caricature of a child, or what occasionally a child would say, but on the very extreme end of it. I felt… [sighs]

something was nagging me about it. It reminded me of *Wide Awake*, and I didn't feel this boy, going through this life that he's had up to this point, would have that naiveté about the subject. It didn't feel… correct. Afterwards, after I had developed the character, it didn't feel right. But it was a sweet moment, and it was a tough one to let go. But it didn't balance with the movie. It was a tricky one; it's interesting you remember that.

After all the writing you've done, is it still tough to let those moments go?
Well, I'll tell you, it's really tough. One of the mistakes I made in making *The Sixth Sense*, ironically, was that the scenes I felt the strongest about I paid least attention to, because…they were done already, how can they miss? But everything needs to be given its proper attention, in performance and in choreography and in camera setup, all that, as far as the execution of a script. I love the snow scene in *Wide Awake*—where the grandfather and the boy are walking together in the snow—that's one of my favorite scenes, dialogue-wise, and that made it into the movie as it was, it's great. So we shot that in the correct way. In *The Sixth Sense*, I love the car scene with the mother and the son, but my favorite piece of writing in the whole movie isn't in the movie! It was the last speech of Malcolm at the wedding [when he professes his love of Anna to the camera]. When we shot it, what I didn't pay attention to was this moment before it. It should have been executed in an uplifting but very emotional way. But it was just sad. [Sighs] When we put the film together, it felt like two endings. So I let it go.

Why do you need to continue, after you hit the climax? What's left to do?
I'm struggling over that right now, in this script I'm writing. Because the first draft had the structure of this ending, a more traditional ending, and it bothered the hell out of me, because it didn't have the power, the tension, as five minutes before, which was clearly the emotional [and story-wise, the] closure of the whole movie. I'm going to try to work it so that I can close things out earlier. For me the last scene in the movie is always the most important scene. You don't need to have another scene if you've said everything that needs to be said. If you haven't, then you need to go back into the body of the script.

Do you kill a lot of those screenwriting babies?
I kill anything that resembles anything I've ever seen before. Even if it's great, if it smells like I've seen it, or I'm copying this movie or it feels like that genre, it's dead. Like I said, the first draft of *The Sixth Sense* was a serial killer movie. The film that was sold was the tenth draft. The first draft was a very powerful movie about a little kid who saw the victims of a serial killer, and the hunt for this serial killer. But it kept changing; bit by bit, the parts with the ghosts became more and more unique. I've never seen that expressed before, and then the serial killer parts—which were good—I'd seen before, and they started to go away, and go away, and go away, until I said, "That's not even part of this movie anymore."

The same thing just happened on this current script [*Unbreakable*]. The first pass I wrote by hand, and it had a whole storyline which I thought was the big anchor of the storyline. As I was going through it, I got to page twenty-something, when that storyline was about to kick in, and I said, "I really love the movie that this is. I have faith that you don't need to do all that, or make it recognizable, or any of that stuff. Let's continue along this unique path, let's try to express this one feeling, this one unique thing, and trust." So I took it out on the second draft. I didn't wait five drafts like I did on *The Sixth Sense* [laughs].

It's all about trusting yourself.
Whenever you get lazy and scared, you do the line that you've heard before, the expected line. When you're writing the next line, in the distance you see something. You know where you want to go, and if you get stuck you get clogged with ideas that you've heard millions of times before, and they'll keep pounding at you: "Just have him say that line, just have him say it, say it, say it." Eventually you'll either say, "Wait a second, I need to rethink this from another angle," or you'll put down that clichéd line. It happens over and over again. Obviously, [avoiding clichés, writing only things that you've never seen before] can happen in five seconds. But for me it takes a long time. Hopefully by the time my script goes to sale, now, it is…cleansed.

You have a very specific voice, in both how you write and what you say. Why are your stories so different from everything else out there?
Well, living in Philadelphia, I'm not in the Hollywood mix. And, I've been very careful about what I've read, script-wise. If you're always reading garbage, when you sit down to write you think, "Well, this is better than 90% of what I've read," and you feel good about that. When you get stuck, all you hear in your head are the options that you've read. I read novels as much as I can for inspiration, writers that I like who are in genres. It's important for me to do unique, intelligent, commercial work, because that is where I will find my area. Whereas doing unique, creative, intelligent, small films that are very specific to a very specific audience was unfulfilling to me, and because of the way my first two films were released. I grew up feeling that *E.T.* was life-altering because it was the combination of two movies that I loved so much: of dramatic human movies that moved you, and a very supernatural thing that makes you wonder and dream. That combination is what I strive for now, and it excites me to see it in this body of work that I'm now starting to do.

You write almost exclusively on spec. Why is that?
Why I don't take a lot of studio projects and keep to myself…? It's an interesting craft, but it's a bad habit to learn—to go outside in. [If you take writing assignments] they come to you, with this thing that's already built, with so-and-so attached, and they're saying, "Can you put in a center for us?" And so you have to work from the outside going in and create something gen-

uine and powerful, and unique, and meaningful, and put it in the center, and pretend that's where everything came out of. You have to go backwards. It's a bad habit to learn. Because it's tempting.

In the first scene of the sale draft, Anna's in the basement getting a bottle of wine, and her breath clouds. Why?
Right, right. For me, Anna has the sixth sense a little bit. Not full-blown like Cole, but a little bit, maybe what we'd call the "normal level." But she can't see [the ghosts]. In the film, I didn't have her breathe cold air in the basement— I shot it but I didn't put it in—'cause that was too much of an awareness, too soon. That's taking her gift close to Cole's level, and that needed to happen at the end, at the climax, with the person who's closest to her. What was happening in that basement was that the house was suddenly filled with spirits, because the presence of a person with full-blown sixth sense [Vincent] had entered the house upstairs. Vincent had brought with him all kinds of spirits, and they were entering the house and being drawn to him. Anna was sensing this change in the house, but she doesn't know what it is. Of course 99% of the audience doesn't know what it is either, but that's cool with me [laughs].

Do you have concerns or fears that Unbreakable *won't measure up to* The Sixth Sense *in the audience's eyes?*
It's not like I'm releasing this in a vacuum. It's certainly coming in after *The Sixth Sense*. But it also wasn't written in a vacuum. *Unbreakable* was made with all of that on my shoulders. So every decision is about "What does the audience want to see? How can I surprise them? How can I give them a new experience, without them feeling they didn't get what they wanted to see?" Hopefully that's pretty intrinsic to the nature of this movie, that it is a very strong followup to *The Sixth Sense* without ignoring *The Sixth Sense*. Subsequently, hopefully it will be different enough that it creates a gateway, that the two films together have similarities of tone but really are very different in nature, and give me the opportunity to keep branching out that way.

What sparked the idea for Unbreakable*?*
I was working on another idea for a spec, and then I just got this idea for a guy who survives a train wreck—at the time it was a plane wreck—and nobody survived. He's the only survivor and he doesn't have a scratch on him, and what does that mean? And then the realization of who he possibly is—was it luck? Was it something else?—all those things. It was a slightly different tone than it ended up being, but basically the same feeling, which was a family dealing with this possibility, and the repercussions on a dysfunctional family about the realization about who this guy is.

It seems like the premise is not, "What if superheroes are real?" but "What if someone slowly found out he was superhuman?"
Right. That's what excites me, thinking in terms of a kid. A lot of boys think

their dad is Superman, until they're ten years old. He's so strong, he's so this, he's so that, they feel so safe around him. What if one kid was right? Those kinds of questions really excite me—I can really write that kid character. And just an average guy coming to terms with this theory, with the possibility that this is true, is a pretty powerful thing. And how it might affect a dysfunctional family.

Are you a comic book reader?
I am, but not an avid kind. [Not a guy who has] three thousand comics in their garage. [I pick up comics] here and there. *Daredevil* is one of my favorites. [Artist] Alex Ross is one of my favorites.

Last time you talked about building a character from the inside out. How did you create David Dunn?
Where it really crystallized for me was [after the] draft that I sold to Disney, there was a revision where I felt like everything crystallized for both their characters. One of the things that was important to me was that something wasn't right with [David] always, and trying to figure that out. So if something's not right with this guy, and he feels like there's something nagging at him, what is that?

Ever since David gave up playing football [a small but critical moment in his life].
He thinks it's that. He thinks it's his wife. He thinks it's his kid. He thinks it's family life. He's always pushing away his family. Those internal things that I can talk to the actors about that are there, and now you see my scene with that knowledge it all makes sense. The subtext of it all. Something about what Elijah says, this crazy notion, rings true for David. He keeps denying it, denying it. When he actually does it, goes out to try to do this [act like a hero], it makes sense to him and he feels at peace.

For me an internal subtext character arc was really important. That's like the fourth level of writing. People don't even [care] about that level, they don't even think in terms of that level. Once I understood that—that the peace that David had could make him a whole person, a whole husband, a whole father—that this average man who was out of balance is now in balance at the end of the movie, with his family and such, [then] everything starts to align. He is the father that his son wanted. He is the husband that his wife wanted.

What is Unbreakable*'s theme?*
"What is your potential?"

And how actualizing your potential brings you back in balance.
Exactly. I've felt a little bit of that in life, during *Wide Awake* and such. I just wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing. Then I stepped back and said, "Okay, what movies did I fall in love with? What kind of filmmaking made

me want to be a filmmaker? Okay, then write that. Make that." So I made *Sixth Sense*. Then it all fell in line. Then there was a peace. Once you do that, you can do things at a high level. Once you find the balance.

"Follow your bliss" philosophy.
It's a Zen thing. But that really gave me a strength to it. Then I had very personal things I wanted to do with the movie. Making the romance, the story line, between the husband and wife very strong and very real.

Why did you decide to show Elijah in flashback at the beginning? [Though David is shown in present-day, the script introduces Elijah to us in a series of flashbacks to Elijah's childhood—and the brutalizing injuries he sustained growing up.]
Part of the jelling of the movie was when I came up with the idea of Osteogenesis Imperfecta as the ailment for Elijah. It gave me real confidence in the movie, because I'm borderline talking about something that's real in this movie. There really is someone like David Dunn out there. There are many people like David Dunn out there. They just don't know it. Because there are many people like Elijah out there, with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, whose bones are so brittle. And so the opposite is definitely true. It's just that on the scale of human existence, this level of weakness exists and this level of strength exists. It's just those people at the other end don't know it. They're doing construction, they're working in front of the computer, whatever. They don't know that, I've played these sports, I fell down that time, I got in that car accident—I've never been injured. That really gave me a confidence. This is a natural phenomenon that's never been talked about. So that was exciting.

Does the disease strike people like it strikes Elijah?
Worse. He is the tamest version of it.

Do you believe that in everyday life there are people out there that are not superhuman, but possibly suprahuman?
Absolutely, one hundred percent. If we put both our arms out, and both of us had somebody hit them until they broke them, my arms would break at a different point than yours. That would be the difference between you and me. On that scale, where you and I belong, people with Osteogenesis Imperfecta are way to the right, just as there's someone way to the left as well. Those people just wouldn't know it until something like this happened, a big event. I have all kinds of stories of people falling, like parachuters, where nothing happened to them. Real, documented stuff where people didn't get hurt. And it's just [explained away by] chance and luck and things like that.

Do you think it's better or worse that these people don't know their own strengths and possibilities?
[Laughs] Then the movie is about theorizing whether there was a higher plan for everybody.

Do you believe there is?
Possibly, possibly.

If Elijah came to you, and you were in David's place, how would you act on that knowledge?
You'd feel a certain responsibility, I suppose.

That's part of the superhero mythology, isn't it? You're a superhero because, it's not just a power you have, it's a responsibility you feel to help your fellow person.
There's a certain responsibility that if you saw something going on in the street, that you'd be like, "I have to get involved, because I can't be hurt. So I have to make sure this other person doesn't get hurt."

And when do you stop that? Or should you go out looking for trouble, saying, "I know I can't be hurt, now I need to find things to get involved in"?
How would it all [fit together]? It would unravel like that.

You move into some much darker territory in Unbreakable, *touching on everything from child beaters and acquaintance rapists to a housesitting serial-rapist killer. The third act is reminiscent of the grimness—or even past that—of* The Silence of the Lambs. *In our last interview, you said, "the last part of* [Unbreakable] *feels like a different tone." How do you think people are going to react?*
I don't know. It does remind me a lot of *Silence of the Lambs* in the last third of the movie. But it's an unusual movie. It doesn't really feel like any movie in particular. And that's part of the thrill for me, and the fear, and the excitement. After a few moments of watching it you realize, "I'm not on familiar territory here, as an audience member. And I'm a little scared about it, because I'm vulnerable now." I think that's an exciting two hours to sit through. It'll definitely have an effect [laughs].

Do you think that people who were turned on by The Sixth Sense *are going to be scared away from this, because it's so realistic—it seems that so many of these things could happen. Your housesitting killer could exist—*
He did exist. In New Jersey.

Jesus. That's—
Yeah. [laughs]

In the end of The Sixth Sense *Malcolm is going to a better place—it's a relatively happy ending. Whereas in* Unbreakable, *there's explanation but not closure. There's closure on David's self-realization, but not on his story.*
Not on his life, right. That was part of the thing. I didn't want to have it clean. I didn't to want have it be fairy tale. At the end of *The Sixth Sense*, he's dead. He can't be with his wife. Those things are forgotten because there's peace. But there's still a bittersweet quality to the ending. I think the same

will be the case here, but in the flip regard. David's okay and his family's good, and he's good and right with his family now, but things aren't all right with the world, they're not at peace.

Your original ending of Unbreakable *had David slipping into a crowd of "ordinary people, walking on an ordinary street, in an ordinary city." You changed the focus of the ending slightly in the revised draft of the script. Why?*
I think the greatest twists are when things change fundamentally. The two films I always use are *Planet of the Apes* and *Psycho*, where what you thought you saw you did not see. [In *Unbreakable*] what you thought you saw was a superhero becoming a superhero. But that's not what you saw. The whole movie twists and turns on its head. It's a kind of fundamental change that I was going for, that I didn't quite get before.

The ending really polarizes people. Some feel the ending ruins the story, while others feel it brings the story full circle. David never physically confronts his nemesis at the end of the movie, even though that's the typical comic book mythos. Why?
It's all the different factors of realizing what the comic book world entails. It's one step at a time, David realizing how deep this goes. If you are true, there are so many things that come with X, Y, and Z. But he may not be happy to find out what all those elements are.

Did you feel the need or pressure, after The Sixth Sense*, to have another twist ending?*
It wasn't like that at all. The movie just evolves as I'm sitting down to write it. I said, "I really want another layer to the movie, what's another layer?" And I think about it until another layer appears. In those two cases that extra layer came out like that. I don't feel satisfied if it was working on just two levels—it needs to work on another level. In a small way, *Wide Awake* had a surprise ending with that little kid appearing there. It's something that I've always been working with.

Did that extra layer appear fairly early, or was that later in the process?
I think it was more toward the middle than it was in *Sixth Sense*. Always in the good versions it evolves toward the middle, as you understand the movie, as you're building on the elements of the movie.

How many drafts of Unbreakable *did you do?*
Eight or nine. One less than *The Sixth Sense*.

Have you reached the point in your writing where you're doing fewer drafts? At this point in your writing, are there certain things that are easier or harder now?
Each movie's different, you have to go about it differently. I felt like the first draft of *Unbreakable* was much, much stronger than the first draft of *The Sixth Sense*. So in that way, that's really exciting. It was a very different writing process than *The Sixth Sense*. I think the characters are stronger in this movie

than in *The Sixth Sense*, all the way down the pike, the wife and the kid. There's a consistency to all four main characters [David, Elijah, the wife, and the son] that maybe the wife didn't have in *The Sixth Sense*.

In both The Sixth Sense *and* Unbreakable, *most people in Hollywood would start the story where you stop it. It's as if you're writing a normal screenplay's first act in three acts, and delving into it in extremely realistic detail. Many screenwriters would say, "At the end of the first act David realizes he has a special power" and then go write a typical Hollywood superhero movie.*

That's exactly right: I took the first act and made it three acts. It was always that way when I wrote it. But when I was outlining it I was doing it in a more traditional fashion, and I said, "I hate the second and third acts. I'm not interested at all." My first act just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. I said, "That's what I want it to be, about a man coming to terms with this. That's it." And that's a powerful thing.

For me, the original *Rocky* is awesome because it's a buildup to one fight. That's what it's about. And really going into detail about it. The other people do it in the first act because they have to do it surface, because they don't have anything to say about the growth. But there's something I want to say about a man coming to terms with his potential. An average man, at that.

Last time we talked, you were in the midst of writing Unbreakable. *You said you ditched your big story line to follow a unique path. Was that unique path focusing on David's discovery of who he was?*

Right.

You said last time that there was a "huge, huge event this movie was originally based on," and Kathy Kennedy was telling you about another film's opening sequence, and you went back and rewrote Unbreakable*'s opening. What was that event, and what was the original opening and the new sequence?*

It was originally a plane crash. And because of *Cast Away*, I just said, "I don't want to have a million plane crashes." The more I thought about it, the trains were better connected with the comic book genre.

In the revised draft you added a penultimate breakfast scene, where David is reading the newspaper. Why did you add this scene?

In a way, that really is what the movie is about. That's really the car scene in *Sixth Sense*. The whole journey about all this supernatural stuff was so two people could be closer together and communicate and connect. It's this moment where David says to his son, "You were right. I am Superman." It's a really powerful scene. When I wrote it, I was like, "Wow, I can't believe I didn't even write this scene in the movie." And then when we shot it, it was so powerful. It's one of the strongest scenes in the movie.

Between David and his son and David and his wife, is one relationship greater than the other?

The movie has a great balance of the four characters. I really enjoy that. It's about a family dealing with this, which is great.

Unbreakable*'s sale was $5 million to write and another $5 million to direct. After* The Sixth Sense*, was there anything you did or didn't have to do? Were you given carte blanche to take* Unbreakable *where you wanted?*

In many ways it was similar to the *Sixth Sense* experience. Because we flew under the radar on *Sixth Sense*—they weren't paying attention to us—and then on this one [we're] flying above the radar. Ultimately it turned out to be very similar experiences. The studio was very supportive and let me go make the movie.

Was David's "Security" rain poncho the real-world equivalent of a superhero costume?

Yes.

What do you do in a spec script that you strip out in a shooting script to make it more streamlined?

All of the changes that happen from the sale script to the shooting script are based on the changes that I make when I'm storyboarding, which is just visually writing it. Then I go back and incorporate all those changes into the screenplay. It's almost not about rewriting the screenplay, it's about going back and writing the visual script and then going back and changing the written script to match it.

It's reflecting what needs to be done to get the thing on the screen.

Right. So, for example, the original idea was to use crowds as a metaphor with David: first he was among them, then he stood out from them. But when I storyboarded I didn't want to do that metaphor visually, so I came up with different ones and incorporated those.

You said, "My goals are to reach the highest level of what I do for a living, and, along those lines, this is breathtakingly high." How much higher can you get? How do you top The Sixth Sense *and* Unbreakable*?*

The idea was to have a really severe one-two punch really quickly. That was my goal. Then take some time and reinvent, not totally reinvent, but reinvent it within the genre.

The genre of…?

This type of filmmaking I'm doing here [laughs]. Hopefully it'll keep evolving. I wanted to take a little time off to figure out how to evolve it.

What's the latest update on your involvement with Indiana Jones 4*?*

We're in deep discussions about it, so hopefully it'll happen.

What for you is attractive about Indiana Jones 4*?*
It's a childhood dream to come in and be a part of that group. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was one of my favorite films, it's what got me started [in filmmaking]. It's childhood coming full circle. I can almost put that part of my life to bed and go on. [And] writing something for Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. What was exciting about the original *Raiders* was when they said, "From the guys who brought you *Jaws* and *Star Wars*." It's cool to think that I could be a third element in that, to bring a certain style of fantasy filmmaking and voice to the table. That's exciting for me.

Kevin Smith

I t's been eleven years since *Clerks* came out of nowhere and shattered long-held notions of what independent film is all about. The movie looked like crap, it featured amateur actors, and was infused with the lowbrow humor (one girl copulates with a dead guy, another has given a record number of blow jobs) and pop culture sensibility that would become Kevin Smith's trademarks. Yet *Clerks* possessed a certain intelligence that shone through in the characters, their pop culture encyclopedia dialogue, and the absurdity of their situations. *Clerks* received both the Filmmakers Trophy at that year's Sundance Film Festival and the International Critics Week Award at the Cannes Film Festival. In short, *Clerks* became a phenomenon, and Kevin Smith has become arguably the most famous director in the world (not even Spielberg or Tarantino has gotten work as a TV pitch man), if not for his movies then for his affable persona and multi-platform productivity (film, an animated TV series, comic books). Smith followed *Clerks* with four features that ranged from the purely frivolous *Mallrats* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* to the surprisingly heartfelt *Chasing Amy* and the uneven *Dogma*.

For better or worse, all of Smith's films are his and his alone; they reflect his point of view on life, love, fart and dick jokes (he likes 'em), and important matters—like the DC universe. While none of them were really sequels, each movie featured Jay and Silent Bob and/or other characters from Smith's "Askewniverse," effectively forming a series. Lots of people were in on the joke, a cultish fan base that has followed Smith from film to film thus far.

But there have been changes in Smith's personal life in recent years. He got married, became a father [he and wife Jen had a daughter, Harley, in 2001], and moved to Los Angeles. Change leads to more change, and now comes *Jersey Girl*, a movie that, at first blush, doesn't sound much like a Kevin Smith

flick. Yes, it stars Ben Affleck, but he plays a widower raising a seven-year-old daughter. The humor is more restrained and the drama emphasized. There's no Jay and Silent Bob—in fact, there's not a single tieback to the world of *Clerks* and the films that followed. Is Kevin Smith trying—God forbid—to cross over? Smith spoke with *Creative Screenwriting* several times about how his writing has changed, and why.

What films have influenced you?
I've been a long-time movie fan but it wasn't until I went to see *Slacker* on my twenty-first birthday, that I really got into independent film. It was an epiphany of sorts. As much as I like watching Richard [Linklater]'s movie, I sat there thinking this was great but if this guy can do this, I can do this.

You were in film school. Is that essential in filmmaking?
Absolutely not. It also depends on what you want to do. I wanted to write and direct. I really didn't want to direct all that much—basically I wanted to write. But I soon realized that to get the exact vision you've written up on screen, you have to take charge of the script, so that's where the directing end came from. But they can't teach you writing and directing in film school. They can teach you format, but you can teach yourself that by looking at scripts. In terms of directing, either you're good with people or you're not good with people.

Did you work on any other films before Clerks*?*
Scott [Mosier] and I went to film school together in Vancouver. The only thing we'd done was this ten-minute video documentary about a transsexual for a class project. Then the transsexual dropped out. We had to make this documentary on how our documentary fell apart. It was kind of interesting but that was the only experience; that and a little 8mm film for my ex-girlfriend for Christmas.

Have you ever had a bad case of writer's block?
Yeah, *Six Million Dollar Man*. But it was as much writer's laze as writer's block.

Was Six Million Dollar Man *something you wanted to do?*
The producer on *Mallrats* asked me if I wanted to do it because he was going to be involved, and I said "yeah," because I liked the guy. Then the studio told him he wasn't the producer on that film. Then the executives I pitched the story to left and were replaced by another set of executives. The people I started the project with were all gone, and I didn't know the new people coming in. That is a terrible situation.

How do you write in terms of structure?
Sometimes you know the ending from the start. *Clerks* basically started with the idea that this guy has a really bad day then gets killed at the end. The first thing I wrote on that was the scene when some video customer comes in and

Randal's reading the paper. It's the ruse scene. Where he's like, "I don't like your ruse, ma'am." That was the first thing I wrote for some reason and then I went in either direction—I did everything before that and everything after.

Do you think as a writer or a director?
A writer. I just don't think I have a directorial instinct. I think it all comes from writing and that's why the films don't have a fantastic visual style to them. In fact, there's no visual style to them. There's a lot of banter and a lot of talk.

Is writing the best path to directing?
In my estimation, yeah. Because that's really all I know, but again I came from a different school of thought in terms of directing. I come from the school of thought that you write what you direct. Sometimes I can't figure out the people who don't write what they direct. I mean traditionally that's pretty much what the director is, some guy who's directing someone else's script, but I always have a problem with that. There are people like Martin Scorsese, people of that cut…and you're just, "wow." They can take somebody else's script and make something tremendous with it. As far as me, I just don't. I can never visualize people asking, "Would you direct someone else's script?" I just don't see how I could. I'm not a visual stylist. The only reason I can direct what I write is because I've written it; I know how it should sound.

How long do you take to write a script?
Chasing Amy, I did in a month. *Clerks*, in a month. *Dogma*, in a month and a half, I think. *Mallrats* was the longest at two months.

Where does the actual writing take place?
Whenever I get up at some point during the day and write. Each one was written under different conditions. I wrote *Clerks* while I wasn't working at the store. Then I polished the draft while I was working at the store. *Mallrats*, I wrote while I was traveling with *Clerks*. I wrote part of it in Japan and part of it in France. *Dogma*, I'd written actually before *Clerks* hit and finished it right afterwards. *Chasing Amy*, I just wrote in a month.

How many drafts do you normally write for each script?
It averages around five. Basically, they never change as much as they start big and they kind of shrink [afterwards]. The first draft of *Clerks* was 164 pages. The first draft of *Mallrats* was 136 pages. The first couple of drafts of *Chasing Amy* were 136 pages. They just shrunk from there.

   And, you know, I'm lazy, so I'd love to shoot the first one, but there's always somebody with notes. Chiefly, the person I listen to most is Scott Mosier, my producer. He has the best advice, and really has great insight into the stuff I write. So I'll write a draft, hand it off to Scott, and then tinker with it based on what he sees in it. I tend to write very large and then rein it back in. I never use Final Draft or one of those screenwriting programs, I just use

Microsoft Word, and then I make my own margins and stuff. When I print up the script, I shrink it down to 80%, so I can fit more on a page than normally [laughs]. You know, which is kind of wrong! I always get blasted by the production staff because they're like, "Your 120-page script is really a 150-page script," because it's printed small. So the whole page-a-minute ratio doesn't quite work for me. It worked on *Clerks* because the dialogue was delivered so quickly, but it took me five films in addition to that to realize, "Maybe I should I stop printing it at 80%." So basically, my first drafts come in really long, and Mosier is kind of the editing knife, he hands me back the draft with a bunch of cut suggestions. So the next draft is usually the one I hand in, and then you start dealing with notes on the studio side.

Do you envision certain actors and friends in roles when you write?
Actually, yeah. Particularly on this film, *Chasing Amy*; all the leads were written with people in mind, people I knew. *Mallrats* not as much because we knew we were going to cast it with the exception, of course, of me and Jason Mewes. *Clerks*, I didn't know anybody. We just kind of cast it out of local theater and friends. I've gone back and rewritten *Dogma* based on people I know and want to cast.

What advice would you give to someone who wanted to enter the industry as a scriptwriter?
That's a tough one. My point of view is write something and direct it yourself. Sometimes people can't click with a script. They can't make the connection. They don't identify. They don't see it on the page. Sometimes if you just shoot something and show it to them and they can see it performed, it'll pan out. That's basically what happened to us.

In Superman*, did you write the initial script or did you join the project?*
There were two writers before me.

So basically it's the same story?
Actually the first guy wrote a story which I didn't use. He came up with his own story and it was bad. The second guy used the *Death of Superman* storyline from the comics and it was still bad. I used the *Death of Superman* storyline from the comics too, because that's what Warner Bros. wanted. Basically the whole script from beginning to finish is mine. Except that it all stems from the idea in the comics.

Is it hard to capture human emotion on screen without sounding too dramatic?
I don't know. It depends who you ask. If you ask people that like *Chasing Amy*, they'd say "Oh God, it must be hard," and if you ask people who don't like it, then obviously it's hard because he can't do it.

The scene in Mallrats *in which Brodie proclaims his love for Rene sounded overly dramatic but it really strikes the audience.*
That's what was so liberating about *Mallrats*. I read a review where the critic said he saw *Mallrats* and he wasn't a fan but it made him go back and watch *Clerks*. The conclusion he came to was that underneath all the cynicism, foul language and what not, they're both sweet romantic tales of hope and ideal love. His final closing thought was, "I now know why Silent Bob doesn't speak, because if he opens his mouth people find what a sweet guy he is." It was a viewpoint on my work that I never really thought about. From there, I was able to work on *Chasing Amy* and not worry about it coming off too sappy. I just went for the heart and it panned out.

Are pop culture references essential for a script?
I don't think so. I mean it's kind of what I did before, before the whole Quentin [Tarantino] thing…before Quentin became a mainstay in popular culture himself. I just like to talk about things that me and my friends would talk about or did talk about.

Do you write with a particular audience in mind?
No, not really. They tell you to write what you know. Since I'm only twenty-six, I wind up writing primarily for a young audience. But people outside our age group seem to dig on the stuff at the same time.

Would you consider changing your style to attract a bigger audience?
I did that once. Never again. *Mallrats* was our commercial stab.

Did Clerks *getting an "NC-17" affect your outlook on writing being censored?*
No. There was an initial worry going into this film because *Chasing Amy* is very frank in its sexual discussion. Perhaps more frank than *Clerks*. We were nervous that they would give it an "NC-17," but they did give it an "R" on first pass.

Just for language?
Language, sexuality, discussion of sexuality, sexual topics, and drug use or drugs—something like that.

Are there more dramatic stories on the horizon for you?
Yes. *Chasing Amy* has a foot in both comedy and drama, so now I got a taste for it and I kind of like it. But I don't think I'll ever totally stray from comedy.

What's good dialogue to you?
Good dialogue for me is when it just pops. Nothing can be happening in a movie, and two people can be sitting in a room for the whole flick and as long as the dialogue pops, it's there. It's back and forth to me. It's banter. Right now to me, good dialogue is something I listen to and go, "Gee, I wish I'd written that." That feeling's few and far between, that you ever hear stuff like that.

What were the movies you've seen that you thought the dialogue just "popped?"
Jerry Maguire is one of them. *Larry Flynt*'s another one. *Fargo*, of course.

Your characters definitely like to talk, so it must be a constant battle to keep it short.
They do like to talk. That's another thing I'm trying to rein in. It's a weird position to be in, because that's what I like to do and what I get the most credit for—the dialogue. At the same time, I always get slammed for the dialogue, for making movies that some people think should be set on stage rather than a film, because they don't lean toward using visuals to tell the story as much as they lean toward dialogue and character to tell the story. We're ten years into this now, and I'm hoping that by the twenty-year mark, people might just understand, "Well, that's what he does," rather than trying to correct it. These are the kinds of movies I want to make, where people are very chatty. Hopefully I can balance it out a bit more, as far as telling a story visually, but I'd rather hear people talk. Those are the movies I'm drawn to, and that I like writing.

Do you allow any room for improvisation from your actors? Does it trouble you when actors change lines?
They don't, not when I work with them. [laughter] I rule with a pretty iron fist in terms of dialogue. It's almost to the point that I used to be a big line-reading freak, kind of telling actors exactly how to deliver a line by delivering it myself.

Sort of like George Lucas?
Does he do that?

There was something on the MTV special on how he instructed his actors by saying "faster" or "more intense."
With *Clerks*, I was always like faster, faster. I mean sometimes I would get to the point that the actor's weren't doing what I heard in my head. So I would just say, "Look, say it like this." Then I would do it and have them repeat it.

Your formula breaks a lot of Screenwriting 101 rules, like keeping scenes short and writing only dialogue that builds character or moves the plot forward. Yet it works.
I think it depends on what kind of movie you're making. If you're making a comic book movie, I guess that much dialogue isn't necessary. If you're trying to write a blockbuster, I would think the less said, the better, because it's all about eye candy. But for the movies I've made, they're certainly not reaching for the $100 million mark, they're more personal in nature, and I don't think I'm really beholden to those rules. Every once in a while, I'm like, "Maybe I should go to one of those Robert McKee things, just to see what the dude says." Because you're always reading these testimonies from people, like, "Robert McKee is a genius." I've just never felt that screenwriting could be taught. Either you can or you can't. Either you can tell a story or you can't;

either you can put dialogue in a character's mouth or you can't. The rest of it is just degrees of how people respond to it; it's more subjective than anything else. I like a movie where people talk a lot, and maybe Robert McKee doesn't. Or maybe when he wants to hear people talk, he wants to hear them do it in a very concise manner. I certainly don't want to pick on that dude; he's just the name that always comes up when they talk about screenwriting. I've never looked into his courses, but on one level I'm kind of morbidly curious.

You could put on the Groucho mustache and glasses…
Yeah, and hide out in the back of the crowd. Actually I really dug that scene in *Adaptation* where the Charlie Kaufman character goes to the McKee class and has a breakthrough of sorts. I found that really amusing. It's not like you can't grow and change; ten years in, I write differently than I did ten years ago. But at the same time, it's not that much different. I've learned to edit myself a lot better, in terms of not writing quite so much for everyone to say, but still I'm not really into the three-act structure and whatnot. Sooner or later maybe I'll get to making a movie where three-act structure is kind of important, but thus far, I really haven't felt compelled to.

When you wrote the unmade Superman *for Warner Bros. a few years ago, weren't you obligated to use the three-act model?*
[Laughs] I guess you are, which may explain why that movie never got made. I haven't gone back and read that script in eight years, I think I was working on it in '96. Maybe I should go back and read it and see if I did write a three-act structure story. But even then, I just remember being so in love with the dialogue, and being told, "Nobody wants to hear what Superman has to say!" And I'm like, "I do! I know Superman can do all these great things, but what's on his mind? That's the thing I'm most interested in." I can imagine if I was doing a work-for-hire thing, where I was trying to write a big mystery movie, I would concentrate more on that. I guess the guy who has that down is Mamet. Mamet's stuff is very Mamet, but at the same time, when he writes something like *The Untouchables*, it doesn't strike you as being overly Mamet. It sounds a little bit like Mamet, but at the same time it adheres to the rules of three-act structure.

Did you ever consider playing the role of Dante yourself?
I was actually writing the role of Randal to be played by myself. That's why Randal has all the best lines. But as we got closer to filming it was just impossible to work at the store, memorize lines, and direct the flick. It was tough. So I had to defer and find a different person to play it.

Have you done a lot of rewrites on the set?
No, not many. I've thrown in a line from time to time. The actors try to throw in lines and I'm like, "No." But from time to time, I've thrown in a line which I would incorporate into the script later on. On *Mallrats*, I wrote a sequence or two while we were actually shooting the movie.

Did you actually shoot a different beginning to Mallrats*?*
Oh yeah. There are parts of it that are neat. It's just the problem that there isn't a single laugh in it until the eight-minute mark. So I started with a crane shot, I don't know, it was kind of difficult. I wanted to put it on the laser disc but they ran out with it before we could put on anything extra.

Are you a perfectionist in terms of the creative cycle?
On *Clerks*, I was. On *Mallrats*, we got loose a bit because Universal hired an editor, and with *Chasing Amy*, Scott and I edited the flick completely. I was able to choose every damn take. There was a scene in *Chasing Amy* comprised of ten different takes. I wouldn't have gotten it if an editor was in charge.

Did you experience a lot of pressure from having a bigger budget on Mallrats*?*
No, not really. Sometimes the studio would be like, "Open it up, open it up."

Was having Mallrats *fizzle a depressing experience?*
It was definitely depressing having *Mallrats* tank, but there was no pressure making the movie itself. The studio loved the movie right up till the release, even including the release. We got so many call-in apologies like, "We kind of screwed up" or "we're sorry."

It seemed liked they backed off the marketing.
Yeah, we were just with the wrong branch of Universal. They stuck us with Gramercy, which was such a bad move. Gramercy is fantastic at marketing platform releases like *Fargo* and *Dead Man Walking*. They can't do dick one with a wide release. Witness *Dazed and Confused, Mallrats* and even something as no-brainer as *Barb Wire*. They can't even make that work at a time when Pamela Anderson was a goddess on the planet. The movie tanked. They just don't know how to go wide. They just don't know who to touch.

With Chasing Amy*, you went back to basics. How was that? Did you write it knowing the budget was smaller?*
There was a point when the movie was going to be made for two or three million. I talked to my producer, Scott, and I was like: "Why don't we do it for two or three hundred grand, 'cause it's a small movie that doesn't require much and if we pull it off, we'll look like geniuses." We got two hundred and fifty grand for it and we didn't go over budget; in fact it came in under budget. To me, honestly there was no difference in directing *Clerks, Mallrats*, or *Chasing Amy*. 'Cause my job is always the same: write the script, rehearse the actors, and make sure they give the performance I heard in my head when I wrote the script. No matter what the budget level that job is constant. It doesn't change.

What was the common theme of your "Jersey Trilogy"?
The theme of the trilogy, I don't know. Basically, the whole idea was horseshit from the beginning. People liked *Clerks*, the press liked *Clerks* and they

were asking, "What was gonna happen next?" We were trying to get our foot into the door and keep it there. I was telling people it's the first part of a trilogy, there's more to come. So we figured that would guarantee we could make two more films. That the people in charge would go, "Well, they said it was a trilogy. Let's give them two more tries to see where the story's going."

What was the initial inspiration for the script of Dogma*?*
I think it came from a lot of places, and one was of course my having been raised and still being a practicing Catholic. The other was comic books, which I think shows in the movie. There's no discussion of comic books like there was in the other movies, and there's no comic books in evidence, but the movie plays like a graphic novel and also some of the stronger comedic works of faith that people like George Carlin and Sam Kinison have done in their routines.

You wrote it around the time of Clerks. *Has it been revised since then?*
Yeah, oh absolutely. Every year I went through another draft of the flick.

What do you do in the revision process? Do you work on structure, dialogue, both?
Usually I start with very large drafts and whittle them down to more manageable, shootable drafts. In the case of *Dogma* from the first draft to the third some of the story changed a bit. In the first draft Bethany was a stripper, and I think the third draft is where she started working at a clinic. And that was about, I think, the biggest change. Everything else pretty much stayed the same. But it was just whittling it down or kinda sharpening the jokes or sharpening points of view. Over the course of five years I think I became a better writer, so I just polished that dialogue a lot more.

You shot other films while revising this script. Did you want to spend more time developing as a writer before shooting Dogma*?*
Not so much develop as a writer as develop as a filmmaker. It was a daunting little flick to face as your second film, and I didn't want to pooch it because it was about something really important to me. I didn't want to get out there and have it fall victim to the sophomore jinx simply by virtue of the fact that I wasn't mature enough to handle the material either as a writer or especially as a director. So I just kinda put it on the back burner until I felt we were ready, and after *Chasing Amy* I thought we had reached that point. Because *Chasing Amy* was a movie that did a little bit of what *Dogma* does, which is blend or balance the dramatic and comedic, although *Dogma* has far greater or more chasm-like tonal shifts. You'll be laughing at something one second, and suddenly it turns dead serious or weighty.

Dogma *also seems more complex in terms of genre. There are elements of comedy, adventure, road film, and then the whole religious epic or quest. How do you go about combining all these genres into something that is uniquely your own?*
Carefully. The flick will never play as kind of actiony-adventurey as most of

the Spielberg catalog or something like that. But there is a little hint of it in there. And it's not as fall-down funny as, say, some of the Farrelly brothers' stuff, but it definitely has its strong comedic moments as well. For me it was interesting finding the blend, and I think *Pulp Fiction* helped a lot. Seeing *Pulp Fiction* back in 1994 at Cannes was an eye-opener 'cause I thought that movie blended a lot of different styles and tone shifts quite well. And that kind of bolstered my confidence.

Your use of pop culture references seems essential in your work. You mentioned Pulp Fiction—*obviously it is essential in Tarantino's work as well. Now it seems like everyone is doing it. It is clever and fun, but is there a deeper purpose in pop culture references?*
I just think, good or bad, our generation, generations that follow us, even some that precede us, have these cultural touchstones that pop up in conversation privately or among your friends, and why not reflect that in movies. It's not taking it to the more obvious degree like the self-consciousness of the *Scream* flicks, of commenting on horror movies while being in a horror movie. It is kind of the awareness of pop culture and how little we wind up actually talking about except the movies we've seen, the TV shows we've seen, because we all share that in common. You come from any different walk of life, and you've probably seen the same films or watched the same TV programs.

How do you make decisions in the cutting room? It must be a tough balance getting rid of certain things and not breaking a certain flow or trying to maintain a flow.
Yeah, particularly with a script like *Dogma* because it's intricately balanced and the dialogue is so much exposition. I'm one of those guys who tells you about things rather than shows you, which is a horrible thing to do because it's a visual medium, but it's the only way I know how to work. So sometimes it is kinda difficult. But through the course of *Dogma* we found it easier and easier to just go in there and line-trim. We just kept looking for lines and stuff that's a little pretentious or self-serving.

If I had a major criticism of the third draft, I thought there was a problem along the lines of what you were just saying—having characters talk instead of doing. There are so many supporting characters, and every time one comes in they have to explain their whole backstory, usually what they were in Heaven and why they're on Earth. It felt like it slowed things up a bit.
Yeah, believe me, it did. But we found ways to get in there and excise stuff so that people weren't going on too much about themselves while still moving the story forward. I'm a pretty harsh judge of the flick, and now when I watch the final cut it moves. It really doesn't seem to drag. At Cannes the last thing that kinda held on as one of these draggy sequences was the Azrael scene in the bar.

That scene I thought especially slowed things up. When we're getting to the end

and it seems like things should be speeding up, you're introducing this new villain (although we've seen him a little bit before) explaining his whole story.
That's definitely changed from the third draft. He's in the flick a lot more throughout the beginning and middle so it's not like he suddenly pops up in that third act. There was a lot of tying up loose ends involved, and then there was a big old speech that he gave, and the speech hit the floor as well after Cannes. At this point you want to get to the church. You want to get to the end as soon as possible.

I guess it's tough because you like certain scenes, but you have to think of the overall film and how they fit in.
Exactly. You have to think about an audience sitting there for two hours and digesting all this stuff.

As the writer and director, do you make changes as you shoot, or do you pretty much lock yourself in to the script and try to stick to that when you're shooting?
I'm really anal-retentive about using the script as the bible. I'm not real big on ad-libbing or improvisation, so most of that stuff stays intact. Periodically words will get shifted around, or you're in a moment. There's a moment with Chris Rock. It was his last day and his last take. There was a line that I was never really fond of, where Bethany says, "Christ? You knew Christ?" and Rufus says, "Knew him? I saw him naked."

That's in the third draft.
Right. I was never really wild about that line, and while we were there it was Chris's last take. I was like, "Throw something else out there." It was the one golden opportunity I gave to somebody to actually ad-lib, and Chris came up with this line that was phenomenal and will end up staying in the flick, where she goes, "Christ? You knew Christ?" and he goes, "Knew him? Nigger owes me twelve bucks."

Were parts written with certain actors in mind?
Some were, some weren't. I rewrote Linda Fiorentino's part when Linda became the character because in the earlier drafts I think Bethany is like twenty-six. When I sat down with Linda to talk about the script and I kinda fell in love with her as the choice for Bethany, I became convinced that it was a better move to have somebody who is older play the character. This person had been through more in her life and seen some shit and had some wear and tear rather than some twenty-six-year-old who sounded more like she was whining than anything else.

This film seems like a departure in the sense that you are working with more actors that you haven't worked with before. Did you change your style?
After you sit down with them and after you know they're going to be in it, you go through and give it another once-over on those characters just to

inflect a little better for the actors who are going to be playing them or maybe tailor some of the dialogue to their delivery.

The controversy surrounding Dogma *as I understand it is that there is this conservative Catholic organization called the Catholic League that is talking about protesting the film. Is there anything else to the controversy, and how do you feel about it?*
It's pretty much that one organization, and it's disconcerting. You just wish they had waited to see the film before they'd jumped on it so hard. It may not have been their cup of tea because it's chock-a-block full of harsh language or what-not, but at the same time they would have at least seen that it's not a blasphemous flick. It's not slapping the face of organized religion or spitting in the face of the Catholic Church. It's actually pretty pro-faith. And at times actually pro-Catholic, and while it doesn't play like a recruiting film for the Vatican, it actually does a pretty good job, an admirable job I think, of upholding or maintaining some of the tenets of the faith and doesn't mock them. So it's kinda disconcerting to have a group, particularly one guy, the guy in charge of the group, Bill Donahue, attacking the movie, and also knowing that it wasn't really about us or the movie, it was more about attacking Disney. He's tried to do it before, and this movie was just the easiest way for him to do it this year. It kind of makes you a little sad or disappointed 'cause I knew going in that I was doing something positive. You can accuse me of being tacky or raunchy, but you can't really accuse me of being anti-faith or anti-religion or anti-Catholic or anti-God when the movie upholds so much of that.

I thought the Cardinal Glick character was a satire of liberalism in the Church—his touchy-feely "Catholicism—Wow!" campaign involving liberal silliness like taking away the crucifix and replacing it with a Jesus who gives the thumbs-up sign. That joke might be something conservatives would enjoy.
Absolutely. You would think so, but forget it. You have to have a sense of humor, and most of the conservatives don't, especially when it comes to religion.

Since you were raised a Catholic, and are a practicing Catholic, obviously this is a personal film. Why did you choose an epic form for a personal story?
If you're going to talk about religion, you better make it damn entertaining because most people will tune out. It's one of those things that people don't like to be talked to about or like to talk about or want to be entertained by. And I didn't want to make this flick where I was on a soapbox for a couple of hours going, "These are the things I believe." If you're going to do stuff like that or stuff that can be construed as that, you at least want it to be entertaining. Kind of that spoonful of sugar approach. Couch it in some humor, and maybe at the end of the day they'll pick up on the message after they're done laughing, or maybe they won't, but at least you haven't bored them to death. I think that was the best medium to do it in, to do it as a kind of a comedic film, or to do it in that epic form, because at least even if the humor is not your cup of tea, there's a kind of a story to it. Ticking clock.

Got all the elements of good movie conventions in it while still not being like a typical movie.

With all the Catholic terminology in the film, it seems like it's a film that Catholics especially would hook into in a way that maybe others wouldn't.
Yeah, there was definitely a kind of fear at some point, like, "Wow, is this movie too inside? Are you not going to be able to appreciate this if you're not a Catholic?" But I think this stuff is broad enough, and the Catholic techno-jargon, as it were, isn't really off-putting. It all pretty much gets explained so we don't leave anyone in the dark. I've been kind of a Jesus freak my whole life. And being raised Catholic helps out a lot with a lot of the concepts. We joke about it, but it's treated kind of reverently because these are the concepts and precepts I grew up with, and they do mean something to me. Even as old as you get and sometimes things fall by the wayside—where you're like, "A plenary indulgence, really? Where did God ever say that He was offering anybody a plenary indulgence?"—you still kind of embrace it or go, "Yeah. That was a big part of growing up."

What do you hope audiences take away from this film?
Chiefly, I hope they're entertained. And hopefully they'll laugh a lot. But it would be nice if people walked out thinking about their faith or whatever that may be, or their degree of spirituality. The movie is chiefly for people who have let their faith fall by the wayside or dropped out of it for whatever reason. Whether you've got issues with the Church or not, it's not like you have an issue with God. You have an issue with an institution that speaks on God's behalf but doesn't necessarily have to be right in every instance. Just the idea that if you have a grievance with the Church or disagree with Church policy, it doesn't have to be a stumbling block between your relationship with God or with Christ. So often people kind of drop out of Church 'cause they're disenchanted with the priest or with the Church's stance on whatever politics of the day, whether it's abortion or homosexuality or things like that. People fall out of their faith because they disagree with the Church's stance on it. And it's just that. It's the Church's stance on it. It's not God's. We won't know God's mind on any subject until we die. So why blame God for something that some guy is putting forward and saying, "This is what we all have to believe"? It's a man-made institution, and it's just as fallible as the rest of us.

Was the Jersey Girl *story conceived before or after you became a parent?*
It was between the two- and six-month mark after I became a parent, after Harley was born. We were out in Los Angeles, working on the *Clerks* cartoon, which was as fun as hell to write but at the same time, it's a little easy, a little superficial. So I was thinking about writing something that was a bit more grown-up, just to balance out [the cartoon]. One night I came home and Jen and I were putting Harley to bed, and I don't know, I was struck with that notion that most parents, particularly fathers, are struck with sooner or later,

which is, "God, what would happen if I had to do this by myself?" Because here I was, coming home from work at seven o'clock, and just catching the kid in time to put her in the crib for the night, and Jen was so wonderful with her. I was just kind of swept up with that feeling of, "Thank God she's here, but what if she wasn't?" It started as a what-if germ. "What if Jen hadn't made it, but the baby had? Where would I be? What would I be doing?" I sat down that night and for two hours, I wrote about fifty pages of what would eventually become *Jersey Girl*. It stayed pretty much the same, except that when I began writing it, I wasn't writing it with Ben in mind. At that time, I was writing it for Bill Murray. He had just done *Rushmore*, and I loved his performance.

When did you finish the first draft?
I did those fifty pages and never touched it again—that was January or February of 2000—until July of 2001, when I went to Ben Affleck's house for a Fourth of July party. We were out in Los Angeles, working on *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, and Ben was doing that thing he normally does, which is, "When are you going to write something we can do together?" …And I was like, "Of the two of us, dude, one has won an Oscar for screenwriting, so I think you could pretty much handle writing something for yourself at this point." And he was like, "No, you should do it." I said, "I have this thing that I wrote fifty pages of, and I haven't touched it in a while." So I gave him the pages the next day, and he called me up and said, "This is it. Finish this, dude, I'm totally into doing this." So I spent the next month finishing up what became *Jersey Girl*.

Your last film opened with Jason Mewes farting into the camera, and now you've written a father-daughter story. You tend to downplay this sort of thing, but you've obviously grown up, just a little.
[Laughs] That was definitely my lowest point as a writer. I certainly enjoyed writing it and I don't disavow it—I know exactly why I did it, it made me laugh. But yeah, it's certainly not the pinnacle of writing. It's weird—thus far, the quality of my writing from flick to flick has gone up and down. Not like some of it is better or worse than others, but even in *Chasing Amy*, for as much pseudo-intellectual or heady concepts we were throwing at the audience, there were a lot of dick and fart jokes in there, and a lot of pop culture humor too.

It's also the film in which you coined the phrase "serious deep dicking." Jay's fart notwithstanding, your lowbrow jokes usually stem from dialogue and wordplay, whereas the Farrelly Brothers or Adam Sandler rely more on sight gags.
That's the thing I've always enjoyed about screenwriting. There are elements in *Chasing Amy* that would put off the intelligentsia because it is kind of lowbrow, but at the same time, the stuff that appeals to the intelligentsia puts off the fourteen-year-olds who went to see that movie because of *Mallrats*. I've always enjoyed mixing up the highbrow and the lowbrow. *Jersey Girl* is different, inasmuch as there's not that reliance on the easy joke and there's not

the reliance on pop culture references. So that was a challenge, to be able to write something that stands on its own, and that rises and falls on the merits of the story and not the movie you did before it.

As your budgets get bigger, do you write differently, knowing that you have more money to work with?
Jersey Girl is our most expensive movie to date. We're at $30 or $35 million. Which is kind of weird, because it's not that much more involved or difficult a story to tell than *Chasing Amy* was, and that only cost $250,000. The world of difference is that everybody gets paid now, whereas on *Chasing Amy* everyone got scale, so suddenly that adds a lot to the above-the-line, and then the below-the-line gets bigger as well.

As for how it affects the writing, I think it depends. When you talk about doing exteriors on Park Avenue, I knew we were going to have the money to do it this time. I knew somebody in the crew was going to wind up getting permits, and we were going to do it above the boards, whereas in some of the earlier stuff, I don't think I would have ever written a scene like that unless I felt like we could steal it real quickly, without getting shut down by the New York authorities. So yeah, that certainly helps.

The characters in Jersey Girl *are more realistic than in some of your other movies. How did you change your approach to writing them?*
I don't know if I've changed my approach. It's just that as you get older, you tend to be more focused, I guess. The longer you do it, the better you get at it, at least I hope so. With the exception of maybe Alyssa in *Chasing Amy*, who I thought was a fully realized character, these characters are the first I've written who live and breathe. They're not just walking fonts of pop culture knowledge, not just spouting things to make the joke. None of these guys reference Urkel so that the audience goes, "Oh yeah, man! Urkel blows!" Nobody's sitting there busting about *Star Wars*, which is fun to write and I'd write it again in a heartbeat, but you don't have to flesh out a character when somebody is just spouting jokes for a while, or just speaking in a clever fashion.

There are musical numbers in this movie, which may also surprise some of your fans.
It's not *Magnolia*-style, where people just start breaking into song; it's part of the movie. At one point, they go see a performance of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in the city, so we see a piece of the musical number "Joanna," and then at the end of the movie, there's a show where they put on the number "God, That's Good" from *Sweeney Todd*. I was a big *Sweeney Todd* fan as a kid.

Are you a fan of movie musicals?
I think the first musical I saw on film that made sense to me—not that the others didn't make sense, but people just suddenly stop and break into song—but when I saw Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, I remember thinking he nailed the musical, because he made it make sense within the story, as if people could

break into song without people who aren't really musical fans going, "What the fuck's going on here?" Because it was in her head. *Chicago* worked on that same level for me. I was really blown away by those two films, but I'm certainly not the movie musical guy. I can appreciate them, but Lord knows I could never make one myself. I can barely make a regular film, let alone a musical.

What were the challenges in creating a child character?
There's a lot of extrapolation. I've not really been around a lot of kids. When I was about seventeen or eighteen I worked at the recreation center in Highlands, New Jersey, for about a year, and we had a lot of latch-key kids. But they were generally older; we didn't have a lot of younger kids. So, outside that first six months to a year with Harley, during which time I started and then finished *Jersey Girl*, that was the only hands-on experience I had with a kid. I never had a little brother, and my friends didn't really have little brothers or sisters who were that much younger than us. So it was a lot of extrapolation, and I was trying to stay aware of it, because I didn't want to write a precocious kid.

One thing I can't stand in movies is a really precocious, Shirley Temple-like kid. I just wanted Gertie to sound like a real seven-year-old, so I kind of extrapolated, because the few that I had actually come across in life weren't overwhelmingly charming. You know, seven is a weird age, where you're beyond being a little moppet, but you're not quite your own person yet. And most of them tend to be more quiet than chatty, at least the ones I've met, so I wanted to write a kid like that. You know, not a kid like Curly Sue, or the kid in *Home Alone*, who's just adorable and always has something cute to say, or is wise beyond their years in a way that doesn't make sense to me. So I worked as carefully as I could on Gertie.

You've managed to keep the Jersey Girl *script off the Internet. Why is it so important to keep the script under wraps?*
For me, it's a matter of keeping it a surprise, keeping the film as a fresh experience for the audience rather than people going in there and knowing what's going to happen in every scene because they've already read the script. We live in a world now where if Hitchcock made *Psycho* today, everyone would know that Janet Leigh dies right away, and that would have ruined the fun of it for that audience. Could you imagine being in the audience when *Psycho* was first released, and Janet Leigh, the star of the movie, gets killed? What a great experience that must have been. I had a variation of that experience when I saw *The Matrix*. I knew nothing about it, had no fucking clue. So when I saw that movie, I was just blown away. I had no idea what I was in for, and I was so glad that I didn't. It's really nice to see movies that way, because now it's so easy to find out what everything's about long before a movie even goes into production.

Jersey Girl *is a little more dramatic, less juvenile than your other films. How concerned are you about alienating your core audience?*
The last thing we did was *Jay and Silent Bob*, and this film is kind of a 180,

although it's not a complete 180 from other stuff we've done—it's very close in tone and spirit to *Chasing Amy*. There's a lot of comedy and there's also a lot of drama. I was kind of worried that all the [fans] we've picked up from *Jay and Silent Bob*, the younger set… stoners and shit like that—they'd catch one look at this movie and be like, "Smith pussed out. What happened?" There are a lot of people who came on board because of *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma*, so I think they'll stick around. But yeah, that was certainly a concern at the beginning. Not so much that, "I better not even try this," but I just knew that we'd lose some of the younger cats.

So you're willing to risk losing part of your fan base in order to grow as an artist?
In the other movies, I knew if I got in trouble, I could throw in Jay and Bob, and I knew I'd at least have the people who'd been around for the previous movies referring to the other movies. I used to do that quite a bit, bringing up other characters from the other movies, interconnecting everything. It was a really nice net to work with, because it always felt like, "Well, if nobody new comes to see this shit, I'll always have the people who were around for the other stuff," because it kind of builds this club-like mentality. But I don't really consider myself an artist. Technically, sometimes, the definition fits, but I'm just a storyteller, man. I just make movies. I never felt, "I gotta grow, I gotta continue to grow." But it's nice to be able to do something like *Jersey Girl*, where you're working without a net.

Do you have a plan where your career is going?
I guess it's pretty impulsive. You know, here we are. There was no grand plan after *Clerks*. The plan was to direct it. Make this movie we could show to other people and get a little money for the next movie we were going to make. We didn't think it would go out and hit a bunch of screens. I didn't think as many people who saw it would see it. I didn't think it would travel internationally. We never thought about that stuff. Basically it was a calling card to say, "We can obviously make a movie technically, so give us money for the next one." That was about as grand as the plan was and then everything just happened. My film career kind of exploded. So you just kind of go with it and see what happens.

Terry Southern

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INTERVIEWED BY MIKE GOLDEN
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Without a shadow of a doubt the hippest dictionary you can find is too lame to define hip. Of course a real hipster would never look it up: If you have to ask I can't tell you is the line that pretty much defines the state of the understatement. In short, people who talk about it are on the far end of the adoption curve, so by the time whatever it is they think it is gets to them, it's already over and being reinvented back at the source.

Only one underground figure ever came through the mundane mulch of the mainstream miasma of the Hollywood studio system and came back to the cognoscenti with his edge intact. I speak of the real Dr. Strangelove, Dr. Terry Southern, American screenwriting's high priest of hiposie, Godfather of Head Lit, galloping guru of what lengths the twisted postmodern psyche would go through just to get off. On October 29, 1995, Southern finally got off for good, passing away at St. Luke's Hospital, in Manhattan, of a respiratory ailment. While lying there waiting for the inevitable, his last words (to his son Nile) were, "What's the delay?" He had collapsed four days earlier while on the way to teach a screenwriting class at Columbia University.

A, if not *the*, major bridge between black humor and the Beat esthetic, Southern was co-screenwriter of such classic films as *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* and *Easy Rider*. He also worked on *The Loved One, The Cincinnati Kid, Barbarella*, and *The End of the* Road, which he also produced. His books included the novels *Candy*, which he wrote jointly with Mason Hoffenberg,*Flash and Filigree, The Magic Christian* (for which he also wrote the first draft of the script), *Blue Movie*, and *Texas Summer*; and *Red-Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*, a collection of short fiction and other writing (considered the altar where black humor married New Journalism and gave birth to Gonzo), as well as the text for *Virgin: A History of Virgin Records*.

Creative Screenwriting spoke to Terry Southern on several occasions between 1989 and 1992.

You've spent a lot of time over the years collaborating in different mediums with different people, from Mason Hoffenberg to Stanley Kubrick, just to name two. Most writers find that difficult, but it seems to have fit in your flow.
In a way it's easy—with Mason it was very good because it was like two guys telling each other jokes. I'd write something and lay it on him, then he'd do the same. Back and forth.

Was Blue Movie *based on the shooting of* Candy*?*
No. *Blue Movie* was based on an idea Stanley Kubrick had. Somebody came by one day with some porn footage. So we looked at it, and he said, "Wouldn't it be interesting if someone who was an artist would do that—using really beautiful actors and good equipment." So that was the genesis. Of course I was hoping he would do it as a film. But he's surprisingly puritanical and shy. When he read part of it, still in manuscript, he said, "Congratulations, you've written the definitive blow job." There actually was a tremendous amount of interest in doing *Blue Movie*. It nearly happened a couple of times, and one of those times it was fantastic. Ringo Starr had the option—he had it for a couple of years. And John Calley, who was a very hip producer at MGM (he produced *The Loved One* that I worked on) became the president of Warner Bros. for a brief time, so he was in this heavy decision-making position. He said, "Well now it's time to do *Blue Movie*." He was convinced that the first studio to come out with a quality full-length film showing erection and penetration, using stars, would go over the top. "It'll be like *Gone With The Wind*," he kept saying. Super enthusiastic about it. So he got Mike Nichols to direct. And since John was practically living with Julie Andrews at the time, he was able to get her of all people, as the girl. John's diabolical genius envisioned Mary Poppins getting banged for the world. And so Mike Nichols was ready to go—ready to do it. I couldn't believe it, so John called Nichols, put me on the other phone and said, "Terry Southern's here now, and he's worried you're not going to do erection and penetration." It could actually be cut in, or simulated, but it had to look real—you know, like a pan instead of a cut. So he said, "Yes." And they reassured me on the phone. So I went to see Ringo, and I said, "Look, there's this chance to do this." He said, "Right, right, right…just make sure you've got a proper deal. I think they might try to use Buck Henry on the script." But the whole thing got bogged down in lawyers. It turned out that Mike Nichols has something like a superstition about allowing other people to be cut into his projects. So the deal fell through, in a grotesque hang-up between Nichols and Ringo's lawyers. But if it had been done, with those kinds of credentials, between Nichols and Julie Andrews, they could hardly have dismissed it as shabby porn.

That's tough to top, but what was the real story of Easy Rider*? There are so many*

versions of how and who created it going around, maybe you can set it straight.
[Laughs] You know if Den Hopper improvises a dozen lines and six of them survive the cutting room floor he'll put in for screenplay credit. Now it would be almost impossible to exaggerate his contribution to the film—but, by George, he manages to do it every time. The precise way it came down was that Dennis and Peter [Fonda] came to me with an *idea*. Peter was under contract to A.I.P. for several motorcycle movies, and he still owed them one. Dennis persuaded Peter to let him direct the next one and, under the guise of making an ordinary A.I.P. potboiler, they would make something interesting and worthwhile—which I would write. So they came to my place on 36th Street in New York, with an idea for a story—a sort of hippie/dope caper. Peter was to be the actor/producer, Dennis the actor/director, and a certain yours truly, the writer. I was able to put them up there—in a room, incidentally, later immortalized by the sojourn of Dr. W. S. Benway [Burroughs]. So we began smoking dope in earnest and having a non-stop story conference.

The initial idea had to do with a couple of young guys who are fed up with the system, want to make one big score, and split. Use the money to buy a boat in Key West and sail into the sunset was the general notion, and that was slated to be the film's final poetic sequence. We would occasionally dictate to an elderly woman typist who firmly believed in the arrival and presence everywhere of the inhabitants of Venus, so she would talk about this. Finally, I started taping her and then had her rap about it transcribed—how they were everywhere. Jack Nicholson's thing was based on that.

During these conferences the hippie/dope caper premise went through quite a few changes. The first notion was that they not be bikers but a duo of daredevil car drivers barnstorming around the U.S. being exploited by a series of unscrupulous promoters until they were finally disgusted enough to quit. Then one day the dope smoke cleared long enough to remember Peter's commitment was for a motorcycle flick, and we switched over pronto. It wasn't until the end that it took on a genuinely artistic dimension—when it suddenly evolved into an indictment of the American redneck, and his hatred and intolerance for anything remotely different from himself—somewhat to the surprise of Den Hopper [imitates Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*]: "You mean kill 'em both? Hey, man, are you outta your gourd?!?" I think for a minute he was still hoping they would somehow beat the system and sail into the sunset with a lot of loot and freedom. But of course, he was hip enough to realize, a minute later, that their death was more or less mandatory.

Are you saying there was no improvisation in the film?
No, no; I'm saying that the improvisation was always within the framework of the obligations of the scene—a scene which already existed.

Then how did Dennis and Peter get included in the screenplay credits?
After they had seen a couple of screenings of it on the coast, I got a call from Peter. He said that he and Dennis liked the film so much they wanted to be

in on the screenplay credits. Well, one of them was the producer and other was the director so there was no way the Writers Guild was going to allow them to take a screenplay credit unless I insisted. And even then they said there was supposed to be a 'compulsory arbitration' because too often producers and directors will muscle themselves into a screenplay credit through some under-the-table deal with the writer. [The WGA] said I would be crazy to allow it and wanted to be assured I wasn't being coerced or bribed in any way. Because they hate the idea of these 'hyphenates'—you know, writer-producer, director-producer—because of that history of muscle I mentioned. Anyway, we were great friends at the time, so I went along with it without much thought. I actually did it out of a sense of camaraderie. They said they could use it, and it would help them out, so I just went along. [Hopper's] always been extremely insecure, and I gave him credit because I wanted to pull him out. In *Interview* he pretty much claimed credit for the whole script. I called him, and I called the woman who interviewed him. He said he didn't remember saying it. Then I heard he said it somewhere else.

Writers appear to be the lowest of the breed in the film biz.
Yes. Except we still have persuasion. Which can be considerable sometimes. Which Tony Richardson was great about. Suggestions.… Of course Stanley [Kubrick], Stanley was like Chaplin. He always tried to compose his own music—he'd get public domain stuff, existing stuff, he'd hardly ever use a composer, 'cause he liked it to read "a film by Stanley Kubrick." But, of course, he deserves that.

Was that a good working situation?
Working with Stanley was terrific. It was ideal, although the circumstances may seem peculiar—in the back seat of a big car. The film was being shot at Shepperton, outside London, in the winter. So he would pick me up at 4:30 in the morning and we would make this hour-long trip to the studio. It was a big Bentley or a Rolls, so the passenger part was something like a railway compartment, with fold-out writing desks and good lighting. It would be pitch black outside and really cold, and we would be in this cozy-rosey compartment, in a creative groove, working on the scene to be shot that day.

Writing it? Or rewriting it?
Well, let's say trying to improve it. Kubrick would say, "Now what's the most outrageous thing this guy [a character in the scene] would say at this point?" Hopefully I could come up with something like, "If you try any preversion [sic] in there, I'll blow your head off."

Keenen Wynn to Peter Sellers in the phone booth?
Yes. Col. 'Bat' Guano ("If, indeed, that is your name") to Group Captain Lionel Mandrake. The thing about Kubrick is he's not only extraordinarily creative, but he will encourage the other person to go all out, and not try to

keep a "reasonable lid" on it. Stanley's like a kind of chess playing poet. One side of his brain is very scientific, the other very poetic.

Over the years I heard talk of a "missing scene" or a sequence that was deleted from Strangelove. *What's the story on that?*
Well that would be the fabulous so-called pie fight episode. You may recall the scene near the end of the film, in the War Room, after the bomb has been dropped, and Strangelove suddenly stands up from his wheelchair, and says, "Mein Fuhrer, I can valk!" And he takes a step? Recall that?

I do indeed.
Well, in the missing sequence, after taking one step he falls flat on his face and starts trying to get back in his wheelchair, but each time it scoots out of his grasp. Meanwhile, parallel to this action in another part of the War Room, the Russian Ambassador is caught again trying to take pictures of the "Big Board." George C. Scott nails him and again they're fighting in the War Room. So Scott exposes about eighteen micro-mini spy cameras on the Ambassador—in his wrist watch, cuff links, tie pin, on his ring finger, everywhere. But Scott says, "I think these are dummy cameras. I think he's got the real McCoy concealed on his person." And he turns to the detail of MP's who have come in. "I want you to search him very carefully, boys," he says, "and don't overlook any of the six bodily orifices." And the Russian Ambassador goes through this quick calculation, "vun… two…" and then when he reaches the last one, he freaks. "Vhy you Capitalist swine," he says, and he reaches out of the frame, gets something and throws it at George C. Scott. I should mention we previously established a huge catering table that was wheeled in, laden with food, so they don't have to leave the War Room during this crisis. So the Ambassador reaches out of the frame, grabs something from the table and throws it at Scott. We don't see what it is immediately, but Scott ducks, and this big custard pie hits the President in the face. The mere indignity of this is so monstrous that the President faints dead away. Scott grabs him and keeps him from falling, and he's holding him in his arms like a martyred hero. "Gentlemen," he says to the others, "Our President has been struck down in the prime of his life…by a custard pie. I say Massive Retaliation!" And he throws something at the Ambassador. And it misses and hits one of the other Joint Chiefs. So this immense pie-fight begins—between Army, Navy, Air Force—a bit of inter-service rivalry, if you grasp the innuendo. Now while this pie-fight is going on, Strangelove is still trying to get back into this wheelchair, moving like a snake across the floor of the War Room, the chair continuing to scoot out of his grasp each time he reaches for it. Finally, he gets to the end of the War Room, and the chair is against the wall and it looks like he's got it this time. But it scoots away again. So Strangelove pulls himself up so that he's sitting with his back against the wall. And he's watching the pie-fight in the distance.

Then his hand—his uncontrollable right hand—reaches inside his coat and comes out with a Luger pistol and points it at his head. He grabs his wrist

with his other hand and grapples for the pistol, which goes off with a tremendous roar. Then cut to the long shot of all these generals in a freeze frame. And Strangelove says, "Enough of these childish games. We have work to do." So they all stand there staring at him in complete silence, until Scott recognizes this is the guy to get tight with, so he walks all the way across the War Room floor, and says, "Doctor, may I help you?" And helps him into his wheelchair. He starts pushing him back across the floor, which by now is so deep in custard pies it resembles a beach—and sure enough we quickly pass the President and the Russian ambassador sitting there cross-legged like two children, doing sand castles, making mountains. And Strangelove says, "Ah, too bad. Apparently their minds have snapped under the strain. Perhaps they'll have to be institutionalized." And so Scott continues pushing him across to this group of officers and CIA types, who are so covered they look like ghosts. And he says, "Well, boys, I think the future of this great nation of ours is in the hands of people like Doc Strangelove, and I think we owe him a vote of thanks. Let's hear it for the good Doctor." And in a really eerie (whispering) voice, they go, "Hip-hip hooray, hip-hip hooray." And then he continues pushing him across the floor as they start singing, "For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow." And this counter-camera pulls up so you've got this long shot of the ultimate allegiance between this mad scientist and this general from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And then they cut to the explosion and the song "We'll Meet Again," comes in—and the credits rise.

That was the cut?
Not without good reason. The problem was that Stanley, great genius director that he is, forgot to say, "Listen, what we're representing here is inter-service rivalry." Which is one of the most evil things—each time there's an appropriation to one group the other says, "Listen, we've got to have that too." And there's no stopping the Pentagon on this level. It's vicious. And he forgot to tell them it's vicious. So what's happening in this pie fight is that people are laughing, and they shouldn't be laughing. It's supposed to be deadly serious. And it was such a funny situation, that people outside the periphery, including Stanley and myself, were tossing pies into the melee, you see. And so it lost its edge. It was like a comedy scene, when everything else in the film had been played straight, except once when the Coca-Cola machine spurted in Keenan Wynn's face. So that's why he decided not to keep it in. I saw [the film] again recently, and think it holds up well.

Me too. So does The Loved One. *It recently came out for the first time on video, after all these years. Why did it take so long?*
For some weird reason, they held it back—it's an MGM film. Haskell Wexler, who was the co-producer and cinematographer, had a copy he sent me, and I got a duplicate made, but you couldn't get it. The casting on that was great. Remember that sequence with Milton Berle and Margaret Leighton when the dog dies and she doesn't want to let them bury the dog?

Yeah, that was played really strong. But Rod Steiger—Joyboy—and his mother were too outrageous to describe.

Every time I see Rod Steiger, rather, the few times I've seen him, he always talks about that. He was carried away by that role, he got into that role so much. He had his hair in rollers on the set. Running around on the set when he should have been resting, dishing with the girls. It had such a great cast: John Gielgud, Lionel Stander, Robert Morley, Jonathan Winters, Robert Morse…

You wrote the scripts for The Cincinnati Kid, Barbarella, The End of The Road, *and* The Magic Christian? *right. What happened to* The Magic Christian? *I loved the book, the book has a whole life outside itself—was Guy Grand based on anybody in particular?*

Well it's sort of a composite of people I've known or imagined. For some reason I've always thought of the actor Robert Morley, as the physical type. He has a nice absurdly pompous look about him.

I couldn't wait for the movie, but. . .

Well, I had written a really good script of *The Magic Christian* for Peter Sellers. He and the director, Joe McGrath, were in London, supposedly setting up the film while I finished working on an adaptation of John Barth's *End of the Road*—which incidentally, was one of the most interesting films I've been involved with. But instead of waiting for me to get to London, Peter who was always ultra-hyper and antsy about everything, gets Spike Milligan and a couple of his *Goon Show* cronies to rewrite a few scenes—*without ever having read the book*. Dig that for gross weird. All they knew was it was about an eccentric billionaire who staged elaborate practical jokes. So they slipped into a bit of infantile self-indulgence, with some pointlessly destructive behavior by Guy Grand. Totally out of character. They had him cutting up Rembrants for Chrissake! So, I'm afraid that film has, in my view, some serious lapses.

The book had an incredible following—I met a number of drug dealers over the years who kept it locked up along with their personal stash.

The ultimate compliment? Peter Sellers, despite what happened to the film, bought a hundred copies when it first came out in England. He would give them to friends at Christmas. In fact, he was the one who turned Stanley [Kubrick] on to…this unique brand of humor.

You seem to have been able to go back and forth between films and prose easier than most writers. When you started writing films, was it hard to write prose?

I think it was just the monetary thing. I got hooked on the bread.

Do you find a physical difference between writing prose and writing screenplays?

Well, there's quite a difference in the deadline aspect of it. I've always sort of visualized things when I wrote prose, so that part comes easy to me. In fact easier than prose, because what I really like to write is dialogue.

I heard Paddy Chayefsky said, "Terry Southern writes the best dialogue in America."
He wrote that in a letter to Peter Beard. He was the best around, so coming from him that means quite a bit.

The first dialogue that ever totally blew me away was from "Red Dirt Marijuana" and "Razor Fight," the first two stories in the Red Dirt *collection. In fact, back in 1970 or '71, I started adapting those stories for Richard Pryor.*
Without an option, of course.

Was A Texas Summer *based on "Red Dirt Marijuana" and "Razor Fight"?*
Not exactly. The first two stories in *Red Dirt Marijuana* are excerpts from *A Texas Summer*. It just took me another twenty years to finish it as a novel.

Were you the white kid, Hal? Is it based on you growing up in Texas?
Reading it over, it seems to be based quite a bit on that. Not consciously, but I certainly drew on my childhood experiences. It's about one summer in the life of an impressionable thirteen-year-old farm boy, and especially his relationship with a thirty-five-year-old black, who's the hired hand. And he— the black guy—is relatively hip and laid back, with a terrific sense of humor—he was, you know, one of those classic "great-spades-of-Texas" types; works hard, drinks sweet Lucy, smokes a little dope, fabulous story teller, great ball player, great crap shooter, eats bar-b-que so hot it makes your eyes water, gets into the occasional razor fight, the whole store. Well, I knew a guy like that. Fantastic guy. A tremendous influence on every white kid he came across. Real down home guru, without realizing it, of course.

How did growing up in Texas shape you as a writer?
Well, Texas is probably a good place for a boy to grow up, in a Huck Finn sort of way, like one big outdoor playground, with a lot of hunting and fishing, Dad-and-Lad stuff going on. But, as Liz Taylor said, "It's hell on horses and women." Because it's a cultural desert. Once, when I was seven or eight and sick in bed, my mother decided to read to me. The book she chose, for some odd reason, since her own leaning was more towards Louis Bromfield, was a volume of the great E. A. Poe—*The Gold Bug*, if memory serves. Well, for a young Texas lout, E. A. Poe was heady brew. And it was a perfect turn-on to "Quality-lit," of a weirdo bent. I was hooked on Poe. And Poe, of course, is the gateway to the greatest. If marijuana leads to cocaine, Poe most certainly leads to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Joyce, Celine, Lautreamont, Huysmans, Nathaniel West, Faulkner, Sartre, et cetera, et cetera, *ad glorium*.

Oliver Stone

I n his twenty-eight years as screenwriter, producer, and director, Oliver
Stone has established himself as one of the most successful, inventive, and
controversial filmmakers of our time. From his early screenwriting ven-
tures such as *Midnight Express*, for which he won his first Academy Award, to
Nixon, Stone has pushed the filmmaking envelope with works that have won
critical acclaim and provoked passionate debate. Stone has been nominated
for six Academy Awards as screenwriter, and has won three Oscars (for writ-
ing *Midnight Express*, and as director of *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth Of July*).
Stone has written *Midnight Express, The Hand, Scarface, Platoon,* and *Heaven
and Earth*. He has co-written *Seizure, Conan the Barbarian, Eight Million Ways
To Die, Year of the Dragon, Salvador, Wall Street, Talk Radio, Born on the Fourth
of July, The Doors, JFK, Natural Born Killers,* and *Nixon*. He is the producer of *The
People vs. Larry Flint* (with Milos Forman), *Killer* (with Tim Metcalfe), and *Free-
way* (with Matthew Bright). Born in New York City in 1946, Oliver Stone
dropped out of college in 1965 to teach in Vietnam and returned in 1967-68
as a soldier in the front line. He completed his studies at New York Universi-
ty Film School in 1971 and wrote eleven unproduced screenplays while work-
ing several jobs around New York until the success of his screenplay *Midnight
Express* in 1978. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Oliver Stone in 1996 and 2000.

Tell me a little about your early days as a screenwriter and your breakthrough with
Midnight Express*?*
I had written a novel when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. It was a very
long, kind of James Joyceian approach—epic language. It wasn't published
and I moved on into Vietnam. I went to Vietnam as a soldier to forget about
writing, to never write again. I made a couple of notes but they got so wet
in the field I gave up the idea of paper and pen and went back to a certain

anonymity. I think writing, [using] those kind of materials, brings a lot of attention to yourself. I felt very self-absorbed and I was trying to get away from that. Later in my tour I bought a camera and started to take more pictures. A thousand pictures of a beautiful country—yellows and greens—absolutely incredible color. Somewhere in this Vietnam experience my mind moved from the cerebral to a little more visceral place, more sensual. All five senses became involved with staying alive. I believe learning to use those senses attuned me to the visual.

When I got back to the States, I combined the cerebral with this newfound sensuality. I bought a Super 8 movie camera; I did a lot of home movies and my writing took that form from then on. It never went back to the internal, as much into that internal state as my novel had been for me. That novel was a really long piece—1,200 pages. I was very much into stream of consciousness, the same kind of deconstruction I ended up doing years later in the last three films—*Natural Born Killers, Nixon,* and *JFK*. Sometimes you see stretches in the screenwriting that come from that period of being a budding novelist.

So, I ended up trying to serve this new master—the camera—and writing specifically for the external. I wrote screenplays the moment I got back. It was sort of a healing process to recover from the war. I was so anguished that I wrote…actually the earliest version of *Platoon* came right out of that moment. I wrote a screenplay called *Break*, which was a fantasy, and is basically *Platoon*, but seven years before and written very surreal. Everything you see later in *Platoon* is there, but disguised in some weird way—long monologues, still partly novel.

Was that before or after you went to film school?
It was before. I actually wrote it before. I ended up in film school pursuing this 8mm dream, this combination of writing and… as soon as I went to film school in 1969 at NYU, I fell in love with the medium. I made short films, one minute, two minute, and worked my way up to a ten-minute film the first year. And then the second year I made a twenty-minute film and my last one was a twenty-six-minute film short—black and white with some color. Already I was using a lot of that black and white color effect, changing the point of view. Very influenced by the New Wave, by Godard—the deconstruction. [Martin] Scorsese was there. Haig Manoogian was there. They were wonderful teachers.

You had to be there in 1968–9 to understand the excitement. We were young filmmakers, we were radical. We were into documentaries, into changing society. It was a wonderful period… very competitive. It was very much like Hollywood in the sense we all had to fight in a collective to make our films. It was like the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where we were all auto-critiquing each other. It was a difficult period, but I think it made us, honed us into filmmakers.

Even though I went to that school I found a dearth of screenwriting going on. Most of the kids were interested in getting out on the streets and doing

stuff with cameras. I was too, but I always kept writing in the back of my head. I just felt like screenwriting was the best entry point into the business based on what I'd read. And I wrote two screenplays a year for several years. My first wife was working, so she helped support me. I was not above taking the occasional money I could get from my father. I worked as a cab driver on the night shift. I worked as a messenger boy. I worked as a PA on soft-porno films and a couple of Channel 13 specials. I got whatever I could get, but I couldn't get anything optioned or really read. I made my own film, *Seizure*, in 1973 with two partners, which I wrote and directed with Ed Mann, but I did most of the writing really. I think Ed gave us an aura of… I thought he was respectable. He had some credits, so having his name on the screenplay helped.

What did you learn from writing and directing Seizure*?*
If you look at *Seizure* in detail… obviously it's crude and primitive, but I had very little money to make it. There's an interesting theme to the piece—the artist, the man who creates out of his own his destiny. And it's a strange destiny based on a nightmare, the nightmare that becomes true. I owed a lot to Fritz Lang's *Woman in a Window* for the thesis of that movie. But it's the same theme that haunted *The Hand* years later. It's bizarre and I always wondered why, when I finally got a break after *Midnight Express,* would I go back to the horror genre and do *The Hand*, almost exactly the same story in another form? *The Hand* was based on Mark Brendel's book *Lizard's Tail*, which was a psychological thriller. I should have kept to that psychological thriller. My first draft was closer, but unfortunately, they were into horror in those days. It was my first commercial film as a director, and I was expected to make it more…to bring out the more horrific elements such as the hand. The picture couldn't find the tone, whether it was psychological thriller or horror. I lost control of the tone, in my opinion, trying to please two masters—myself and the studio.

How did you work toward receiving your break with Midnight Express*?*
As a writer I continued writing two a year. I probably did eleven or twelve scripts in there, plus many treatments. I sent them around. No agents would read them, I couldn't get my scripts read. It wasn't as open a market as it is now when you have agents courting kids out of film school like rookie ballplayers or something. Yes, there was a burst of younger people into the business in the late '60s-very early '70s, but limited, very limited. And it closed up pretty fast after the failure of films like *Strawberry Statement* [Stuart Hagmann's student anti-discipline film]. Except for Marty (Scorsese) and Billy Friedkin and Coppola and Bogdanovich, it was not that fabled a time. Access was very limited. So, most people I knew ended up like me, working outside. I ended up at a sports film company for a while. I was miserable, but at least it was putting some bread on the table. Two screenplays a year, every year. Churning them out.

My big break came when Robert Bolt and his partner read one of my scripts and liked it a lot. It was based on the Patty Hearst kidnapping and called *The Cover Up*. It was an early form of *JFK*—it had a conspiracy-type theme—because, in fact, some of the people involved in that kidnapping had records as police agents. Bolt loved it and brought me out to L.A., one of my first big trips here. He treated me like a king. A very genial man. He wrote *Dr. Zhivago, Lawrence of Arabia, A Man for All Seasons*. And he had just finished *The Mission*, which I read then—a wonderful screenplay.

Every day for two weeks we would sit and he'd help me rewrite that screenplay. It was wonderful, so generous of him to share that time. When he was frustrated with what I was doing he'd write it himself. I learned a lot from watching him work. So the resultant screenplay is excellent, it reads very well, but it never got made. Robert did get me an agent when I was here—one of his people at William Morris. They took care of me and I went back having learned a lot, having more confidence, being in the big league, so to speak. Being treated as if I could do it was very important to my ego, my confidence level.

I went back to New York and my life was still not working. I was failing in that regard until the age of thirty. Then my grandmother died, a significant event in my life for personal reasons, and I vowed to turn it around, to do something with my life. That summer I sat down with a lot of pent-up desire and really wrote *Platoon*. I had been gathering the notes for it for years, but I hadn't written it. So I just sat down and wrote it in 1976. And for some reason that screenplay hit a chord right away. It was read, commented on, and optioned by Marty Bregman for Sidney Lumet to direct. It went around. It was a "hot script" in the parlance. But, they never made it. It was frustrating—you know the rest. It took ten years to finally get it made, but it was a hot script. It put me on the map, in their minds.

Then Peter Guber called up. He had a small film, *Midnight Express*, based on a true story. So, I went to London to work with David Puttnam and Alan Parker. In six weeks I turned out the first draft of *Midnight Express*, which they loved. And they pretty much shot that movie, on a very low budget, in 1977. Then it turned into a huge international success. It must have cost $3 million and grossed $100 million plus. During that time I was hired back to New York by Marty Bregman to work on *Born on the Fourth of July* for Billy Friedkin and Al Pacino. I was very enamored with that idea—these were big stars to me. Billy was one of my heroes. We spent time talking about how to write the screenplay. I learned a lot, and I wrote *Born* in that period, from my heart. Hanging out with Ron Kovic, I met Richard Boyle.

And again it was horribly frustrating. The screenplay was great, we almost made it. Al was great. I saw him rehearse the whole damn movie. We had all the actors. Dan Petrie was the director after Billy dropped out to do *The Brinks Job*. Dan was great, and we almost got it made. We were just at the lip and the money wasn't there. A lousy $6 million for an Al Pacino movie. It was heartbreaking. It was one of the worst experiences. Between *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* I just decided this was hopeless. Vietnam was lost to the

memory. I told myself, walk away and don't be bitter about it. I put both scripts in my mental closet, so to speak, and I tried to move on with my life.

I wrote *Conan the Barbarian*. I loved Robert Howard and really put my heart into a huge script that would've cost $50 million. Again, it was never made, but it was a hell of a script. I was into the mythical fantasy…it was Edgar Rice Burroughs, but with a hipper kind of…Conan was nasty. He was the young peasant who wants to become his own king. The idea of that movie was the girl he saves makes him king of her country, but he turns it down because he wants to find his own kingdom. [Editor's note: This idea was used in the sequel *Conan the Destroyer*.] It could have been a twelve-picture series, in my opinion, if they… I disagree with John Milius. We're friends now, but, it took another tone. For budget reasons…Dino De Laurentiis didn't want to spend what he should have spent and the picture looked it. It only lasted two films, but it could have been a great series like the James Bond films. It launched Schwarzenegger.

There's still talk of a third film.
Yeah, it's too bad. I mean it could've made… I wish you'd read my script because it's really a pristine…

I have read it.
Oh yeah? What do you think?

It was definitely a grand vision… a lot darker than the final film.
Well, I think I was closer to the spirit of Howard. Howard was a very dark person—he committed suicide young in his life. He was a demon-ridden man. That material is bloody. So, I was very much out there. I wrote *Demolished Man* in that same period. *Demolished Man* was also a sci-fi idea. Very hard to do, a lot of audio work, advanced audio work. I kept writing. I wrote *Baby Boy* to direct, but I backed out. I made the big mistake of not having confidence in my own material or going far enough. And I decided to do *The Hand* because it seemed to me like a commercial first idea as a director. It backfired and flopped miserably at the box office. It died in one weekend, and I was back to writing scripts. It was very frustrating.

What were those years like, working as a screenwriter-for-hire? Say, 1980–85.
It was frustrating. The Reagan era started and the emphasis was, as I remember, on comedies—*Ghostbusters*, which was a good movie. All those kinds of movies. Chevy Chase movies were in vogue. The drama was rare, as I remember. *Missing* got made: difficult to earn money. *Raging Bull*: difficult to earn money. *Reds*: missed. It was a wonderful movie, but it missed in terms of box office. So it was a time when dramas were suspect and everything I was writing ran into a brick wall. I felt there's no future for me here.

Then, Marty Bregman appeared for the third time in my life and offered me the opportunity to write a new version of *Scarface*. I had no interest in the

old one. In fact, I preferred *Little Caesar*. I didn't like *Scarface* much. But the idea of doing it Cuban was interesting. I went down and partied and researched this thing in South America and in Miami, which was booming.

Being on cocaine quite a bit at that time, it felt natural. I hung out with lawyers, prosecutors, dope dealers. Although we were criticized for excess, I don't know. You saw what happened in the ensuing ten years. After our film, Michael Mann made it very popular with *Miami Vice*. In a sense, he was credited for a lot of what we had done with our look. Brian De Palma had a very interesting, sort of operatic texture for the movie. My script, if you read it, was much more realistic, street realistic, than the resulting movie because Brian decided to go more in the Sergio Leone direction—bigger camera moves, slower camera moves. He slowed it down so it became a bit of an epic. Certainly a dark one and a cult movie. But it grossed, I think, about $40 or $50 million. It did well, but was reviled by the Hollywood establishment and many critics as a violent film. So, it didn't have any impact on my career. It didn't change anything for me. I felt very dark and depressed and I almost left. I said to myself, maybe you don't belong.

Michael Cimino talked me into doing *Year of the Dragon*, based on Robert Daley's book. I did the best I could with Michael. Michael would talk it and I would write it. I enjoyed the research enormously. We went to Chinatown and had a thousand banquets with gangsters, Chinese gangsters. There was no question we hit a nerve again, like with *Scarface*. I mean, the Chinese were importing heroin. They did not acknowledge that in American newspapers until a few years later, but we were on the money about that. And, of course, we ran into a wall of criticism from the community again, like the Cubans, that we were making gangsters out of their ethnic pride. So, it was frustrating.

It was Michael's idea that as a tradeoff for writing *Year of the Dragon*, I would take less money, but he would produce *Platoon*. I had established a very high price with *Scarface*. That's not to say I was being offered a lot. I was offered, occasionally…I was not living in LA, but I was offered things like *Top Gun*. They came to me as a writer, but having done *Platoon*, I wasn't going to do *Top Gun*. It wouldn't have been my thing. Let's say I was sort of out there, but I wasn't where I had been after *Midnight Express* by any means. So, when Michael said "take less money on *Dragon* and I will produce *Platoon* at a low budget with you directing it, you can do your own movie," that was very generous of him, having come from *Deer Hunter* and that success. And I said, "I don't think that's going to work. Who cares about Vietnam? It's over. *Apocalypse Now* did it, *Deer Hunter*…" And he said, "No. It's going to come back."

Unfortunately, Dino (De Laurentiis) welshed on the deal. He didn't come through with his end and he even tried to keep the screenplay. I had to sue him, threaten to sue him actually, to get my script back and for him to absorb all the casting and scouting costs in the Philippines. Which he finally did, but I had cast the whole movie. I had scouted it. I had everything picked out. It was another heartbreaker—you cannot have your heart broken so many times without getting… either you give up or you become cynical.

What kept you going through that?

I don't know. I do think I have a strong will and a strong life force. I've had so much rejection in my life and so much failure. Most people think...it's ironic most people think of me as a tremendous, powerful person and as a success. If you looked at my life in detail you'd find most everything has been failure. I think probably that's true about a lot of people. We have that occasional success and it gives the illusion of always being successful.

I think the rejections in those years steeled me, my character, in a way that I've been able to survive criticism of the worst kind. I've probably had as rough a criticism as any director's ever had. Even my screenplays. They singled me out. Pauline Kael [movie critic for the *New Yorker*] would write diatribes about how awful I was. Mean stuff that would destroy a lot of people who didn't believe in themselves. It's hard. I'm actually very sensitive and self-critical. As a kid, I went through a lot of rejection. So, it was very hard. I think there is some truth to that Nietzsche line: "That which doesn't kill you, only makes you stronger." But, I came very close to giving up, very close—you can ask my ex-wife, she was there.

I think the biggest break I got was that after Dino broke my heart, I didn't give a shit. First of all, Arnold Kopelson came into my life and I gave him *Platoon*. Fortuitously, Arnold called and said, "Let me have a free option on *Platoon*." He loved the material. I don't know how he'd seen it. I couldn't care less. It had been read by everybody, so I said "take six months and run with it." And he did. During that period I met John Daly, who had also been down on his luck. John was an Englishman, tough little guy. A boxing promoter, he'd been everywhere in the world. He was running a little company called Hemdale and he had a little money. I don't know where from. He was making a James Cameron film *(The Terminator)*, and loved the *Salvador* idea I presented to him. Because at that point I said, "I'm not going to write any more Hollywood scripts. I'm going to go out and make my own movie with my own money. Put it up. I'm going to sell my house and just mortgage the fuckin' shit out of my marriage and my kid and make a movie for $500 grand." But John stepped in and said, "I'll do *Salvador*." Then I gave him *Platoon* and he said, "I'll do *Platoon* too." An incredible turnaround for me. So Arnold and John worked it out that they would do *Platoon*. I decided to do *Salvador* first. So I did back-to-back movies as a director.

That must have been a crazy year.

It was a wonderful time. Sean, my first child, was born. We did *Salvador* for no money in Mexico. We had an enormously complicated, difficult production. Somehow, we finished the movie. It died at the box office. Another heartbreak. But, by that time I was making *Platoon*. I thought that would die too, but I was wrong for once. And this little picture that cost $6 million was, as you know, an enormous worldwide hit. Enormous. Just beyond any expectation. It made $135 million in America, but it made more than that abroad. A huge hit, out of nowhere. At that point I was back, I guess you'd say, where

Midnight Express had put me. I was back in the mainstream. I was a hero for fifteen minutes again.

I was actually nominated twice that year for original screenplays for *Salvador* and for *Platoon*. *Platoon* was an original. *Salvador* was very much an original too. In the back of Richard Boyle's car in San Francisco one day we were talking about movies. I was fascinated by Boyle's character. And I said, "You know, you and I should just go out and make a movie, and you should play the journalist, this loony-toon guy who just does anything, who lives on the edge, hand to mouth. We'll use you, Richard, as the character and we'll get your friend Dr. Rock to play himself and we'll just go shoot it. Where? Lebanon? Somewhere." And he said, "What about [El] Salvador?" He had a girlfriend in Salvador, and I said, "Great idea. We can drive down to Salvador from LA. We don't have to worry about it. And we can do it for nothing." So, he had this oil-stained manuscript which was a series of sketches. It wasn't very cohesive. But I read it and said, "I can do this."

I got Richard down [in LA]. I paid his way. I put him in my house with my newborn. Richard was drinking pretty heavily and some nights he would empty the baby bottles, the baby formula. [Laughs] I'd find him in the goddamned rocking chair. My wife wanted him out of the house, but he stayed on and on. And we sat there. It was the most exciting month. I'd sit behind the desk and write and write and write and Richard would talk. It was all his stories, but I'd give it the screenplay shape. I'd make the notes and then I'd write by myself. The screenplay took that shape and we shot pretty close to it. In the editing room it got cut to shit. It was such an outrageous movie, a lot of it got cut. *Platoon*, I revised a bit, but it was essentially the same script I had written ten years before. And I did the same thing with *Born on the Fourth of July* when I went back to do that. Again, I revised the 1979 script into the 1989 script. You can read them; there were some changes in both.

The version of Scarface *that you wrote was not so much a remake of the original '30s film but a reinvention in a sense. What was it that appealed to you about remaking the film and having it deal with the drug trade?*
The origin of the movie is an interesting story. I had directed *The Hand*, and it had failed at the box office. It was completely ignored; in fact, I took a heavy hit. If you go back and check the reviews, there was a lot of personalization in the reviews. It was probably because *Midnight Express* really hit people hard, and some people went after me. It was also a period in my life when I needed inspiration; I felt stale as a writer. [Producer] Martin Bregman had approached me, and I said I wasn't interested in doing it. I didn't like the original movie that much, it didn't really hit me at all, and I had no desire to make another Italian gangster picture because so many had been done so well, there would be no point to it. The origin of it, according to Marty Bregman, [is that] Al had seen the '30s version on television, loved it, and expressed to Marty as his long time mentor/partner that he'd like to do a role like that. So Marty presented it to me; but I had no interest in doing a period piece. Then

he called me months later: Sidney Lumet had stepped into the deal. Sidney, who I had met from [my script] *Platoon*, was a New York director and he had worked with Al quite a bit. So there was a lot of linkage there. Sidney had a great idea to take the '30s American prohibition gangster movie and make it into a modern immigrant gangster movie dealing with the same problems we had then—we're prohibiting drugs instead of alcohol. Prohibition against drugs created the same criminal class as [prohibition of alcohol] created the Mafia. It was a remarkable idea. The Marielitos at the time had gained a lot of publicity for their open brazenness. The Marielitos were the "crazies." They were deported by Castro in 1981 to America. At the time, it was perceived he was dumping all the criminals into the American system. According to the police enforcement in Miami Beach, they were the poorest people, the roughest people in the prisons, who would kill for a dollar. How could you get this outlandish, operatic character inside an American, contemporary framework? It's very difficult if you think about it. Al is a brilliant actor. I worked with him on *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1978. He was genius in a room. I saw the rehearsal for *Born on the Fourth of July* in 1978 with a full cast. He was on fire in that wheelchair. On fire! It stayed with me for ten years. I put as much of that energy as I could into working with Tom [Cruise] in another way.

Did you tailor the role of Tony Montana to Al Pacino?
Of course, from the get-go. It was Al. *Scarface* grew out of this Lumet idea of the Marielitos coming to America, the brazenness, the drug trade, making it big, taking over from the old Cuban mob. I went with it and wrote the script. I researched it thoroughly in Florida and the Caribbean. I had been in South America recently and did some research there. So I saw quite a bit of the drug trade from the legal point of view as well as from the gangster point of view. Not many people would talk; it's a very closed world.

How were you able to get in touch with those people?
I was exposed in certain situations on both sides of the law. I went to the Caribbean—there's no law down there, they'll just shoot you in your hotel room. It got hairy; it gave me all this color. I wanted to do a sun-drenched, tropical Third World gangster, cigar, sexy Miami movie. Pacino's accent was derided at the time [laughs], yet people imitate it to this day. It may not be literally accurate but what the fuck, it works!

I remember you had said in Playboy that at the time you researched the film, you saw a lot of things going on in the drug trade that later played out into big things like Iran Contra.
Oh yeah, the shit was heavy. In Fort Lauderdale, Miami, Miami Beach, Miami Dade, there's different law enforcement departments, DEA, the FBI, plus Justice, so you have a lot of organizational activity and bureaucracy. And you gotta think about how they interact with each other and how much they all compete. This was the beginning of the drug war. The stories were outlandish.

The story of the chainsaw was one of the things that happened that was on the record.

So that was a real incident that happened?
Yes, but not done that way. I dramatized it. They were rough, the Colombians played rough. So I moved to Paris and got out of the cocaine world too, because that was another problem for me. I was doing coke at the time, and I really regretted it. I got into a habit of it, and I was an addictive personality. I did it, not to an extreme or to a place where I was as destructive as some people, but certainly to where I was going stale mentally. I moved out of LA with my wife at the time and moved back to France to try and get into another world and see the world differently. And I wrote the script totally fucking cold sober.

Writing the script, was it in any way a therapy in weaning yourself off the drug?
Oh, it was more than that. One of the things that's bugged me, and I think a lot of writers will agree with this, is we spend money on our vices and we pay through the nose for our mistakes. I'll admit that coke kicked my ass. It's one of the things that beat me in life. As a result, getting even, getting paid to make a movie about it—and making it a good one on top of it—there's nothing better. But to go back and finish the story as to how the film originated: Sidney Lumet hated my script. I don't know if he'd say that in public himself; I sound like a petulant screenwriter saying that; I'd rather not say that word. Let me say that Sidney did not understand my script, whereas Bregman wanted to continue in that direction with Al.

Do you feel the story might have been too strong?
Yeah, I think that he felt there was too much gratuitous violence, which was the ultimate rap on the film that came from the critics. From Sidney, it went to a couple of other projections, and then we went to Brian [DePalma], which was a good idea. And Al liked him and trusted him. It turned into a film that has its own history. It basically took off with Brian and Al, and Bregman was the control pilot.

Being that you had a cocaine habit, do you feel it gave your script a different perspective than if you had never tried the drug?
Probably so, because the big switch point for me in the script is the fall of the king. I see Al turning paranoid in that movie, I see it perhaps because I was more attuned to it. But the paranoia of coke is the most striking [aspect], the fire of it. I'll give you an example. You're down in the Caribbean, you're doing coke, you're drinking at a bar with three Colombian management guys. They run the cigarette boats out there with tons of shit every night. They go right to the Florida coast in these cigarette boats. They fly across the moon, they skim the ocean at night, it's really incredible, full speed. Then they slow down to nothing, they whisper in the night, and you can't hear the engines. Then

they sneak up past the coast and the by-ways, past the Coast Guard. It's really a trip. You do this, and you get into that world. All of the sudden, you're flashing coke in the hotel room at four in the morning; you're talking the coke talk about how great things are. They started boasting, and I started telling them I was a Hollywood screenwriter. They thought I was an informer because I dropped the name of a guy who had been one of my helpers, who was making money now on the defense side of the ballgame. But the guy had previously busted one of these three guys when he was a prosecutor. So at four in the morning, that gets dangerous! Two of them went into the bathroom and I thought they were gonna come out and blow me away. But you know, the truth of the matter is I got out by bullshit, by the skin of my teeth. I was nervous the whole night, nervous beyond belief. That never could have happened to me if I had been straight. And they never would have taken me to any conference, nor would I have the necessary élan to approach them. I would have been totally out of sorts. You can't do it from one side of the coin.

[Stone refers to a printed draft of the script for *Scarface*.] I enjoyed this very much because it's one of those scripts like *Wall Street* where it's filled with zingers. We worked on the zingers a lot; they come from the subconscious. What I love about original writing is you can really let out some of your deepest feelings. Sometimes you're amazed at what comes up. You say stuff that you don't think as a civilized being you'd say.

So there were some lines of dialogue in the film that reflected your views?
Oh, many of them. That's the beauty of originals—you can be subversive. Your most subversive side can pop up and you can say anything through a character. You're not saying it; Tony's saying it or Manny's saying it. You can say something so outrageous and if the actor goes along with it, nobody recognizes it as you, and you got away with it in a way.

The restaurant scene where Al Pacino delivers that great monologue is one of my favorites in the film.
"Say goodnight to the bad guy," yeah, yeah, yeah. Where is that? Hold on… [turns pages] Oh yeah, here it is: "Is this it? Is this what it's all about, Manny? Eating-drinking-snorting-fucking, then what? You're fifty, you got a bag for a belly, you got tits with hair on them, your liver's got spots and you look like these rich fuckin' mummies." I was in a restaurant in Miami thinking those thoughts [laughs]! Because everyone's over-fed down there and they live manicured lives. They have Cadillacs, manicured fingers. So I was thinking, man, what could be worse than this kind of death? Luxury is corruption. Corruption lives in luxury. [Continues reading] "Is this what I worked for with these hands? Is this what I killed for? For this?" Well, is this what I killed for is obviously a little over the top, but that's the direction the script was going. This sounds very Shakespearian: "Is this how it ends? And I thought I was a winner." How about the one about the women? "First you gotta get the power.…"

Yeah! That's one line everybody always talks about, how did you come up with that?
I thought about it: first you gotta get the money in America in my opinion. This was me in 1981–82 when I saw the system in my thirties. First you gotta get the money, then the power, then the chicks. That was the way it works… I think! [laughs]

That sounds like the natural order.
I think in dramatic terms where you hear that kind of concept, it's power that's always last, or it's first, but it's really the second. It's funny because the thing that they wanted was not the power but the chicks [laughs]! This one I got from a car dealer, "What's a *haza*? It's Yiddish for pig. It's a guy who's got more than he needs so he don't fly straight anymore."

You got that from a car salesman?
Yeah, not the dialogue but the description of a haza more or less. A guy who wants too much, a pig, a greedy guy. There's a few in the movie business, I really know 'em! There's nothing worse than a haza because they pig out. It's okay to want money and to make it, but when you want too much money then you fuck the other guy. That's the real drug war in my opinion, in the '80s anyway. Guys would get to a place and they'd always blow it because they'd want more. Or they were incompetent. They'd go to a place where they had three thousand people working for them and they couldn't do it any more. They'd go crazy; they'd become paranoid or hit their own supply, or they would become really paranoid. Look at Escobar—the guy went nuts.

What's interesting about the dialogue in Scarface *is how often "fuck" is used.*
Actually in the script, there's probably a hundred and something, I think Al made it three hundred and something!

Why was the word used that much?
Because I'd heard it a lot between Vietnam and Miami [laughs]! Also in New York City. It's not like I grew up in rural town life; I grew up in the heart of the city. If you read the script, the word fuck is used deliberately, it's not just thrown away. It's used for rhythm. But Al managed to use it his way by inserting it more and finding the right rhythm. He used it well. I mean with Universal, it was a really tough film, it was really hated at the time.

I remember before Scarface's release the controversy about the ratings board threatening to give the film an X unless the chainsaw scene was cut down.
Yeah, but it was even more than that. It was the amount of revulsion. I was in LA at the time and the amount of revulsion of so many people inside the industry toward it. Like, "This was a horrible thing to do to our industry." The critics were so cruel, except a few of them who got it. There was such revulsion, very much like *Natural Born Killers*, the bad boy complex, the bad boy

movie. It was too much. We had gone one step over. Brian was in the hottest water of all.

When the script was done and the movie was being made, was there any concern from the studio then or did that come after the film was done?
It was a tough movie to make. I think Bregman really championed that one through with Ned Tanen, president of Universal at the time. Ned was his friend and I think Ned was the guy who took the hit. But I'm glad he made the movie. The way they made the movie was torturous for them. It was scheduled to shoot for three months, and it went almost six. I would have shot it another way, but that was Brian's domain. I learned a lot from Brian. He was very generous; he let me watch everything.

So you were allowed on the set while the movie was being made.
Yeah, at Al's request too, because dialogue changes were going on all the time.

There's something interesting I noticed in how Tony has his downfall. Throughout the film he does a lot of bad things, but when he tries to do the right thing and prevents a mother and her children from being killed, that's what brings about his assassination.
That was intended. It was based in fact on the idea that he was pure in a way. In his honesty there was something pure, and his honesty is such that he cannot kill the innocent child. He just can't, and it costs him his life.

Let's talk about the process of writing the film. I remember reading in James Riordan's biography of you, that your wife at the time, Elizabeth, said you wrote in a very dark room and you shut out the lights of Paris while you were working. Did you feel you needed to be in an environment like that to write the film?
Yeah, I guess so. It's concentration. It's basically a womb. I still do it on the movie set because I'm sort of known for building this black cave and carrying it around with me with every shot. But it really is important. It's not like hubris; I just need separation and concentration. Because what goes on in the movie when you're directing it is very complicated, there's a lot of things distracting you, and there's many levels of thought. But you have to really get the essence of the script. You have to remember what it is you started out to do with the scene, because you'll get lost otherwise. I think what I do is I reconnect to the origin of the scene. I study the script and I ask, "What was it I intended?" Then I know where I'm going. So I need that womb.

Did you work a specific schedule when you wrote Scarface*? Did you try and write a certain number of pages a day?*
No, I'd work forward on a weekly basis. I was not too strict about it, but I would say by the end of the week, I'd like to be here in the process. I believe in going back and getting the first look. The first draft, the first structure is really important. The first draft is formed roughly over six weeks—could be seven or eight, could be three or five, but let's say six. And doing it in a six-

week rough gives you a taste for the movie better. Do it fast, don't get stuck. Bob Towne probably spent a day fixing a line, but I'm not sure that's the right solution. I respect him very much as a writer, it's just a different style of working. With *Midnight Express*, I had exactly six weeks, they were pushing me hard. And I did it. The first draft did hold up.

So for Midnight Express*, the movie was pretty much the first draft?*
It held up, yeah. On *Scarface*, a lot of improvements were made, but I wouldn't call *Scarface* a six-week draft, frankly.

How much longer did you work on revisions after you completed the first draft?
Oh, that was a painful process, because we're talkin' Pacino here [laughs]. He was in his heyday when he loved to rehearse. There were a lot of revisions, a lot of revisions of dialog, but the structure didn't change that much.

You used to work on a typewriter in those days; do you still use one?
No, I've moved on. I tried a computer, I'm not wild about the keys. So I use longhand and dictation. I dictate into a machine; I don't dictate to another person. I'm going over it alone in a room into a machine, and I often retape and retape. I like to speak, I try to act it out. I've always done longhand and typing. Now I try to do it through dictation. I think I'm more focused, and you also get into characters. Now that I've been around actors a lot of my life, I do some of the acting myself. Sometimes I come up with some crazy stuff. It makes you work a lot harder at externalizing. You can't fuck around [laughs]. You're hearing yourself right away. You gotta step up, you're in the arena. You're an actor now, you're no longer a guy hiding in the shadows on the sidelines. It's an interesting way to work.

You had mentioned earlier how Scarface *was received very badly when it first came out, but years later it's really grown in popularity. I hesitate to say it's a "cult" film, but it's gained a life of its own.*
Oh definitely. We knew that back then. I would hear stories; people would come up to me and say, "A bunch of us lawyers we get together to watch *Scarface*. We know the lines." You'd hear these stories for years. You'd know because people are telling you, and that is the way I judge movies. I have to—look at my career. I mean, I've gotten more slams than Bob Evans! There are very radical points of view on me, right? Ultimately, I believe real people who come up to me and tell me in the street. This black dude came up to me the other day, it's really funny, I thought he was gonna rob me. It was in a parking lot about midnight after a movie. A black dude, about 6' 2", strong lookin' guy comes up to me and circles me as I'm about to get in my car. He says, "Hey, are you Oliver Stone?" "Yeah." "You do that football movie?" "Yeah." "Man, that was a really good movie. Man, that said some things, man." I was relieved! He appreciated that I did a film about a black quarterback. That was more real for me than a review in the *New York Times*, honestly.

Why do you feel Scarface *became popular years after its release? Do you feel it was ahead of its time?*

Scarface was definitely on the money, it was right on. It was exaggerated, but it was close to the truth, but nobody got it at the time. *Miami Vice* plunged in right where we [left off]. Michael Mann saw it right away; he told me that. He saw the power of it. They cashed in on it more than we did. They made money on it, we didn't! I think sometimes the pioneer dies, you know. The pioneer doesn't make the money. He's the guy who does it, he dies out, then the next wave is the one that makes it.

For you, what is the relationship between screenwriting and directing?

It's a process. Screenwriting is really the beginning, the first stage. It's like giving birth to the fetus. And I think directing is very much civilizing the thing, bringing it on to an adult stage—educating it, clothing it, taming it. Turning it into a civilized human being. And that includes the editing stage as well because I believe directors must work through the editing. They just go hand in hand. I see no conflict at all. It's just another stage of development, and it makes sense for you to follow through with it.

I need that sense of having seen it on paper. When I wrote those screenplays—*Scarface, Midnight Express*—all the directors commented that it was like… Brian De Palma said, "It's like seeing it on paper." I make it very clear, sentence by sentence, the direction I'm going. Each sentence outlines a shot. I always wanted to direct the films I was writing. If you love movies it's like the top position. It's the one thing you want to do.

Did you write to get the story on paper or were you writing for the reader?

Both. That was the issue, of course. After you get the money, then you go and tilt the screenplay in the revisions. You tilt the screenplay more towards actor, more towards director, and away from the more difficult side of getting the money. Often the earlier drafts would be written with an eye towards the sensational or the, you know, descriptions that deliberately would attract the attention of the financier. That's the school I'm coming from, the School of Rejection. So, you have to realize the script has got to get made before we can start to get into this business of talking about artistic merit. But the passion was the same.

The passions I expressed were related to personal experiences in my life. When I wrote *Midnight Express*, I was very angry with the Turkish system. The theme was injustice. I saw it like *a Les Miserables*. Passion governed *Platoon* and *Salvador*. *Wall Street* was very much coming from a desire, again, to make a business movie because my father had worked there. So, I tried to go into that world and write an intelligent movie with Stanley Wiser. Stanley did the first draft, based on my notes. I told him what I wanted and he wrote while I continued editing *Platoon*. That was an episode where I was swamped and I needed some help. Stanley hung out with a lot of the people on the Street, turned in a first draft, and we went to work. On that one, we could

have benefited from a few extra months. But I rushed it not to get caught up in the… I was just worried about the whole preciousness of this thing. It goes to your head….

I knew I had a lot to learn as a director. I had only done *Platoon* and *Salvador* and they were war films and there was a great charm to both in some areas. But, I really knew I had to push on and find out other things. In a sense, you could say I became more director than writer at that point, that I became interested in my ability to direct and what I could do as a director. So, my emphasis went there where I had been writing for so many years. I didn't neglect it, but I didn't pursue it with the same…it wasn't the only thing any more. So, I used the advantages of the system, getting other writers to work on material. There's no reason not to. I don't have a need to prove I do everything.

I wrote and directed ten films over ten years. Actually, twelve films over a longer period. But, now, why not? There are so many good minds in the world. If you can use drafts of people's minds to get to a film that matters… I have no problem with the idea of being a hired hand. Many fine directors I've admired have done that over the years.

When you work with another writer how do you structure the collaboration?
It varies. You'd have to be specific. With *Wall Street* it was very much my ideas. I was specific with Stanley with the direction of the screenplay and the characters. He added many, many things, which were invaluable, and I'm very pleased with the film.

What about on Natural Born Killers*?*
That was a very weird, oddball situation. I don't regret it at all. I think we made the right move. I bought Tarantino's… he was not a big star at that point. I had seen *Reservoir Dogs* before it came out, and I thought it was a terrific movie with a lot of talent. I read the screenplay *[NBK]*—it was at the bottom of a junk pile actually. It had been rejected by several directors and been around for a couple years. It wasn't this robbery he describes. It was a screenplay that appealed to me because I was looking to do an action movie, actually a summer action movie. And in Quentin's screenplay was a great Roger Corman B-Movie. Two lovers on the run—that's sort of a cliché, it's true. It works from a point of sex and violence. Combined with Quentin's 1990's take on the media, media satire. So, a lot of the screenplay was about Wayne Gayle and jokes about Wayne Gayle and his crew. It was a good screenplay, but I couldn't make that screenplay. I knew that when I bought it. We paid the price—it was a very steep price. And the deal was tough because Don Murphy and Jane Hamscher, two producers, would not sell it unless I made it next. That is, I couldn't put it into development. They were tough. I accepted those conditions. I said okay, let's go.

A lot of *Natural Born Killers* was based on my feelings about society. We had, if you remember, a run of sensationalism. Money was being made by net-

works and by newspapers. Any subject was news, and not just tabloid news. We had the Menendez brothers. Then you had the woman who cut off her husband's penis. A string—O.J. Simpson, Joey Buttafuco, Tonya Harding—it was an amazing string, one after another. I felt, coming from that place in the 1990's, that this is such a weird era. And I wanted to, in a sense, address it. I was going through a personal divorce, so I was affected. I felt like throwing up on canvas, regurgitating. So that's what *Natural Born Killers* was, my vomiting on a canvas, my impression of society.

Quentin, as you know, went around the world badmouthing the film without having seen it. And that really hurt the movie. A lot of critics took a "Stone against Tarantino" approach, which I think was really damaging. It was two different interpretations.

Your script for Natural Born Killers *added a brilliant backstory for Micky and Mallory to Tarantino's draft. Could fleshing out the characters have cut against your critique of the media by allowing them to stand more fully on their own as protagonists?*
No, I don't think so at all. It was so clear what we were doing. A lot of people got it, so I know we're not off base. I sat in enough audiences and heard the laughing. There were a lot of levels to the movie. We had the media, but it was beyond the media. It was an aggression in this entire century. It was an aggression in the environment. It was an aggression that goes back in the past through rear projection to Stalin, Hitler, pollution, Vietnam, whales being killed. We have everything going on in there. It's an aggressive century and we're the product. A culture of aggression.

You've said Americans are a violent people, that Americans love to see violence.
Not just Americans.

And you've been criticized as a violent filmmaker.
Yeah.

What role does violence play in storytelling?
Well, I come from the culture. I grew up in America, and I was very influenced by violence in all our movies… in not only the movies, but the aggression that exists in the culture. The dollar sign is a competitive sign. It makes people struggle and gnash their teeth and die of heart attacks and eat too much. To do crazy things and hurt other people in the name of violence and in the name of money, in the name of being number one. There is something in our culture that drives us to heart attacks and early death. The issue of violence—yeah, I've shed a lot of that by becoming more conscious, as I get older. My life as a kid was marred by violence. Fights, being beaten up, chased—the fear of violence. My parents split up very suddenly in a violent divorce that shredded the fabric of my society. When Kennedy was blasted at high noon in Dealey Plaza in Dallas it shredded the American consciousness. You know, this is an amazing thing having a President's head blown

off. Sort of reminds you of who owns the place and who controls it. I went to Vietnam. I saw the major fighting of the war as an infantry soldier. So, obviously when I wrote screenplays I had a heavy dose of violence because it was in my nature. It was in *Break*, it was in *Platoon*, it was in *Born on the Fourth of July*, it was in *Scarface*, so forth and so on. I think I became more conscious of it with *Heaven and Earth* because I was around a woman who was a Buddhist and reacquainted me with the tenets of Buddhism.

I didn't sell my principles in any way to make *Natural Born Killers*. If anything, *Heaven and Earth* made me aware of the issue of non-violence. And when I turned to *Natural Born Killers*, it was precisely because there was so much violence in our society. It was misunderstood, as you said, but I can only tell you what I felt. That I was really regurgitating, holding up a mirror to what I saw, and it was pretty disgusting. But it was held up in such an exaggerated fashion, I can't see how anybody would take it that seriously. It was a fiction that was done in an overboard, kind of Jonathan Swift style. But some people react as if it was a realistic drama that encouraged kids to kill their parents like Rodney Dangerfield.

Finishing *Natural Born Killers* and being blasted by Bob Dole was really something. Here's a guy who supports the NRA, who supports putting guns on the streets, putting assault weapons on the streets. Not only that, but a major supporter of the military-industrial complex, which ships huge amounts of arms abroad. Here they have this hypocritical stance about our movies in saying they're the causes of violence. It's so transparently hypocritical when it's weapons that kill.

Have you considered doing a film about the military-industrial complex?
Yes, I have. It would be one that I would probably not get away with. They're already on me. The political lobby in this country, let's call them opinion makers, have been on my case since *JFK*. They didn't cut me any slack on *Nixon*. I mean endless details about what was fact and what wasn't fact. It blurred the picture, which was about a much larger theme.

Washington and New York, the establishment, their media arm, are very concerned about dramatists and interpreters, people who work in drama instead of so-called "fact," coming into their territory. But, they won't explore it. They will marginalize the question into Republican versus Democrat or some other BS issue on the cover of a magazine. But it's not really about that. It's about who owns the country, where the money is.…

If I started to, I think I'd get killed. Not physically anymore, I'd just get killed in the media. "Oh here's Stone again, the conspiracy nut" and all those demeaning terms. Going after America and blah blah blah. What ever happened to the concept of dissent? In the '60s and '70s it was around. In the '30s and '40s it was around. In the '50s? But the concept of dissent has been misunderstood as being anti-American. It's not. I'm a patriot in the sense of believing America could be a better place if it were run for its people and not for its special interests.

What is your role as a dramatist within that context?
First of all, whatever you fault me for, I do feel the person comes first. I've never addressed the background first. I've never done a film about the military-industrial complex or politics. I've always done a film because there was something in the foreground that really sparked me and that took me ideally into the background. So it would be able to combine, like [Sir David] Lean *(Lawrence of Arabia)*, and the other great filmmakers did, the concept of a foreground and a background. An intimate epic, so to speak. On *Born on the Fourth of July* I was fascinated by Ron Kovic's changes. But through him, I was able to live through thirty years of American history. Richard Nixon is a fascinating foreground figure and through him you can see much of the American consciousness for fifty years. So, I've always worked on those premises. Go back to *Midnight Express* and *Scarface*. It starts with one person. That's been my way of working. It's very inductive.

You start with a person or a theme, but not an idea?
Yeah. Generally, if you look at all the movies, they're about people. People who have maintained their integrity or found it again or lost it and found it against some threat. Who have overcome a crisis of conscience in themselves, or else discovered a conscience in themselves. Of all the films, *Nixon* is probably the dodgiest because here's a man who's fascinating because, in a sense, he's lied all his life. It wasn't out of malice, but character. That's what it's about. The threatened self or the concept of integrity.

Has working within the constraints of Hollywood influenced your vision as an artist?
No, I think the media had influenced it to the degree that they're critical. Often there's no question in my mind that thirty percent of the people who go to see the movie have made up their minds before they see it. Because they're seeing my movie. It's a shame, because they're not allowing the movie to happen, to flow, to be. Let the movie happen, don't prejudge it.

That's a good point. I really didn't expect Nixon *to be presented the way it was. I was more impressed with the picture, partially because I expected it to be more along the lines of* JFK. *It surprised me.*
But it's a bookend film. It's very much a companion piece because it deals with that 1963–74 decade. A key decade in our changes.

The published scripts for both JFK *and* Nixon *are heavily documented for much of their material. Is that worth the effort? Are critics really attacking the lack of documentation or are they attacking your critical point of view on American history?*
I think it was an act of responsibility. It's a guide, an appendix to the movie. It tells you where our thoughts come from. We did it for both films, *JFK* and *Nixon*. You should never take a film as your only source. You see a movie and you're excited by it. It's a visceral reaction, you live in it. You believe in it during the time you see it, but then, you should re-examine it. If you're inter-

ested in *Lawrence of Arabia*, you should probably read something else besides Robert Bolt's version of it in order to get more perspective. *Schindler's List* requires a second… should be read to be believed, because there are some questions. All movies have that. I don't know why they make a big thing out of Stone, but they do. It's a magnetization that's gone on. It's a shame. It's a misunderstanding I think. I think that *Nixon*… it's a good guide to the movie. It tells you what we did.

You have to admit though, film is a powerful medium.
It is, I've always said it is. When they accused *Natural Born Killers* of inciting violence I said, "I'm not going to give you some bullshit answer. It is a dangerous medium." And it should be, because that's what art is about. It's about expression of subversive ideas. Movies are the most subversive of all, and they are dangerous. But that's exactly what the First Amendment is about. The right to express dangerous ideas. I don't believe a movie makes people kill, I think that really comes from your own perverted nature, from your environment, from genetics, a combination of those things. But it could be a spark. But if it wasn't a movie that sparked a nut, believe me, it would happen a month down the line with something else.

Should dialogue be between characters in a film, or is there room for it to be between the filmmaker and the audience?
Hopefully the dialogue will sound as if it is in the movie. When Mr. X is talking to Costner [in *JFK*]—some people have told me it was one of the most extraordinary expositional scenes they've seen in their lives. In fact, [John] Frankenheimer told me it was one of the most powerful moments… it reminded him of the Sidney Greenstreet scene in *The Maltese Falcon*. Greenstreet tells Bogart some long, far-fetched exposition and he was just blown away by that. So many people have mentioned that scene because, I guess, it is believable. That's the point, it happened to me. It wasn't a made-up scene. I went to meet Fletcher Proudy, who had worked in the Pentagon—a serious man, an ex-colonel. He had been the liaison to the CIA and he told me a similar story in the course of an afternoon in Washington, DC. I felt like Kevin, it was just too much to handle. So, it was all based on an experience. Donald Sutherland did a great job because it was such… it was ten pages of dialogue. And he made it come smooth, for me. It just flowed from him, he found the right attitude, the urgency, and yet the cynicism it was necessary to deliver.

That scene stands out as an incredible expositional device.
I'm very concerned about structure. I always have been. Structure is the screenplay form, it is the art. It's the art of knowing what to do at the right time. That scene raises the whole movie to another level. Until then it's been a local murder mystery, which is fascinating. It's Sam Spade, Hammett; really Raymond Chandler was my concept. He was walking the dark streets alone. But now he goes to Washington on this call and the fucking stakes just zoom

up. That's where we should have had an intermission. If they had the old road shows, which I miss so much, that's where you go out. You absorb all that fucking information from Mr. X and the first half. Then you come back in the second half and you're fresh again, you're ready to go. But, unfortunately, they won't do that. And as a result, you have to push right into the next scene. So, for me, structurally, it's a problem. I think there should be intermissions in movies as there are in plays. Why can't we have them in movies? They are tampering with the form there because the playwright has the right to have an intermission. So should the screenwriter.

Haven't you used voice-overs as intermissions of sorts in some of your films?
No. Voice-over—I've used here and there sparingly. I use it when I feel it's right, I don't know why. It's always an instinctive thing. I used it in *Midnight Express* in a very personalized form as a letter. I used it in *Platoon* as a letter. Then I used it in a third person form several times, like at the end of *Nixon*. Where else have I… well, I used voice-overs to give information in *The Doors*.

I was thinking more of Platoon *just as a…*
It was a letter. Then he keeps writing it, but it's a shorthand, little memos, not at all consistent. It just comes and goes in dribs and drabs. In a sense, I think it reflected my own weariness. You become weary in war, you stop writing. At first you're sending letters home every other day to mom or grandma.… In fact, I changed the point of view. It went from writing to grandma to consciously becoming an older man looking back on that experience, as if writing a book. So they cease to be personalized for the grandmother and turn into an older Charlie Sheen writing about when he was a younger man. That shift wasn't logical, but it just made sense, it was instinctive. I don't know that I've done too much voice-over. Have I been accused of that?

Not that I know of. It just struck me as a kind of a pause you used in several movies.
Yeah, it's a nice pause. I love the concept of deconstructing a movie, being aware it's a movie. I have no problem with that. In fact, the last three movies have pushed heavily into that area. *Nixon*'s very conscious of the use of alternating techniques, the same thing with *JFK* and *NBK*.

Your use of different techniques seemed much more seamless in Nixon.
Well, it depends on your point of view. The use of technique is a form of writing. What it does is interiorize certain exterior moments. For example, in *Nixon*, we will be saying one thing and cutting to an alternate image, whether black and white or color. The image contradicts what he is saying. So, what we're saying is that there is an interior and an exterior at the same time. Sometimes more than one image, sometimes five images. In *Natural Born Killers* we had various imageries that were chaotic, they weren't necessarily ordered or seamless, as you said. Micky's mind is pretty wild. You have to show the savagery and the madness in his mind.

You've been criticized in the past for your use of stereotypes. What role do they have in screenwriting?

I think that's a very complicated question. I don't think I can handle it in terms of the long answer. But, we're all stereotypes too. People say things that are stereotypical, and then they don't. And life is this constant reassessment. "I might become a cliché." If you feel stale, you have become a cliché. Sometimes you are, and sometimes you're not. I see nothing wrong with stereotypes, they've been a staple of movies, as long as they're honest about being a stereotype. In other words, there are certain people who behave in certain ways that have been preordained, and it's sort of like you see through them. So there's nothing wrong, you shouldn't run from stereotypes and make every character some kind of eccentric who's different. It's nice to find the freshness in the stereotype, I always believe that. But, I think you have to wrestle with that question until you die. That's what writing is about. I think that as I've gotten older, I've gotten better as a writer. I do think the world invests everybody with their own point of view, their own private struggle. When you're younger you're shallower. You can only concentrate on one or two people. I think I've gained more perspective as a writer.

You can see that in the scripts. You don't seem to enjoy your role of producer as much as your writing-directing.

Well, the producing thing was originally to… we had offers to do that. People were always coming to us to produce their thing and get involved. If you believe in the material, it's a way to help get something done. Pictures that are tough make me especially happy—*Reversal of Fortune, The Joy Luck Club, South Central, Zebrahead, Wild Palms, McMartin* all needed a little push. That little piece of me. I never got it when I was coming up, except from Robert Bolt and a couple of people. Mostly rejections. I'm very aware of that. I know what young filmmakers have to go through. But now, it's a lot easier for them; in some ways, it's a lot easier. There's a lot more films being made and new technologies [have] allowed that.

I'm not sure it's a good thing. I may disagree with Coppola. Not every Hi-8 picture is worth seeing. People should refine their craft, go through a little rejection and discipline. There are too many movies that are half-written out there, half-made. They talk about this "Independent" movement. It's only independent if the thinking's independent. It's not independent because it was done for a price, that's not the issue. So, too much crap. But, on the other hand, I've tried to help young filmmakers. I didn't get anything out of it in terms of… I got mostly bad press trying to produce *Harvey Milk*… mostly bad press. So, why do it? Why do it? I have two very good partners, Janet Yang and Danny Halstead, and they pretty much run the show. I try to help when I can. It's a lot to handle.

The final cuts for Nixon *and* Platoon *seemed to move away from some of the most controversial politics in their scripts. Or downplayed them to an extent. At least with* Platoon*, that really seemed to me to open the film up a little bit, to allow the film to speak to a number of different audiences. Was that a conscious effort on either film?* No. You can't run from politics, it's awful to do so. I think Bob Zemeckis is a great filmmaker. *Forrest Gump* is a wonderful movie to watch, but you get into the whole area of what is Bob's historical responsibility. Or for that matter, Ron Howard's historical responsibility on *Apollo 13*. These are very questionable areas, and if you want to dodge it and go for as big an audience as possible, you do yourself a disservice in the long run. It's better to do something with less popularity but make it true, at least to your own conscience and what you believe in. You have to be willing to take the loss at the box office. That's not to say you can't be entertaining doing it.

I think *JFK* was an extremely uncompromised picture and it did historic, incredible business everywhere. I didn't expect it to. I thought it was too dense, the dialogue too much. Three hours, dark subject, complicated, and yet it did business everywhere in the world. Unbelievable; it truly is. So I used that marker, in a sense, to do *Nixon*. Which didn't do well commercially. Very few directors have been able to make two politically uncompromised movies in their lifetime. It's not about politics, it's about people who are in politics. Remember that.

So, do you want me to make films for box office or not? *Platoon*, if anything, hit the note because people were ready to welcome the Vietnam veteran. They wanted that experience at that point and time. So it was just the luck of the draw. *Nixon* and *Heaven and Earth* may have come out at the wrong time. Maybe *Nixon* would have been acceptable seven years ago or ten years hence. And *Heaven and Earth* may always be doomed because Americans don't care about Asian women. I don't know. I am still glad I made *Heaven and Earth*.

I cannot expect to succeed every time I go out the gate. If I want to be happy with myself, I have to be able to do what I feel helps me grow as a person. It may come to the day when I won't be able to make another movie. And I'm sure I can't go back at that point and sell my soul out to make a movie. That would be the worst thing I could do.

The last question I wanted to ask is about something that you said recently in Premiere *that got a lot of attention. It was a joint interview with Darren Aronofsky where you said: "I'm ready to go soon, I'm talking about a final movie, the final movie." You had said this a while back now. Are you still planning to make your final movie?* Actually, that was misunderstood. I think that made the world press again. A lot of wires came out saying I'd announced my retirement. Then they announced I was directing the Reagan movie; I'm only producing that. Then I saw [wires] from England from the movie critics praising that I was getting out of movies! So it was really a nice little circle. But if you really read the *Premiere* article in the spirit of it, you'll see the context. I think it was a wistfullness about being, you know, I wish I were young again and could have the

same energy as Darren has. But I've done a lot, achieved a lot. I'm saying now each movie really does count; you put your heart and soul in it, and you can't take it lightly. So every time you invest a piece of yourself or peel off another layer of skin, it's gonna cost you. And at the end of the day, how much skin can you give? I'm talking in that philosophical sense, maybe I don't have that much more to give. But by doing that, I'm gonna go out like The Wild Bunch; I'm gonna go out with a bang! I'm gonna do something that's gonna rock. I'm not gonna go out with a whimper. I'm not saying I'm retiring. Maybe I do have the energy for another seven pictures, I don't know. I'm not that old you know! I did ten in a row from *Salvador* to *Nixon*. In ten years, I did ten movies. That was really a run. And I did run. I hardly looked, I just ran with the material and did what I had to do because I wanted to make movies and I thought that right would be taken away. It took me a long time to get there. I did two movies from 1996 to 2001. Two movies and two books: *A Child's Night Dream*, which was very important to me, and I contributed to the essays of *Oliver Stone's USA*.

I think you've definitely got more movies left in you.
I think so. I do. I think I have a way of seeing things that most people don't.

Quentin Tarantino

Quentin Tarantino is a filmmaker who inhabits his characters, and through them, the very stylized world of tough guys, shocking violence, and captivating rhetoric he has brought to life. "I've been living in Ordell for a year now," the Oscar-winning writer told me over lunch at Jerry's Deli. Ordell Robbie, the current star of the hour, is black, cold-hearted, and the stylistic center of Tarantino's new film *Jackie Brown*. Ordell is a bad mofo and fits snugly into the universe Tarantino's powerful vision and writing have conjured.

Perhaps it's Ordell's influence, perhaps not. But Tarantino is cultivating a new reputation. "I bitch slapped [Don Murphy] like three times, bam, bam, bam…a little bitch slap don't hurt nobody, it just humiliates them and that's the object," Tarantino recalled on the Keenan Ivory Wayans Show. Combine such aggression with a new black, beret-wearing look, and you have Quentin Tarantino, Hollywood's bad boy writer-director. In meeting with Tarantino I decided to set aside his image making and focus my inquiry on his writing, the heart of his power as a filmmaker.

More than any other writer of his generation, Tarantino has created a distinct dark universe where he unfolds his stories. Although dogged by questions of his borrowing from other films and filmmakers, there is no denying that Tarantino has crafted a unique reality that audiences want to spend time in. It is a testament to the strength of his vision that it has prospered over four films: *Reservoir Dogs, True Romance* (directed by Tony Scott), *Pulp Fiction*, and *From Dusk Till Dawn*. Only in *Natural Born Killers* did the vision of Oliver Stone, another strong writer-director, obscure that of Tarantino. *Jackie Brown* fits Tarantino's universe like a new glove over an old fist. Described as "a comic crime caper loosely based on Elmore Leonard's novel *Rum Punch*," *Jackie Brown* is Tarantino's first true adaptation. But because Leonard's writing has had such

a strong impact on Tarantino, and their writing styles are so similar, *Jackie Brown* doesn't end up being much of a stretch for Tarantino.

"Leonard opened my eyes to the dramatic possibilities of everyday speech," Tarantino told me. And there is no lack of that everyday speech in *Jackie Brown*. Tarantino's adaptation follows Leonard's plot line, dropping a few minor characters, improving several others (most notably Ordell), and inserting only a handful of new scenes. But it is in the dialogue of the script that Tarantino follows Leonard's low-life naturalism most closely. Only a few scenes get a taste of the stylized, pop-culture prose Tarantino is known for. This may be a stretch for Tarantino, but we miss his electrified dialogue and powerful voice. Tarantino is a man who holds his filmmaking craft very close to his vest. Although he was reticent to show too many cards, our discussion of *Jackie Brown* and his writing roots opened a few windows into his world and his technique as a "method writer."

How exactly have Elmore Leonard's books influenced your writing style?
Well, when I was a kid and I first started reading his novels, I got really caught up in his characters and the way they talked. As I started reading more and more of his novels it kind of gave me permission to go my way, with characters talking around things as opposed to talking about them. He showed me that characters can go off on tangents and those tangents are just as valid as anything else. Like the way real people talk. I think his biggest influence on any of my things was *True Romance*. Actually, in *True Romance* I was trying to do my version of an Elmore Leonard novel in script form. I didn't rip it off, there's nothing blatant about it, it's just a feeling you know, and a style I was inspired by, more than anything you could point your finger at.

The strongest scene in True Romance *is the confrontation between Cliff [Dennis Hopper] and Coccotti [Christopher Walken]. How did you approach crafting that scene?*
The way I write is really like putting one foot in front of the other. I really let the characters do most of the work, they start talking and they just lead the way. I had heard that whole speech about the Sicilians a long time ago, from a black guy living in my house. One day I was talking with a friend who was Sicilian and I just started telling that speech. And I thought, "Wow, that is a great scene, I gotta remember that." In *True Romance* the one thing I knew Cliff had to do was insult the guy enough so that he'd kill him, because if he got tortured he'd end up telling him where Clarence was, and he didn't want to do that. I knew how the scene had to end, but I don't write dialogue in a strategic way. I didn't really go about crafting the scene, I just put them in the room together. I knew Cliff was going to end up doing the Sicilian thing but I didn't know what Coccotti was going to say. They just started talking and I jotted it down. I almost feel like a fraud for taking credit for writing dialogue, because it's the characters that are doing it. To me it's very connected to actors' improv with me playing all the characters. One of the reasons I like to write with pen and paper is it helps that process, for me anyway.

What's the relationship between your acting and your writing?
I think they're almost inseparably married. When I describe things in my writing I never use writing adjectives. I don't know what a writing adjective is. I always use acting adjectives. To me writing's almost the same thing because you're acting like a character and that's what acting is all about, the moment. You don't want to be result oriented, you don't want to say, "Okay, this is what's going to happen." No, you start with your character and anything can happen, like life. You shouldn't try to predestine where you're gonna go and what you're gonna see. You can hit the nail on the head, but you want the kind of freedom that allows for something you hadn't even imagined to happen. I'm very much a man of the moment. I can think about an idea for a year, two years, even four years all right, but whatever is going on with me the moment I write is gonna work its way into the piece.

Can you think of an example where your perspective at a certain moment really changed the way you approached something?
Well anything that's really personal I wouldn't want to talk about because that's not what the scene's about, it's just underneath it there. But something more on the surface would be Vince's whole thing in *Pulp Fiction* about Amsterdam. I was in Amsterdam for the very first time in my life when I was writing that script and it was kind of blowing my mind. And it was blowing Vince's mind too, he'd just come back from there too. When I spent time in Amsterdam I was just going there to be by myself, but it worked its way in 'cause that is what I was going through and that was gold.

Do you think the Hollywood environment constrains writers' perspective?
Well, it's your life and anybody's life is valid, you know. But to really get to know people and discover humanity, which is what I truly think writers and actors do, you've got to be interested in other human beings, you have to be interested in humanity in general, and you have to do some discovering of humanity and different people. In real life there are no bad guys. Everybody just has their own perspective. I do have sympathy for the devil. To keep pursuing that you need to break out of your environment, whether that is Hollywood or you're a novelist living in Rhode Island. You gotta go have a conversation with and get to know somebody that makes $10,000 a year. You know, they have a different fucking perspective. So that's the only danger; you've gotta work at it, you gotta work at going out and keeping your hand into other people's lives and not just your own.

What adaptations of Elmore Leonard's books do you admire?
I liked *Get Shorty* a lot, I guess where he was funny, and I really liked *52 Pick-up*. I think that's the only other crime one that I've really liked.

Did other adaptations suggest anything for your own approach?
No, I've never really felt that anyone got [Leonard] in the prime zone.

What about Scott Frank's adaptation of Get Shorty*?*
Well it's funny because he came pretty damn close. I actually read his script and thought he did a really good job with it. But there was still something lost in the translation. I've always been kind of a perfectionist about the idea of adapting a Leonard novel because I just wanted to have the feeling of the novel, those long dialogue scenes where a character is slowly revealed. To me, that's the fun of adapting it. I'm not dissing Frank at all. I think he did a great job with *Get Shorty*, but there's another aspect of Leonard's novels that I'm interested in.

You've voiced concern in the past that your own voice, your own dialogue might some-day become old hat, that people might grow tired of it. Was that one of the reasons you decided to go with an adaptation rather than an original script for your next film?
Well, that wasn't the reason but it does very conveniently serve that purpose. It's a nice way of kind of holding onto my dialogue, of holding onto my gift and whatever I've got to offer. I don't want people to take me for granted. The things I have to offer I don't want wasted. When you watch something David Mamet's written you know you've listened to David Mamet dialogue. I want to try and avoid that if I can. I want to try to avoid that as a writer and I want to try to avoid it as a filmmaker. I want people to see my new movie, not my next movie. Does that make sense?

Definitely.
There are a lot of directors out there where you can almost number their films. That doesn't make them bad films and these guys are doing exactly what they want to do. I just want each movie to have a life complete unto itself and still when you look at it from a perspective you can see how it all fits. I don't want to do a Woody Allen or a John Sayles thing where one film blurs into the next. Those guys are doing exactly what they want to do, and I'm not putting them down. I just want to do something else.

In Jackie Brown *it almost seemed like you went to great lengths to make the dia-logue naturalistic. Some of it was taken from Leonard and some not, but it really casts against the very stylized excessive dialogue that you're known for. Is that a step away, like you were saying, from your voice as we know it?*
Yes. I don't want to be known for writing… you've gotta remember, I've done two movies before this, so wait till I've done six movies to start pigeonhol-ing me. I tend to do different types of things. *Dogs, Pulp Fiction, True Romance*, and my script for *Natural Born Killers* take place in kind of my own universe. But that doesn't make them fantastical. Larry McMurtry writes in his own universe. J.D. Salinger writes in his own universe and it's a very real universe and I think mine is too. But having said all that, this movie doesn't take place in my universe.

It doesn't?

This is in Elmore Leonard's universe and it was interesting making a movie outside this little universe that I created. This was Dutch's universe, and because of that, I wanted it to be ultra-realistic. I used a different cinematographer to kind of get a different look. It still looks great but just a little bit more down to earth, a little less like a movie movie, a little bit more like a '70s *Straight Time*. I actually like building sets. In *Jackie Brown* I didn't do that. Every single solitary scene in the movie was shot on location. Some things were written for specific locations in the south [of LA] that I went out and found.

Does the Cockatoo Lounge really exist?

Yeah. I found the place. I was looking for a black cocktail lounge in Hawthorne, and I eventually found the Cockatoo Inn and it was perfect.

I think one of your great strengths as a writer is that you have been able to define your own vision, your own universe, and set your stories within that. In looking at the difference between that and where you see Jackie Brown, *what elements would you say define the Tarantino universe of film?*

Well, that's kind of a hard question to answer because a whole lot of this stuff is subliminal. It just comes out. One of the ways other writers have created their own universe is through overlapping characters, which I think is very interesting.

I understand what you're saying about its being kind of subliminal but you're also a smart guy. I'm sure you get analytical about some of it too, especially as far as where you take your universe.

To tell you the truth, I try not to get analytical in the writing process. I really try not to do that. I try to just kind of keep the flow from my brain to my hand as far as the pen is concerned and, as I've said, go with the moment and go with my guts. It's different than when you're playing games or trying to be clever. To me, truth is the big thing. Constantly you're writing something and you get to a place where your characters could go this way or that and you just can't lie. The characters have gotta be true to themselves. And that's something I don't see in a lot of Hollywood movies. I see characters lying all the time. They can't do this because it would affect the movie this way or that or this demographic might not like it. To me characters can't do anything good or bad, they can only do something that's true or not.

Basically, my writing's like a journey. I'll know some of the stops ahead of time, and I'll make some of those stops and some of them I won't. Some will be a moot point by the time I get there. You know every script will have four to six basic scenes that you're going to do. It's all the scenes in the middle that you've got to—not struggle, it's never a struggle—but you've got to write through—that's where your characters really come from. That's how you find them, that's where they live. So I've got basic directions of how to get to where I'm going, but now I'm starting the journey. I can always refer to my

directions if I get lost, but barring that, let's see what we see. I think that is how novelists write. That's how Elmore Leonard…

Definitely more than screenwriters where it's all structure, structure, structure.
I just don't do that, you know by the first act this has to happen, and so on. I hold no interest in that, I just see it in too many movies. I'd like to see more art put into screenwriting. One of the things about writing a novel is you can do it any way you want. It's your voice that's important and I see absolutely no reason why a screenplay can't be the same. Now it makes it a hell of a lot easier when you're the writer and the director. But that's not even necessary now, because things are a little more open.

In what way?
There are a lot of bad screenplays, so if you write a good screenplay people are going to respond to it. Now if you're way at the bottom and you're just starting your career it might take a long time to get to the people who'll appreciate it. It'll just get shot down by all the readers and everything. But if you keep persevering, eventually you'll get past that reader and on to the people that are really bored to death reading screenplays. These are the people who really appreciate something new. That was the big thing I had against me starting off in my career. I was writing shit differently, and different meant I was doing it wrong in that whole reader mentality. Before David Mamet was David Mamet, people probably thought he said fuck too much too. But once they get to know you, once you get that Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, it's a whole different story. But in the beginning having a different voice is a real hindrance.

Do you think that repetition of a phrase or word in dialogue enhances its power for an audience or detracts from it?
Well I do that a lot. I like it. I think that in my dialogue there's a bit of whatever you would call it, a music or poetry, and the repetition of certain words helps give it a beat or a rhythm. It just happens and I just go with it, looking for the rhythm of the scene.

Some people have criticized your use of certain words such as "nigger," and you have always responded that no word should have that much power in our culture. I'm not sure I buy that. I've got to be frank. Aren't you also using powerful words to electrify your dialogue, to make it more interesting?
You know, if you didn't know me, I could see where you'd come up with that. I mean, I am a writer, I deal in words. No, there is no word that should stay in word jail; every word is completely free. There is no word that is worse than another word. It's all language, it's all communication. If I was doing what you're saying, I'd be lying. I'd be throwing in a word to get an effect. And well, you do that all the time, you throw in a word to get a laugh, and you throw in this word to get an effect too; that happens, but it's all organic. It's

never a situation where that's not what they would say, but I'm going to have them say it because it's gonna be shocking. You used the example of "nigger." In *Pulp Fiction*, nigger is said a bunch of different times by a bunch of different people and it's meant differently each time. It's all about the context in which it's used. George Carlin does a whole routine about that, you know. When Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy do their stand-up acts, and say nigger, you're never offended because they're niggers. You know what they're fucking talking about. You know the context in which it's coming from. The way Samuel Jackson says nigger in *Pulp Fiction* is not the way Eric Stoltz says it, is not the way Ving Rhames says it. They're all coming from different places. That word means something different depending on who's saying it.

Ordell uses "nigga" a lot in Jackie Brown. *How is his use of the word different from that of the characters in* Pulp Fiction*?*
Actually Ordell probably doesn't use it any different from Jules. Actually when Jules and Marcellus use it in *Pulp Fiction* they're comin' from the same place, but having it mean different things. Marcellus is very much like, "You my nigger now," and that was Ving Rhames who came up with that. But Ordell's comin' from the same place, he's a black guy who throws the word around a lot, it's just part of his dialect, the way he talks. And if you're writing a black dialect, there's certain words that you need to make it musical. Nigger's one of them. If you're writing about that kind of a guy, motherfucker's another. Those are two of the key words that are appropriate for that guy. Sam Jackson uses nigger all of the time in his speech, that's just who he is and where he comes from. That's the way he talks, so that's the way Ordell talks. Now what do you have to say to that?!

That's a good question! I think you have a valid point if that's where you're going with the character. Certainly the word nigger is part of the universe you've created. It's one of the things that stands out about your writing.
Also, I'm a white guy who's not afraid of that word. You know most white guys are deathly afraid of that word.

You're right.
I just don't feel the whole white guilt and pussy-footing around race issues. I'm completely above all that. I've never worried about what anyone might think of me 'cause I've always believed that the true of heart recognize the true of heart. If I'm doing what I'm doing and you're comin' from the same place, you'll see it, no question about it. And if you're comin' with an ax to grind, with your own baggage and your own hate, then you might react strongly to where I'm comin' from. Now what I just said there is that if you have a problem with my stuff, you're a racist. I practically said that. Well, I truly believe that.

Other than its being more realistic, what other differences do you see between your universe and that of Elmore Leonard?

The two big things were to make it much less stylized and don't rush it, 'cause his novels are not rushed—they talk about things and eventually it kind of creeps out, as they're talking. But there's no rush; it's the best part of his rhythm. Stephen King actually summed it up pretty well when he said, "I went and saw *Stick*, and I love Elmore Leonard's novels and the plot's all there, everything that happens in the book pretty much happens in the movie, but what is gone is the feeling that I get when I read an Elmore Leonard novel." I wanted to get that feeling in my own writing too, not just with his writing. So my stuff and his stuff go together pretty seamlessly.

It was kind of funny because when I wrote *Pulp Fiction* I wrote that by myself. The middle story I adapted from a script that Roger Avery wrote, but you know it was me at page one and it was me at the end. It wasn't like we weren't doing it together or anything. I adapted it myself and I made all these changes I was gonna do. My name alone is on the script for *Jackie Brown*, I'm the guy that did it. But, I think more than Roger Avary, Elmore Leonard almost deserves credit on the script. We never talked about anything but there was a real collaboration… actually I was the one doing all the collaborating. So much in fact, that I kept a lot of his dialogue exactly the way it was and I wrote a lot of my own and now as time has gone on, I don't really almost remember what was mine and what was his. I don't think his stuff stands out or my stuff stands out—I think it works like a really happy marriage. I also tried to get away from that on *Jackie Brown*. I think in the screenplay there is too damn much importance given to the page count.

It's structural thing.

I mean, when it came to *Jackie Brown*, it was like you know what? I'm in a position now I can just say fuck the page count. I know the movie's gonna be about two-and-a-half hours long. All this page count stuff is for the production manager. It has nothing to do with me. So I'm not gonna dumb down my writing to keep the page count down. I end up still kind of pulling back towards the very end of the process because it was getting pretty excessive. But you know it used to be I would write all this description and everything and I would be all happy with it and I would be battling page count by the end, and it would just turn into Vincent and Jules walk into a room and start talking. On this one I'm not gonna even fucking worry about it. Also because my scripts are getting published now, this is gonna be the fucking document. I'm not writing novels, these screenplays are my novels, so I'm gonna write it the best that I can. If the movie never gets made, it'd almost be okay because I did it. It's there on the page.

You've optioned four of Leonard's books? Why did you make Rum Punch *first?*

Again, it was extremely organic. I actually read *Rum Punch* before it got published. It turns out Elmore Leonard's agent is a really really good friend of

Lawrence Bender, my producing partner. So they sent us the book and I loved it, but I didn't want to do his books as big budget movies, because they are actually very modest stories and can't bear a $50 million price tag. So we were getting ready to go into *Pulp Fiction*, and were talking about a deal where we could option it for very little money and shoot it for very little money. But his agent very rightfully said, "Now guys, if we're gonna do this, and he's gonna pass up millions of dollars, you guys gotta commit to do this after *Pulp Fiction*." You can never really do that, all right, cause who knows who I'm gonna be after I get done with a movie. I couldn't really commit to it 100 percent, so I let it go. And it so happened it became available again with these other three novels.

I was going to give it to another director to do, so I read it again so I could talk about it. In reading it again I remembered exactly what it was I wanted to do when I read it a long time ago. It was like I saw the movie that I made in my head a long time ago, and let go of, that movie came right back. It came right right back. That's what I'm gonna do. So that's how that one became the one. You know if you love something, set it free? Well I did, and it came back!

In reading your interviews you shield it a little bit, but I think you take a little pride in the way you presented Reservoir Dogs *and* Pulp Fiction *in non-linear formats. Why did you move to a linear format in* Jackie Brown*? Was it just the material?*
Yeah, I'm proud of what I did in *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. But I'm not too proud of it, 'cause I think that everyone should be able to do that, and it just seemed like the best way to present those stories. I don't have any one way to tell a story, all right? I don't have any rule book of how it's supposed to be done, you know? But I've always said that if a story would be more emotionally involving told beginning, middle, and end, I'll tell it that way. I won't jigsaw it just to show what a clever boy I am. I don't do anything in my script just to be clever. That's the first thing that goes, it has to…

…be true to itself?
Yeah, emotion will always win over coolness and cleverness. It's when a scene works emotionally and it's cool and clever, then it's great. That's what you want. In the case of *Jackie Brown*, this story is told better this way. And the sequence where the money is switched three times? That's how I saw it when I read the book. It's not in the book that way, but that's how I saw it.

That's interesting on the screen.
Yeah, I love it. I was just watching the movie in my mind as I was reading the book and thought, "That would be really cool." Before *Jackie Brown*, the most interesting character I ever wrote was Mia in *Pulp Fiction*.

Why is that?
Because I have no idea where she came from. I have no idea whatsoever. She's not from another movie, she's not somebody I know, she's not a fantasy girl,

she's not really a part of me, she's not a side of me. I knew when I was writing that story, I knew nothing more about Mia than Vincent did. All I knew were the rumors. I didn't know who she was at all, until they got to Jack Rabbit Slim's and she opened her mouth. Then all of a sudden this character emerged with her own rhythm of speech. I don't know where she came from and that's why I love her.

Has it been daunting to adapt the work of someone who you have so much respect for? I know Elmore Leonard kind of cut you free saying, "You're the filmmaker, make your movie."
The only thing daunting about it was when I was finished with it and gave it to him to read. I wasn't going to change it, but I really wanted him to appreciate it and sign off on it. But during the actual writing process I think you would have a hard time doing a good job if you were thinking about stuff like that. I was dropping stuff left and right. Stuff I had totally intended to use, I ended up not using. You know I got this book, and I gotta find my movie inside of it. So I wrote a ton of shit.

Was your writing process different for an adaptation?
Actually it was different, but my process didn't really change that much. I've always equated the writing process with editing, sort of like when I get through editing the movie, that's like my last draft of the screenplay.

That's how John Sayles sees it too.
My editor Sally [Menke] was like my writing collaborator on this; and adapting *Jackie Brown* was like this six-hour movie that I had to cut down to two-and-one-half hours. It was funny because I took about a year to write it. The last five months, that's pretty much all I was doing, and I found it very beneficial to sit with the material that long, especially for an adaptation, because I just kept finding my movie inside the material, more and more. I learned to lose more and more, and I'd make those cuts in the script exactly the way you do when you're making cuts in the editing room. The stuff that I did in the last two months of writing it, after writing for the whole year, was some of the best stuff in the whole script, because I had lived with the material for so long. If you're trying to drop ten pages from a screenplay, it hurts like hell, but if you just put it away for a month and then take it out, you can do it just like that!

Right. Get some perspective on it. You always tend to write long, I mean 500 pages for Pulp Fiction, *and then cut back. Do you think that's a good process in bringing out the best in material?*
It works good for me, all right, but I don't actually think about anything like that, for most of the script. I start getting responsible about length in the third act. You can do all kinds of shit at the beginning of the movie that you don't have the fuckin' patience for when it gets to the end. You want to see how it ends.

The single biggest addition I made to the book is the whole Beaumont section. Of all the structural things in the movie, I think that is the best thing I brought to it. It's almost like a non-sequitur, it has nothing to do with the Jackie thing, except it mirrors it completely. Right? You get to understand Ordell's situation and what's going on with Jackie through the Beaumont situation, 'cause you've just been through that. It's like a movie unto itself for the first twenty minutes. But it sets up everything that you're going to see, and I really like the storytelling involved in that. When Elmore Leonard read the screenplay, one of the comments that he passed on to me was, "What's with all the Beaumont stuff?" He didn't think it was important. But by spending twenty minutes with Beaumont here, that's a really neat shorthand I can do for the rest of the flick. 'Cause [now] you know Ordell's modus operandi.

The only major structural thing I did in *Jackie Brown* was I liked the idea of telling the stories from the different perspectives of the characters, without being real precious about it. I dropped that from the movie, though. I took out the title cards. It worked well enough, but it was too precious. I wanted the film to have more of a rhythm at the beginning. And it seems to play, one into the other, and everything happens like in the script. The ball does get passed to Max, when it's Max's turn. The whole first part is Ordell's, but it was too much like *Pulp Fiction*, it was just a little too precious. I didn't need to be so clever and precious with the structure. I was like, "No, this is the story, this will tell it."

Jackie Brown *is a story that constantly unfolds. Not necessarily in reversals, but new elements are added, and those reversals per se are often brought about through Jackie's dialogue. Was that something that you liked?*
I think it kind of works well. It is always unfolding; it's not a movie about Jackie figuring out in the first ten minutes how to get a half million dollars and doing it—no! It's like little by little by little it starts coming to her, as life and situations change and she's being torn in this direction and that direction. It slowly evolves; and then from that point on, it's straight ahead until she does it. It's very novelistic in that the first ninety minutes of the movie is just about characterization. Then, it's all execution. The last half-hour is just them doing it, the money switches and all that.

There's more exposition in the dialogue of Jackie Brown *then in your previous scripts.*
That's for damn sure, yeah.

Was that a part of the adaptation process?
Yeah. I mean, that's all that happened in the book, she's talking to the people about that stuff. That's part of Max's whole relationship with Jackie, kind of talking about their problems, with him acting as a counselor, trying to help her out. In the second half it's her thinking out loud, she's kind of talking to herself. Yeah, that's the first time I was dealing with exposition in a big way.

That definitely struck me in reading it.
Did it come across as "Oh, here's the exposition thing"?

No, but there's certainly a lot more of the plot being told through the dialogue. That's a departure from your earlier work.
Yeah, yeah. But they're planning something too, so it's organic to the piece.

Were there any techniques or any ideas you had, to bring the numerous "talking head" scenes in Jackie Brown *to life? To keep the interest of the audience?*
It was funny 'cause I thought about that when I was writing the script. There were a whole lot of scenes with people talking to each other, right? But I thought about it and said, "That's what it is. Don't be afraid of what it is." All right? And I made a pact with myself that there are two different styles going on here—the first half is about character and the second half is about action.

I'm not necessarily going to try to show off to the world what a great film-maker I am in the first half. 'Cause the way you service that is you just get the best single performance you can from the actors and you edit it the right way so that their best work is showing, and then you can have talk for ten fuckin' minutes, twenty minutes or an hour, it doesn't fuckin' matter. But in the second half we're going to crank it up.

It almost ties back into what you were saying about the editing really kicking in in the third act. There was a lot less flash there, I mean, just boom, boom, boom, boom, as opposed to the longer character scenes up front.
Yeah, definitely.

What kind of music are you going to have in this film?
What surf music was to *Pulp* this is all soul music, kind of the rhythm that this story takes place to.

Did you write to that music? Is that something that enters into your writing process?
Oh yeah, yeah, it's a major part of it, that's kind of how I write. I'll write for a while and then I'll find an appropriate song and in a weird way the music will keep me in the mood. I find music to define the mood of the movie, the rhythm the movie is going to play in.

Besides writing an adaptation, what creative goals do you set for yourself in writing Jackie Brown*?*
I like the idea of following a female lead character as in *Jackie Brown*. I like that a lot; I think I have an extremely unfair rap from people who say, "Ahhh, but can he write women?" The only fuckin' reason they're saying that is because I did *Reservoir Dogs* first. I really love the idea of following a black woman in her forties. It's funny, I do feel that *Jackie Brown* is mine, she's the same character in the book, but by making her black, it affects her 'cause her life experiences are different, and her dialogue is different. But she's the same person basically.

Was there any specific research you did for her character?
No, I actually have known a few women in my life who reminded me of Jackie and that's who I used. I just wanted to find her in myself. I joke about it, but I'm very much a method writer. I really become the characters when I'm writing them. I'll become one or two of them more than others, I'm consistent that way. I become all of them when I'm writing, but I'll become one or two when I'm not writing. The entire year I was Ordell. He's who I identified the most with in the piece. I was Ordell when I was writing the script. I walked around like him. I talked like him. I spent a whole year basically being Ordell. I couldn't shut him off and I didn't want to. And in a weird way Ordell is the rhythm of the movie.

What do you mean by that?
Like his character, the way he talks, the way he dresses—everything about him is how this movie should play. He is the old school of soul music. He's the personification of that, and I completely identify with that. If I wasn't an artist, I would probably be exactly like fuckin' Ordell.

That's interesting, but it's not his movie.
It's Jackie's movie. It's Jackie's movie but what's so neat about Jackie's character is that she ain't revealing at all. The story requires her to have a poker face. It requires that you don't know what's going on in her head. One of the things I held on to in the adaptation was that every time she got with Ordell, she would tell him everything she knew about the cops. That would always surprise me, no matter how many times she did it.

It was always a new wrinkle.
Yeah! It's like, "I cannot believe she's fuckin' him so bad!" I couldn't believe she was fuckin' the cops and I couldn't believe she was fuckin' Ordell. But I was like, "God, I hope she isn't fuckin' Max." I think she's playing straight with us, but I don't know 100 percent. And it's a different thing, because Max is the audience. You see the movie through Max's eyes.

He's an outsider…
Yeah, he's an outsider and he's also the conscience and the heart of the piece and he's definitely the major human link to the film. It's like Max is the audience, but Ordell is the rhythm, the soul of the movie in a weird way.

When you're developing a character, what do you do to get into their mind? Do you do a kind of backstory on them? What do you do to get a character down?
That's a very interesting question. Maybe I should actually—I don't. I do that as an actor though. That's very interesting. Maybe I should start doing that in my original stuff or even on this stuff. No, in the case of *Jackie Brown* by the time I started writing the script I was pretty damn familiar with the material so I felt I knew these people. I don't know, because part of that process

is discovering them as I'm writing them. It's different from acting. I won't even think now about acting in a role where I didn't do a backstory for a character. Sit down with pen and paper and bring them up to this point. All right. But there's a birthing process when you're writing.

Ordell is fascinating because he really seemed to change from the book. He becomes a lot smarter in your script.
Oh really?

Definitely. How did he evolve?
That's pretty interesting because I had a lot of prior knowledge of Ordell, Lewis, and Melanie because I read *The Switch*. *The Switch* was the very first book I'd ever read, so even before *Rum Punch* was published, I was like, "Oh shit! Ordell, Lewis, Melanie, Jesus Christ!" I was like, "Oh my God!"

Is that the whole thing about the kidnapping?
Yeah, yeah. I knew these characters because I was doing a little adaptation of *The Switch* in my mind when I was fifteen, when I read it. So I knew the characters pretty well, but I really did kind of become Ordell to one degree or another when I was writing *Jackie Brown*. I didn't choose that, it just happened, and I was walking around as Ordell. There's a lot of me in Ordell.

Do you put a lot of thought into the way you juxtapose humor and violence?
No more thought than I put into anything else. I love it, I think it's like a Reese's Cup, two great tastes that taste great together. I'm not bending over backwards to try and do it, it just kind of happens. And then when it happens, it's like, "Whoa, that's great. I got something."

The final scene between Melanie and Louis was taken almost verbatim from the book.
Right.

But you could have written that scene, your voices were so in sync there.
Yeah, I felt that. And it was so cool—because when I actually talked to Elmore Leonard about something like that, like the scene where Ordell kills Louis—he writes like I write. He didn't know Ordell was going to do it. He knew one of them was going to kill the other one, but until it actually happened he didn't know how it was going to happen or who it was going to be.

For that last scene between Melanie and Louis, Leonard had a lot of time to set up Louis's character that you just didn't have. The violence that came out of him seemed like an extension of his character. In your script it comes more as a shock. That's something you've used before—violence as a shock.
Right, sort of the way violence plays out in your life, all of a sudden. Very rarely does violence build up in real life the way it does in movies. No, it explodes in your face. That's what's so shocking about it.

What do you think that accomplishes dramatically? For an audience, I mean, using violence as shock.
Well I think it gives the movie a dose of reality, especially in the scene we're talking about. That's kind of how it would go down. And it's played like that. It's not played in terms of good guys and bad guys, it just kind of explodes out of nowhere.

But as a dramatist, isn't it important for all action, especially major action, to be set up, so people understand why it took place?
I think it is set up, but Louis is only partially on the page—all right? I remember talking to De Niro about the role and saying, "Look, this is not like most of the characters that I write." The reason actors like to do my stuff is because they usually have a lot of cool things to say and they feel cool saying them. But Louis is a different fish, and I told him, "You know, Louis is a different character from the ones I ordinarily write. He doesn't say a lot. This is a character who truly needs to be gotten across with body language." I'm talking to one of the greatest character actors in the world. That's why I wanted him for the part, because he does that, all right?

Did you know who you wanted to cast for all the characters when you were writing Jackie Brown*?*
This is one where I completely did. I normally don't. I'll have some people in mind, but this was one where I pretty much had everybody. The one guy that was kind of open was Louis. I thought about De Niro, but I wasn't a 100 percent sure I could get him.

Do you think that the audience has an attachment to Melanie when she dies? Or is that important?
No, I think the audience has a complete love-hate relationship with Melanie. Audiences applaud when Louis shoots her, but they…

That would partly be the nature of the scene, I mean she is being so…
Such a bitch, all right. It's impossible that someone could be asking for it, but she's asking for it.

And she's kind of that way throughout most of the movie…
Yeah, she's a fuckin' smart ass, treacherous and all these things. But we also like her at the same time. She's a totally fun character. So I think it's a love-hate relationship.

You've said a number of times that you don't want to be known as "the gun guy." But Jackie Brown *and your future projects are basically all crime stories.*
Well, the next one I do, I think as a director, will be a Western.

Really?
Yeah, but there's guns in Westerns too.

A Western in the mode of The Good, the Bad, the Ugly *or* Unforgiven*?*
Actually it's different, it's a prison Western. It takes place in a prison in Yuma, Yuma Territorial Prison. So it's like a Western *Papillon*.

Will that be an adaptation or an original?
It will be an original. But I know where you're going with this question. The thing is, I've only done three movies. I've got all the time in the world to do different things.

Haven't you really done four movies? Wasn't True Romance *your movie?*
Yes and no, the thing is, it's Tony [Scott]'s movie. I never visited the set of *True Romance*, and I only visited Tony once, just once. I made some suggestions and he didn't take them.

But isn't that your voice on the screen?
Yeah, it's my voice, but it's Tony's movie. I would have made a much different movie out of it. I actually think Tony made a better movie out of it than I would have at the time. *True Romance* is a case where it all worked out, it all completely worked out. If Oliver [Stone] hadn't done *Natural Born Killers* I would have gotten away scott free in this business. I wouldn't have any horror stories to talk about.

What about Natural Born Killers*?*
I wasn't even involved in that one either. But I think I fucked up. I would have preferred they had not made the movie. I actually didn't want anybody to make the movie, not just Oliver, anybody. But as a script it was pure. I did what I wanted to do.

Why didn't you want anyone to make Natural Born Killers*?*
After my passion had gone for it, when its expiration date passed as far as my love for it and everything, it was almost beside the point to make the movie. It was pure—you read my…

Yeah I read your script.
I fuckin' directed that thing on the fuckin' page, man. It was right there. And I did all that on paper. I think there's nothing you can't do on paper. I'm making my movies first here on the page.

And they hold up. Especially if you look at True Romance*, I mean you only made that movie on paper, but I would say that it's more your movie than Tony Scott's.*
Yeah, but his take on it was different. My movie would have been harder.

In the past you've been real open about how you've cannibalized your own work in building new scripts. Is that a way of drawing stories into your own unique universe?
Initially, when I first started doing stuff like that it was just so I didn't have to write that part of it, it was a way to save time and pages. But it never quite works like a slam dunk anymore. By the time I get through with it I've usually rewritten it so much to make it work for whatever I'm doing that I might as well have written a new scene. I haven't done that in a while, actually.

I didn't notice any borrowing in Jackie Brown.
Oh yeah, not at all. I think it was more like I save my writing and everything, and I never throw anything away. And I'll just take something and read it, and get excited about it again. "That's good, oh God, why did I stop doing that, that was really good." So it's just an attempt to not let it go to waste. To find some way to fit it in.

The only script of yours that I haven't read is Open Road.
Yeah, no one has read that. I never finished it. That was like the first time I really wrote a script. Roger [Avary] had written a script called *Pandemonium Reigns* that was forty pages long and really funny. It's like these two characters on the road and there's this hitchhiker and it's a surreal, wild comedy. Then they get to this kind of crazy, surreal town. Then he ended it in this way that I didn't like at all. Because I had never finished a script, I had just written scenes, I asked him, "Could I take that? Like rewrite it, just do my own version of it?" And he said, "Yeah, go for it." I don't think he was going to do anything with it—I don't think he liked his ending either. I started with getting the guy on the road. I wrote forever setting up the thing—now that you bring it up, I had forgotten, but there's actually a really funny, like violent comedy scene in it that's really good. I get really annoyed with people saying that I ripped off the Mexican stand-off stuff. *Open Road* was like way before I even knew who John Woo was. It had a Mexican stand-off scene, *True Romance* has a Mexican stand-off scene. I wrote that like in 1985 or 1986, way before I had seen *A Better Tomorrow* or anything. Way, way before. That Mexican stand-off scene is mine as much as it is his. That's always been in my shit. So I really set up this big fuckin' deal to finally get him on the road. But I ultimately found out that I didn't have a good ending for it either; I saw no way to end it.

To resolve it.
Yeah. That's the case with a lot of movies, the writers never come up with a way to end it. You see a movie with a good ending now and you go, "Jesus Christ! It's a masterpiece." Oddly enough, you can fuck up a whole movie and if you end it good, people will walk out of the movie thinking it was good. But having said all that, it was like a tome, like 500 pages, and I wasn't even to the third act yet. But it was a very important script for me because I had never really gotten that far before. I always crapped out around page thirty

or so. I'd always come up with another idea, something better. And the reason was I wasn't writing. I was doing what every other screenwriter seems to do: they want to write to a screenplay, they want to write a cool movie, but they don't want to tell a story. To me that's totally putting the cart before the horse. It doesn't work that way. You should have this burning story to tell and you can't wait to get your movie on the page. That's why I always dropped everything by page thirty; it starts to be hard work about then.

Did you incorporate any scenes from that into your later scripts?
I never really did because *The Open Road* was just so damn specific—well, I did you know, that's a big lie, 'cause actually I did do one thing, the character I was going to play—a guy named "F. Scarland"—was in my very first draft of *Natural Born Killers* that most people never read. I later did a complete rewrite on *Natural Born Killers* but the first draft, F. Scarland was like the third lead in the piece.

Billy Bob Thornton

INTERVIEWED BY ERIK BAUER
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 4, #1 (SPRING 1997)

B illy Bob Thornton has maintained a successful writing partnership with his childhood friend Tom Epperson for over fifteen years. Together, the two wrote the acclaimed 1992 feature *One False Move*, the 1996 release *A Family Thing*, and the 2000 film *The Gift*. Their work has dealt with relations between blacks and whites, the theme of redemption and reconciliation with one's past, and is suffused with the rhythms, colors, and characters of their native South. Thornton was born in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and raised in the tiny town of Malvern. He recalled, "When I first saw Elvis Presley movies, I knew I wanted to be a movie star or a rock-and-roll singer—one or the other." Thornton has done both. He spent several years singing before moving to Los Angeles in 1983 to pursue a career in acting. *Sling Blade* is Thornton's feature-length directorial debut and the first solo script of his screenwriting career. After this interview was conducted, Billy Bob Thornton's screenplay for *Sling Blade* was nominated for an Academy Award for best screenplay based on material previously produced or published (his stage play) and a Writers Guild award. Thornton also received an Academy Award nomination for best performance by an actor in a leading role for *Sling Blade*. While *Sling Blade* is not autobiographical, the story draws much from the people, places, and events of Thornton's youth. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to Billy Bob Thornton in 1997.

You've been incredibly busy as an actor this past year. How hectic has it been?
It's been pretty nuts. I can only imagine what it's like for guys like Kevin Costner and Mel Gibson. Although my life might be a little busier because they tend to do one movie a year. When you're a character guy like I am, you go from one thing to the next. I might do two weeks on this movie and four weeks on that one and five on another one. I was doing three movies

at once, just now. I did a couple of scenes in Robert Duvall's movie *The Apostle*. Then I went and did Oliver Stone's new movie *Stray Dogs*. And I just started *Home Grown*—I'm the lead in this one. I started it, went to Arizona, then came back. I don't fly, which makes it kind of hard. I've been living on the road a lot, like circus people or a carnival.

It looks like you're going to be in just about every movie released last year.
It feels like it. I just hope some of them are good.

How do you find time to do your writing in that kind of atmosphere?
Well, I haven't lately, to tell you the truth. I was working on a script—the next one I'm going to direct—got about half-way through and just had to drop it. If you can't concentrate, there's no sense doing it. I can write some on the set. I write sort of stream of consciousness style, so that works great. Sometimes I'm able to write twenty pages in a half-hour. Tom [Epperson] writes every day. He gets up early in the morning and writes for eight hours. I can't do that. I never was able to do that, because I'm not a natural born writer in terms of discipline, structure and all that. I'm really an actor who writes. My strength is in coming up with characters and dialogue. To have to sit down and know you have to write a screenplay… I'm glad I'm directing now, so I don't have to write a bunch of narrative. I know what it's going to be. Now, when you're trying to sell something, you've got to write out all that. I don't feel like writing EXT. DAY FARMHOUSE. That's a pain in the ass for me. It's not on the screen, so I don't see any sense in it. I'm just not real disciplined. I'm lazy in a way. What I have fun with is writing monologues, like in *Sling Blade*. I like to do that. I could never write an action movie. It's not so much snobbery, but that I don't know enough to do it. I'm not geared for it.

Would you say your writing is an extension of your acting?
Yeah, I guess, in a way. I have more fun as an actor. I've always had a burning desire to do it. And yet, writing is in my blood a little bit. My grandmother was a writer. My mom has been a real keen observer of people and writes down short stories about people. I've always liked to write short stories too. I have a passion for that. But writing screenplays? Sometimes I wish I could just go out there with it in my head and start shooting. Unfortunately, you can't do that. The prop guy's got to have something to go by. I love the result, once I can sit back and say, "Wow, that was great." There's a great feeling of satisfaction once I finish a script. But it's real hard to get me going. If there's a television around and I could be in there watching *Bonanza*, it's real hard. My writing's the hardest thing I do. My hat's off to people who write.

You and Tom [Epperson] moved from Arkansas to L.A. together, and you've written together for years. How do you work together as writers?
It's different on each script. We don't write together, we don't sit in the same room. Generally, we work out the story together, over a period of three or

four weeks. We know each other pretty well, so we know who should write what. It's always pretty obvious to us, who should write what scenes or whatever. Sometimes people ask us if we use index cards or something like that. I never knew what that meant. It's not like that at all, we just kind of go. Some scripts we'll know, well, this is Tom's thing and he'll write most of it. Then we'll do another that's more mine. For the most part, it's about 50-50. There's no real formula, other than we just know who should do what.

Do you and Tom have different points of view as writers?
I think we see everything pretty much eye to eye. We generally like the same movies and the same types of books. We rarely even have a discussion or argument over how something should be. The major difference is Tom really loves to write and he's more likely to want to do any kind of story as a challenge. Mostly, the stuff we've had produced, me with *Sling Blade* and he and I with *A Family Thing* and *One False Move*, those are more my kind of things. I like writing that—real character-based stuff. Not that Tom doesn't, but if we got offered a science fiction movie, he would jump at it a lot quicker than I would.

How helpful has it been to have someone who's "got your back" here in Hollywood?
Incredibly. No doubt about it. He and I were alone, we didn't know anyone. I relied on Tom a lot in the early part of my career. He knew how to write and I knew how to talk like people. It was a great collaboration. I don't know if I would have ever written a screenplay without Tom, because I would have started and said, "Oh, just forget it. I'll just be an actor." So it's been great. I think my life experience has been so… I've had a pretty eclectic group of friends over the years and I've done a lot more traveling on the road and getting to know people from bikers to bankers. So, I think, maybe Tom is pretty happy about that part of it.

How did you and Tom break in to Hollywood as writers?
We had written one script back in Arkansas and just decided, "Hey, let's move to Hollywood." I was a musician and wanted to be an actor. Tom wanted to be a writer. So we took off with this one script. In the midst of horrible poverty and nervousness every day—we didn't have a clue—I met this guy who knew a producer. So we showed our script to him and I'll never forget…. You know what's really weird? This is where we met the guy, right here in this very Hamburger Hamlet [across from the Chinese Theater in Hollywood]. Tom and I were feeling pretty good, you know. A producer read our script and wants to meet with us, that's great. We've only been here six months.

He said, "I hate the script, but I think you guys are really good writers." We were like, "What the hell does that mean? Our script sucks but we're good?" Later on we understood—we didn't know how to write a screenplay, but he liked the dialogue and the characters. It was called *Run for the Hills* and was like 180 pages long. We didn't have a clue. He said, "You need somebody to

show you how to structure a script," and he had a story idea. It was about a Arkansas guy who comes out here to Hollywood. We always wondered whether he came up with that idea right then. So we signed a contract for $30,000, which we thought was a big deal. We both sent a copy to our mothers. I couldn't imagine that kind of money in a million years. Which, of course, is really cheap. But we didn't know that. So we signed the contract to write the thing and it was for no money. We basically signed a piece of paper saying we'll write a script for free. That's all it said. But to us, we'd signed a contract with a Hollywood producer.

We wrote a script called *Good Intentions* and he tried to sell it to everybody in the world—actually, to John Ritter's people. It's funny, I've become friends with John years later. Nobody bought it, but we just kept writing. We wrote four or five more scripts and they didn't sell. We finally wrote this thing called *Hands of Another,* which was an L.A. police thriller—one of the ones which was more Tom's thing. I wrote the weird characters in it. David Geffen optioned that script for $10,000. That, sort of, kept us alive. After that we became known enough with the studio people that we could get meetings. We wrote a script called *The Island*. We wrote *One False Move*, which didn't sell to anybody.

Wasn't your script Hurricane (One False Move) *a breakthrough for you and Tom?* That's what started it all. I was working here and there as an actor and we were making a living being hired to write things now and then. But when *One False Move* came out it was good for everybody involved. It was really like the lucky stroke for everybody—Carl Franklin, the producers, Bill Paxton, me and Tom—that one really set things off. Since then, everybody's been working steady. We're all big deals since *One False Move*.

What was it about your script that caught fire? Well, we didn't really write it, Carl Franklin did. 'Cause when we wrote it, it was more a *Dukes of Hazard* thing…no, I'm playing with you. [laughs] Tom told me what Carl Franklin said [in *Creative Screenwriting*'s interview with him]. That's been our only bone to pick with that whole thing. It was real odd.… I've got nothing against Carl, other than that. I always liked him and thought he was a buddy. It kind of disappoints me that I can't hang out with him any more, cause I enjoyed it. *[One False Move]* was one of those deals where people wanted credit so badly, because people liked it so much, and there was plenty of credit to go around. I don't know why everybody couldn't just settle down. If I were ever going to claim credit for something I didn't do, it would be something nobody could find out about. This script was registered at the Writers Guild years before we even met Carl Franklin.

It's amazing what you can get away with in this industry because everything's accepted at face value. There's no investigative journalism, it's all hype. The original script's pretty much what we shot. What Carl did was cut some

dialogue in the end between Bill Paxton and Cynda Williams. That scene in the house was a lot longer. The things that were changed, I changed them. I remember doing it. He does too. He did some great stuff with it as a director, but to claim you rewrote the script is kind of odd. It really hurt us, because we know we wrote a great script. Everybody in town read it. If he had a beef with me and Tom, he should have at least thanked Bill Paxton and Cynda Williams.

Why did you decided to make Sling Blade *a solo writing effort instead of collaborating with Tom?*
I came up with the character of Karl years ago and performed it in the theater as part of a one-man show. I knew the character and what I wanted to do. It was such a personal thing that to have anybody else write it with me just didn't seem right. If Tom came in he would do a fine job on it, but I had it. I knew what it was. There was no sense in having him write a scene and then saying, "No, Tom, that doesn't quite fit." Because, while Tom and I see eye to eye on everything, our voices are different. It works out great on most of the stuff—it's good to have one character who talks this way and another who talks that way—but I knew all these characters. It was just my story.

How did you go about creating the main character Karl?
Frankly, I came up with it when I was working on a movie. I had five lines on a cable movie *[The Man Who Broke 10,000 Chains]* and I was feeling bad about myself. I saw all the "real" actors around me, people who had a real job—I was basically an extra with a couple of lines—I just felt depressed. I only had the job because the casting director was helping me out so I could get insurance. And I went into the trailer at lunchtime and started looking at myself in the mirror, making faces at myself. I made that face and then the voice came and I started talking to myself. Just rambling, at first. I don't know what I said. And then I did that opening monologue, all at once, and I didn't know where it came from. It was kind of spooky. Then I started doing it as a one-man show. I thought, God, that's a pretty cool character. Maybe something did come out of this horrible movie I'm doing. I'm sure some of that story is pieces of things from my subconscious, but I don't know what exactly. A lot of the other stories in the movie, the stuff that takes place after the mental institution, are true. Like the story Karl tells the kid about the little baby— that really happened where I grew up. All those characters area based on people I knew. Each character is a composite of a lot of people I've known.

Karl's monologue really stands out in the film. What purpose did that serve for you? Did it build sympathy for Karl?
Yeah, I think it does. But it also gives you the sense of danger, or potential danger. If he's just this poor, pathetic guy who gets out, then you're not really waiting for anything to happen. I think you need to know something about him before he gets out. One of the mistakes a lot of movies make is they don't take time to lay out who everybody is, so who cares what happens

later? It also shows his willingness to just say the truth, which is a very important thing in the movie.

This is a film that flows from one character.
It just seemed like a natural to me. It wasn't like I ever thought about it. I knew the story with this guy had to be that he gets out, meets up with a kid he relates to, and a lot of other really good people who accept him. And he needs to meet one asshole who doesn't and that's who he's going to kill. People say it's a simple story—"Not much to think about here, we know he's going to kill him"—but that's what I wanted. Hitchcock talked about that. It's much more interesting to watch something transpire that you know is going to happen…

Suspense.
…rather than wonder who did it. All the characters are symbolic in this movie. The movie is metaphorical. I wanted to make a movie about misconstrued ideas like religion. Because, at my core, I'm a religious person. One thing I was nervous about was that really religious people could look at this movie and take it as a slam on religion, and non-religious people could look at it and think, "Oh, this is just a bunch of religious horseshit." In fact, it's a little of both. It's right down the middle—the basis for all religions is pretty good, but along the way, people empower themselves to condemn others.

You've said, "Karl is an angel." Where does the line of morality fall in Sling Blade*?*
It doesn't say killing's okay. What it does say is, "Boy, sometimes, wouldn't you like to kill that guy?" If this was the Old West, somebody would kill that son-of-a-bitch. Maybe in a perfect world, people who have no redeeming qualities wouldn't exist. And also in a perfect world, maybe you could save people's lives from a person like that. That's what Karl does in this. Whether you believe in the soul or not, Karl does. In his mind, he gives up his own soul to save this kid. He thinks he may go to hell for this, but at the same time, he tells John Ritter's character, "The Bible says you shouldn't be with other men, but I don't think God would send you to Hell." So, maybe in the back of his mind he's thinking, "Maybe I won't go to hell for this." But he knows it's wrong by the law and he knows he's going to have to suffer the consequences.

This is not the kind of movie that's going to make it right now. It's getting a lot of great reviews, everybody loves it and that kind of thing. But it's not like *Shine* and *The English Patient*. First of all, the guy in *Shine* talks loud and really fast—they like that better. Guys who win Academy Awards are guys who either cry or scream. I'll be the first guy to tell you when something of mine stinks. I've done some things that stink. This is just right. *Sling Blade* is just right. One day, twenty years from now, this movie's going to be in the hearts and minds of everybody. Not right now. Too slow paced.

So, you don't think Sling Blade *will find an audience.*
It has found an audience with artists. Actors and directors love the movies—eighty-five percent of the critics do. I don't know if it's always because they really get it or if it's because it looks like the kind of movie they ought to like. Roger Ebert is so good to me. He always has been. He's really behind it and that's great because he's a mainstream guy—people in Omaha and Kansas City listen to him. Critics from the heartland have thanked me. It's like, "Thanks. Someone finally wrote a movie about the fuckin' middle of the country that really is about it." There are directors from Ohio or whatever, directing movies with actors from Queens or Santa Monica about some lynching in Mississippi? I'm sorry. They don't know anything about that. The South's a magical place.

How has the South influenced who you are as a writer/filmmaker?
Completely and totally. That's all I am. I can't go make a movie other than that. You go outside of what you know, and it's not your best stuff. Life is short and I want to do my best work. The South is a rich place. There are ghosts in the South. The atmosphere's different, the air's heavier. It's an area where stories are a staple. The South is all about stories. I loved growing up there. I loved hearing the stories. I loved hearing my grandmother and my mother and people I worked with at the highway department or a factory or wherever. That's what it was all about. That was the highlight of the day. I'm not influenced by movie makers in the least. I'm influenced by novelists—the few novelists I've read—mostly Southern—and musicians. William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell and Frank Zappa. I read their things and it's like, yeah, I know that. I want to write about these folks I know like you wrote about those people you knew. Frank Zappa got me out of the South and into the city. As much as I have a sophisticated sense of humor, I got it from Frank Zappa.

You've said your interest lies in certain areas. How conscious has your focus been on certain issues, such as race?
None of it's been conscious. It's just been natural. It just comes out. Obviously, that's what we want to do. The race thing…it has never been so much about racial issues or racism, but about my affinity for Southern blacks. I was a lead singer in a group that was all black. I sang in an R&B group and a lot of my buddies were black. I just hung around across the tracks a lot. I know the people well enough…sometimes I'll watch a black filmmaker's movie and go, "Naw, that's not it." Mostly in terms of dialogue. And these things they make like *Ghosts of Mississippi* or *Mississippi Burning* are just ridiculous. I can't even discuss those.

There's more and more of those movies. They're like their own genre now.
Oh, I know. And they're always about some case that happened in 1962 about some black man who was killed. That was important, yeah. Just like the Kennedy assassination was important. Everything's important. But, why

there's this desire to write about all these horrible things that happened over civil rights, I don't know. A movie like *A Family Thing* doesn't get seen. It seems to me that kind of movie helps more than reminding people of our horrible past. Also, that's not the whole ball of wax. You grow up in the South where everyone's supposed to be racist—it's just a bunch of poor fuckin' people eating cornbread down there. It makes people think that everyone from Mississippi is like Byron De La Beckwith or something. James Woods, God bless him, is a terrific actor, but he's got no business playing that part. Just like I've got no business playing a yuppie lawyer from Manhattan.

In your scripts, and in Sling Blade, *have you attempted to dispel some of the stereotypes about Southerners?*
Not consciously;, I just wrote about the people because I know them. It comes out like it is, which appears to be what you said. In fact, I'm just writing about how it is. The redneck character Dwight Yoakam played, he could be from Bakersfield, CA or Buffalo, NY. But I know how to write his dialogue for the South. I'm not making a statement about any of that. I'm just writing a story—this is what happened at this particular time.

You've said, "Casting is the entire ball of wax in making a movie."
The script first. Then casting.

How did you tailor the writing in Sling Blade *to the actors you knew were going to be in it?*
There's been a lot of talk about how I cast most of the main roles before I wrote the script. That's true, but those roles would have been written exactly the same, even if those people weren't playing those parts. I knew how this was going to be before I wrote it—I knew what Vaughan was going to be like and I knew what Dwight's character was going to be like. I didn't put lines in because that's what Dwight or John would have said. I just knew that's what they were like already. I knew the dialogue could come out of their mouths. If any of it was tailored at all, it would be John's character Vaughan. John is a great orator—he hosts telethons and beauty pageants—he can speak in public. So I did write Vaughan's big speech at the diner knowing that John can reel things off like that. I knew it would be furtive and eloquent in his way. That scene did have John's way of speaking in mind. Not necessarily the words, but the rhythm.

Was the character of Vaughan drawn to stereotype as a homosexual?
I'm not so sure it was a stereotype, certainly not the movie stereotype. Because you generally have two types of gay characters in the movies: real serious, spiritual, wonderful people who are dying of AIDS or guys like Hank Azaria played in *The Birdcage*. Kind of like Rip Taylor. Sure, his movements were a little effeminate, but those were all character choices by John. The things he said could have [said by] been anybody, if you just read it on the page. A friend

of mine wrote a song one time in which he made a reference to a guy named Saul who had money to loan. He got all this flack from the Jewish community. He knew a guy named Saul who owned a pawn shop. He told me, "It's a real song about my life. Do you want me to name him Roger?" This character is based on a guy I knew who was a choir leader in church back in Arkansas. He wasn't very far from the way he was presented in the film.

One thing that impressed me about Sling Blade *was you stepped away from the violence in the film. Many independent filmmakers feel a healthy dose of violence in a film is commercial.*
And they're right, it is definitely a commercial element in getting your movie seen. I firmly believe that if *One False Move* had not had the violence, nobody would have given a shit about the movie. If it was about a small-town sheriff and a black woman who had a baby together and the problems they had, it would have never worked. People want to see something happen. I certainly didn't want to do that with this movie.

Why?
One thing, I'm pretty anti-violence. I don't want to do more movies about violence. I'm okay with *One False Move* because the violence in the movie is ugly. It tells you, you don't want to be involved in this. It doesn't condone violence whatsoever. Whereas, big commercial movies kill 100 people at once and everybody laughs. Or in Quentin Tarantino's movies you root for those silly hit men.

The violence is very sexy, especially in Tarantino's movies.
Yeah, absolutely. Obviously, people are drawn to that. But I don't like it. The killings in this movie are more symbolic than anything else. If that's the case, I saw no point in showing it. A lot of people said, why don't you show flashbacks of when he kills his mother as a kid? I don't want to show flashbacks. For me, it's much more powerful and mysterious to hear the story. I don't want to know what Karl looked like when he was eleven. I want to imagine it.

This movie has been long in the making. How did you get Sling Blade *produced?*
I didn't have to work much at it, actually. My agent, Todd Harris at William Morris, knew Larry Meistrich at The Shooting Gallery and he said, "You know, Larry Masters doesn't like the Hollywood system either. I think you'd like to meet him, and he'd like to meet you and he doesn't like to meet anybody." So we met and he said, "We like it when the writers make their own movies. We think that's a good way to do it." He asked me if I had anything I wanted to direct, and I told him I had this character and this story and he said, "Okay. Let's do it." He was the only guy I talked to. That's easier than anything else I've ever done. Now I can do that—they want me to direct a movie about a Martian who infiltrates the CIA or something. They only know that,

for some reason, you're hot. So, if you're hot, and we've got this movie open, you should direct it. They don't ever think that maybe you can't do it.

Miramax acquired Sling Blade *for $10 million and you signed a multi-picture deal with them. Do you think Miramax figured they could recoup that money on* Sling Blade*, or were they building a future relationship with you?*
I think it's more that they're building a future relationship. Harvey Weinstein at Miramax is a lot more like the old movie guys like Louis Mayer and Darryl Zanuck.

Those guys at Miramax are smart.
Oh, yeah. You'll get a lot of arguments out of Bob and Harvey [Weinstein], you'll be pissed off at them half the time, they'll be pissed at you half the time, but at the end of the day they are making quality movies. And they do want to do it. Half the time, I think Harvey, in particular, wants the prestige and the respect as much as he wants the money. Because he's a showman like P.T. Barnum, and I love that. I'd rather have an hour-long argument with Harvey than a minute-long conversation with the studio heads here. They're releasing it now in a few theaters to qualify for awards, but I'm way too pessimistic and insecure about myself to ever imagine I would get some award.

Your acting in Sling Blade *was excellent. If you had been in a supporting role, we might be talking Academy Award nomination.*
Absolutely. If that were the supporting role in the movie, I would win the Academy Award. There's no doubt. That fact is it's the lead, it's ugly, he doesn't cry, he doesn't yell, he doesn't have a big emotional scene—that's a requirement for an Academy Award. I'll never do another role like that again. That was a magical, cosmic kind of thing and it won't happen again.

This year *Shine* will win, Tom Cruise will be nominated for *Jerry Maguire*, probably Daniel Day Lewis for *The Crucible* only because he's Daniel Day Lewis. I saw a clip from the movie and he has one really big screaming scene. He's like on the verge of tears and he's screaming—that's surefire. Karl's the same character all the way through. His character is even.

What kind of growth does Karl undergo as a character? What kind of arc does he have?
The difference between real life and acting is that in real life, people don't react much. In acting we react the shit out of everything. There can be a voice-over where somebody's thinking out loud to the audience, and you'll see on their face that they're doing it. Actors who aren't very good do it all the time and I've been guilty of it myself. In real life you just sit there. Karl went through exactly the same growth any other character goes through, only it doesn't show because, one, that's what I like to do as an actor; and two, that's just how he is. He's not really capable of showing emotion. He loved the kid—the first love of his life. He realized there was something he could do to correct a situation like he was raised in. He felt good about himself for the first time ever.

He smiles one time in the movie when the kid says, "I like the way you talk." And he says, "Well, I like the way you talk." It's the first time anyone's ever paid him a compliment. That right there is the most important moment in the movie. Critics won't see that. They're too busy wanting me to cut to a fuckin' close up. The critics and the people who make comedies about a pickle who comes to life, or whatever, can kiss my ass.

That really casts against the dominant film esthetic of the emotional close-up.
I don't think I'm a filmmaker. I like to watch movies, but I don't think I'm a filmmaker because I have no interest in learning what you're supposed to do. But, I use them when I think it's appropriate. I like to see and feel the room. The movies that made me want to make movies were *Tender Mercies, Hope and Glory, High Noon, The Searchers*, all of Jim Jarmusch's movies, and *Paris, Texas*. *Paris, Texas* had a guy who didn't talk for half the movie. That made me want to make movies.

It's not the technical aspects that make a filmmaker, it's the vision.
Right. Right. It's just never going to be easy, for me. I'll never make a movie that's universally accepted.

What are you doing next?
In this Miramax deal the next one's supposed to be this comedy called *A Thousand Miles From Nowhere*. Then I've got one called *East End,* which I'm looking forward to. It's one of those I really want to do. I've been thinking about it lately, and I'm not sure which I'm going to do next—they're both writing and directing deals. I was supposed to do the comedy next, but now I'm not sure.

Robert Towne

I f one person was selected to personify the art and craft of screenwriting in the late twentieth century, that person would probably be Robert Towne. Towne embodies characteristics too often lacking in the profession: longevity (he's been writing for over four decades, beginning with *The Last Woman on Earth* for Roger Corman), classicism (his Academy Award-winning *Chinatown* is the obvious example, but there's also *The Last Detail* and *Shampoo*), flexibility (he's script-doctored everything from *Bonnie & Clyde* to *Armageddon*) and survivalism (he's one of the few writers from the halcyon '70s who is still writing big-budget features today).

Towne has also survived his share of personal and professional difficulties. His battle with producer David Geffen during the production of Towne's directorial debut, *Personal Best*, ended with Towne relinquishing the rights and directing duties on his beloved *Greystoke* script ("I think it would have been the best film I'd ever done if I'd been able to make it") to see *Personal Best* through to completion. The pain still shines in Towne's eyes when he talks of the sacrifice of *Greystoke*. Warner Bros. gave *Greystoke* to director Hugh Hudson (coming off the Oscar-winning *Chariots of Fire*). Suffice to say, Towne is not a fan of that film.

Thereafter, Towne went through a painful divorce, which led him to reassess his position in Hollywood. He decided to reinvent himself, to show the town that he could write on the blockbuster features as well as the smaller, more intricate dramas. Towne's agent at the time, Paula Wagner, also represented Tom Cruise. Wagner suggested Towne work with Cruise on the Don Simpson/Jerry Bruckheimer racing film, *Days of Thunder*. Not only did this allow Towne to prove that he could write the big films, it also created a personal and professional bond between Towne and Cruise. Towne has scripted half of Cruise's films in the last decade, including *The Firm, Mission:*

Impossible, and *Mission: Impossible 2*. In turn, Cruise produced Towne's writing/directing effort *Without Limits*.

Towne's *Mission: Impossible 2* continues his relationship with Cruise and Cruise's *Mission: Impossible* alter ego Ethan Hunt, Towne worked with Cruise and director John Woo to take a handful of action sequences and create a story that would employ dramatic action while continuing the Paramount Pictures franchise. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke with Towne in his Los Angeles home in 2000, where he discussed the rules of writing action melodramas, building character from action, and how writing never gets any easier, no matter how renowned a writer may be.

How did the writer of Chinatown *get involved in* Mission: Impossible 2*?*
The way I usually become involved in it: I was asked. I discussed it early on with Tom [Cruise] and Paula [Wagner] and then I was working on another project with him and eventually it came back to me. At least six, seven, eight months went by, then he asked me to become involved. It isn't very interesting. Like the way I got involved with the first one, you know?

It was an interesting problem because by the time I got involved, there were certain action pieces around which the story had to be written, or, at the very least, the story couldn't interfere with the action pieces [laughs]. [These scenes], through the storytelling process, had become solidified in John Woo's mind. I won't say those sequences had a life of their own but they were there, and had been developed. In a movie like *Mission*, as in all of John's movies, his action sequences are carefully choreographed. They were there. And the story, at the point that I came along, was not there to support the action. So what it really came down to is somebody saying, "These are the action sequences that we've got. How about telling the story?" That's unusual. That was the most challenging thing about it: starting with the action sequences and using them to tell the story.

It's an important consideration.
Yeah, you can put it that way; and knowing that, I judged it would be a good idea to try to make the action pieces part of the story [laughs]. Now, given the alternative, that was the sensible approach, you know? I kid about it. It was very difficult, and it didn't work right away. But after awhile, enough monkeys at a typewriter—or acting enough like a monkey on a typewriter—it actually worked. [The action] really became (at least what I hope appears to be) an integral part of the story.

When you're working in that situation, is there a regressive analysis that goes on, to fit a story around those scenes? Do those boundaries make the writing easier?
Well, there are certain action sequences that are there. There's no analysis that needs to be done. That's it, man. And you do your best to work it out. Oddly enough, Tom and I—even before other writers got involved—had talked about an approach to the story that was still possible under those con-

ditions. I returned to that approach and talked it over with Tom and John [Woo] and they approved of it and we went with that.

It took three drafts. The first draft was creaky because trying to make the action look as if it flows from character is very hard. It didn't work the first time, and it didn't work the second time. But for some reason the third draft (when we were in Australia), I remember getting about twenty-five to thirty pages into it and thinking, "Well, I don't know where we're going but I know that, at least from my point of view, this is going to work." And we all felt that this draft worked. It had a level of—I really don't want to say reality—but it seemed organic, it started happening. And then suddenly it was fun, and I felt good about it. The first two drafts were tough, but that often happens. I would guess that the writers of Hitchcock movies, like the writers of *Mission* movies, well, they're a lot more fun to see than to write.

Was it a bit daunting to come onto this project? There had been a number of writers before you and then you're working with Tom and John. Is there a weight in that situation that you wouldn't have if they had come to you fresh off the greenlight?
There are two ways to look at that. A lot of avenues have been explored by that time—alternative avenues—and they'd obviously not worked. So I suppose in that sense, it's daunting. In another sense, you feel a little bit freer because this other stuff hasn't worked. By that point they're hoping something's going to work [laughs]. Maybe in the sense you have a little more freedom simply because—oh, it's partly because of the fact that other things have been explored that haven't worked and in a sense, that's taught you something. Also by this time we know each other pretty well and we trust each other pretty much. So if I say, "Well, let me try this," Tom will tend to let me try it. And in fact, that has happened once. He said, "Well, why don't you try this?" (this is later on, in the third rewrite) about something, and I said, "Jesus Christ, man, I don't know. I would never try that on my own. Are you sure it'll work?" And he said, "I'm positive." And I believed him. I believed him because I believe he really has a handle on this particular piece and what the parameters are. He has a really intuitive grasp of it, and so I tried it and it worked. So, it cuts both ways. It's always a benefit when you've worked with somebody and enjoyed working together. It helps.

There's a lot of trust between you and Tom that you don't normally have when you're coming into a new project. You've worked with Tom before; he knows the character. It sounds like the work goes more smoothly.
Yeah, there is real trust there, no question about it.

You've said, "What I've always responded to is movement—character is automatically expressed more quickly and eloquently through movement than through dialogue." Can you give some examples of that working with Tom and how his physicality helped shape the script?
Look at James Cagney walking. Look at Jimmy Stewart walking. You're halfway

there with a character. [With Tom Cruise] it's just a ferocious energy level that you see. The last shot of the filming actually took place here [in Los Angeles]. I'd gotten back from Australia and Tom called me up and said, "Why don't you come out to the airport and watch the last shot?" So I ran out to the airport, went into this big hanger, got in this lift, went up seven and a half stories. Got hitched to a bar with this thing around my waist so I could lean out over the edge, which was dizzying. Tom greeted me, he said, "Hey, man, watch this!"—and with that, he dove seventy-five feet and ended up six inches from the camera. Now, of course he was on a sling, but it was a major stunt for anybody. And he did a flip in the air.

Now does that free you as a writer to explore areas you might not explore with someone less adventurous?
It focuses me as a writer to explore those areas. I don't know that you can call that freedom. It certainly is a stimulant. Look at the title of the piece. *Mission: Impossible*. There's a guy who's always trying to prove that something can be done, and doing it. That's his history. You just see it. It's this irrepressible thing about his nature. Tom, inside, knows he can accomplish anything, even if he has never tried it before. Tom is somebody who never gives up on anything. He just knows he will triumph. That is Ethan Hunt. And that "peskiness" and persistence also has its comic side, and so it's highly suggestive.

Tom started parachuting onto the set of *Days of Thunder*. He'd parachute out of the plane and hit the Daytona track, then get in the car and drive 200 miles an hour. People were doing it, but not many, and it took a good deal of skill. So about two or three days after his last jump (he didn't do it every day but he did it more than once, put it that way) some guy jumped, got caught in a downdraft, hit the pavement, and got killed. And I said, "Hey man, aren't you worried about that?" And Tom said, "No, no, the guy didn't know what he was doing." He had it worked out where this guy just didn't operate within the parameters of what he knew himself to be workable, and from his point of view, that could not and would never happen to him. And you know, it never did. You think, "Maybe this guy obviously knows something I don't." But to see that in him…it's really there. You are building a completely fantastical character on a piece of someone who really is there. It's amazing how helpful that is.

That sounds like it gives you a lot of strength as a writer. When you put something down on paper, you know Tom can do it.
It's all an illusion. But it gives you strength because you know he is doing it. It gives that odd little extra bit of conviction because you think, if there really was an organization like this, and there really was somebody maniacal enough to do it, it would be Tom. And so in that sense, it makes you believe. In another sense, it's helpful because it goes to the motivation. Why do guys do that? Because they like to. You can see the great, good fun.

I remember once years ago, when my older daughter was about eighteen

months old, I was running with her on the beach, carrying her. And I turned her upside down when I was running and she giggled. It was as if she was a little doll that was programmed. Every time I turned her upside down, she would giggle, automatically. I realized that that little child instinctively knew that she was defying gravity when I was turning her upside down, that it dramatized the fact that she was defying gravity because people can't be upside down normally without falling on their head. But something was aborting the rules of gravity and it delighted her. Defying the laws of gravity, both literally and figuratively, is something. That childlike delight is at the heart of somebody like Tom. It's a very simple thing, but it's genuine. It gives you something that's real, to build your illusion on.

And that also plays to the audience because they want to see that.
Yeah, they want to see it and they want to believe it, and in this case, their desire to believe has a foundation. Whether they know it or not, they sense it. It instinctively helps them to be transported into this fantasy world, this ride that they want to take, and to feel that, 'Well, maybe something like this could really happen.'"

That's the best of all worlds. Tom trusts you as a writer, you trust him for his input, and you can identify his personality with that of Ethan Hunt. And the audience trusts both of you. It's that pact that's made in the filmmaking and viewing process.
I certainly think that's true with Tom and me. There's a real desire on all our parts to play fair with the audience, to give them the best possible ride, and not to cheat. To try, within the fantastic rules of *Mission: Impossible*, to abide by those rules. Every genre has its discipline. And so you say, "Okay, once you enter this world, this world will have its rules and we will abide by them and he will succeed within the context or fail within the context of that world, with its rules. Some of them are a bit heightened from the real world but those will be abided by." That's what I mean by playing fair.

Does the audience implicitly know those rules?
Well, they know the rules are there. They've known them from the beginning, from the television show, from all the rules spoken and unspoken that melodrama over the years has been codified into. Generally speaking, and even in an action melodrama, there are no extraneous [elements]. A guy can't be in the middle of running down villains, and in a car chase out of one of those voyeuristic television shows about cops, run around the block, hit somebody and get killed. That can't be part of this world. This world is a dream world and in a dream, everything has a place and advances the action.

  [As opposed to] those weird things that just happen. There were those three great Greek tragedians, and one of them—I think it was Sophocles—died because he was walking along a road and his bald head looked like a rock to an eagle who was carrying a turtle. The eagle was looking for something to crack the turtle's shell on and he dropped it on the head of arguably the

greatest tragedian in the history of Western civilization. Of course, there is a poetry about that, but you can't have those kinds of odd events [in an action melodrama]. It has to be relevant to what the villain and the hero do. They are demiurges, they are forces strong enough so that they control the action, the action does not control them.

Within those rules, how do you build characters in an action melodrama—and a sequel at that—who can stand on their own within this film and yet do not get in the way? We know that at the end of Mission: Impossible 2, *Ethan Hunt is not going to sacrifice himself for the greater good even though he might want to. They need to be able to make* Mission: Impossible 3.

What you're saying is that you know he's not going to die. I think that's right and I think that's one of the critical problems. However, that doesn't mean that a very important or critical secondary character or co-lead can't die, or that doesn't mean that he might not, for example, pledge to protect or save somebody or fail. There would be the possibility of his failing to do so, which would, in a sense, kill his character, even if he doesn't physically die. So the point is that you have to set up situations where you fear, if not for Ethan Hunt's life, then for the life of somebody that he feels that he must protect. How he reacts to that [is the crux situation]. How he reacts, let's say, to a situation where he's torn between what he has to do to get his job done or saving that person's life—the classic conflict between love and duty. In other words, there are other ways to create a drama with a character [other than] whether he's going to physically survive or not.

To what degree can Ethan Hunt fail, since we know—we assume—that he will ultimately triumph? Is Ethan Hunt allowed failures, great failures, through the picture?

Well, sir, you go too far. You'll have to see the movie. [Laughs]

You've talked about the fact that sometimes you work up a treatment, not necessarily to slavishly follow it, but that it's a direction to begin with. And that many times, the script will go in a direction diametrically opposite to the treatment.

You have to have something to argue with. That's why the treatment sometimes works. I'm writing *The Thirty-Nine Steps* now. It's been one of my favorite movies and I never saw the point in redoing it. Unless and until I felt that I could bring something to it, the truth, to allow me to use the old movie as a cultural icon, as a myth, that can be retold to different generations in a different way. As a myth that can have a relevance in a different time and be used for different reasons.

For example, painters have used scenes of the Annunciation, the Crucifixion. Those myths, those moments, and the way they've been treated in the past, are things for them to rewrite. "Carravaggio did it this way; I'm doing it this way." No matter how good the person is, if a different time and place provides the freedom to do an entirely different approach, in a way that could be said to provide an occasion to allow you to rewrite.

How do you effect the argument on the film that you like? How do you bring in modern-day sensibilities to both honor the original film but also update it?
I'll just say one thing about that, and then maybe you can understand it from there. Remember the central character of Richard Hannay from *The Thirty-Nine Steps*? Remember who he is, sort of an English gentleman? [Now] imagine a world-famous dissolute American movie star.

Replacing one critical element with its opposite.
Yeah. The update also then takes you into an area of issues of privacy and the press and the fact that some of the press seems to prefer rumor to fact. So it becomes the occasion, the movie does, to examine other issues.

It spins the story in a completely different direction but is still true to the original.
Honor it, and depart from it.

Since drama is change, what change can you effect on characters in an action sequel?
Well, you certainly can't in something like *M:I-2*. You enjoy somewhat the same problem that you did in the television series in that you can't kill your hero. But you can effect his—you can turn the fact that perhaps that's so emotionally involved, or sufficiently involved emotionally, that it could affect his performance.

That speaks to the difference between Mission: Impossible 2 *and the Bond films, where Bond rarely seems to evolve.*
The differences are such slender threads. I miss Sean Connery. No matter what happens, no matter how good these guys are—Pierce [Brosnan] is doing a good job—but Bond is Sean Connery. That's it. The smooth-talking son-of-a-bitch was something you loved because it had this great-looking dour Scot right in the middle of it with that burr and suddenly: "Bond, James Bond," and "Shaken, not stirred" and the Walther PPK and all that stuff. You bought it, just off that guy's personality and his accent, and at the bottom you felt there was something in Sean, as indeed there was: "I don't know how much longer I can do this." That unspoken subtext with this great-looking guy suggested (a) he was doing it, and (b) he was really good at it. There was something real about it. "Real," in that way. There are actors who by dint of their personality [inform their character with a life of its own].

   I think Tom, he's so very American, you know? That sense of "By God, I'm going to do it" and "I'm not going to be the one who's going to die trying. I'm going to get it done." He's so full of that vitality that you believe it. Because at a fundamental level it's in the persona of the actor; it's true. And you trust that in writing about it, in the way in which guys who must have worked with Sean trusted [when they wrote for him as James Bond]. It's not that we bring something so different to it. You've got to be good enough to recognize that tiny little edge that is always there, that the right actor brings you. Whether it's Sean or Tom or Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes. You

just gotta try to deal with your character in situations, not to screw with that, to show that off to your best advantage. Because that's the reality you've got in an action movie, where action is the essential nature of the actor and we exploit it in the best possible way. And if you do that, if you dramatize that correctly, he's going to do it no matter what, in a situation where he's torn between that need to do that and a very emotional attachment. That's going to be your best way of showing off that character. Your collateral in these kinds of films—*James Bond, Mission: Impossible*—is the actor. When you've got one who's the genuine coin of the realm, the real McCoy in this phoniest of all worlds, wisdom consists in learning how to exploit it. By exploit it, I mean dramatize it. So in that sense, as a writer, my real collaborator—literally, and even when he's asleep and not there, although that wasn't very often—was Tom.

Do you think that modern-day audiences have that wanting, that willingness to believe, as much as they used to?
Oh, sure they do. It's just that what you and I are talking about in terms of an actor for a running part, that doesn't happen very often. There's William Powell *(The Thin Man),* Sean, and that's true of Tom. Tom is really that guy. There's a piece of him that's just exactly like that guy. Audiences want to believe that as much as they ever did. They're just more skeptical than they've ever been, more sophisticated than they've ever been. You have to be more careful about letting them enjoy it. In other words, you have to create a situation where it's not that easy for the hero to display his wares, so they're rooting for the hero. Showing up's not going to do it.

Those dynamics don't ever change, anymore than storytelling ever changes for children or adults. All you have to do, if you want to be reassured of that, is look at *Harry Potter*. What's number one, two, and three on the best-seller list, on the *New York Times* list. Not for children. For children and adults. It's *Harry Potter*. If you want to know whether storytelling is something audiences want to read, hey, Potter's a real hero. If you want to read great storytelling, that's great storytelling. And all the things we're talking about, in terms of a hero whom you have to believe can get it together to overcome incredible odds, is there.

It's really a wonderful story.
Yes, that never changes. The skills that have been brought to motion pictures in recent years have not been as finely honed as they were in the past. It's partly a legacy of the '50s and '60s where the advent of television had such a powerful impact on movies. [And so Hollywood, in an attempt to lure audiences back to the theaters, relaxed the code of what could be depicted in a film.] Let them see something they can't see on TV. So, in a way, it was great. We used language we hadn't used before, and showed scenes dealing with sex. But it also removed the stumbling blocks that were really spurs to good storytelling. All right, you can't show them having sex so what do you

do? All the inventiveness the old films had in terms of storytelling—you can't show a certain type of violence—all of our inventiveness was gone. Our need to be inventive was gone. Not that you can't be inventive with additional colors in your palette, but just the fact that you can show blood, and bullets in people, and do it in slow motion, and have simulated sex and all of those things.… It very often became the occasion for people to photograph that, rather than use them judiciously; therefore, a lot of storytelling lapsed. The improved techniques with the camera and CGI and everything else became Grand Guignol and the razzle-dazzle of technological advancement. To the detriment of storytelling.

There was nothing to argue with any more.
Exactly. And that was enough. Not that there haven't been good stories. There's been some very good storytelling. For example, the first *Jurassic Park* had some very good storytelling. There's plenty of it. But there's also plenty lacking.

Myths usually focus on the winners, but some of your most powerful pieces have focused on losers, or people in losing situations: Without Limits, Chinatown. *Do you think it's as important to have the myths of the losers?*
I do. Almost by definition, in tragedy, the guy loses. It's only the fact of his loss that allows us to see how heroic he is. That the passion and the spirit which informed his actions, the fact that he's failed or died and that we're still left with that feeling, lets us know that that feeling is so strong that it transcended the physical.

Do you feel more for someone who willingly goes to their death for a cause, or for someone who fights for a cause and dies unwillingly?
Personally, I would identify with the latter, the guy who dies not willingly. That was really the success of a lot of World War II movies. He didn't want to die, but he believed in what he was fighting for.

You're considered one of the grandmasters of Hollywood. How do you feel when people describe you like that? Is that a crown of thorns or a crown of gold?
Given the choice of being lavished in praise or not praised, what do you think? Of course you would prefer being praised. But I have to point out out that it doesn't make one's job any easier. In some cases, it makes it more difficult. I can honestly say that I don't think any studio in the '90s—even in the '80s, the great '80s—gives a damn: "He's done these movies, we better pay a little attention to him." I don't think that has anything to do with anything. It doesn't figure into the equation. If anything went well, that was then, this is now. The only benefit your experience gives you is, when you're stuck on the story point: "Well, hell, I got through it before, I guess I'll get through it again." It's that dumb faith in the fact of your own history. "I must be able to do this. I did it before." But it's just as hard every time.

Does the writing get any easier?
No. In certain little ways, yeah. But in any real serious way? No. It's still hard.

You've worked in Hollywood for several decades. What sort of changes have you seen?
The biggest change—at least for the writer—was years ago. I remember when I wanted to do *Greystoke*. I called up a friend and said, "Let's do it." But he says, "Oh, damn man, that's going to be a problem"—because an associate of his had [met resistance trying to put together a Tarzan film]. Oh, no, come on—Jane Goodall, *Shadow of Man*. We could actually do it now as if it really happened. [And my friend said] "You're right, screw it, let's do it." That ability in the shorthand an idea, where somebody says "Well, I'm not sure but go ahead and do it." That willingness to gamble on the hunch of the filmmaker is gone. You know, there are too many other people who will second-guess every second, the creative executives who come along and read the material and then sit around. That visceral response, that "Try it, and if you screw up, then it's your ass, but go ahead and try." Storytelling is fun and impulsive: "Wouldn't it be great if we did this and did that?" When you have to wait five damn years to find out if it'd be great, the impulsiveness is gone.

Are there people who still work under that visceral response system?
If I find one, I'll let you know. There are people who have those impulses, but they are to some extent constrained in the same way I am. They don't have the ability any longer in those jobs to say, "Hey, I'm going this way with it." The system has it built-in that there are too many people to answer to. Just the damn fact of the in-house lawyers, endless tin cans tied to your tail. It takes months and years to get a contract done. Used to be, somebody just did it on the phone. Never had a damn deal. Now, the deal is [everything].

Was that the advent of corporate ownership of studios?
Yeah. It's bad because that's isn't what it's about. So much a part of filmmaking is that impulsiveness—"Let's do it [snaps fingers]. Screw it, let's do it tomorrow. Let's not do it three years from tomorrow." That's terrible. It's the thing that will eventually kill me.

Does it get harder every year?
Not the doing of it, all the bull surrounding the doing of it. Endless.

Chinatown *is often used as the perfect paradigm for the three-act structure and all of that. When you're building a story, do you use any of these paradigms?*
I don't know. I start thinking about it and it forms, or it doesn't form. I start thinking about it or writing, taking notes, whatever it is, until it starts to come alive on its own.

There's no trick? No magic key?
No. I wish there was.

How have you managed to stay in the game when so many of the great writers of the '70s—such as John Milius and Paul Schrader—are no longer doing the big pictures?
How I ended up doing this is both misfortune and good fortune, like anything else in life. I was unfortunate enough to need money and fortunate enough to, run into and meet people and work with them and truly love it. Personal difficulties necessitated my working in areas where I wouldn't have thought I'd be working, like *Mission: Impossible*, because I needed the money. And then what begins as a purely commercial venture becomes something more when I run into somebody like Tom.

There are well-made movies and there are movies that are not well made. And that's about the only difference. Whether they're commercial or not commercial, or whether they're smaller or larger, it's really secondary to that. I guess needing to work and needing money, I worked in a greater variety of areas than I thought I would. I can do a film that is not a big film that I like, like *Without Limits*, and have the great, good benefit of having someone such as Tom produce it for me and allow that to happen. And at the same time do large films like *Mission*. As I said, the only difference is not between them so much as between movies that are made with passion. And believe me this movie, whatever its frustrations, a great deal of passion went into the making of it.

The '80s were a very difficult time for you, yet you successfully moved to the block-busters. What did you learn from that time period? There was a lot of tragedy and you arose from the ashes. That's not something that happens a lot in Hollywood.
Tragedy was just everybody's life. Domestic difficulties, family. I'm not different from anybody else. It was domestic problems that are long, long gone, but certainly [were] difficult to deal with for a time. It's a favorite John Milius quote, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." John loves to quote that, so I guess I can quote that too.

Lars von Trier

INTERVIEWED BY ELAYNE TAYLOR
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T hirteen years after graduating from the Danish Film School, Lars von Trier's hand-held film *Breaking the Waves* won a Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival and earned a Best Actress Academy Award nomination for Emily Watson in her first film role. Critics were surprised at the success of von Trier's amazing little film, but even more at the change in his writing. A melodrama just wasn't expected from the same writer who, along with Niels Vorsel, created the icily controlled Hitchcockian thriller, *Zentropa* in 1992. Helena Bonham Carter expressed prevailing sentiments best by saying, "I had no idea how talented Lars was. His other stuff [before *Breaking the Waves]* seemed rather cold and stylistic." The warming of Lars von Trier began with *The Kingdom* (1994), a mini-series shot in his distinctive, hand-held style. Von Trier's low-gore horror-serial was set in a real hospital and produced on a miniscule budget featuring effects nobody would call special. But the characters riveted Europeans, and the series' real heroine was a fifty-plus hypochondriac who padded the vast hallways in her bathrobe, searching out the ghost of a little girl murdered decades before by her doctor-father.

Von Trier completed his literary reversal by 1995, with the creation of a set of rules called Dogma (or Dogme, in Danish). Partnered with writer/director Thomas Vinterberg, the two writers swore off glitzy special effects and production techniques that they claimed were camouflaging weak stories and crowding out real acting. Internationally published, the Dogma rules provoked as many filmmakers as they influenced. But von Trier and Vinterberg triumphed over their critics with simple films that won critical and commercial success.

After writing and directing *The Kingdom Part II*, Von Trier wrote *The Idiots* (1998), in less than a week. His latest film, *Dancer in the Dark*, stars Icelandic diva/composer Bjork as Selma, a nearly-blind, single-mom, factory worker, and legendary French actress Catherine Deneuve as Selma's friend Cathy.

Though it's being described as a musical, the film transcends the boundaries of that genre. Members of the audience at the Cannes Film Festival reportedly were "shaken" when the house lights went up. Unusually and relentlessly tragic, *Dancer* seems more the bastard child of grand opera than cousin to the American musical. Despite controversy and mixed reactions, the film won the Golden Palm at Cannes, and seems positioned for an Oscar nomination. *Creative Screenwriting* spoke to von Trier by telephone from his home in Denmark, which he never travels from because of acute phobia of confined spaces, including theaters.

How did you start writing Dancer in the Dark*?*

I thought I would like to do an execution scene and then I put the story together. It was actually intended to be a remake of *Breaking the Waves*. We call it style, you know, if you repeat yourself.

Why an execution scene?

I remembered *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote's film. In that film, this poor man who's going to be hanged is in a harness. And this I put in my script. And then my stenographer called me from the state of Washington saying that they only use that in Texas. But they had something else and she was standing right next to it. Collapse boards they call it. It's not that everything has to be exact, [because] you can never match real life. But I could never have invented a board like this. Never in my life could I have thought of that.

You did a lot of research and got coverage from American readers?

Oh yes. I had conversations with American lawyers and people who knew how things were back then. I had a very big problem getting Selma convicted in the courtroom. People reading said there wasn't a chance I could get a blind woman executed. Then I had to change the crime and put in a lot of evidence for the court. I found out that it would be really bad for her to say something good about the Communists, so I put that in. And then it also helped that she didn't flee her country because she wanted to flee her political system. She actually came to get the operation for her son. Research can help you [shape] characters.

You're writing a new script right now…

I'm preparing and I haven't got the slightest idea. I'm putting up a lot of difficulties for myself. For example, I put up those Dogma rules, and they changed the whole film. I have changed a lot over the years with my approach. I'm writing stories simpler and simpler. In my earlier films we made a very complex script and storyboards. Even the edits we storyboarded before the film was shot.

Are you referring to Zentropa*?*

Yes, especially *Zentropa*. Everything was planned. The bad thing about that is

when you go out and film it, you can only reach seventy percent of what you have dreamt. And then it's kind of depressing. But if you do the opposite—only writing a sketch and keep the story simple—then part of the script work is with the actors. Because they put things into it, you get something instead of losing. Dogma taught me to make a stronger bond with the actors and use them in a better way. Now, I would like to move to more abstract film again.

Was there a big switch from writing Zentropa *to writing* Breaking the Waves*?*
I changed, yes. But in all my films the scripts are quite close. All the stories are about a realist who comes into conflict with life. I'm not crazy about real life, and real life is not crazy about me. After *Zentropa*, I had the idea to make an emotional film. It was quite a cynical decision, in that sense. Although I took it very serious[ly]. It wasn't a joke.

David Morse quoted you as saying, "My script is shit, do the subtext."
Carl Dreyer *[The Passion of Joan of Arc, Ordette]* was a famous [Danish] director, who spent many years on each script. He started with eight hundred pages and then cut down and cut down and ended up with sixty pages or something like that. So the whole process was simplifying. For actors to work with character, maybe the words in the script should never be said. We had exercises in this film where I would simply say, "Now let's do it again and not use any words from this script." I can tell from that if everybody knows what we're doing and what the conflict is. I get them to try to say it with their own words.

So you can pinpoint exactly what the actors are clear about or what they don't get.
Absolutely. I developed this technique over the last five or six years. I shoot a scene in many different ways, shades, angles and intentions, and then in the editing put the whole thing together. Now that I'm working on video, with one hour of tape, I just go on filming for the whole hour without stopping and then discuss and suggest that the actors do it a little differently. Or suggest that what they came up with here and here could be used there. I remember a very good example of this when I worked with Bjork and David [Morse] on this scene where they're sitting in the trailer, and he's saying he doesn't have any money, and she's talking about going blind. We shot about one hour and it was very intense and extremely good. Bjork was suddenly changing the pace and getting excited. I said to David, "When she does this, go with her." I sat alone with the two actors and the camera, and it came to life. The script is not alive when I write it. The process where it comes alive comes after, when I do it with the actors. When I know who [the cast] is going to be, then I may rewrite a little bit, but actors always give you something on the day. It's a little bit like being a chef—going to the market to see what we have today…

I wasn't expecting a mushroom soufflé but here it is.
And for breakfast! Surprises come, and you see what kind of mood you get out of it.

For the first twenty-five pages I felt played with—not sure if I was going to like Selma or not. I loved being given time to make up my mind about this character. Did you write it this way originally or did it come out of working with the actors?
It's in the original script. It's very clear. If you compare my technique to drawing, I would draw a picture and then erase it a little bit here and there. It's much better that [the audience] have the feeling that they can decide about Selma than if you hit them over the head from the start that she's a golden-hearted woman. It was extremely important to me that this boy, Gene, should not be a dream of a child, that he and his mother should not have a lot of love on the surface. I write the story, and then I go against it, here and there. It becomes more like real life if things are not extremely obvious.

Selma seems angrier in the script. Did Bjork soften her on screen?
That is possible. When you shoot a scene in many different ways, as we did, then the final decision comes in the editing. My way of working is to sample and collect a lot of different things.

When Selma first storms out of the factory and confronts Gene about skipping school, the script says she slaps him hard three times. But she only slaps him once on screen.
Bjork changed that. She didn't want to slap him at all. She said, "I never slapped a person in my life." And then I said, "I remember something about a journalist in Hong Kong…" and she said, "Only once!" I remember this journalist got banged into the concrete floor. But I still couldn't get more slaps out of her.

There is a scene in the script where Selma plays a prank, pretending to order expensive ruby jewelry from a shopkeeper. Why didn't that scene make final cut?
Bjork made [Selma] more grown up. I had something in mind that was closer to [the character of] Bess in *Breaking the Waves*. Bess was always fooling around and making strange faces. It didn't work for Selma.

Let's talk about genre. You seem to have created a tragic musical melodrama for the proletariat. I've never seen anything like it before.
My films are a little dark, right? So if I should make a musical it would be dark too. My first idea was to make more of an opera than a musical. An opera typically has a melodramatic story. All the emotions come from the music and the singing. I was eager to try to use them because people have been crying at the operas for many years. I suppose some people think it's bad taste. It's never really used in film. It's a little strange that in other countries they have melodramatic musicals, but for western audiences it's uncommon. In my view, musicals were always closer to operetta, which normally is a lighter story.

Are you thinking about genres or are you a genre-breaker?
Yes, I am thinking about them. And trying my best to take them very seri-

ously. I hate films that make fun of genres or other films. I prefer deconstructing, 'cause then you're just taking parts of the film and putting it in a little box and saving it. Genres are the genetic material we have for film, so we can put it together [respectfully] in different ways. Maybe we can invent new genres. I'm sure this can be done.

At the end of the script, there are notes about the musical numbers. For the "In the Musicals" number, you write, "This is where all of Selma's pent-up musical clichés blaze up. This is where the idea of the musical must ring forth loud and clear. It must be so beautiful that it hurts, drawing on anything to hand. We must dig down to the ultimate clichés. And they cannot lie! Everything is so simple here that untruth has no place."
Shit. You really have some inside documents there. This was between me and Vincent Patterson. I have learned that if you want people to contribute, then you should give them as much information as possible. I also wrote a little text that you probably also have, called Selma's Manifesto. It was a text of five pages about where these songs and dances came from, so Bjork and Vincent could work from this paper. It's very difficult to write a musical. It's not something that you just phone somebody and ask how do you write it.

Your female characters are three-dimensional and loaded with emotional dynamite. What allows you to create women characters like this when so many writers fail?
I have this very good friend who is a writer and he tells me that one way of writing is to take yourself and divide yourself into different characters. He says this is typically the way I write. I can see some logic in that. I use myself in these women, although I wouldn't have liked them as men. I've always been surrounded by strong women, you know. I'm not concentrating on giving a portrait of a woman. I see them as quite complex and human.

What's your favorite scene in the script?
The scene that we talked about earlier in the trailer. You have to be excited when you write. I write extremely fast when I'm excited, and when I'm not, I don't write anything at all. I did a script for this Dogma film I did *[The Idiots]*. I wrote it in three and a half days. Other [scripts] have taken years. In the *Dancer* script, if you find that scene in the trailer, you'll see that it's not close to the words [on screen], but somehow it was clear enough to ignite the actors. That's what I'm most proud of.

Andrew Kevin Walker

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID KONOW
Creative Screenwriting, VOLUME 11, #2 (MARCH/APRIL 2004)

L
ike *Taxi Driver* in its day, Andrew Kevin Walker's screenplay for *Se7en* was a must-read among industry insiders, but no one seemingly had the cojones to make it. Yet against all odds it did get made, and was the surprise hit of 1995. It also cemented Brad Pitt's star stature, sprung David Fincher from bad movie jail after the debacle of *Alien 3*, and resurrected the unhappy ending. Many imitations followed in the wake of its success, usually with happier endings (no head in the box, we promise) and some, like *Kiss the Girls*, even brought Morgan Freeman along, but they all missed the uncompromising vision that made *Se7en* a great film. Walker was able to use the misery he felt living in New York as inspiration for the story, and as a great example of poetic justice, selling the script would provide his ticket out of the city he hated.

Walker, a native of Pennsylvania, knew early-on that he wanted to work in film, but really got focused on becoming a writer when he was attending Penn State. "I saw writing as a way to get to directing and that was my intention, but once I actually got out of college and saw how hard directing was, I wasn't that interested," he says. "But I really got focused on writing in college and was lucky that I was able to work on a feature length script there rather than just a short film." [Walker's screenwriting teacher was Jeff Rush, a member of *Creative Screenwriting*'s Editorial Board.]

Those who are familiar with Walker's story know that after college he moved to New York instead of Los Angeles because he couldn't afford a car. He lived there unhappily for five years, and the city played a big part in inspiring *Se7en*. "I lived in New York City in the mid to late '80s, and it was overwhelming to me," Walker recalls. "I'm from suburbia. NYC was an assault on my senses. I was just expressing some thoughts that occurred to me as I wandered hither and thither in New York. It did actually seem like you could just go around and find all the sins everywhere in the people, in stores, on

billboards, in Times Square and the subways… *Taxi Driver* and *Midnight Cowboy* really got certain aspects of New York right on the money if you ask me."

While he lived in New York, Walker worked as a production assistant for a very low budget company called Brisun Entertainment. As he recalls, "The kinds of movies they were making were things like *Blood Rush*, which was murders in a fraternity house, and they had one idea they wanted to do called "Abusement Park" with somebody sabotaging all the rides, putting piano wire in front of the rollercoaster and everyone's heads get lobbed off! They never did write that script. And there was something called *Brainscan* that I worked on that actually got made, which was for no pay. So I was in a very exploitational mode, and the idea of the seven deadly sin murders kind of made sense to me. Now as I developed it and worked on the characters, it hopefully became a little more than what "Abusement Park" may have been!"

Walker quit working for Brisun because he needed the structure of a regular job where he wouldn't work long and erratic production hours. He then worked at Tower Records on 66th and Broadway for the next three years. As for how long it took for *Se7en* to go from idea to a finished draft, Walker says, "I would say, once I started writing, probably five months or so. It took a long time to write *Se7en* because I was working full-time at Tower Records, and all the research had to take place after work, but I think it does show that you you can carry off a full-time job and still find time to write. I feel like now when I write stuff, once the laborious kind of research period and outlining is all done, I feel like it takes about three months to write a script. Not that that's fast or slow or anything to shoot for, that's just kind of where I fall."

A lot of screenwriters have railed against the creative process having rules, particularly three-act structure, yet Walker is a big believer in going into a script with a good game plan. He highly recommends outlining a script because "when you know where you're going, I think the reader can feel it. If you do any sort of script reading in general, there are screenplays that feel like the writers sat down, started writing, kept writing, got to page 120, and stopped. That may work really well for some people, but you can often tell that it's an exhaustive kind of vomiting information out, and it doesn't sustain your interest as much as you might hope."

Walker recommends reading as many scripts as you can, which proves a valuable lesson to see how things are laid out on the page, how each writer approaches the process, and what gets changed or cut out of the finished film. "When I took film production at Penn State, scripts were much harder to find, at least in Pennsylvania," he recalls. "There was Kubrick's *2001* in the library, which was amazing, but mostly for how unlike anything else it was. He'd just have two or three lines of description on a lot of the mostly blank pages."

When planning his own scripts, Walker outlines very specifically and puts it all on one page. "It takes a long time to do it, but I know almost every scene, or at least what I intend it to be, from start to finish," he says. "That's why I like having it on one page so I can see whether the first act length is the right size in comparison to the second act and the third act. If I can't fit

it on the page, I know I'm in trouble. There's three columns. The first column is gonna end right near the bottom of the page, the second act starts at the bottom of the page, the whole center column and maybe a bit more. The third act is always like: three scenes, gigantic chase! Three scenes, they fight!"

The tools of the trade were much different back then as well. "It's more easy now than ever because of Scriptware and Final Draft," Walker says. "You can hand in a professional looking piece of material to somebody. There wasn't spellcheck when I started writing… way back when! I actually wrote my first stuff on an electric typewriter, then I had a word processor and the files weren't big enough to take a whole script, so I had to break *Se7en* down into five separate files. I'd stop one and move on to the next, and if I changed something and the end of the page on one file got shorter, then I had to go back in and shorten that one, then I had to shorten and adjust all the other files."

Walker spends a lot of time in the screenwriting process conducting research. "It's invaluable in making a detective story seem real, a period piece seem real and so forth," he says. "One of the biggest reasons for research is it's one of these things that stirs up your imagination. There are countless things in *Se7en* that came from just the research. Research is often a lot more surprising in its worth. If you read or at least skim an entire book and get one good thing out of it, it's worth it."

Walker continues, "Another thing that was drummed in by my professor was make everything fully imagined, without sitting there and describing every scrap of clothing on a person, what their shoes look like, what their hat looks like… and please especially don't describe things like: 'He has a look on his face that tells ya he's been in Vietnam! The scar on his cheek is from a woman that he left…' Don't tell me stuff you can't see. You can tell me if he looks grizzled and beaten, but you gotta sell that stuff through what's said and what's seen when it comes to character."

Once *Se7en* was finished, the next step was to get an agent, which is always easier said than done. "I think you gotta do whatever you can when it comes to looking for an agent, but before that, you really have to have written the script that you think is going to get an agent," Walker says. "You shouldn't, I think, be trying to show an agent a handful of treatments or outlines. You should have this thing that's hopefully not five-hundred pages, that's hopefully not written in crayon, that you can give to an agent, that you think can honestly give you the very best shot at getting a sale. You wanna put your very best foot forward."

Walker ended up getting his big break by calling David Koepp *(Spider-Man, Panic Room)* out of the phone book, and asking if he'd check out *Se7en*. "With David Koepp, he happened to have a few articles written about him in Premiere magazine at the time, and *Bad Influence* had just come out," Walker continues. "He was at a smaller agency that wasn't ICM or CAA, and I really thought that if you went to a smaller agency there would be more of a chance of them taking a chance on somebody who's new, which is true."

Once Koepp checked out the screenplay for *Se7en*, he recommended it to

his agent, Gavin Polone. It wasn't long before Andrew got the phone call every struggling screenwriter dreams of. "When Gavin called me up in my tiny Astoria, Queens apartment and said he'd represent the script for *Se7en*, I literally leaped for joy. And I'm not using the word 'literally' like so many people do nowadays. I jumped in the air! I hope I never forget how impossible it felt to ever get an agent to look at anything, let alone shop it around. I know what desperation is, that feeling of wanting and trying and yearning to work in the film business. I don't ever want to forget that."

Walker has often said that with *Se7en* he tried to take the clichés you see in police stories and twist them into fresher ideas. "The stuff that people got on *Se7en* about, and still do, are the rookie cop comes in, the old cop is there… anything with two buddy cops doing something, anytime you walk into a crime scene, especially now because of *CSI*. Look, if you have a cop who comes into the autopsy room and the guy doing the autopsy is eating a submarine sandwich, we've seen that a thousand times! You know when you're doing that stuff that you're doing it, some of it you're gonna have to do. You're gonna have to walk into a crime scene if there's been a murder, but there's gotta be some way to play with it." [Walker went against a cliché in his last act where the cops usually apprehend the villain by having John Doe turn himself in instead.]

One of the best scenes in *Se7en* wasn't a graphic or bloody one, but a tender moment between Gwyneth Paltrow and Morgan Freeman where she confesses she's pregnant and is unsure whether she'll keep the baby. Walker comments, "I liked that scene because it had Tracy asking Somerset to keep a secret, that she was pregnant, from Mills. And that played a part in the final scene, because Somerset knew, even before Mills, all that was lost with Tracy's death. That scene between Somerset and Tracy, along with Mills and Somerset's argument in the bar about whether they can make any difference at all or should even try—these were scenes that some involved in the making of *Se7en* wanted to cut out, I guess because they were slow, maybe even boring, scenes for some. I've come to seriously appreciate a movie that isn't afraid to bore me occasionally. I find that a really daring choice these days, to be applauded and celebrated as a great achievement."

Many adjectives fit the ending of *Se7en*. Shocking and controversial certainly come to mind, but it also seemed the most logical way to end the film. It's hard to think of any other way the movie could convincingly end, but Walker smiled and said, "Well the studio had all kinds of different ways! The killer had to do the thing that guaranteed that this cop was gonna complete the cycle, so it was only natural that that head should be in a box." In a sense, the ending was there practically from the beginning. When the idea for the movie first popped into his mind, at a certain point Walker thought, well, there has to be something where the cop becomes that seventh sin, and that became the conceit of the film. Not everyone understood this line of reasoning. During one meeting *Se7en* producer Arnold Kopelson reportedly said, "There's no way that there will be a head in the box at the end of this

movie, there is absolutely no way that will ever happen, don't even talk to me about that."

"Luckily Fincher and everyone fought for it," says Walker. "It's not like I'm saying the only good endings are really depressing, down endings. The only ending that's good is the ending that's appropriate to it. *Sleepy Hollow* always had a happier ending. "My argument was always that anybody who sits through this and makes it through the lust murder, if they're still in the theater, they're ready for whatever! The lust murder was the real sweaty palm moment when you watched the test screening…. The thing I remember when they were test screening *Se7en* was that you were subjecting this movie to an especially unsuspecting audience, recruited from a mall, for example, and so I was expecting everyone to stand up and leave. Luckily they didn't."

"*Se7en* was a hard movie to test-screen because it's kind of designed so that the audience walks into the same buzz-saw that Somerset and Mills walk into," Walker continues. "There were no credits and no music, no period for anyone to catch their breath. So if you were an audience member at one of the test screenings, basically there's the last scene with the head in the box, and all that agony and violence, and then suddenly the lights come up, and someone hands you a scorecard and pencil and says, 'How'd you enjoy that?! What do ya think?!'"

Se7en never showed as much as you thought, but people swear it's a much bloodier movie than it really is. Surprisingly, Walker says, "Nowadays they don't show anything, which to me is a huge disappointment. I grew up with *Dawn of the Dead*, which was showing something; there's just certain things that it's appropriate for. Nowadays everything's PG-13, or if it's an R, they're worried about getting an NC-17. To be honest, I can go either way on it. There were certain things in *8mm* that were like, 'There's no reason to show this,' you know? People sometimes talk about *Se7en* like it was restrained, I mean you see a lot of stuff. And yes, you don't see the murders, that's what suited the story. It doesn't mean that was the way it should be done, it just means it worked for that. It would have been ridiculous to show the lust murder. It was better that people imagine it and see the reaction of the characters; that made sense." One of the best elements that was never shown was in Walker's first draft of *8mm,* where one of the villains is a gigantic steroids monster porn star named Machine, who always wears a Mexican wrestling mask. At the end of the script when he is killed and the mask is finally pulled off, his face is never shown.

When he was first writing *Se7en*, Walker also wanted the audience to know absolutely nothing about John Doe for the entire story. But as he came to realize, "A serial killer story where there's a series of murders and a cat-and-mouse game with the police, you kinda have to tell a little bit about the character, towards the end at least. I really wanted to leave it almost all unsaid because the more you describe it, the more you're gonna push it into pure fiction. When you're trying to explain exactly what spanking it was, and at what age it was inappropriate that his mother gave it to him and that's when

his mind snapped…. With Machine, when they take off the mask and you're waiting, I thought, 'How cool would it be—it's so pretentious, but who cares— not to show his face?' It really frustrates the audience, but what face under there would answer any questions you had? 'Oh, of course!'"

Se7en came in at number one at the box office on its opening weekend, and remained in the top spot for several weeks. "It wasn't that it opened huge, but it hung on pretty well week to week," says Walker. "The thing that was hard to grasp regarding *Se7en* being successful financially, which is so important in this town, was it was hard to stop worrying about whether it would do well. The thing is I loved it, and so did all the people who were involved in it and fought for it, so I'd be very, very proud of it regardless. But it took the longest time for it to sink in that the movie did well financially, and how lucky I was in that respect, because frankly, with the bleak subject matter and ending, it certainly wasn't a given that it would recoup."

So is the key to follow your heart, and the rest will follow? "You really have to write what you want to write, including, if you gotta write your five-hundred-page script, God bless ya," he says. "Probably nobody's gonna take a look at it, but if that's what you gotta do, then that's what you gotta do. But I would say once you've sent out your five-hundred page script and spent all your money at Kinko's, start your next one, then start your next one, and your next one. Don't just sit and go, 'This is the one that's gonna make it happen.'

"You gotta keep doing it and keep striving for this thing that you want it to be. You can never really be trying to write stuff that you think other people will want. Please don't go and write what you think has been done before that you can reinterpret slightly and make a million bucks at it. You may do that, but make sure you're doing something that feels right and personal to you. If you dig something that's super mainstream, that's great as long as you're being true to yourself—then I think more good stuff will get made accidentally."

Creative Screenwriting spoke to Andrew Kevin Walker at Screenwriting Expo 2 in 2003.

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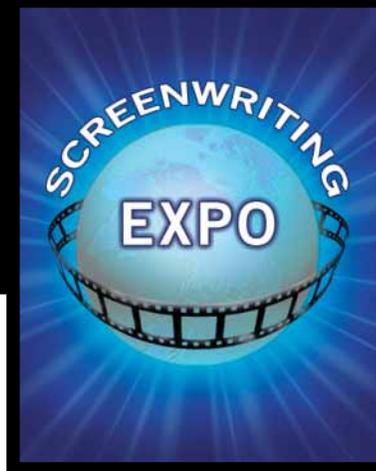
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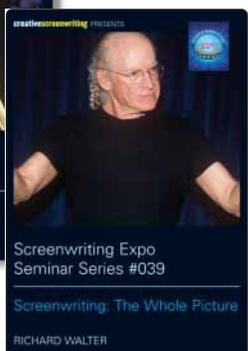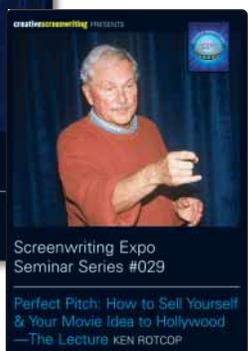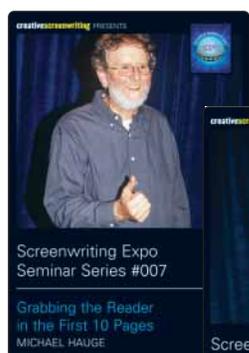
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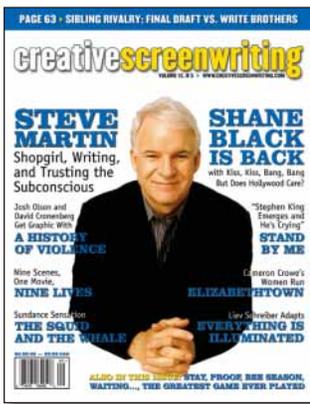
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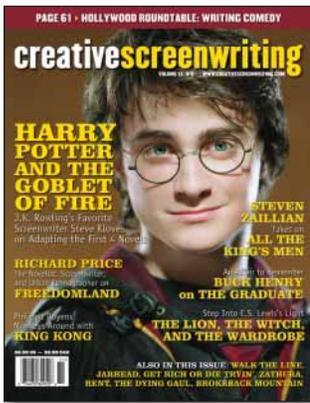
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Creative Screenwriting invites you and a guest to participate in our Los Angeles Screening Series. This series allows writers of all walks of life to come together, watch a film and participate in the Q&A session afterwards—usually with either the writer, director, or both! Past films in the CS Screening Series have included: THE AVIATOR with writer John Logan, SIDEWAYS with co-writer/director Alexander Payne and co-writer Jim Taylor, THE SEA INSIDE with co-writer/director Alejandro Amenábar, THIRTEEN with co-writer/director Catherine Hardwicke, IN AMERICA with writer/director Jim Sheridan, COLD MOUNTAIN with writer/director Anthony Minghella, THE SQUID AND THE WHALE with writer/director Noah Baumbach, SYRIANA with writer/director Stephen Gaghan. These free screenings are currently only held in the Los Angeles area and seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. **REGISTER FOR FREE AT WWW.CREATIVESCREENWRITING.COM**

CS Podcasts

Creative Screenwriting now brings you podcasts of interviews with your favorite screenwriters! Register for free at www.creativescreenwriting.com/podcasts/main.html or find us on iTunes.

Your Screenwriting Network: CSWeb.ws

CSWeb.ws is your portal to the screenwriting world. Included in the sites below are more than 1,000,000 words of advice to help you make the transition from aspiring to professional screenwriter. All of these sites are presented by *Creative Screenwriting* magazine.

How to Write a Screenplay
www.howtowriteascreenplay.net
Writer/Director James P. Mercurio presents a step-by-step approach to writing your first or fiftieth screenplay. Don't miss the huge archive of articles on all aspects of screenwriting craft.

Movie Scripts Online
www.moviescripts.name
The best online database of movie scripts and TV scripts, this site also offers links to additional articles and interviews for each script included. Movie Scripts also features *Creative Screenwriting* magazine's list of the 100 best English-language screenplays ever written.

Screenplay Format
www.screenplayformat.net
You have to look professional to be considered in Hollywood, but the intricacies of screenplay format can be baffling even for seasoned writers. This site presents the standard screenplay format and answers all your questions.

Screenwriter Interviews
www.screenplaywriter.net
There is no better way to learn the craft and business of screenwriting than speaking with the best scriptwriters working today. Scriptwriting Interviews offers more than 150 complete interviews from *Screentalk* magazine, *Screenwriter* magazine, *NY Screenwriter* magazine, and sample excerpts from the best interviews ever published in *Creative Screenwriting* magazine.

Screenplay Contests
www.screenplaycontests.biz
Screenplay contests are one of the best ways to get your screenplay noticed by producers. This site presents a comprehensive guide for entering and winning screenplay contests.

Entertainment Industry
www.entertainmentindustry.name
Writer/Producer Heather Hale presents a step-by-step guide to how the entertainment industry works.

Screenwriting Resources
www.screenwritingresource.com
Information on all best products and services for screenwriters. Software, consultants, script supplies, this site reviews the best of everything you need for your career.

Scriptwriting Business
www.scriptwriting.ws
Writer/Producer Michael Lent presents his 5-year plan for scriptwriting success including how to get past the studio reader, how to agent your own material, and how to work a meeting to your advantage. This site also hosts a large archive of additional articles on the business of scriptwriting.

Screenwriting Books
www.screenwritingbook.net
The number of books available on screenwriting is staggering and it can be difficult to decide which ones would be the most beneficial for your writing and career. This site contains detailed review of 75 books for screenwriters.

Television Screenwriting
www.screenwriting.tv
Do you want to get paid? Do you want job security? Do you want control over your vision? Television writing is the place for you. Veteran TV writer and producer Catherine Clinch presents her method for writing a TV screenplay from concept to production, discusses how the networks and studios work, the rules of writing two, four, and seven-act scripts, and how to approach writing a spec for an existing show.

Screenplay Treatment
www.screenplaytreatment.com
What is a screenplay treatment? How can you use a treatment to pre-write your screenplay? Can you sell your story on the basis of a treatment? Writer/Producer Michael Halperin lays out and approach you can use to writing treatments for your feature and TV scripts.