

A Filmmaker's Journey into the
LIGHTS of HOLLYWOOD and TRUE LOVE

Kiss Me Quick Before I Shoot

GUY MAGAR

"Finally, a book for all who love the movies by a filmmaker who has walked the walk in TV and film. Don't miss this unique look inside the real Hollywood!"
JOE ALVES, Production Designer, *JAWS* and *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND*

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"A great storyteller, Guy highlights the journey of building a successful film career and tells it like it is. This book is about honesty and passion in living, marrying, and working in Hollywood. For film lovers and film students, this is an absolute must-read!"

Eve Honthaner, Production Coordinator *TITANIC*
USC Film Instructor, Author of *Hollywood Drive*

"A beautiful story about living a rich and prolific life…a film life. Guy's hilarious stories and unique voice makes this memoir a very compelling read about the behind-the-scenes of filmmaking and living a romantic Hollywood life. A smart, engaging and uniquely passionate book."

Geoff Schaaf, 4-time Emmy Winning Cinematographer
FATAL EXPOSURE*, *SEAQUEST*, *JACK AND JILL

"Finally, a book for all who love the movies written by a filmmaker who has walked the walk in TV and film. A very entertaining journey of fascinating industry stories providing a true look behind the curtain of filmmaking. Don't miss this unique treat inside the real Hollywood!"

Joe Alves, British Academy Award winning Production Designer
JAWS*, *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND

"Jacqui and Guy have lived a true Hollywood love story which includes a brave triumph over cancer beautifully told in layman's words. This is a great memoir for all romantics, caregivers, and movie fans!"

Linda Mendez, Business Manager Entertainment Industry

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For Jacqui

With my eternal love and grateful thanks
for bringing such great love into my life.
You are my heart forever.

"I'm very sure, this never happened to me before
I met you and now I'm sure
This never happened before

"Now I see, this is the way it's supposed to be
I met you and now I see
This is the way it should be"

This Never Happened Before
— Paul McCartney

Introduction

Why?

ROLL CAMERA! Well, my first camera didn't quite look like the professional one on the left. I made my first film *Why?* for a humanities class project when I was a high school senior in Middletown, New York. My father had a Super 8mm home movie camera that we used on family vacations and to capture special occasions such as birthdays and local parades. Oliver Stone could've used our small-town parade footage in his brilliant *Born on the Fourth of July,* one of my favorite films.

The 8mm camera took three-minute reels, so the film was limited to that length. I had no editing equipment, which meant I couldn't change anything. Each shot for *Why?* had to be flawless (only one take of each), and the shot order had to be perfect. It sounds ridiculous now, but it actually worked

out; I had carefully planned my debut film "shot-by-shot" as they say.

Since I didn't want a silent movie, I recorded a music track on a reel-to-reel magnetic tape machine. Though I knew nothing of keyboards, the music I recorded was a simple series of random melancholic notes I played myself on a piano. There was no dialogue or sounds so exact synchronization of music with the film was not necessary. All I had to do was start the magnetic tape whenever the visuals came up on the screen. Turn on two machines, and *voilà*! Instant epic filmmaking. Look out, Ridley Scott!

Why? addressed the big questions of life (or a teen's life) as I was a curious, wondering, daydreaming 18-year-old. There were shots of me walking around looking deep in thought, shots of my high school, shots of cheerleaders (girls always on my mind), shots of my college applications (brochures spread out on a table), reflections on religion (shots of synagogues and churches), and scenes of life and death (bustling city streets juxtaposed with hospital buildings and cemeteries). Hey, life is ambitious in three minutes!

The visuals were so easy to understand, the film did not need narration. All it needed was a single handmade title card: "WHY?" Since I could not edit at all, the title card was obviously the first shot, and I went from there in perfect order. I would shoot the exact planned shot length, and move on to the next shot on the list. Once shot, I could not change my mind.

Why? earned a solid "A" for the semester, and was presented to the senior class on Humanities Day. It played on the "Big Screen" in the school's auditorium with the theater's loudspeakers blasting my brilliant music score. Who needs composer-genius John Williams? It felt as though the movie was being shown at a

giant Cinerama Screen with Dolby Stereo (before I knew about either). And then, it came: Applause…BIG applause! *They got it!* Teen angst and all! I had communicated with my first audience. I had told my first story on film. Although this is the only screening *Why?* ever had, it was my *Star Wars* premiere!

I was hooked.

Kiss Me Quick Before I Shoot is a memoir about magic. Not sleight of hand, sawing showgirls in half, or levitating tigers, but the kind of magic that permeates the air every time I call "Action," every time I'm in an editing room, every time I'm working with a composer on a film score. For me, there is no more magical a professional endeavor than making films.

This book's celebrated journey will share a wild and crazy filmmaking career and its cherished behind-the-scenes moments. With production work spanning a hundred credits—from documentaries to shorts to TV shows to feature films—my stories range from my first producer turning out to be a Mafia assassin, to shooting in Africa for the original series *Battlestar Galactica*, to directing a grunting Mr. T on *The A-Team,* to almost decapitating a young Drew Barrymore outside my home, and coming close to derailing James Cameron's illustrious career (or at least slowing it down as he proved way too talented for anyone to alter his storied destiny). I shudder to imagine our film world without the amazing *Titanic* and the breathtaking game-changer *Avatar*! Bravo, Jim.

Fascination with film magic is alive and well, and going to the movies is as cherished a leisure activity as it's ever been. In 2010, U.S. box office receipts topped a record-breaking $10-billion

for the second year in a row. With the popularity of cinema at an all-time high, movie lovers are more enthralled than ever to learn what it would be like to work in the dream factory, to be a film director, to have an inside peek at Hollywood's inner workings making movies and TV shows. This memoir is about living the American Dream, an immigrant's dream, sharing the highs and lows of a filmmaking journey, bringing to life the many personalities and stars encountered, and telling the hilarious "stories behind the stories" on the rocky road to Hollywood success.

"Kiss me quick before I shoot" has been my welcoming catchphrase to my wife Jacqui whenever she visited on-set, seemingly always just before I rolled cameras. And so this book is also about a deeper magic, the magic of finding a life partner. Love begins when you meet a kind heart, a kind soul, and blossoms into caring for that person more than for yourself.

If there's just so much good luck allotted to each person, mine was in finding my soulmate. At 34, I felt no rush to find a life partner, and was focused on developing my career. I was happy to be a promising director, an American Film Institute graduate, and a French-accented bachelor who had a busy calendar working and dating in the film industry world.

And then, KA-BOOM! On a Saturday night in September 1982, I was completely and utterly swept off my feet when I met Jacqui. We were introduced and shared drinks at one of Hollywood's comedy clubs, The Improv. After the

bartender yelled "Last call," I turned to Jacqui and asked, "Would you like to go to the beach with me tomorrow?" She raised a curious eyebrow, smiled a beautiful smile, and said, "OK." It turned out to be the most important and cherished OK of my life, and I will share that magical story in this book.

In love, as in filmmaking, I am passionately dedicated. After turning on my charms for a year and a half, the love of my life said "Yes!" Jacqui and I were married in a memorable and beautifully costumed Renaissance-themed wedding. I got to duel in a sword fight to win her hand against hooligans (stuntmen friends) who kidnapped her after she arrived by horse-drawn carriage in front of 300 surprised, open-mouthed guests. It was truly a magical wedding. It was my *Errol Flynn* life moment!

Now, 28 years later, I am still head-over-heels in love with Jacqui. We have lived happily in our home in the Hollywood Hills, leading a treasured daily life while enjoying busy careers in fashion retail and filmmaking. And until Thanksgiving 2008, we had been very fortunate not to have had any major tragedies, personal traumas, or diseases strike us.

But then, suddenly, Black Monday hit: Jacqui was diagnosed with leukemia.

When cancer hits your family, it is a powerful, scary, life-changing event. I immediately moved into the role of caregiver, and my entire 24-hour life focus became Jacqui's healing. While she was in the hospital undergoing chemo treatments, I spent long days at her bedside, and long nights educating myself on blood

cancers. Finally, I found a cutting-edge treatment available only in clinical trials.

We discovered the healing mecca of the City of Hope in Duarte, California. There we met a world-class gifted doctor who welcomed Jacqui to join their national trial. We locked up our house, boarded the dog, and moved in to start Jacqui's curative journey back to health.

Now, Jacqui's leukemia is in full remission. She is feeling terrific and is more beautiful than ever, sporting a healthy glow and new curly hair. Jacqui never ceases to amaze me as she fights darkness with great courage, and celebrates the beauty of each day with a joyful zest for life.

Kiss Me Quick Before I Shoot is an unconventional memoir because of its diverse topics. It's the story of a rich life, rich in love and experiences in an industry to which few people ever have access. As screenwriter Mark Boal said after winning the Oscar for best original screenplay for *The Hurt Locker*, "Hollywood has always been the promised land. It's very surreal…beyond a dream come true." This passionate, life-celebrating memoir embraces both love and work within a spectrum of entertaining stories of what it's like to live this dream. May it also inspire readers to reflect and appreciate the magical adventure of their own life journeys and fulfilling their dreams.

I invite you to join me on a wild and thrilling rollercoaster ride of a Hollywood film career, the intoxicating highs of finding and sharing true love, and the sweet triumph of survival and healing—all told with a little hyperbole and a measure of *joie de vivre*.

Pull up a chair—I'm servin' the lattes and cappuccinos—come share this journey of my magic show. And it begins in Egypt, of all places!

In Jacqui's honor, and with my most sincere gratitude to all who work, research, and heal every day at the amazing City of Hope, portions of the proceeds from this book will be donated to their medical center. I thank you for your purchase. Enjoy!

Chapter 1

Exodus from Egypt and Coming to America

I was eight, and sick in bed with the measles. My kind mother was taking care of me by candlelight since we were not allowed to turn on lights during night air raids. As loud sirens pierced the air outside, she'd whisper, "Don't be scared, Guy, I'll take care of you," as she smiled reassuringly. She had the soul of an artist and had given up a career as a ballerina to marry my dad and raise a family. She named me after her favorite French poet, Guy de Maupassant.

The windows, each with brown tape marking a giant X to prevent it from shattering, rumbled continuously from the British bombers flying overhead. Within a mile of my bedroom, Egyptian anti-aircraft guns blasted away, and when I peeked out the window, I could see the flash of their gunfire. Their booming sounds were deafening and made the windows rattle louder. This was 1956 during the Suez Canal Crisis when Britain, France, and Israel declared war against Egypt because it nationalized the canal, and attempted to solely control one of the most strategic waterways of the world.

I was terrified during these air raids; they marked a turning point in my early years in Alexandria. Before then, I remember a wonderful and comfortable life, as my family was not rich but certainly affluent. We employed a housekeeper and an all-around handyman who cared for our Jewish family. Life was safe and happy in Egypt, and I remember relaxed and joyful trips visiting family as we traveled often between Alexandria, with its beautiful sandy coastline, and Cairo, a bustling, exciting capital three hours away by car.

My first public outing at age two with my parents in Alexandria, Egypt. I sure look wary of the world, don't I? That's because a life in film was awaiting me!

During the first half of the 20th century, Egypt and Lebanon were jewels of the Middle East where non-natives lived peacefully among Arabs. This was before the creation of Israel, a time when Jews and Arabs had managed to live together for centuries in adjoining neighborhoods. European Christians and Jews made up the educated classes and were numerous enough to maintain the medical, engineering, scientific, and educational industries at a surprisingly high level for Third World countries. Beirut was once known as the Las Vegas of the Middle East, with its fancy beachfront hotels and elegant casinos, instead of the bloody pile of rubble it has now become.

It all went to hell when Israel (population of 800,000 back then) was granted statehood by the United Nations, and was immediately attacked by all its surrounding border countries in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (the year I was born). Israel's survival brought out bitterness and new hatreds in neighboring countries like Egypt, where a nationalistic movement grew against the

monarchy, which was blamed for losing the war. The good-time party in Egypt was over when on July 23, 1952, a military coup led by future Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk and the reigning monarchy to establish a new independent Egyptian republic.

King Farouk (1920-1965), the last ruling king of Egypt

Within a few years, Nasser had nationalized the country's industries. Private business ownership was now illegal. Everything belonged to the state and everyone worked to serve it. My father had inherited a successful children's clothing factory from his dad, but it no longer belonged to our family; it was now owned by the Egyptian government. My family was deeply traumatized when my father's livelihood was suddenly snatched from him without a dime exchanged. My dad was allowed to stay and run the factory as before, but he was now just a salaried employee. At the door were soldiers with machine guns, representing the new government owners who now controlled the management of the business and the accounting of revenues. Full-blown socialism had come to Egypt, and thus, the great exodus out of Egypt had begun.

It was a tumultuous time as my large family on both sides made hasty plans to leave post-Farouk Egypt. The mass evacuation included all my friends and just about everyone who was non-Arab. The idyllic life in Alexandria, complete with summer homes on fabulous beaches, was over for me at age nine.

In early 1958, Nasser gave Egyptians a short window of opportunity to leave before the borders were closed for good. It was part of his plan to build a nationalistic country and get rid of all who didn't want to be there. Suddenly, the pressure was

on and everyone's plans to leave took on a new urgency as the looming deadline approached. To make matters worse, no one could take any money out, and only one piece of jewelry was allowed per person. Upon leaving, everyone's passports were taken away so they could never return, making them refugees at large without a homeland. For a kid, it all felt like a strange life upheaval—momentous and insecure.

It was especially terrifying for my Jewish parents and family members who had no idea where to go or what would become of them. They were undesired refugees in a scary and unstable world just a few short years after the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. The Egyptian educated class, mostly Europeans and Jews who had lived there quite comfortably for decades, left and were never replaced. The local people they employed were now jobless. This was the sad beginning of the end of Egypt's then thriving economy, which has never recovered. For the last 60 years, it has remained stagnant with overwhelming poverty and very limited progress.

Our relatives spread out all over the world during this hurried mass exodus, and sadly, my immediate family had limited contact with most of them over the years. Some I never saw again. Some went to England, some to Israel, some to Italy, others to Brazil, and some to Canada. In those days, so many people wished to immigrate to America—the triumphant liberator of the free world—truly the land of milk and honey, where safety, freedom, and dreams were possible. Immigration quotas were stringent, and the process for entrance was long and arduously complicated. My sister and I will always be grateful to our brave parents (who were quite young, still in their late 20s) for choosing the good ol' USA as our destination, despite the very tough journey and the many unknowns to overcome to get to the New World.

Since Nasser had given a very narrow time period in which to leave, there was no opportunity to apply to immigrate anywhere, never mind the USA. We were forced to leave quickly and wait that process out in another country. In our case, France was our choice because it offered assistance programs for Jewish refugees after World War II, and French was our family's primary language. It was going to be a long wait as temporary refugees in limbo because we were not allowed to work or attend public schools. America was still a very distant dream.

The chronicle of the post-World War II Jewish migration to Israel, by boat in this instance, was the heroic storyline of the Paul Newman movie *Exodus,* directed by Otto Preminger in 1960. This was two years after we had left Egypt, so the film was poignant to all of us at the time. It made quite an impression on me as I never forgot its power of storytelling and realizing the emotional impact that a movie can deliver about the human experience. My family's experience. The movie absolutely enthralled me. It was definitely a seed of my future film interest.

While we waited for immigration visas to the US, my family lived in the small suburb of Paris, Bois-Colombes. We shared a crowded house with other family members, and I watched the unemployed, frustrated men in my family slowly get larger before my eyes—they had nothing to do but eat and get fat. For two years, my parents called the Jewish agency HIAS weekly, to find out if our immigration requests had been approved. We would gather around the phone with anticipation, and week after week after week the answer was *"Non, pardon"*—not yet.

In our second year, my resourceful mother managed to get an under-the-table administrative job at a private British school. Part of the deal was for them to let me attend gratis so I could learn English before coming to America. It was a tough four-

hour daily roundtrip train commute, and I was thankful that my mother boldly undertook it. Unfortunately, I recall not doing too well: Out of 356 students, my scoring grade put me dead last—I was number 356! I was a lousy student, but I couldn't understand the language or anything being said. I preferred spending time playing soccer and smiling goofily at the giggling British girls.

Speaking of girls, a cute ponytailed French girl I was nuts about used to come play in our garden. It had a popular sand mound favored by neighborhood kids and my sister Michele, who was four at the time. For months, I had a bad case of 11-year-old hots for this cutie, but never had the courage to do or say anything except impress her by building elaborate sand castles. She drove me crazy by always teasing me that she was a year older than me.

Finally, the day came when we ecstatically received our U.S. immigration visas and started packing to leave France. I invited the cutie—for the first time ever—to come play *inside* the house, in my room, on our final afternoon in the country. She not only accepted, but—for the first time ever—came all fancied up in a short pink dress and pink shoes. My heart was beatin' fast as we walked upstairs to my room. I was fully determined to get my first kiss, just a simple kiss on the cheek was my panting hope. We sat down on the floor to play dominos, and I started inching my way around to her side so I could reach her. But she kept moving away from me. We made three full circles around the room in an hour of not-so-subtle chasing and evading.

Finally, I was inches away and leaned over to kiss her cheek and…and…she suddenly shrieked! I was stunned at what my action had caused, but then I realized she was shrieking with joy: She had seen my stupid turtle come out from under my bed. She got up and hurried to go pet the damn reptile. As I watched her

play with it and kiss it repeatedly for what seemed like an hour, I swore I'd have turtle soup that night. I was bummed. My turtle punked me!

When she announced she had to leave, I felt overwhelmed with disappointment as I walked her to the gated door outside. Finally, I gathered every ounce of my manhood (or boyhood) courage and decided to kiss her or die trying! We both hesitated at the gate while we basically told each other in French, "Have a nice life and goodbye forever," and then I just went for it. I leaned toward her, hoping to make contact with her cheek, when at the last possible moment she turned her head so our lips met—yes, our lips! And her hands went up to my face and she held the kiss for at least, I swear, a full ten seconds. The ten longest of my young life. I know I heard violins! Well, maybe one.

It was now absolutely obvious she was way ahead of me, much more savvy when it came to messing around. I must have looked like a shocked puppy because she giggled when she saw my expression, winked at me—*winked*—and turned and skipped away. Yeah, skipped away in slow motion (before I ever knew about slow motion), in her pink dress and pink shoes, from my life forever. She was so teasingly Frenchie in retrospect, such a preteen vixen. That evening, I was the happiest stud-muffin boy in all of France!

The next day—we were leaving within an hour for America, filled with excited anticipation as family members busily closed suitcases—when the doorbell rang. I went to answer the same door where the heavenly kiss occurred less than 24 hours earlier only to find this large, tall, angry beast—about 16 going on 40—who lunged forward and grabbed me by my throat. Putting his fat face in mine, he spat, "*Qu'est-ce que tu as fait à ma petite soeur?*" I was shocked to hear, "What did you do to my little

sister?" What? I had no clue what this was about…until…until from behind him, my first-kiss cutie leaned out and…and…stuck her tongue out at me!

I was terrified and speechless and about to die just before leaving France for a new life. I quickly thought 1) "It's the last time I ever kiss a girl" (who kissed *me,* remember?), 2) I hoped she suffered from turtle poisoning from kissing my reptile the previous day, and 3) that she had spread the turtle poisoning to her behemoth brother from hell so that he would drop dead soon and let go of my throat before I died! I was about to yell, "DAAAD HEEELP MEEEEEE*!"* when Godzilla ordered me never to come near his sister again, let go of my throat, pushed me hard to the ground, and walked away with his giggling sister in hand. Just as they rounded the corner, she turned around and stuck her tongue out at me one last time! And even then, she looked sooo damn cute doing it. It's the last image I have of my first-kiss bratty babe. Ahhh, French girls!

As destined, in the summer of 1978 when I was 30 years old, I returned to Cairo. Believe it or not, I came back to shoot at the Great Pyramids for the original *Battlestar Galactica* series. I was then the new assistant to the show's executive producer at Universal Studios. This was my first job in Hollywood, and returning to Egypt was an incredibly coincidental "wow" experience. Though excited to be there again, I was profoundly taken aback by the severe living conditions and the change from the deceptively frozen-in-time Cairo I had experienced. My childhood memories of a beautiful, vibrant city were not in sync with this Cairo—a very noisy city seemingly out of control, filled with severe overcrowding and oppressive poverty and stagnation akin to a hopeless Calcutta on a bad, hot day.

Though the *Galactica* shoot itself was a uniquely unforgettable experience I will share later in this book, sadly, the charmed and joyful childhood memories I held of my birth country and birth city were now gone.

Chapter 2

Existentialism and "This Ain't No Tobacco, Man!"

There she was—another French girl—but this one didn't hurt. One of the first things my family did when we arrived in New York in 1960 was visit the Statue of Liberty. I will never forget seeing her loom larger, as the Liberty Island Ferry slowly approached, until I was standing just below her. It was a special moment for me and my family. Our dream to immigrate to America had come true.

My uncle, who had immigrated to New York a few years earlier, was our advisor. He recommended where to live, work, and go to school. In our case, it was Queens. My father commuted tirelessly to Brooklyn every day, selling cheap pants by day and working a paper-pushing job at night to pay for our food and apartment. The kids at Forest Hills Public School were brutal to a Middle Eastern new kid who could hardly speak English. I tried hard to fit in but whatever I managed to blurt out was deeply accented. I was pushed around and beaten up a couple of times by bullies. My parents weren't happy either, and also felt

isolated as outsiders. It was an alienating time for us in this new land of New York. What had happened to the dream?

Six months after our arrival, my dad landed a job as the manager/buyer of a men's clothing department of a store in a small town of 20,000 about 60 miles north of the Big Apple called Middletown, New York. Bingo! I had landed in the most idyllic, friendly, all-American, laid-back town I could possibly have wished for.

I went through grades 6 to 12 having a great time, sheltered from the big bad world, lettering in sports (soccer and tennis), hanging out with friends (Jeff, Marc, Laura) and learning English well enough to be the sports editor of our school paper. I went to every prom lookin' good with a hot girl on my arm and amazingly, my grades ended up placing me 11th out of a graduating class of 372. Much better than dead last at the Parisian school where I couldn't *speakazyenglish*!

I was pretty good at math and science but my English SATs sucked, no surprise. It became clear to my parents (and to me, who had no better idea) that I should pursue a career in engineering. The other two clichéd choices for a son in a Jewish Middle Eastern family were medicine and law. I was not the studious type and simply too lazy to embark upon what seemed like decades of heavy studies, plus I didn't want to wait to earn good money until my 40s, so doctoring was out. I had a brief interest in becoming a trial lawyer, but everyone said my accent was too heavy and that I mumbled too much. Mumbled? I don't remember that, but OK.

The film bug hadn't bitten me yet, even after my high school film *Why?* had rocked me. Committing to a film school was not on my radar. In September 1967, excited to be on my own for the first time, I registered as a freshman at Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

I always wondered how this highly industrialized, hardcore, cement-laden, smoke-stacked state was inappropriately called "The Garden State." Have you ever been to Newark or Trenton or Bayonne? Never looked like a garden to me, and it sure never smelled like one! I'm sure mindless American teen life seen in footage of *Jersey Shore* is being used as successful recruiting videos for Al-Qaeda! But hey, it can't be all that bad if John Sayles (an indie filmmaker I've long admired in my film career) lives in Jersey City, and "The Boss" Springsteen also lives in Jersey.

So there I was at the prestigious, men-only (at that time) Rutgers as a straight-laced engineering major about two hours from home, but minutes away from the girls-only Douglass College. I was bursting with enthusiasm to tackle collegiate life and suck every marrow of opportunity and knowledge coming my way. That lasted until my parents finished unpacking me in my dorm room at Campbell Hall, which was indeed on the banks of the old Raritan River (as the school song goes). I hugged them goodbye, and waved as they drove away. I hurried back to my new world on the penthouse floor of my tiny, two-bed dorm room.

Minutes later from my window, I saw a 6'5" guy who had just pulled up on a noisy, oil dripping, double-carbed Triumph 650—a beast of a motorcycle. I shook my head and thought, "God help the poor jackass who gets this biker wacko for a roommate." Five minutes later, Captain America walked into my room carrying a leather saddlebag. From behind cool biker

sunglasses, he introduced himself simply as "George" and sat down on the other bed in the room, five feet away from mine. Though intimidated, I immediately liked him—I had to!

"Hey roommie, you wanna help me smoke this?" George asked a few minutes after we met. He whipped out what looked like a cigarette with no filter. "Sorry, I don't smoke cigarettes," I replied, trying not to sound like the biggest wuss-nerd of all time from the tiny, all-American home town I had just left that morning. After all, I was a real good kid drenched in innocence and goodness and Rutgers' most promising straight-A engineering star.

George slowly smiled, licked the rolled edge, and said, "This ain't no tobacco, man!" He flicked a silver Zippo, the kind that only a cool motorcycle guy would have, and lit that sucker up.

WHAAAM! I instantly shed my entire straight-ass, all-American, small-town, studious, good-kid image with one giant puff of that super wackywacky, and instantly became pot radicalized as the newest member of the stoner-hippie love generation, baby! Somebody call *Ripley's* as a faster, more radical lifestyle transformation has never been recorded in history!

The next four years were a wild combo of hazy, crazy college life—rock concerts, dating, motorcycles, drugs, all-night poker games, becoming the scrum-half of the raucous Rutgers rugby team (if you don't know rugby, it's for crazy people—almost as violent as football but without protective equipment), and living the tumultuous politics of the late 1960s. (Notice I didn't mention much about studies.)

I never made it to Woodstock but I got as far as nearby Monticello where thousands of us were stopped by riot police

trying to control the traffic madness. It was so jammed that we gave up trying to go further. We ended up dancin' in the streets as mescaline hallucinogens kicked in, and we grooved on the marijuana peace-love smoke vibe reverberating from the historic concert phenom a few miles away.

It was a crazy time to be in college. During the national collegiate strike to oppose the Vietnam War, I joined a group that orchestrated the takeover of the Rutgers president's office in protest of the student killings at Kent State, which had shocked the nation. I was also the photo editor of a freebie newspaper that covered hippie politics called *All You Can Eat*.

With that not-too-legit press pass, on September 5, 1970, I was assigned to cover the Revolutionary People's Convention in Philadelphia. It was a wild, emotionally charged conference whose humble intention was *only* "to rewrite the U.S. Constitution," and the star speaker was none other than Black Panther leader and all-around badass, Huey Newton. I got there late and I remember bangin' on the locked doors of the conference hall. Beside me was a reporter from *Newsweek* also waitin' to get in. They allowed me in with my crappy press pass, but not the real reporter who had legit media credentials. They didn't want the straight press there. It was nuts!

Outside, the Philly riot police were preparing to lay down some law and order when we all came out of the hall at 9 p.m. It was a scary-as-hell night, a chaotic scene, and the first time I was ever gassed. My pictures of the angry sentiments expressed by America's youth at this convention and chased by club-wielding police wearing riot gear and gas masks were soon splashed all over leftie newspapers. It was an ugly political time in America.

A few times a month, in between my mind-numbing engineering and physics homework, George and I got on our motorcycles (I had bought my own screamin' Yamaha monster) for long late-night rides. We'd flyyy north (on psychedelic wings) on the New Jersey Turnpike to the drug fest Fillmore East in Greenwich Village to catch midnight shows of Sly and the Family Stone exploding the place with "I Want to Take You Higher" or The Chambers Brothers belting a trippy half-hour rendition of "Time." Dance music didn't get much better than that in those days!

As a member of the love generation, my dating life was an ongoing series of one-night and weekend stands as it wasn't cool or necessary to have a serious, long-term hookup. No one expected it. We were all brothers and sisters with our long hair and bell-bottoms and beads and multi-ethnicities, united by the greatest music of all time, determined to stand against the bad-guy government conducting the very wrong Vietnam War. This national discontent brought down the L.B.J. presidency when Johnson decided not to run due to his unpopularity with America's youth. It also set up the paranoid neurosis of the Nixon presidency, which eventually led to Tricky Dicky's shameful Watergate downfall. We never got enough credit for influencing history but we should have, as these were some of the few beneficial influences of the hippie movement.

In retrospect, I wish I had had the opportunity to walk away with a much better education and the academic knowledge that a great four-year college experience can and should provide. Instead, I embraced all the distractions of college life. In my graduating year of 1971, we were busy with demonstrations, strikes, shutdowns, traveling to weekend concerts, and tuning out at drug fests. We missed so many classes, the Rutgers faculty

decided it would be impossible to grade anyone so they put us all on pass/fail without any final term papers or exams necessary just to graduate our class out of there. Unless you were a complete moron, everyone got a pass. I remember thinking, "There is a God after all!" as I surely would have failed any final exams.

I stayed in the engineering department as long as I could stand it (with my slide rule hangin' from my patched jeans) even though I had picked the easiest of the specialties: industrial engineering, which was specializing to be an efficiency expert. For example, designing the floor plan of a manufacturing plant to produce the most efficient, cost-effective machine and manpower output. A capitalist career choice if ever there was one, and not a compatible subject to focus on within the haze of pot smoke and hallucinogenic rainbows! But I toughed it out as I didn't want to disappoint my parents, who were already freaked out by my long hair, beard, tie-dyed Indian shirts, and hashish-stupored girlfriends wearing no bras and with unkempt hair *a la* Janis Joplin.

When I invited my folks to a rugby game against Hofstra U, it didn't work out too well. It was an especially violent game and my face was a mix of blood, mud, and sweat by the final whistle. When I excitedly asked how they liked it, while spitting blood and checking a loose tooth, they angrily said, "If you ever play this game again, we are no longer paying for your college." Oh well, I kept on playin' though I had to deny it forever after.

It is unusual to change majors after two and a half years of study, but I finally got the nerve to do it. As I had no idea what to change it to, I spent some time researching all the majors at Rutgers. The only one that made sense, and sounded remotely interesting was, well, philosophy!

I had big questions and philosophy seemed to be the study of life's big questions. I soon learned that I was already living the life of a passionate existentialist, so it was an easy choice to change my major. Surprisingly, philosophy screwed my head squarely on my shoulders when I found the answer to my questions. When you study Kierkegaard to Nietzsche, Heidegger to Sartre, every philosopher presents a perfectly reasonable, absolutely convincing argument about the big life questions. And yet, many opposed each others' theorems. That was quite revealing!

The true answer to my big questions was, and still is: *There are no absolute answers*! Period! BAAAM! Freedom, baby! You can choose to believe in whatever you wish, but let me repeat: I believe there are no absolute answers to the big questions, from God to morality to creation to the universe or to anything that cannot be physically proven as real. No "blind faith" is allowed since that has no verifiable reality. This includes resurrections, not using electricity after Sabbath sundown, sacred cows in India, 72 virgins in paradise for jihadists, and joining a streaking comet by group suicide. The list goes on forever throughout history. It is estimated that more than 4,300 faith-based groups exist at any one time around the globe, though 98% of the world's population follow one of the 15 traditional religions, each with at least a million followers. The secular/agnostics/atheists are estimated at almost a billion around the world, or one in seven. Religious beliefs or not, it's whatever works for each person… whatever floats your boat.

My personal opinion was, and still is, that religions were created by wise old men out of desperate necessity to control the out-of-control savagery of the *homo sapien* populace who were killing, raping, maiming, and stealing at will. It was a

desperate yet ingenuous way to tame men by creating fear of an imaginary and all-powerful "Almighty," complete with behavior-based afterlife destinations of "heaven and hell." It provided control by fear and incentive to be good by creating rules designed to stop the unspeakable violence and wanton mayhem. And it has sort-of worked for thousands of years by somewhat civilizing the beast of mankind so that humans can be governed by systems of laws—most of the time in between wars and massacres.

Studying philosophy, I could get on with my existentialist life, which was to pursue the things I felt most passionate about, like filmmaking, and enjoy life to the fullest. I felt fearless since there were no answers, no order, nothing to screw up, no one to answer to. There was no need for burden, worry, fear, or guilt.

In the spring of 1971, I graduated from Rutgers with a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy, not exactly the career-enabling degree my parents had in mind, but I was cool with it. Sadly, I lost touch with my friend and roommate George after Rutgers. I heard that, as with many folks from the '60s who could not adjust to life outside the counterculture, he had dropped out.

Since I had no plans to teach or write philosophy, I had no career to pursue. That summer after graduation, I headed for the idyllic communal life of living in a tent on the beach in the art community of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Though already a gay haven then, there were plenty of straight female tourists and local women artistes with whom I could share my dinners and nightly bonfires, where I joined my beach-crashing stoner buddies singin' Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love," and Joe Cocker's "Feelin' Alright."

I started my post-college adult life as a barefoot, long-haired, golden-tanned beach bum—completely broke, with zero prospects…and perfectly, happily content!

Don't bogart that joint, my friend.

Bumpy Road to Filmmaking and the Mafia

Unlike some film giants such as Spielberg and Cameron, I did not start making home movies at an early age. I didn't have a burning desire to tell stories on film like those gifted guys did. If it wasn't for a high school humanities project I needed to come up with, I would have never made the three-minute *Why?* using my dad's 8mm camera. My calling for cinema came after college when at 24, I fell in love with filmmaking at my first film school in London.

In Egypt, my parents were dedicated film fans, and I remember being taken to the movies frequently during my childhood. They were not aficionados, they wouldn't know a Fellini from a Bergman or a DeMille, but they were truly devoted filmgoers. I remember my favorites were Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin comedies until *The Ten Commandments* blew me away in 1956. I fully credit my movie-going parents for seeding my initial fascination with the silver screen.

A lot of people want to make films and they have tons of cool ideas, but they never get it together to make any. Making a film is a lot of hard work, and you have to dedicate your time and focus your efforts. Hopefully, every time you make a film you learn how to improve your process, and your films get better. Your third film should be a lot more ambitious and accomplished than your first. Your fifth, that much better.

Filmmaking is the craft of visual storytelling. In any format—from a commercial to a doc to a feature to a TV show or a miniseries—it's all about visual storytelling. And the more you do it, the better you get at it. One exception are sitcoms. Though there is always a story being told, the entire visual process is designed to deliver close-ups for the funny lines, and then cut to other characters for their reactions. This focus on joke/reaction doesn't give much opportunity for visual language or storytelling interpretation. It's just not what situation comedy is about.

Making film is a complex process that involves a lot of technical knowledge, obsessive dedication, self-motivation, multi-tasking, and people-intensive collaborations. You had better be an extrovert who likes people and can work with many types of folks. This creative craft can be learned like anything else, and like anything else, some are better at it than others.

Is filmmaking an art form or a craft? I believe it's a craft, a group effort as opposed to art, which requires just one person to create original work. A composer who writes music is an artist, in my book, while the musicians who perform it are craftspeople. Just as a painter or sculptor is an artist, the writer of an original screenplay is also an artist, but the writer adapting a novel is a craftsperson. Directing film is working at a craft because it involves so many people—it's a group endeavor. For me, Marty Scorsese

is not an artist. He's an extremely talented craftsman, a visual storyteller, known as a filmmaker. In his case, a damn good one!

To me, a brilliant performance by an actor (e.g., Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull*, or Charlize Theron in *Monster*, both Oscar wins) is a work of art. Even though it's molded by a director and with wardrobe and makeup/hair by a film crew, an individual performance qualifies as artistic. Through the years, I've admired actors like Michael Keaton and Kevin Kline who bring such effortless everyman qualities to their characters. Lately, I am a big fan of Mark Wahlberg's work. In 2010, at a young age (39), Mark deservedly received his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I especially liked his powerful performance in John Singleton's under-appreciated *Four Brothers*.

This is why I love actors. I love what they do when they do it great. I learned the craft early on by taking acting classes myself. I recommend all serious directors do the same, as you learn best (and fastest) the "language of acting" by experiencing it yourself. This is something few film students bother to grasp while in film school, as cameras and lighting and editing are much more sexy and fun to study. I taught acting courses whenever I could fit them around my production schedule, simply because I enjoy working with actors and molding their performances. I designed a practical class aptly called "The Battlefield" to help actors learn how best to audition. It provided helpful insider tips about how to shine at auditions, and thus, acquire paying work—the crucial frontier for all actors—in the competitive jungle of the acting profession.

After making *Why?* in high school, I made my second film at Rutgers when I took a course in television production. It was the only film course on campus. Productions had to be made inside a studio with lumbering, outdated TV cameras that could hardly move. I got to sit at a small electronic board, and was able to

edit my film by cutting between three cameras as I was shooting. This is how daytime soaps, sitcoms, and sports events are taped or aired live. Camera choices are provided for the director to edit shot after shot and create the show as he goes along. A golf event like the Masters has more than 50 camera shots to choose from. Lots of geography to cover in golf; it takes them a prep week just to lay out all the necessary cable.

Luckily, a choreographer friend of mine had a dance piece comprised of ten dancers who started moving slowly and apart, and developed through frenzied robotic movement into a tightly intertwined group that became motionless, emulating a machine breakdown. I asked if I could put it on tape, and my friend said yes so she could get her own copy. In those days, one-inch-wide videotape was used. There were no cassettes yet. I found still photos of machinery and crowded rush-hour pictures, and superimposed them fading in and out over the dancers' performance. It was student-arty but the symbolic concept worked: commerce grinding to a halt.

It was called "*9 to 5*" (long before Dolly Parton's film) and it told the story of the frenzy of repetitive factory work leading to dehumanized automaton breakdowns. What else would you expect from an anti-capitalist philosopher hippie? The video didn't set my film passions on fire or point me towards film school just yet, but it did set me up for the most bizarre experience of JJ.

In the spring of 1971, during my last semester at Rutgers, I shared an apartment with my good friend Theo. We were both busy finishing our course requirements and partying as much as possible before serious adult life started after graduation. I had just finished the "*9 to 5*" video. My professor thought it showed an aptitude for making films so I was jazzed to find my next project. This was the very first time that filmmaking percolated in my head as a possible

endeavor. And just as I was hungry for anything to lead me in that direction, JJ came into my life.

Jerome Johnson was a slick, friendly, well-dressed, and outspoken black man. We met just by chance through a mutual friend. JJ was looking—ready for this—for a new, young director to shoot his movie script. Inexplicably, he wanted *me*!

Imagine my luck! A film producer was looking for a promising film director in New Brunswick, New (fokkers) Jersey (if a studio can say it in the film *Meet the Fokkers*, I can too!). When we met he hired me on the spot without asking to see my work. What work? I couldn't show my dance film to anyone unless they came with me to the college TV lab where a technician would run a large one-inch videotape machine. When I told Jerome about my just-completed production, he told me he could "just tell" I was very talented and I was "his guy." I was in!

Hey, people win the lottery, no? The only thing he courteously asked was if he could stay at Theo's and my place whenever he was in town. His home was in New York City, and living with us would save him a commute. My producer who was giving me my first shot at directing a feature film was asking to crash on my sofa? *No problem whatsoever, and peace/love, my brother!*

During the next few weeks Jerome came and went. Theo and I fed him whenever he was crashing at our place, and shared whatever weed or booze we had at the time. Whenever we started to wonder if Jerome was legitimate—or a professional moocher—he would come up with something totally convincing and legitimate to reassure us. Once, he opened his producer-looking leather briefcase and showed us photo proofs of his new movie, which was shooting in New York City. They were publicity shots of a movie set that included pictures of the star Billy Barty, of all people! Barty

was the most successful dwarf actor in the movie world; his credits included hundreds of movies.

Well, if Jerome was making a movie in New York with Billy B. and had the stills to prove it, I'd give him a big thumbs up, and cook him an expensive steak dinner complete with a Jamaican doobie and all the booze he could drink. I'd even put fresh bedding on the couch!

One day, JJ announced that he was setting up a press conference to launch "our movie" and that he was going to have the star of "our film" fly in on a private helicopter to attend this media event. Stunningly, he then announced this star was none other than his good friend Diana Ross! Yup, the legendary diva star of The Supremes. It don't get better than that!

Our Jerome then talked the city of New (fokkers) Brunswick into providing a meeting hall to hold this media bash, and he made a deal with a caterer to provide an elaborate food spread for the event. He even hired a pianist to create an elegant mood. Jerome used my typewriter (remember those?) to write his press release to local and state media folks to announce the launch of a new movie—directed by newcomer Guy Magar and starring the one and only Diana Ross, who would be at this press bash, live and in person!

On the fateful day, I was excited and ready to start my film career in grand style. I had to borrow a tie and jacket (hippies had none) so I could look good at my first movie's press launch. Theo helped me put jelly ointment in my long hair so we could comb it down and make it look shorter than it really was without having to snip it off (God forbid!). After all, I was about to join the world of moviemaking, and this was my official entrée into Hollywood! And I was about to meet my star, *Diana darlin'*. After JJ's Billy Barty movie, it was time for the Guy and Diana movie! Who knew

a three-minute student dance video would lead to my first feature film right in the middle of the Garden (fokkers) State? I never even had to travel to Los Angeles or New York!

It was certainly a day I will never forget. Jerome looked sharp in a tan suit and tie, and was expertly blah-blah-blahing a mile a minute to all the entertainment reporters who showed up with video cameramen in tow. There were about 50 people at the press conference and JJ went on and on about the movie, its unprecedented commercial potential, and his beaming new director discovered from—of all places—the Rutgers philosophy department! He just kept talking while checking his watch, wondering what could be keeping his dear friend Diana from arriving. He excused himself a number of times to "call the heliport" to check on her arrival. Only the fact that it was pouring rain outside made everyone buy the hours-long delay. JJ managed to keep the media guests there until all the appetizers were gone, but no helicopter or Diana ever showed.

Though Jerome kept telling us how disappointed he was that Diana let him down, needless to say, after this humiliating debacle, even two dimwitted college guys had had enough BS, and the free ride living at our apartment was over. That very same evening, we told crazy brother Jerome to pack his suitcase and hit the road—and he did, amicably. We never saw him again.

Two months later, on June 28, 1971, the Italian-American Civil Rights League was having a rally in Columbus Circle in the heart of Manhattan, which was attended by 50,000 members and sympathizers. This was the very same anti-defamation league that had infamously secured an agreement from *The Godfather* producer Al Ruddy to omit the words "Mafia" and "Cosa Nostra" from the film's dialogue. They also succeeded, with the

help of the virtuous yet sometimes over-the-top rights protector ACLU, in forcing Macy's stores to stop selling the board game *The Godfather Game*. Hard to believe? All true, and only in America! The Mafia as the Red Cross!

The leader of this Italian "civic group" was none other than infamous big-time mobster Joseph Colombo, boss of one of New York City's big five Mafia families. On this hot June day at Columbus Circle, with cannoli vendors having a busy day, Colombo was about to address the huge crowd when gunshots rang out and all hell broke loose. His assassin, who put three bullets in Colombo's head, was in turn shot in the back and instantly killed by another shooter, who was never caught.

The next day, as I sipped my morning coffee, I read the front-page article about the shooting. The newspaper featured a mug shot of the dead assassin, and later the police photo was broadcast on every TV newscast. To my shock and amazement, I saw that Colombo's assassin was a black man (unusual in an Italian mob hit) and…and…I instantly recognized him! It was my very own couch moocher, my angel film producer, the now-revealed ex-con hired by some mob boss to assassinate another mob boss! It was Jerome Johnson himself. My fokkers JJ? Diana Ross's pal? Billy Barty's producer? My first feature film hero? And there was his name under his picture in the paper and on every TV breaking news story!

The police described Jerome as "a demented street hustler" who had somehow been provided false press credentials so he could get close enough to the parade's stage area to shoot Colombo when he started his speech. The investigation went on forever but they were never able to prove who had hired my good buddy, the producer. No arrests were ever made, and the cops finally declared him "a crazed lone gunman."

Mug shot of Jerome Johnson, my first movie producer and lone assassin of Mafia boss Joe Colombo in NYC, 1971.

Mugshot of Joe Colombo from an earlier arrest.

Police photo of Joe Colombo after the shooting. He died in 1978, having never recovered from his shooting injuries after a seven-year coma.

JJ? A crazed gunman? Living on my couch, eating my food, smoking my weed, and hiring me to make my first feature epic?

I immediately realized this movie business was going to be a hell of a lot harder to crack and much wackier than I ever thought!

For all who have ever been disappointed or screwed or lied to or ripped off in the film world—in or outside Hollywood—remember my slick buddy and freeloader roommie, Jerome Johnson. He was the best movie hustler I ever met. And the dumbest assassin ever born.

Falling in Love at Film School

One of the most frequent questions asked at my Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminars is "Should I go to film school?" My answer is always "Yes," but not for the obvious reasons, such as access to instructors and film equipment. You should go to film school to find out if you *love it*. You need to truly love making films to survive the arduous journey of building a TV/film career. Filmmaking is a passionate endeavor, and film school is the perfect place to discover just how much passion you have for it.

Before film school, I had a discouraging experience in film studies. After my post-college beach-bum summer, I signed up for an "experimental film class" at the New School in New York City, as my interest in film was burning again after the loony "JJ Mafia Assassin" setback. A bearded guy named Ed taught it, and the first film he showed was a 10-minute film called *Snow*, which he announced had just won an obscure fest award. To my surprise, the entirety of the film was clear

16mm film leader (transparent film) that he had dragged on a dirty floor so it would pick up all sorts of lint, dirt, and scratches intended to look like "snow" on a bad TV channel. It didn't—it looked like dirt going through a projector! He said the film provided "a silent, self-interpretive, hypnotic experience for each viewer." No music, no sound, no nothing. Since the loose dirt would never be in the same place twice, he proudly said each screening was an "original film experience." Well, I wish I knew *his* weed dealer!

Two things happened after this class. First, I swore never to make a non-narrative "experimental film" in my life and second, I realized that if this eccentric wacko could make a small living as a filmmaker then maybe I could, too. After all, my 8mm high school film *Why?* was a masterpiece of storytelling next to this fool's dirty film leader. He must have had one hell of a job cleaning the 16mm projector of the dirt build-up after every screening.

When I turned 25, I realized I needed to get serious about making money and doing something constructive. However, no job or career path interested me. I toyed with the clothing business at my dad's store, but it wasn't for me. The only thing I really liked to do was go to the movies. I figured if I liked going to see movies so much, maybe, just maybe, I would also like making them. This was a daringly bold idea for an immigrant with no ties or connections to anyone in the elitist and impenetrable movie business. I knew it was a tightly closed door, a super-competitive industry, and that it would be silly to even attempt to break into it unless: 1) I really wanted it bad. I needed to find out how much I would enjoy the process of making films. Did I have great passion for it? 2) I needed to discover if I had some aptitude, some natural

talent for it that would, at the very least, be promising enough to give me an outside shot. That's all I could ask for—a fair shot. A zillion people want to be filmmakers, but do they have the goods? Did I?

Because I wanted to live in Europe at the time, I applied to two film schools in London since they spoke English there, albeit with funny accents. If either accepted me, I would give it a shot. If neither did, I would forget this crazy idea and move to a hippie commune near Boulder where some friends had made a happy home raising chickens and had invited me to join them. One school, the Royal College of Art, rejected me right away. As I was preparing to travel to the Colorado Mountains, I was accepted into the 1972 fall class at the London International Film School. Great! I was gonna get a shot at filmmaking. The chickens would have to wait.

The school is located in an old, fortress-like, six-story brick warehouse with no elevator on a cobblestone street in Covent Garden, which used to be the downtrodden market area of West End, London. In this dreary building, I fell in love with film. Today, it is a fancied-up, trendy area with chic outdoor cafés and galleries. Though the school always seemed to be running on fumes when I was there, it's now doing much better, and its chairman is the British director Mike Leigh (*Secrets and Lies*, *Happy-Go-Lucky*), who was one of our instructors back then. One of the school's most successful grads is director Michael Mann (*The Insider*, *Heat*, *Miami Vice*) who attended two

years earlier than I did. I wish I had known him as I admire his work. Incomprehensibly, I'd heard that one of our brightest and most talented directors, Christopher Nolan (*Memento*, *The Dark Knight*, *Inception*), was infamously denied admission to the London Film School—go figure!

One of the best treats at film schools are the film history courses. They offer an inspiring journey of discovery and appreciation of a young, only 100-years old, craft. Cinema's short and colorful history starts in the early 1900s with the silent film era of such geniuses as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Al Jolson singing in the first "sound" film *The Jazz Singer* opened a whole new audio dimension to audiences in 1927. Celluloid film hit its stride when color burst on the screen and brought a magnificent epic breath of vision to the screen. Its use resulted in a new realism and compellingly imaginative storytelling with unforgettable films such as *Gone With The Wind* and *The Wizard Of Oz*, both thrilling audiences in 1939.

Unfortunately, celluloid days are just about gone forever as "digital" is the new film format in the 21st century. Digital changed the definition of possible, and imaginations soared without bounds. In my opinion, the mind-blowing effects in *2012* (great job by director Roland Emmerich) were the peak of visual achievement of the first digital age, which was inspired by the *Star Wars* films. Within a few weeks of its release, Cameron's outstanding, groundbreaking *Avatar* gave us our first glimpse of the next digital film age.

Of the thousands of films submitted to my annual shorts festival, The Action/Cut Short Film Competition, no more than a handful were shot on film stock. Though the pixel world has led to a huge boom in short films, as everyone can now

afford digital cameras and home editing systems (bypassing expensive film stock and lab costs), the quality level has not improved. Simple explanation: Access to equipment does not mean folks know what to do with it. Knowing how to tell a creative story with a camera, using visual storytelling language, is crucial for filmmakers. Just like learning French or Spanish, you need to learn the basics of visual storytelling if you want to make good films.

Movies offer a subjective experience for each of us. Give the same script to ten directors and you will see ten completely different films. It is this subjective magic of filmmaking—bringing your personal talent to it, your personal vision to tell that story—that completely seduced me at the London Film School and forged my commitment to a film career.

Whether you want to be an actor or hair stylist, or you want to work with cameras, or grip equipment, or electricals, or you love dressing people, or you have an artistic design mind, or when you see a film you hear music you can compose, or when you see a location you know just how to decorate it to fit a story mood, or you love explosions and want to work with things that go *BOOM!*, or you wish to drive a car that screeches around corners and then goes *BOOM!*, you better have committed passion for the craft. So many share the dream and want in, but only the ones with dedication will find a way to survive long enough in Hollywood to open doors of opportunity. And then, only the most talented will walk through these doors and forge meaningful careers.

If you've got plenty of *chutzpah* and you are an extroverted social animal, you will probably get opportunities to show your stuff. When you do, you better have the talent to back it. Everyone else will last as long as they can financially and then

go home to have a life, get married, have kids, and make more accessible, stable, and less frustrating career choices.

In my American Film Institute Fellowship class there were 100 hopefuls who started out. Twenty years later, I attended an AFI alumni luncheon and at my class table, we were only three. Unless some just didn't show up, it looked like about 3% of my graduating class were still in Los Angeles working at film careers. The other class tables were just as sparse.

Thousands of actors come to L.A. every year with their 8 x 10s looking to win the lottery. Most actors are parking cars and working as waiters when they start, and get tired of being broke for years at a time if they don't start catching breaks. Hollywood also attracts thousands every year who graduate from film schools and colleges across the country, and who travel to LaLa-land with a student film in hand, hoping to catch the golden ring. On both sides of the camera, competition is intense at all times. That's why you better fall in love with film if you're going to pursue this industry. It's the only way to get through all the pain, suffering, disappointments, and rejections.

How best to communicate a story to an audience is what the directing or filmmaking craft is all about. Film school is where you discover whether you're any good at it. When I started making films at school, from silent 16mm black and whites to sound/color 35mm productions, I fell in love with the film craft—with the entire process, from script to screen. Making films became a great love affair for me. Finally, I had found something that challenged me, that I enjoyed doing and could be dedicated to. I was 25 and late to the party…better late than never.

From my first day at the London Film School, I noticed a broken-down van parked ten feet from the entrance door. Lee and Ed, two strapped-for-cash American classmates, decided it would be a brilliant idea to live in the van (which they had just bought for $300). They could sidestep renting and avoid commuting costs to get to school every day. At night, they walked the open market after hours to pick up leftover veggies. They would cook a big stew on their alcohol burner in the van to save on food costs. It didn't matter if they were broke, they were attending film school. That sure proved those guys had the passion for filmmaking, and Lee and Ed became two of my most trusted best friends for life. My job was to knock on the van door each morning to wake them up, and then I would move quickly before the stench inside wafted out. They would roll out like dazed zombies with toothbrushes in hand, stumbling to the school's bathroom.

It soon got really cold in London, too cold for the van. After I joined a group of six other students moving into a great frat-type house across from a beautiful park called Primrose Hill, Lee and Ed moved into the walk-in closet. It was the only room they could afford. They put up a sheet of plywood four feet high and turned the closet into a two-man bunk bed. It would get pretty damn crowded whenever they had lady guests for the evening—the most active closet in London!

One of my now nine roommates in this house (which quickly became party central for the school) was an eccentric but talented guy from New York, Lee Shapiro. Lee was the only one in the entire school—maybe the only one in all the film schools in the world—who made big, glamorous, old-style dance musicals for his zero-budget student films. These

were lavish productions, as if Lee had channeled Hollywood's famous choreographer and director of the '30s, Busby Berkeley. He filled his films with Vegas-style leggy showgirls and plumed, glitzy dancers doing synchronized, precision dance numbers *a la* the Radio City Rockettes.

After we all left London, we lost touch with Lee S. until 1987, when we sadly heard the tragic news that he had been killed while making a news documentary in Afghanistan—the very same hell hole of a hopeless country where we are at war today. Shapiro's film journalism work inspired the making of *Shadow of Afghanistan*, which premiered at the 2006 Tribeca Film Fest.

The story of Lee and others randomly killed twenty years ago is also the subject of the book *Blood on the Lens: A Filmmaker's Quest for Truth in Afghanistan* written by Jim Burroughs, who was also one of the film's directors. I mention this story to honor Lee Shapiro, and to remember, as tragic as it is, a film career path that started with innocent, happy musicals in London and ended terribly while making a documentary in a dangerous place that didn't deserve his sacrifice. Moral of the story: Be careful where your film passions take you. All the dancers in heaven and earth are kickin' it high for you, Lee.

I loved film school and London. I was living a 24-hour film-student life including going to midnight club screenings and attending Kurosawa and Fellini weekend marathons. We would spend hours criticizing everything while making our own student film epics. The only film I directed at the London Film School was *Bingo*, a one and a half minute color 16mm film with sound but not synchronized, which meant no one could be seen

talking. In case you didn't know, the Brits are addicted to bingo and they have as many bingo parlors as we do 7-Elevens. The story was about the winners of a bingo game whose prize was to shoot and kill whomever they wanted in the room. Everyone would calmly watch as the dead body was removed, and the game would start up again. It was my metaphoric statement about the worthless lottery of human life—how little value it had. It was my protest film of the Vietnam War and the senseless loss of life there. It was so student-arty that my end credits were red, white, and blue and the music over it was "Yankee Doodle Dandy." To this day, 35 years later, it's a favorite at my seminar screenings, and it inspires and encourages students to go make their own first *Bingo*s.

Cut to Kuala-Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2006, where I was hired to give my Action/Cut Seminar to more than a thousand Southeast Asian filmmakers from Singapore to Tokyo. An attendee came up to tell me he had recently graduated from the London Film School, and had seen and enjoyed *Bingo*. He told me the school had showed it to his class as a student film example. What an amazing small world. I had to go to Malaysia to find a *Bingo* fan, 30 years after I made it!

During my first summer in London, I got my first job as a camera assistant at a busy documentary (doc) company. I was excited when I arrived on the first day, and started cleaning the camera (a 16mm Arriflex BL, if any still exist today), as I had been well trained to do with my little kit of brushes and air jet dusters. The camera was absolutely filthy, with globs of dirt over its inner working parts. The old, ornery boss walked in, saw what I was doing, shut the camera door and growled, "Just keep that damn door closed and dirt won't get in!" and huffed away. Welcome to the real film world, Guy! I didn't

last long, as I couldn't handle traveling with this miserable old fart who took all the fun out of driving to Wales or the Isle of Wight to shoot fishing docs at sea.

I soon got another job as cameraman for a company that made 16mm docs on art subjects for educational distribution. I dropped out of my second year at the London Film School to take this paying job for six months. I hired my buddy Lee W. to assist me again, and we were the first ones from our class to make money shooting films. It was great but I didn't have an employment card, so I really couldn't stay in England and work legally. I loved being there, loved the Brits, and loved running off for wild weekends in Paris whenever we had enough money to get on trains and hovercrafts, which took about five hours of travel each way. When you're young, you're indestructible! Crossing the English Channel for fresh croissants and cinnamon lattes, among other things, was no biggie. Paris is an amazing, beautiful city, and a cineaste's dream with art houses running classic films 24/7. The French truly love cinema.

Before leaving England, I wanted to make a film I could show to get work back in the USA, something more polished and longer than my minute and a half student epic. I'm often asked, "How do you get an idea to make a film?" You tell a story of personal interest, something that intrigues you, a tale you wish to communicate. In my case, I was fascinated by the homeless population that thrived in London at night but mysteriously scattered and disappeared by daybreak. It was a society of the night who were hardly seen in the daytime. I didn't know if this was a Brit oddity for the homeless to politely disappear during the day or what, so I decided to make a doc about it. I wanted to find out. It intrigued me. That's all it takes to inspire a film story.

I discovered a social services organization that provided soup and bread nightly to the homeless out of a traveling van. This is where passion is necessary because it takes a lot of energy and commitment to make any film. I couldn't just show up at night pointing a camera and lights at these people, as many were alcoholic, some were violent, and you were messin' with their privacy. So I volunteered to work on the soup van for two weeks. I had to get to know them first and get them to know me. Some would give me letters to mail to their kids; others just needed a cigarette or a friendly ear while they slurped their hot soup, which for most was their only meal of the day. Once they got to know me, they agreed to have me film them, which I did over one long shoot night. The 10-minute black and white 16mm film with a jazz music score is titled *Soup Run*.

What do you do with any short when it's done? Not much. Unfortunately, there is almost no market for shorts, but they can be a steppingstone to bigger films and help you develop as a storyteller. You enter festivals looking to make some noise, get a good review, receive an award you can list on your résumé, and hope it can open a door to your next film. I entered *Soup Run* in the San Francisco International Film Festival, known for its competitive documentary shorts, and it won the Grand Jury Prize in 1974.

I had come to England with no career, no money, no nothin', to attend a school and test my interest in film and discover how big a passion (if any) I had for the craft. Now, I had fallen in love with filmmaking. I was an award-winning filmmaker, passionately committed to a film career, on my way back home to kick butt in the film industry. Look out, Hollywood!

A Half-Ton of Smelly, Sweatin', Wrestlin' Beef

The problem with documentaries is they don't open doors to making dramatic films. And why should they? They are a completely different breed of filmmaking. First, they do not require a screenplay. Docs can have outlines of material to shoot, narrations written, and a synopsis of the doc's purpose and intentions, but no screenplay is needed and that's an integral part of any fiction film. Second, no actors are required. Thus a documentarian, no matter how proficient and award-winning, is a neophyte when it comes to making a fiction film, and has no clue about working with actors or shooting a script as a story blueprint.

An example is Bill Couturie, a terrific documentarian whose *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* was highly acclaimed and won Emmy and Sundance awards in 1988. I had heard Bill wanted to direct features and it took him eight years to finally get one. After delays and false starts, having no clue what to give a talented documentarian to direct, a studio finally allowed

him to helm *Ed,* which starred Matt LeBlanc (from *Friends*) in his second feature. It was a crass comedy about a minor league baseball team with Matt as pitcher and a monkey (a real one) playing shortstop. Matt and the chimp were traveling teammates sharing motel rooms. The film was so bad it received three Razzie Awards, which are the infamous worst achievement awards.

Documentaries are a wonderful genre and one of my favorites to watch. I am a NatGeo, Discovery, and History Channel fan, and like most folks, I very much enjoy watching well-made docs on bios, wildlife, history, etc. I admire all who work in that field; it's hard work and doesn't pay well. It's a passion-driven genre demanding great dedication. When you're watching an impossible shot of a rock climber hanging by a thread, just remember there is an amazingly brave cameraman on that same cliff, shooting that ridiculously dangerous shot…or a courageous documentarian holding his ground, filming till the last possible moment to capture the brute force of a charging rhino.

But beware, making non-fiction films has zero pull in the world of fiction filmmaking. I found out the hard way. My first real interest in film was to become a cinematographer as I had an aptitude for cameras, lenses, and film stocks. Lighting became my passion. My advisor at the London Film School was a great director of photography named Manny Wynn. He was one of those crusty, crew-warrior-type guys with tobacco-stained fingers who could talk film all night long over

My first mentor Manny Wynn, with his usual cigarette, working on one of his Brit films.

pints of Guinness. Manny hated taking crap from anyone and had a short résumé because of it. He had shot beautiful British films, many of them indie black and white features that didn't make much noise in helping his career. His best known credit was as second-unit cameraman for the Academy Award Best Picture *Tom Jones* in 1963. Before I left England, Manny advised me to become a director because he thought I had what it took to make it, and he wanted to spare me the heartache he had endured as a "below-the-line" (BTL) guy.

In the film world, budgets are divided into two sections: Actors, producers, directors, and writers are listed as "above-the-line" (ATL). Everyone else who works on a film—from wardrobe to editor to composer to the coffee guy—has their salaries listed along with location fees, set construction, and all equipment and costs for all departments under the BTL section on budget forms. Manny explained that the BTL folks spend their lives waiting for the phone to ring to get hired by the ATL guys, and he had the emotional scars and career pain to prove it. He told me it was "healthier for the soul" to be an ATL—a director or producer who works creatively to develop projects by reading, writing, optioning books and scripts, meeting with writers, raising financing, and working daily to get films green-lit. BTL guys receive work calls once pre-production begins. Manny was right and had great influence on me. Sadly, he died a few years later at the very young age of 47. As I heard it, he had a heart attack while making love with his mistress. If you knew Manny, it was easy to believe he'd go that way—out with a smile and a bang.

No matter how many people saw and liked *Soup Run*, my award-winning doc on the London homeless, I couldn't get hired to direct even a short fiction film, or any film of any kind in all of

New York, even for zero salary. I ran around for six months and not a nibble. I walked into the IATSE 600 Cameraman's Union in New York to sign up as a member with the hope that this would help me find work. I remember meeting with an elderly guy who had a weird grin, as if I was a dumbass amusing him. He explained you don't just walk into "the union" and become a cameraman—you gotta pay your dues and go up the ladder. Ladder? He explained I'd have to start out as a clapper/loader and spend seven full years of service in that capacity, then I'd have to work as a focus puller for another seven years, and then as a camera operator for an additional seven. After 21 long years, I'd finally be allowed to hold a light meter as a director of photography? That meant I would not be a union cameraman until I got to my 50s!

This was worse than becoming a doctor, for crissakes! Just loading film magazines and clapping slate boards for seven years sounded like a death sentence to me. I remember trying to befriend this union rep by asking, "Come on, man...there's gotta be a way to shorten those long 21 years." And his reply was, "You ain't got a hell of a chance, young man, as you can't join in the first place unless someone in your family is a member—in good standing!" And with that blatant nepotism policy, both he and I knew this was the end of my dream to become a cameraman.

Soon after, I responded to a job ad by a TV station in North Carolina that had an opening for a news cameraman in Winston-Salem. I figured I could lay low from the union radar, especially since news camera guys were not part of "the New York 600." I applied for the job and got invited to interview. On the flight down, I was excited at the prospect of covering big news like fires or robberies, and other physically dangerous stories. Hardcore news, baby. I had always admired

war cameramen's courage and dedication. Just give me a flak jacket and I'll point the camera—I promise to shoot in focus and hold the damn thing still under fire!

After the interview, they sent me out with their news team on two assignments to give me a feel for the type of work they do. The first was a story about the "rising price of buttons" at the local J.C. Penney—yes, *shirt buttons*—for a story about inflation. After that earth-shattering story, we were sent out of town to a farm to cover a giant pig that had given birth. The farmer had called the station to report he was looking "to give away the new brood." On a newscast?

Needless to say, my heart was crushed when I realized small towns in America's suburbia enjoyed such sugary, cutesy, fluffy stories on their nightly news. Certainly no flak jacket needed here! A few days later, Tim Swain, a great guy who was hiring for the TV station, called me in New York to tell me the local union (NABET for news cameramen) said "no way" to my employment. Another union got me! The chances of ever becoming a cameraman of any kind were slim to none. Manny was right: I wasn't meant to be a BTL.

Then, as destiny did its magic, the same Tim called me three months later, out of the blue, to inform me that the station had received a grant to produce a miniseries on the upcoming U.S. Bicentennial. The great news was that though I had applied to shoot news, he was so impressed with *Soup Run* and some of the British art docs I had shown him, he offered me the job to produce *and* direct *and* write the miniseries! The guy was truly my first film angel. I moved to Winston-Salem for a year to do this project, which became four two-hour-long prime time specials. It was titled *We the People*, and it was the first big job project of my career. It built my confidence to forge ahead as a

director, and move away from becoming a cameraman with its union clutches and too-tough-for-me rules and regulations. I put away my light meters.

Two important things to mention: First, it is a lot easier to start a film career if you are single because you'll be broke most of the time, and also, you may need to travel to where the work is as I did by spending a year in North Carolina. You may be willing to live in your car while you write your *Rocky* script or go to endless auditions, but what if you have a wife and/or a kid? Are you going to have your kid live in a car or on a friend's couch and eat out of cold ravioli cans? Launching a film career is tough and no matter how much you're willing to sacrifice, don't put your family through it. I recommend you stay single until you achieve financial stability.

Second, you build a career by doing projects, one after another, building a résumé, and hoping your work will open doors. Though *We the People* didn't open career doors, being the producer and the director/writer of an eight-hour TV program—which won the 1976 Silver Award for Miniseries at the Chicago International Film Festival for Film & TV—gave me a substantial credit. It also gave me a ton of confidence that I could tackle any production. A year later, it helped to get me admitted to the American Film Institute.

A side note about my North Carolina days. As I write this, I mourn the passing in 2010 of Milton Supman, better known

as "Soupy Sales." I met the children's show comedian when he was in Winston-Salem for a charity drive, and I volunteered to do a promotional TV skit with him. It was my honor to have exchanged cream-pie hits with Soupy, as have thousands of others, from Bob Hope to Frank Sinatra to Ed Sullivan. With Soupy around, heaven will never run out of whipped cream.

Though I put in long hours on the miniseries, living in Winston-Salem was one of the most enjoyable times of my life. It is a beautiful place to live—very Americana with weekend barbecues and softball games and tennis courts everywhere. I had high hopes of raising money to make a feature or launch a local production company. This is tobacco country and many of the local guys I hung with were scions of powerful Southern families such as Reynolds Tobacco. Unfortunately, those guys hung onto their inherited dough like it was the last dime on earth, and all those investors fizzled with broken promises, but always with a smile of Southern hospitality.

To help me with the miniseries, I hired my buddy Lee W. again, who moved in with me from his home in California where he had returned after London. Because my miniseries budget could not pay Lee enough salary to survive, he also worked for the station as a part-time camera operator on such shows as Sunday church services, and shooting the studio promotions for the local wrestling shows. And that's how I met the Danish monster, Eric the Animal!

One day, Lee called me to the studio to meet a 6'5" 400-pound Dane mountain man dressed in bear skins. He was at the station to do promos for an upcoming wrestling event. Eric was renowned and feared as a heel (a bad guy in wrestling lingo) for carrying a cow bone to the ring. He hung it on the turnbuckle, and it was always part of one hell of a bloody finish when the

referee's back was turned. The bone was disgusting as it still had rotting pieces of flesh attached, and it looked like you'd catch instant zombie malaria if you touched it, never mind getting your head cracked open with it. For whatever reason, Eric and I hit it off and became friends, though we had absolutely nothing in common. It was fun to hang with a wrestling star, and I learned that despite pre-arranged choreography and fight outcome, the bumps and bruises were very real. These poor bastards were a mess with ice packs, bandage wraps, broken noses, muscle strains, bone fractures, and all the rest of it after a night of flying through the air, crashing on each other, and smashing skulls with metal chairs. In Eric's case, it was smashing with a cow's femur bone!

I also discovered that despite their wacky looks, eccentric wardrobes, and peculiarities such as facial tattoos or bones through noses or weird hairstyles, there was never a shortage of ring rats (wrestling groupies) hangin' at the bar lounges of their cheap motels. After all, wrestlers were professional athletes and regional TV personalities. Three things I noticed about the ring rats: they all chewed gum, all had bouffant hair, and all wore two-sizes-too-small clothing with lots of cleavage and high heels. Other than that, they were all very friendly, charming women, and they just loved the Danish Animal!

As his guests, Lee and I always had ringside seats and saw the chaotically choreographed wrestling craziness, with thousands of wacko screaming fans, upfront, close and personal. These local shows were much more raw and violently bloody than the polished circus we now see on TV. There was no money for fireworks or sequined capes or extravagant staging. The local shows just delivered nasty, bloody, hardcore wrestlin'. The film *The Wrestler,* with Mickey Rourke's Oscar-nominated performance, captured that brutal, white-trash/blue-collar world

very well. Remember the wrestler in the movie who used a staple gun in the ring? Local wrestling is more like that kind of ruthless insanity than any glitzy pay-per-view wrestlemania.

I drove a two-door Ford Gremlin in those days, the "hippie denim" interior model, of course. The image is forever etched in my mind of Lee squeezed behind me with the 400-pound Eric next to him in the back, and his tag-team partner, George "Crybaby" Cannon—who weighed well over 500 pounds and looked like a human beach ball—riding shotgun next to me. My severely leaning car had its shocks smokin' as I drove them from their hotel to the arena so they could save on taxi fare. Hey, we were buds!

My buddy Eric (aka Eric the Red) with his fearsome bone and his tag-team partner George who, like most wrestlers, used various ring names and identities. On slow nights, they'd fight each other. George's big wrestling move was to sit on people. They'd soon surrender!

Wouldn't you stuff a half-ton of smelly, sweatin', wrestlin' beef in your tiny car…and with that huge, disgusting, tyrannosaurus bone on the arm rest?

Bring It! Hollywood or Bust

There's no getting around it. If you are really serious about dedicating yourself to a career in the film and TV industry, then you've got to move to Los Angeles. Yes, I know Spike Lee lives in Brooklyn, and Woody Allen hangs in Manhattan, and some soaps and a small handful of series, such as *The Sopranos* and *Law & Order,* have shot in New York, but if you want better odds for employment success, 80% of studio/network films and TV shows hire out of Hollywood.

Once I was done with the miniseries and the grassy hills of North Carolina, I returned to New York to figure out my journey to the Gold Coast. I knew I needed to get there, but without any family or friends in the industry, it was just too scary a place to come to without a plan. I also knew I needed to make a dramatic short; a bicentennial miniseries and a doc about the homeless wouldn't cut it in Hollywood. Where else could I make an inexpensive short than at a film school? But I didn't need a film curriculum since I had already been through one in London,

and a four-year super-expensive USC or UCLA—both terrific for what they do—was out of the question for me. I just wanted to make a short drama with actors. I needed a showreel.

My research led me to the one-year Fellowship Conservatory at the American Film Institute (AFI). They accepted 100 fellows every year, 20 in each of five fields of study: directing, producing, writing, cameraman, and editing. I could not apply to be a directing fellow because I knew that everyone and his mother were applying—it was the most competitive of the categories. Also, an entry requirement for directors was to show fiction shorts. I had none. I discovered that while directors got to make three films in the one-year program, producers had the option to make just one, if they wished. That's all I needed to know. That's all I wanted—one shot to make one film. Hopefully, it would be good enough to open Tinseltown's doors.

I applied for admission to the AFI as a producer fellow, which I knew was the least popular and therefore, my best shot. I had producing credits on projects I had directed that were festival winners, and for producer candidates, none of the projects were required to be drama shorts. I got through the first selection process and then nervously danced my way through the personal interview, which took place in New York. It's a pretty stringent entrance process to get to that AFI 100 class.

In August of 1977, days after I turned 29, I packed that old Ford Gremlin (the one with the bad shocks thanks to my giant, rotund wrestling friends in North Carolina) and I headed cross-country with a bumper sticker that read: HOLLYWOOD OR BUST! I was headin' to the AFI!

In case you've never done it, I highly recommend a cross-country trip. It is the only way to get a feel for our homeland and see what a magnificent, beautiful place we are all so lucky to

call our country. I was driving alone and made some sightseeing stops along the way. Surprisingly, when you get to the California border and you tell them you're heading to Hollywood, they stamp your passport, "Allowed to lie with no repercussions." Agents get this stamp in bold caps.

I stayed with my buddy Lee for a couple of weeks until I found a cheap apartment in Hollywood with an AFI cinematography fellow named Gary T. Gary was a super-straight guy from Montana cattle farms; kudos to him for putting up with the east coast lunatic hippie he was now roomin' with. Of course, a great lifelong friendship developed and Gary photographed my one and only AFI film and eventually, my first feature, *Retribution*. He did well in the commercial world as a top DP and director, shooting big time spots. Gary also turned out to be my only buddy who has won an Academy Award: an Oscar in 2005 for Technical Achievement for designing the Sparrow Head, "in recognition for its significant contribution to the art of cinematography." In case you ever wondered who pulled off the amazing interior, 360-degree car shots in the incredible *Children of Men*, it was my smart buddy Gary. You can check out his groundbreaking work at his unique film equipment company: *www.doggicam.com*.

The American Film Institute was created in 1967 by the National Endowment of the Arts through financing backed by LBJ, of all people—not exactly an artistically-minded president, but he gets the credit. On our very first day at the AFI, we were welcomed by a board member. It was a surreal moment for me. One of the most impressionable movies I ever saw back in Egypt was *The Ten Commandments,* when I was eight. There I was some 20 years later, thousands of miles around the globe, being welcomed to the hallowed American Film Institute by none other

than Moses himself! It was cool to meet Charlton Heston on my first official career day in Hollywood. He was the first star I ever met, and this was before he became a gun nut.

In those days, the AFI was located in the northern heights of Beverly Hills in a castle-like mansion known today as Greystone Park and Mansion, available for weddings and film locations. It was surreal as most of the fellows and I were broke, but we'd drive every day in cheap cars from crappy apartments to this superbly manicured estate surrounding a magnificent mansion-style building that held the keys to our future Hollywood careers. For guest speakers, we'd have such illustrious directors as Norman Jewison, Sydney Lumet, and the emperor himself, Steven Spielberg. That's what's great about the AFI—it's the industry school, and amazing people come to speak and teach. After you graduate, it's easier to get power players to look at an AFI film than one made at other schools. Trust me, that's a fact. Which other school institution has their lifetime award televised every year with the A-listers attending? I was there as a proud alumni the night they gave the AFI Life Achievement Award to the deserving visionary, George Lucas.

After being welcomed by Moses, I signed up to be the first producer to make a film in the first semester, since I only had enough money to attend one semester. The equipment they provided were black and white video cameras, recording on a three-quarter-inch cassette deck. Before my turn came up on the schedule, I produced three films for other directors. The producer's job was to assist in getting a director's film made and to handle the AFI-provided budgets of $150 (mostly spent on late-night pizzas during the prep-shoot-post). Basically, producer fellows were production managers supporting the directing fellows, who ruled the program.

Then, my turn came to direct my one film!

Since I was only getting one shot to make a showreel, my first thought was to make something commercial, an action piece, which would hopefully get me a job. I also knew studios looked down on black and white, or didn't view it as commercial, so my plan was to shoot my one-and-only AFI film in color, despite the ban on doing so. I swore my crew to secrecy and rented a color camera from an outside supplier with which I could use the 3/4" video deck the AFI provided.

In those days, early '78, the cheapo camcorders so widely available today didn't exist. The daily rental for a video camera was $500, and my producer wanted to save the $150 budget for the pizzas. My shooting schedule was four days and I remember only having about $850 in my bank account. I had to get that color camera. I waited for a three-day holiday weekend and ordered my one-day rental camera for a Friday morning pickup. When I told them I could not return it till very late that evening (I knew they'd be closed), they said not to worry and bring it back Tuesday morning when they re-opened. Bingo! That is how you get a four-day rental at a one-day price.

My AFI film, *Once Upon an Evening,* was a straightforward action piece. I wanted to open TV doors and there were lots of action dramas at the time—police shows such as *Police Woman* starring Angie Dickinson, and *Magnum P.I.* starring Tom Selleck. All those drama shows hired a director for each one-hour episode, and they each made about 24 shows per year.

My film had a simple revenge storyline: Three burglars randomly break into a couple's home at night, and while the guy is in the shower, they murder his girl and ransack the place. He comes out of the shower to find the horror of his deceased girlfriend, and sees the bad guys still in the garage below, packing their car with the stolen goods. In a fit of blind rage, he sets out to block their exit, and proceeds to stalk and kill each one—the last one he engages in a brutal fight and a drowning finale in a swimming pool. My roommate Gary lit it, we shot it in our apartment, and we used the garage and pool areas of our building. We shot four all-nighters of noisy filming activities in our apartment complex, without any permissions or permits. We got away with the whole deal.

One of my heroes is French filmmaker Claude Lelouch whose most successful film is the romantic classic *A Man and a Woman*. I met him when he came to speak at a London film event. Claude was the only world-class filmmaker known for operating his own camera, all handheld, every shot from his shoulder. Handling the camera personally felt so organic to me, as close to a painter's brush or a sculptor's chisel as a filmmaker could get. So I operated my first fiction film at the AFI, and swore I would operate all the films I ever directed. Unfortunately, union rules interfered once again, and I was never allowed to operate on union shows, except for a random handheld shot that directors of photography would allow me to shoot just to shut me up.

I admire the few directors who direct/operate as Kubrick did and as James Cameron and Steven Soderbergh do now. I met Soderbergh when I was invited by the Weinsteins to the industry premiere of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. I liked his debut film and congratulated Steven after the screening. He was very gracious, but looked like a deer in headlights, overwhelmed by his debut. Little did we know he would become such a gifted, accomplished

director. Today, he's also a VP of the Directors Guild, of which I have proudly been a member for 28 years.

My AFI film ended up with a running time of 25 minutes and had a terrific music score, which I stole from some of my favorite movies. You need no clearances when you make a student film, as it will only be shown at private screenings. If you're going to screen in some of the bigger festivals and you have an Elton John song opening your film, then you need to cover your butt by getting festival rights from the publishers. They're usually free; their only concern is that you don't make any money from your film. If you ever do, they'd want their share of the pie.

At the end of each semester, the student films are screened. Our entire class was crammed into a large, packed theater along with faculty and guests. When the lights went down to start my film, the first thing that came up on the video screens was color bars. In those days, people used color bars to adjust monitors/TVs to the right hues. Since all films were made in black and white, no one had ever seen color bars at the school. I will never forget the collective gasp I heard in the dark when everyone discovered they were about to see the first color video ever made at the AFI!

They've been shooting in color ever since. No one ever wanted to shoot black and white after *that* screening! However, the film was not well received by this audience, who mostly found it to be "too commercial." In film school, you're expected to make personal, arty kind of films that allow you to grow as an artist. Anything too outright commercial (like horror or action) is looked down upon as a no-no. Of course, commercial was exactly my intention, in the hope that it would get me something important called a job-job!

The head of the faculty was a cool Italian named Tony Velani who counted Fellini as one of his friends. I liked him and we had

a good relationship. But after the screening, he really had no choice but to call me down to the stage and tell me in front of everyone that I had not followed the assignment protocol since I had broken three rules: 1) I shot in color, 2) I had music, 3) I had front/back credits. The idea of the first-year fellows' videos was to make "learning exercises" and not finished show pieces. For that reason, they never wanted to see completed films with music and credits, and certainly never in color since the school had no color video equipment.

Out of the twenty directing fellows each year, they would pick two or three they felt were the most talented and invite them back for a second year. They would give the chosen directors a budget of $10,000 to make a 35mm color film (not video). These films made great AFI student showreels since they were much more polished and expensive than first-year black and white $150 video exercises. The school was a bit elitist in that way. The program was designed to discover the best directors while the 98 or so other fellows were out on their butts with only their unfinished black and white videos. As a producing fellow, I knew I was not going to be invited back for a second year. This one and only "exercise" had to be my show ticket. I needed a complete polished film in color with music and credits, damn it! I understood when Tony said he was sorry and they had to confiscate my 3/4-inch master cassette for not following the rules. I never saw that original tape again. However, I had smelled that one comin', so I had already made 15 copies. Now I had a showreel to show!

I spent the next nine months screening my AFI film to anyone and everyone who would see it. If a studio janitor was willing to watch it, I'd run it. The biggest industry honcho who got to see it was Sydney Pollack, a great guy and a very talented director

(*Tootsie, Out of Africa*). He told me he liked my bravado filmmaking but it was just too violent for his taste, which meant he would not take me under his wing. It was too bad as Sydney would've been a dream mentor. Most of the time, producers would agree to see the film if I left a cassette with them. Sometimes they would misplace them, sometimes lose them—one producer gave me back a melted plastic cassette, which he had left in his car trunk over a very hot summer weekend.

After 170 screenings (I kept count) and with just a couple of copies left, I was completely broke and only had $17 left in my bank account. One of the many who had seen the film was Peter Saphier, a vice president in features at Universal Studios. I mention his name with grateful thanks after all these years. Peter liked the film and told me it was the best student film he had ever seen, even better than the one he had seen from Scorsese. Geez, better than Marty's NYU student film? Was he just being kind to me? Could he help me?

Sometimes desperation inspires enough *cojones* to change your destiny. On a desperate yet determined day, I got into my car, drove to Universal Studios, and sneaked past the guards in the lobby. This was much easier to do in those days than in today's high-security world. I managed to get to the penthouse of the Black Tower, the ominous-looking building where the great Lew Wasserman lorded over his studio domain. Talk about plush offices, with six-inch-deep carpeting that made you feel like you were walking on clouds (especially if you had holes in your shoes, as I did!). I started looking for Pete's office.

I saw Peter at his huge desk. He was on the phone. I walked past his surprised secretary, into his office, shut the door…and locked it. Peter was startled by my bold action, hung up the phone, and lashed out at me, "What is this? What are you doing here?"

I went for it. "Mr. Saphier, I'm here for 30 seconds of your time to ask one question, and then I will leave without any trouble." He was listening, I was trembling. "A few months ago, you told me my student film was the best you ever saw—even better than Marty's." *(*Hell, I couldn't resist!) "So I'm here to ask if you were bullshittin' me. Did you mean it? If it was bullshit...no problem, I'm gone. But if you meant it, if you really thought I've got potential to be a director in this town, then I need your help because I've got $17 left to my name, and I'm dying out there!"

Whew! I had gotten it all out. Peter stared at me for the *longest minute* of my life, and with the secretary banging on the door, yelling that security was on its way, he quietly said, "I wasn't bullshitting. You made one hell of a student film. How can I help you?"

WHAT? I was stunned! I managed to mumble, "I want to learn the TV production business. Just get me in as the assistant to the biggest producer on the lot, and…and I'll take it from there, and…and I'll work very hard to develop a directing career." After staring at me for the *second longest* minute of my life, he said, "OK."

OK? OK! It took me six months and 170 screenings of my AFI film to crack the coconut! Within two days, I was introduced to the biggest TV producer at Universal, Glen Larson, and I became his right-hand man. I signed a seven-year contract with Universal, which was unofficially known (as it was explained to me) as the "Steven Spielberg deal." It was created years earlier when Steven had infamously sneaked on the lot and set up an office in an empty room. When they discovered him there, instead of throwing him out, they signed him up. Spielberg had VP Sid Sheinberg as his mentor angel at the studio; I had VP Saphier.

Each year or so, as a goodwill gesture, Universal gave this deal to one young person with promise. With the contract, they had you tied up for seven years in case you turned out to be a genius, and they only paid me $250 per week, a cheap investment compared to the secretary they assigned me, who was making $375.

But who cares? I had my first Hollywood job at the biggest studio in town—the busiest with the most TV series productions. The place was humming with action. By sneaking up that Black Tower, I literally broke into the Hollywood bubble!

I was the new Universal Studios golden boy, their promising young future director. And my beat-up Gremlin with the bad shocks proudly took its assigned parking space in the executive garage, baby!

I was IN!

Chapter 7

Battlestar Galactica, Return to Egypt, and Producer X

I was excited to start the first work day of my seven-year contract in Hollywood as the assistant to the most powerful television producer at Universal Studios, Glen Larson. He was on top of his game with series on the air such as *Quincy M.E.* (a medical examiner show, pretty good) and *B.J. and the Bear* (a trucker and his monkey, pretty lousy). Glen was the Aaron Spelling of his time, able to sell practically anything to the three hungry networks who ruled the airwaves. There was no cable TV competing in those days. Glen had just sold the most exciting mega-hot series of the coming season, the TV version of the biggest movie hit ever: *Star Wars*. This most promising series, *Battlestar Galactica*, was such highly anticipated event programming,

it made the *Newsweek* cover on September 11, 1978 and the covers of many other popular magazines.

Glen loved entourages and on my very first day, he invited me into his limo and we sneaked away to catch a couple of innings of the boys in blue at Dodger Stadium in his VIP box. On the way, he handed me a yellow pad and asked me to write background cockpit chatter for the show's aerial space fights: "Starbuck, look out at 9-o'clock!" and "Apollo, comin' up fast on your six!" The more Glen discovered I was responsible and had a knack for the creative process, the more he entrusted me with various duties including reporting to him on the dailies for his series, shooting main title sequences for new shows, checking final prints at the lab before airings, and attending his script meetings with his writers.

I was getting as full and active an education on the television business as I could have wished for. I had a big office right next to Glen's and I became his go-to guy whenever he needed anything, which was constantly. It was a grand time for me. Life at the studio was exciting as we were in the middle of a production center surrounded by the energy of a buzzing film and TV industry. I'd walk by Alfred Hitchcock's office and slow down, hoping to get a peek at him through a window. Hitch went to his office every day until he passed in 1980. I became friends with Jerry London, who was directing one of the first and most successful miniseries ever made: *Shogun*. Glen's office suite was production central with a constant parade of staff and visitors.

Lorne Greene, *Bonanza's* Ben Cartwright, would hang out in my office dressed as Commander Adama between breaks on the *Galactica* set. Vince Edwards, who had made it big starring in the medical show *Ben Casey* twenty years earlier, was now

working as a director for Glen, trying to pay back huge debts he had lost on the ponies. I even met everyone's ultimate TV mom, *Lassie's* June Lockhart, whose daughter Anne was an actress on *Galactica*. It was an exciting time for me to be in Glen's world.

Showrunners (creators and executive producers of series) are the most powerful people in TV. They start as writers and work their way up to producing. The new geniuses with hit shows become the wealthiest, and the most prized by the networks and studios. Everyone thinks that "they" have a special connection to the American zeitgeist of the moment. This lasts until those Nielsen ratings start falling and, all of a sudden, their once dedicated audience is now switching to *Wipeout* or *The Bachelor* or *Dancing with the Stars*.

The three-act story structure is the classic story writing form. Episodic one-hour drama is a different format consisting of four acts. They usually end with cliffhangers before the commercials to entice the audience to return to the channel after the break. They include prologues (a trailer to grab you at the top of the hour) and epilogues (to bring you back next week). If you can master this six-part formula, and learn to write fast while creating 24 plot lines to fill a year's order, then you can also become a king of TV like Aaron Spelling (*Charlie's Angels*), Stephen Cannell (*The Rockford Files),* Frank Lupo *(The A-Team*), Dick Wolf (*Law & Order*), and Steve Bochco (*NYPD Blue*). Today, I am in awe of the very talented Shonda Rhimes, the terrific showrunner of

the back-to-back and always excellent medical dramas *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice*.

Six weeks into my job, Glen got the crazy story idea to have *Galactica* characters walk on the fictitious "deserted planet of Kobol," which had pyramids. If Glen wanted real pyramids, Glen got real pyramids. He turned to his right-hand, dependable new assistant and said, "You've got to go to Egypt and shoot these characters walkin' around the real pyramids, and bring it back as fast as possible so we can edit your footage into the show, which will premiere on the air in a week!"

WHAT? EGYPT? ME? You mean the real Egypt? The one in northern Africa? You gotta be kiddin'!

At first, I was thrilled to be returning to my birthplace but I was also freaked. When we left in 1958, Egyptian officials took away our passports so we could never return. I had no clue if my family's name was on a banned list. At least if they arrested me and put me in a *Midnight Express*-type Egyptian prison, I hoped Universal Studios' big shot lawyers would come to my rescue.

John Dykstra, who had won an Oscar for the visual-effect wonders of *Star Wars*, had been hired to do the same on our show. He was sending a stills photographer with me to shoot plates on 8x10 negatives which would be used to create visuals of space fighters attacking pyramids with lasers on the deserted planet of Kobol. Crazy! We were going to use the real pyramids built by a thousands-of-years-old civilization, transpose them to a foreign planet, and have firefights with laser weapons exploding all over them. Don't you just love this business?

Within 48 hours of Glen's eureka idea, I headed for my childhood homeland. I had no clue what was awaiting me, which was unnerving, especially during the long flight to Cairo. Traveling with me was a film cameraman, a stills photographer,

all their equipment, a trunk holding *Galactica* costumes and wigs for the doubles, and my puckered sphincter!

I had not told anyone about my fear of being on an Egyptian blacklist. After all, I was traveling under an American passport. I was thankful that the production office at Universal had arranged for this Egyptian location guy, Abdul, to pick us up and make all local arrangements. Sure enough, Abdul greeted us at our exit gate and took us around the back of the customs area. With a wad of cash, he started "backsheeshing" (tipping) security guys along the way, and *voilà*, we were out of the airport without any customs' hassles. I sensed the authorities never knew we were officially there, and I happily never knew if there was indeed a blacklist or if I was on it. We were rushed into an air-conditioned limo as we sped to one of the seven wonders of the world, the Pyramids of Giza. My reservation at the luxurious hotel nearby, the Mena House, was where my parents had honeymooned. I was back!

The entire experience was surreal for me. I felt sad as we drove through Cairo streets when I saw the overwhelming poverty and over-population. Though I was nine when I left, Cairo looked like all progress and modernism had stopped in its tracks and Nasser's nationalism was a gigantic setback for the country, which seemed frozen in time. The pyramids were magnificent, of course, with crowds of tourists climbing the giant stones, riding camels, and eating native foods like falafel pitas. I had no clue how I was going to shoot three *Galactica* doubles (extras) walking by deserted pyramids, but Abdul assured me, "No problem," as he waved the huge wad of money that had been wired by Universal. He added, "Studio take good care of you." I sure was grateful.

At the hotel, Abdul had arranged for extras to audition and try on the three costumes and wigs. I had to find the right "photo

doubles" for Lorne Greene, Richard Hatch, and Jane Seymour, who is one of the most beautiful women to ever grace a TV screen. She later married a great guy and producer I had worked for on *The Young Riders* named James Keach—Stacey Keach's brother. I quickly cast the male doubles but ran into a major problem with Jane's due to her costume. It was a pant-and-jacket *Galactica* outfit, and none of the Arabic women auditioning would wear pants. None. It was not allowed for women in the Muslim world, and not in 1978.

Panicking, we decided to find a skinny guy who could fit in the pants and wear Jane's long-haired wig. To our dismay, we discovered Arab men will not wear a woman's wig, not even for lots of cash. It is too demeaning in their chauvinistic medieval society. We were stuck, and I was worried because we were scheduled to shoot early the next morning.

That night, we were drinking at the hotel bar with absolutely no idea how to resolve this crazy problem, when Middle Eastern music started playing, and an exotic belly dancer with castanets came out to entertain the tourists. A half-drunk Abdul looked at me excitedly and yelled out, "Jane! Jane!" Abdul explained that only a belly dancer, already showing plenty of skin, would be bold enough to wear pants for money. During her break, he asked her if she could work for us while I ran to the room to get the costume for her to try. Perfect fit! We had our Jane Seymour double six hours before our sunrise call. I've had a soft spot for belly dancers ever since.

By the time we were ready to shoot our first shot, a very wide shot of all three pyramids, there must have been a thousand tourists surrounding them. This is a very popular tourist attraction. We had no permits, no government approval, not even a police officer, but Abdul was unfazed. He kept smiling and

saying, "No problem." He explained every acre or section around the monuments is the accepted "informal territory" of different Bedouin tribes, handed down through generations. Depending on where you were standing, someone was unofficially controlling that little area. If you want the Pyramids of Giza completely deserted, you have to backsheesh about a hundred guys and set a signal for them to clear out—themselves and everyone standing on their little piece of land. Wild and crazy!

When we were ready to shoot (with a glorious sunrise on the horizon), Abdul, who had it all worked out with the "real estate folks," used a loud fog horn to signal the "reps" of centuries-old landowner families. Within minutes the entire pyramids area was magically cleared. A breathtaking moment! I got my master shot of our three costumed doubles walking on a deserted landscape towards the great pyramids in all their glory. It was one of those movie magic moments you never forget. Universal Studios sure had picked the right location man in Cairo, and sent him enough dough to clear all of Giza for me!

The only nuisances I had all day were the belly dancer's chaperones—her mother and aunt, wearing traditional black veils, head covers, and long black garments called *abayahs*. They were repeatedly tugging on my arms telling me (in Arabic, which I barely understood) how great a wife and cook their young dancer was, and advising me to marry her immediately and take her back to America. The dancer herself was giving me "come hither looks" and flirting with me as I was setting up the next

shots. Then as today, girls from oppressive countries hope to marry American men and come live the dream here. *Galactica* almost changed my life!

Within 48 hours, we were flying back with 35mm footage of TV characters walking around the pyramids, the Temple of Karnac, and 8x10 still plates for the visual effects. They edited my footage in a few days, and added fighter jets firing laser shots and explosions to include in the exciting title sequence that opened each episode. As scheduled, we premiered that very next Sunday in a three-hour special ABC presentation on September 17, 1978. If you ever wondered if those pyramids were the real thing in the *Galactica* main titles that now play forever in reruns, they are real—very real—and they almost cost me my bachelorhood!

After months of long days, nights, and weekends working for Glen, we were sitting one evening at his beautiful beachfront Malibu mansion when I finally asked him to let me direct a show, any show, as he had five series on the air. Amazingly, five hours out of 22 prime-time hours per week were Glen's! That's almost a quarter of the content Americans were watching at night. I reminded him that Universal had me under contract to develop my directing career. After being on sets and watching dailies for months, and bringing back great second-unit footage from Egypt, my confidence level was high. I was ready to rock. Unfortunately, Glen was not.

He explained this was the most prolific period of his career, and he needed all the help he could get to maximize it. He told me I was a great dependable assistant and he was afraid to lose me if I became a director, which he would have. He promised he would let me direct my first TV show in two years if I continued to work for him till then. I explained that if I was 22, I would gladly give

him two years of my life, but I had just turned 32 and I didn't have that kind of time to give anyone. I was anxious to move forward with my career plan, but Glen had his own plans.

At about that time, I completed a screenplay, again written with my buddy Lee. It was a mystery drama revolving around the real phenomena of cattle mutilations occurring across the country. Believe it or not, UFOs were the most common explanation at the time. It was called *They Came by Night* and would cost about $10 million—way too expensive to allow me to direct it. My latest film was still my AFI video, which I had made for $500. So I decided to find a more qualified director, someone who could help me get it made.

I was on the studio's backlot one evening, by the small lake, watching a crew shoot second-unit shots for *Jaws 2*. I met the production designer, Joe Alves, who had designed the original *Jaws*. Joe was Spielberg's favorite designer and went on to make *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* with him. Joe and I hit it off and became pals and to this day, he is one of my dearest friends. I soon discovered Joe was looking to direct and got excited after reading our UFO/cattle mutilations script, which had promise of being a very visual thriller movie. Joe and I quickly agreed to team up and make the film. The project was moving forward and all we needed was a producer to find the dough.

Well-known and established Producer X (you'll soon see why I can't reveal his name) loved our quirky project. More importantly, he believed in Joe and was willing to back his directing break. He welcomed me to produce it with him and offered us office space at his company at the Sunset/Gower Studios. All of a sudden, the feature world was beckoning with open arms and an immediate project. The TV world was only offering two more years as Glen's assistant. It wasn't even close.

I said goodbye to Glen, asked Universal to tear up my contract (which was no biggie for them since I hadn't directed anything yet), and I boldly made the move from Universal Studios in the Valley to the Sunset Boulevard studio in Hollywood. My first feature project, *They Came by Night,* was about to be made.

The first thing our new producer did was to send Lee, me, and our director Joe, to Albuquerque to attend the nation's first convention on cattle mutilations, convened through the offices of President Carter himself. More than 20,000 cattle mutilations had been reported in 23 states; it was becoming quite a bizarre phenomenon. The convention was attended by a wide variety of folks—from FBI agents to the most ardent UFO believers to folks who purported to be alien abductees to college professors presenting data to sheriffs showing photos of the gruesome "inexplicable methodology" used to slaughter the cattle. It was a freaky bunch.

Evidence included smashed bones suggesting drops from great heights, geographical dislocations of sometimes hundreds of miles (with no footsteps or markings around them), very clean laser-like, precise cutting of cows' missing lips, tongues, anuses, and hearts. And no other animals, including predators, would go near these carcasses, not even flies. Strange? We thought so, and we also thought it would make an exciting movie. Joe started designing cattle carcasses. After all, he was the guy who designed Bruce the shark and the rest of the amazing *Jaws* production designs.

One day during a production meeting, Oliver Stone (who was friends with Producer X) opened the door, looking like death warmed over. He obviously hadn't slept yet and was still on a "high" from the previous evening's thrilling Oscar win for his original screenplay *Midnight Express*. He stared at us and

then said with a sneer, "None of you losers will ever win an Oscar—but I won mine last night…so fuck all of you!" We all cracked up, applauded him and his win, and with a shit-eatin' grin, Oliver exited. This soon-to-become genius director turned out to be one of my most admired hero filmmakers. Eight years later, he won again for his amazing *Platoon,* this time earning the Directing Oscar along with the Best Picture award.

Producer X was looking for a financing deal while we were almost in full prep and working hard with long hours every day. In anticipation, we would celebrate the hopefully upcoming deal with happy group dinners and lots of bottles of wine. Joe was turning down designing offers to focus on his first directing assignment. It was amazing to see such a great designer sketch out his visualization of the movie with colorful storyboards. We could not wait for the gifted Joe to yell "Action" and get this show on the road. I was running out of money, as no one would be paid until a deal was closed and the money spigot opened. If you want to be a producer, you better have some available cash because you only get paid when a film is green-lit or a deal is approved. Until then, you're always advancing your own overhead. It's a nerve-wracking gamblers' game.

Finally, Avco Embassy Pictures called for a green-light meeting. Avco is no longer around but it was run at the time by Robert Rehme, an especially nice guy who became a prolific producer (*Patriot Games*), and was later honored with the presidency of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (the Oscar folks). Green-light meetings are the most exciting in any producer's career as they determine whether your movie gets a "green light" to proceed—or not! A bunch of people (execs, accountants, marketers) sit around a conference table and hash out the basics from the budget numbers to the schedule to the

casting leads (a list of got-to-get stars in order of preference or else the deal is dead) to where to shoot the movie the most inexpensively—Canada, Kansas, Bulgaria, or anywhere to save a buck. If everyone is on the same page, a movie is born. If not, goodbye and say hello to a lonely date with Jack Daniels!

I had no idea that the existentialist phrase "shit happens" was born in the movie industry, the land of quirky eccentricity. One of the things that makes our industry unusual is its high tolerance for odd behavior. I'm not quite sure if peculiar individuals are drawn to the profession or if they become wacky through the unique alchemy of big-time power and oodles of money, but I was about to experience it firsthand with my new boss, Producer X, at the green-light meeting we were attending at Avco.

When that day came, I was very excited, had hardly slept the previous night, and got into the office too early. Finally, I saw Producer X arrive and walk down the hallway toward me.The closer he got to me the more it felt like I was going into the Twilight Zone! There was definitely something bizarre about his face but I couldn't tell what it was until he got a few feet from me, whispered hello (this guy always whispered), and continued past me into his office.

Dumbfounded, I followed him with a "What's up?" He explained he had been to the dentist earlier that morning to have all his wisdom teeth pulled. As he was driving to the studio, he thought his cheeks looked too swollen and kind of "chipmunky." *Chipmunky?* So he stopped at a toy store and bought a full face mask, which he had put on his face to hide the swelling! The mask was clear plastic but with a skin-color pinkish tinge. From a distance it was hard to see but close-up, it was a disaster because it was the mask of a hundred-year-old man, all wrinkly

and craggy and ugly. He said it was either that or a gorilla mask. Thank God he picked the right one!

He grabbed his keys and I followed as we got into his car for the drive to Avco Embassy. He was driving cross town with the mask on while I was assuring him his cheeks were not swollen *at all* and that he absolutely did not need to wear this ridiculous mask. He insisted he was more comfortable wearing it. I could not talk him out of it. We arrived and walked into the most important meeting of my young career with my producer partner wearing a cheapo ten-dollar plastic face mask held on by an elastic band around his head.

Everyone in the conference room stared with disbelief as we sat down. To my horror, my partner never acknowledged the mask or provided any reason for it. He just sat down and started gabbing about the movie. He had forgotten to cut a hole in the plastic for his mouth and since he was a whisperer, no one could hear or understand a word he was saying. He also forgot to make holes through the plastic for his nose so he could breathe properly. Every few seconds his translucent mask would fog up and his face would disappear. And yeah, it was *that* bad.

Needless to say, we did not get the green-light. I always believed it was impossible for the studio to approve giving a $10 million budget to an eccentric man wearing a full face mask with no explanations. Even in Hollywood where anything goes, there are certain limits to bizarre eccentricity. Though he was a great guy and went on to make many well-known pictures, Producer X soon lost interest in our movie and moved on to other projects. It was a huge disappointment to Joe, Lee, and me. It was a setback for my career. I was now unemployed and broke again with zero prospects in sight. The Universal contract I'd left tattered behind me was a distant memory.

Moral of the story: Never ever go to a business meeting with your partner wearing a mask!

Never ever!

Television Directing and My Break-In with Buck Rogers

After the mask fiasco with Producer X, I had no choice but to suck it up, wipe the dust off my AFI student thriller, and start showing that $500 film all over again. It was all I had, and I had to use it one more time to find that infinitely small industry crack to slip through and finally get my first TV directing gig. It was the only job I was now looking for.

The craziest part about one-hour series directing is the politics which if you're not careful, can make directing a joyless experience. It takes a special breed of directors to sustain a long career in that world. Basically, you're shooting a schedule, not a show. Success for a TV director is measured by coming in on schedule and thus, on budget. Some showrunners' deals allow them to keep every dollar saved from the agreed-upon budget paid by the networks in addition to their huge salaries plus writing money every time their names appear on a script. The more ruthless the production managers, who pressure every department to come in under budget, the higher the "bonus"

they get for making the showrunners richer. If they don't, they get fired, simple as that.

The crew is hired for a season, which is usually 12 episodes for a new show or 24 for a year's worth of shows for an established hit. In the spring and summer months, it's all reruns. Series work is the most stable crew job in the industry, especially if you work on a hit show that is on the air for years. This is much different from features where you have to find your next job every few months after you complete a film. A series crew gets tight, almost like an extended family. They work long 12-hour days plus overtime. They all share the intensity of an unyielding schedule as each department works hard to deliver their part of the puzzle. Together, they eat, they travel to new locations, they gossip, and they get to know each other and their families.

Sometimes, they hook up during the production run, especially if it's an out-of-town show and they're living in hotels. When you see the director of photography getting a neck massage from the script continuity girl, you wonder what else is going on between them.

In episodic TV, within this tight family atmosphere, a new script gets started every seven days with a new director. You must act nicely and not yell at anybody because you've got to get this crew to roll up their sleeves and work hard so you have a slim chance to make your schedule. If someone does not like you and the word spreads that you're a jackass or an a-hole, watch the entire crew move in *very slow motion* and kiss your schedule bye-bye.

In features, Jim Cameron can yell and scream and do whatever the hell he wants to get his way because the power in film is with the director, but not in TV. It doesn't count that he directed on the *Dark Angel* series (which launched Jessica Alba) because

he was also the creator and executive producer—the boss. My old friend Jim would not have lasted long as a TV director nor would he have wanted to. His quality demands cannot be met on a series schedule shooting seven to nine pages a day. He'd be miserable in that world and would prefer to go be a painter, sculptor, or probably a deep-sea explorer.

Here's a great story I heard about directing movies versus TV. When *The A-Team* was top of the ratings as the #1 most popular show, the production company received a call from one of the most respected feature film directors: Richard Brooks. Richard was one of those hardcore icons from an earlier time. He directed such famous films as *In Cold Blood* (1967) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). He won an Oscar for writing *Elmer Gantry* in 1960. Richard loved *The A-Team* and was interested in directing a show. Everyone was excited to have him come in for a meeting at the Stephen Cannell Company. At the meeting, they handed him a typical *A-Team* screenplay. Richard leafed through it and saw it had 60-some pages. He had only one question, "How many days do I get to shoot it?" When he was told just seven days, he returned the script, stood up, and said as he walked out of the room, "Gentlemen, thank you, but no thanks. I have no idea how to shoot that many pages in seven days. Goodbye and good luck." No better story can differentiate the two different worlds of directing.

A director's contract for one-hour episodes runs for 15 days of employment—seven days to prepare, seven days to shoot, and one day to edit. That's right, just one to edit, but I'll get to that shortly. The seven prep days flash by mercilessly on turbo speed. There are four main areas of focus during prep and you juggle them the best you can during very long days that do not include many hours of homework when you finally get home.

First, you work with the writers to get the script in the best possible shape. You discuss scenes that need clarity or scenes that need better dialogue or a better act break (the cliffhanger before the commercial). Sometimes you don't find the right location or suggest a better one for a scene. For example, instead of going to church to pray for her slain soldier/husband, what if the heroine is on her knees at his gravesite at night, wailing in her pain and anguish under a torrent of rain? Is this a more effective visual? A more dramatic expression of her pain? Maybe it works or maybe not—the producer of the show gets to make the final script decisions. Maybe such a scene is too heavy in tone for a light weekly drama. If the producer has a big ego, you may be out of luck as he may hate you for your good ideas. I had a producer change a plot point in the editing room simply because it was an idea I added. When I saw him three months later and asked him why he cut it, he smiled and said, "It was great but it wasn't my idea." I shook my head and walked away. Any producer whose ego so clearly gets in the way of the quality of a show deserves to be banned.

Sometimes, the writers are hacks; it all depends on the show. Sometimes these guys are great writers, like David Kelley, who almost single-handedly writes all his series' scripts and is, in my opinion, the most prolific quality TV guy around (*Boston Legal, The Practice, Ally McBeal*) plus the SOB is married to the beautiful actress Michelle Pfeiffer. The guy is sure doing something right! A young Michelle auditioned for my first feature and I passed at the time. Painful to recall now, but it was very early in her career and though she was gorgeous, she was very green. Kudos to her for her perseverance and talent, and for becoming one of our most respected actresses.

During the prep, the task that takes the most time is finding your locations. You run around in a van all day to check out

locations picked by the location scout. Whether it's a restaurant or an apartment or an airport, the location scout finds the best choices he can, and then you get to choose. It is important to be precise when you communicate your vision of the location. Usually the script has no location description; it just says "park" or "apartment." The scout has no clue, so you had better tell him. A director's contribution is his vision of the story and the locations picked to tell that story. A director's job is to get that vision from the page to the screen.

Sometimes you find the perfect location but it's not available for your scheduled day or the rental is too expensive or the ceiling is too low to light properly. One time, I thought I had found a great location until I looked out back to find a railroad track 20 feet from the door, which you couldn't see from the street. I had to walk away when they told me trains go by every hour, which would have killed my soundtrack and made me lose precious time waiting for trains to pass. It's all about compromises and choices, but you better have your 15 or so locations locked up by the end of your seventh prep day because, ready or not, you're shooting on the eighth day.

Same with casting. If you've heard that casting is 75% of a director's job, it's true. During your prep, you work with a casting director who brings in actors to audition for you. If he or she is dedicated and resourceful, you'll have wonderful actors to choose from. If not, it's hell on wheels because nothing will kill a movie or a show faster than bad or boring or uninspired performances. You had better pick right and you had better fight for your choices. I've run into some producers who judge talent by breast size! You meet all kinds—this is Hollywood, lala-land!

In addition to script revisions, location scouting, and casting, you work with every department, because each needs input from

you to prepare what you want—from the art department that may have to design and build a lavish casino set to the wardrobe folks who need to know how you see every character and what he or she wears. Clothes define personalities just like what's in our closets reveals who we are. Props will need to know what kind of dog you want for that jogging scene, the transpo guys will need to know what kind of car you want to propel off that cliff, and the special effects guys will need to know how big an explosion you want to see when that car hits the bottom of the canyon.

The decision-making is constant and endless, and everyone looks to the director for the answers. You had better answer them all during those seven prep days or else what you need won't be on the set when you get to that scene.

The big gorilla in TV is to make the schedule, which is a 12-hour day. Crews *must* eat every six hours—not six hours and three minutes, six hours exactly! God forbid those hefty teamsters have to wait three more minutes to inhale whatever the caterer is serving. When the end of your sixth or 12th hour is fast approaching, you sweat it out rushing to combine shots or just get the most crucial ones in the can because if you go over without feeding, everyone on the crew is now on overtime and those are counted in 15-minute increments. There are also "meal penalties," and those are counted in six-minute increments. So if you need an additional 32 minutes to finish your day's work, you just cost the company three overtimes and six meal penalties! For a normal TV crew size, that's roughly $45,000 to $60,000 for about 75 folks, depending on salary levels. You are now dog shit and on a *persona-non-grata* list, never to be hired for this show ever again! Most of the time, producers have some overtime dollars included in their budgets as a contingency and

as long as you don't use it all up, you are re-hirable. But they always lie about it just to keep the pressure on you.

On some shows like *The A-Team* and *Blue Thunder*, they had a second unit doing the stunt/action work. It had more people working on it than the first unit. You would powwow with your stunt coordinator to design the action sequence, maybe even find time to storyboard all the shots you want, and then the second unit director would go shoot the time-consuming chase scenes. The first unit would shoot all the actors' close-ups with the real actors. For example, in a car chase, the director shoots the actors' close-ups jamming the wheel left and right and "acting" worried and looking behind and to the sides, etc. The second unit shoots all the wide shots with stunt doubles who look (from far away) like the actors and are dressed and wigged to match them. Every great movie chase (*Bullitt*, *The French Connection, Ronin*) has been done this way, with editors cutting first and second unit shots together to make it all seamless as one great chase with the actors seemingly in every shot, but they're not. It's all part of movie illusion, movie magic.

Neither George Clooney nor Brad Pitt is allowed to do even small stunts (though actors always want to—it's a macho thing) because if the star gets hurt, the entire movie shuts down. Insurance liability companies demand that working actors, even on weekends, do not ride motorcycles, go skiing, sky-diving, or do anything more dangerous than a fast walk.

Shooting a seven-day action episodic is an exercise in organized chaos. You hope all your prep pays off and that you're getting enough sleep to survive the ordeal. Though it is a dream job to direct one-hour TV dramas and get to translate a 60-page story to your vision, the pressure of it all can be quite a challenge. You learn quickly to get the most important shots

first, as you always know that Murphy's Law will catch up with you—every day.

Editing is the process of how a film finally comes together, and all directors look forward to it. Hitchcock thought real filmmaking was in the cutting room and that the actual shooting part was just a necessary nuisance. In TV, you get one day to work with an editor you've never met who puts together a rough "first assembly" while you're shooting. During your editing day, you work like a bandit trying to re-cut the film to look like what you intended.

The producers want you out of there as soon as possible (thus the one-day edit) so they can take over and reshape it the way they want since they get final cut, not the director. It is their responsibility to deliver a precise final running time contracted by the network. If the director's cut is 12 minutes too long, the producers get to decide which 12 minutes to cut out. In features, there are no precise running time demands; you edit until you get the best story you can tell to create the best possible film. A wonderful editor is priceless and a lousy one will kill you—or you'll want to kill him or her! This is why top feature directors work with the same editors over and over.

A respected cable drama like *The Sopranos* gets more slack with their schedules and leniency for their directors, as cable companies value quality much more than the free networks. Cable miniseries also have longer shooting schedules. They are treated like features, especially if executive produced by top powerful talents who care about quality. This is true of Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, who made *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific,* two high-quality HBO war series. This is why every year, HBO wins the most Emmys. This is what they promise their subscribers— *quality,* not mindless filler between

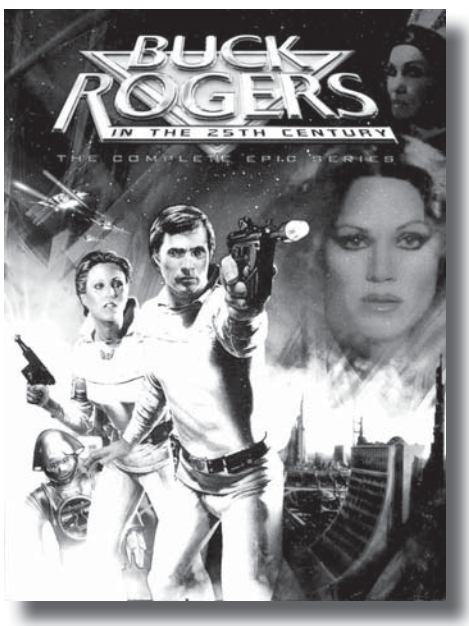
commercials like *Wipeout,* which must be America's prime time contribution to the end of mankind. Free networks have no paid subscribers to satisfy. Instead, they live and die with the highest possible ratings, appealing to the masses and the lowest common denominator. The higher the numbers, the more they can charge their advertisers.

TV crews shoot five days a week and every seven days a new one-hour drama begins. While a director is shooting for seven days, the next director on the schedule is preparing during the same time. This is why you can't have one director shooting every show or even back-to-back shows. A one-hour director is lucky to get 10 to 12 shows a year (three weeks' employment each). However, in half-hour sitcoms, a show only takes five days to complete, so you can have the same director for an entire season. Sitcoms begin rehearsals on a Monday and do two tapings on Fridays with live audiences, who are usually bussed-in tourists who will laugh and clap at anything. If they don't, producers just add a laugh track whether a joke was funny or not. Then an editor and producer put together the final show for airing with the best moments from the two tapings.

This is why some sitcom directors are super wealthy. Once they are "liked on a show" (meaning they have the right chemistry between the producers and actors), they can do most or all of the 24 episodes for the year. Guys like Jim Burrows (*Friends, Cheers*, *Will & Grace*) hit the jackpot directing sitcoms. I believe it is the easiest (physically) and most financially rewarding of all directing gigs. Easy because it all takes place on stages and sets. There is no location scouting, no hassles with bad weather or losing the light at the end of exterior days, and it is always comfy on air-conditioned sets working mostly normal hours. The shooting is a piece of cake with three or four video cameras

following a shooting plan, which basically consists of being on the right actor for the joke or punch line, and then cutting to other actors for their reactions. Compared to dramatic film location shooting, this is nirvana. You direct sitting down in a production booth snapping your fingers every time you want the tech guy to cut to another camera. It's all about timing the jokes in sitcoms. I often wished my career path had led me to comedy, but *nooo*, I had to like big-action adventure dramas!

One of the people I cajoled to look at my AFI tape was a big-shot producer at Universal. Bruce Lansbury (Angela Lansbury's brother) was the head honcho of the series *Buck Rogers and the 25th Century*. Bruce had liked my student film but was not about to give me a show. There is great pressure on producers delivering weekly shows and they are responsible for their budgets. The last thing they want to do is give the production reins to a beginner who has zero chance of bringing in a difficult seven-day episode on schedule and thus, on budget. A network or studio can fire the producer for making a dumbass directing hire and endangering the financial welfare of a series. Each one-hour show cost about $1.5 million. If you were in charge of making 24 shows in nine months ($36 million yearly budget), would you gamble your job by giving a first-timer a shot at one of them? This is why it is almost impossible to break into TV and get a first show.



Bruce had kindly allowed me to spend time at Universal

on the *Buck Rogers* sets where I absorbed as much knowledge as I could, especially by watching the directors work. I'm a good networker; you have to be if you want a chance in this business. If you're an introvert, time to become an extro! If you don't like people, time to start liking them! This is a people business.

I would stop by to say hello to Bruce about once a month to keep in contact, but he never wavered about giving me a show. Then one day, *whammo*, I hit the lottery! I wish I could boast how brilliant I was or how strategically I played it but the truth is, I was just in the right place at the right time. To win the lottery, you must network inexhaustibly. It's the only way I know to make your own luck and be in the right place at the right time.

On my lucky day, I knocked on Bruce's door and, for the very first time ever, I noticed he had a huge grin on his face when he saw me. This was unusual, he just wasn't the smiley type. He was busy packing up his belongings and told me he was moving out of his offices that very day. He explained that his *Buck Rogers* series had just been canceled and he was leaving the show, there was only one episode left to shoot and the other producers could handle it. And then, nirvana shined on me. The film gods sent me a care package. Amazingly, he said, "The directing slot is still open for the very last episode. Would you like to direct it?"

WHAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY, BRUCIE BABY? Meee? Direct the last episode of *Buck Rogers*? Uh…let me think!

I am absolutely convinced that if my 80-year-old Egyptian grandma, who didn't speak English and was bedridden, had somehow wheeled into Bruce's office that day, he would have hired *her*. I just got super lucky and can't emphasize enough: Right place, right time.

I later discovered that Bruce was not a fan of this series. I heard through production team whispers that he wasn't fond of

the network, the studio, and most especially, he couldn't stand the star. Bruce had either been fired or had just quit when the series got canceled that day, and with the last directing slot open, the rumor was he was going to hire the greenest, most unproven, most inexperienced, most sure-to-fail director he could find, and stick it to everybody while on his way out, heading to vacation.

Of course, I prefer to think he was kind and generous enough to give a hustling young filmmaker a dream shot. We'll never know Bruce's intentions, but I'm extremely grateful to him.

Buck Rogers was a technical show because of the many special effects, and doing science fiction was not an easy assignment in those pre-digital days. There were plenty of reasons to be overwhelmed and screw up, especially for a first-time director. There is no one way to break in. Everyone's career path is different. If it took an amazing, well-timed, bizarre lucky moment where I was hired on my first Hollywood show for possibly the wrong reasons, then all I can say is: *Amen, baby!* Better lucky than good as we say in poker!

This final episode of the series was about a big-time rock 'n roll band whose music was used to inadvertently brainwash its teen listeners to commit violent anarchy around the galaxy. The most fun I had was working with the art and wardrobe departments designing futuristic instruments and super-techie band outfits.

My guest star was Jerry Orbach, a well-known Broadway star at the time. Jerry wanted to break into TV and make some "real money," as he told me. This was his first TV show and I think Jerry was shocked at the low level of acting required for this cartoony, campy-written show. When we wrapped, he told me he was going back to the sanity and quality of the New York stage. Well, a decade later, he achieved his fame-and-money wish as the distinguished, street-wise detective lead in the great series worthy of his talents, *Law & Order*. My other guest star was Richard Moll, who was just starting out and later found fame as the tall, wacky bailiff on *Night Court*. In the episode, Orbach played the band's corrupt music manager responsible for the mayhem. Moll played his badass henchman. They were both great fun to work with on my first show.

One of the special highlights of *Buck Rogers* was meeting Mel Blanc, who did the voice for "Twikki," the little robot character (with a little person inside the costume). Known as "The Man of a Thousand Voices," Mel was a legend in the animation world and famous for many familiar cartoon voices, including Bugs Bunny, Yosemite Sam, Porky Pig, Woody Woodpecker, Barney Rubble (*The Flintstones*) and my all-time favorite: Daffy Duck.

Speaking of robot characters on a series, on *Battlestar Galactica* they had a pet robot named "Daggett," but this one had a real monkey inside a costume with his head inside a robotic helmet. When his trainer would take his helmet off between shots, the soaked in sweat, eyes-wide-open, claustrophobic chimp

looked so very relieved, like from a bad LSD trip! I don't think animals get the concept of being inside full-body costumes. I later named my first dog Daggett as an homage to this sweat-drenched (*a la* Albert Brooks in *Broadcast News*) actor chimp.

I will forever be grateful to Bruce Lansbury for my first "Directed by" credit on "Space Rockers," the last episode of the *Buck Rogers and the 25th Century* series on NBC. It allowed me to join the Directors Guild as a director member. Finally, I never had to show my $500 AFI film again because I now had a $1.5-million episode of *Buck Rogers* as my showreel. I had broken into network television directing in Hollywood.

My pro career had begun.

Meeting Zorba and Almost Derailing James Cameron's Career

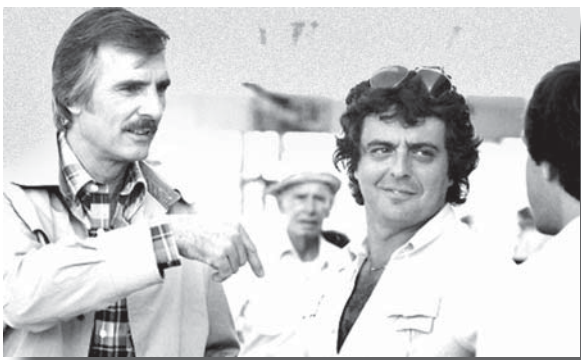
The Hollywood rollercoaster ride can get very bumpy in ways you can't imagine. You should expect it and bring enough motion sickness pills because it can be a mean, crazy ride.

I survived directing my first TV show and had a cool *Buck Rogers* episode, but amazingly, I got pigeonholed as a "sci-fi director." Producers would ask my agent, "Can he do anything else besides sci-fi?" After just one lousy show, I'm an expert at directing sci-fi but can't direct any other genre? Getting typecast is a bitch. SOBs keep you in a box, and it's hard to break out. The 2010 Directors Guild Lifetime Achievement honoree Norman Jewison (*In the Heat of the Night*, *Moonstruck*) recently said, "I was under contract at Universal making only comedies. When I made my first dramatic film, *The Cincinnati Kid*, it saved me from being pigeonholed in the studio system." It happens to the best of us.

Matt LeBlanc did a terrific job on my *Lookin' Italian* feature and proved a charismatic and resourceful dramatic actor.

However, he's been pigeonholed for years as the slow-witted Joey from *Friends*. He did such a great job on that hit show, producers doubt he can do anything else. But you can't feel too sorry for a guy who won the acting lottery and pocketed millions.

It took me a year to find a producer, Alex Beaton, who saw beyond typecasting genres and realized that if I could direct a tough sci-fi show, I could handle his police series *Stone*. It starred Dennis Weaver, the star of Spielberg's great 1971 TV film *Duel*. Dennis and his real son Robby played a detective team.



Stone had the only female director of photography in the entire IATSE union working on the show, and she was the most coddled crew member I ever saw. She was a tough-as-nails woman who managed to break the glass ceiling of the very male-oriented cameraman's union. This was the only time in my career that the DP's chair was moved to the next shot before the director's. On my second show, I ran into the Dragon Lady!

She was protected by her crew and did little more than consume copious amounts of coffee as her gaffer set the lighting without ever conferring with her. We were doing a car chase scene and the bad guys were driving down an alley. We had a camera mounted on the driver's door, which stuck out about two feet from the car. I repeatedly reminded the young actor who was driving to remember the alley had walls and that a camera was sticking outside his window.

Unfortunately, when he heard me yell "Action" on his radio,

the actor gunned it. He got into the excitement of the chase with stunt cop cars behind him, and I could see he was going too fast to make that alley turn. I started running towards him screaming, "CUUUTTT!" but he didn't hear or see me in time as the car slid into the corner burning rubber, and the camera… well…it smashed into the wall. In what seemed like horrifying slow motion, it broke into hundreds of pieces, the magazine opening and 35mm film flying, unraveling in the air. Certainly an "Oh shit!" moment, but thankfully, no one got hurt.

Universal Studios was insured for such equipment accidents, but because it was *her* camera department, her crew wanted to deflect any blame by pointing to the young, green director as being inexperienced and setting up a "dangerous shot" in an "impossible location." Side door mounts are commonly used in car chases, and the alley had more than 10 feet of room on either side of the car. Your grandmother with cataracts could have made that turn and driven that alley safely, mounted camera and all. But the Dragon Lady's minions were spinning their lies.

Not only was I pigeonholed a "sci-fi director," but I was now also a "reckless director." With those two strikes against me, work dried up in TV land after my second show, which turned out, ironically, to be an excellent dramatic episode. But it was unfortunate politics. All you can do is ride those out and keep moving forward. With time on my hands, I went back to writing with my buddy Lee. We wrote a summer camp/creature horror movie called *Shriek*. Good fortune came upon us when a producer named Gary M. read it, liked it, and agreed to find the money.

Gary's Hollywood gig came from his skill as a tennis player. Tennis is popular in this town, and the big shots always need younger players to return their balls as they huff and puff on

their private courts. Gary had a tennis appointment almost every day of the week. He also made sure to *miss* crucial match points knowing studio big shots don't like losing, no matter what. With his tennis services, Gary managed to get one development deal after the next, which included offices, parking space, salary, secretaries, and reading staff. He literally built a career with such deals without making any movies. You have to be aggressive to get a movie made in this town. In the land of white sharks, Gary was just a valued tennis partner…and my new hero producer.

As fate goes, Gary met Anthony Quinn, Zorba the Greek himself (his most infamous role). Of course, they met on a tennis court. Quinn had acquired financing from a Mexican broadcasting company willing to invest $1 million each to make three pictures. Quinn hired Gary to produce the films and *Shriek* was chosen to be one of them. Because of the movie's small budget and my experience on two TV episodes with bigger budgets, they agreed to let me direct the movie.

Finally, I got my first feature. Who needed TV and its wacko politics? During pre-production, we found a great summer camp location in New Orleans which had everything we needed including a lake. We started hiring a crew, casting the picture, and focused on creating the all-important creature/monster.

My search for the best (and most affordable) visual effects designer I could find led me to the Roger Corman Company. Corman is famous for making a lot of movies on very cheap budgets, employing first-timers who become big-timers—from Scorsese to Coppola to Howard. Everyone there was raving about a young hotshot who was the art director and visual effects guru on Roger's latest $3-dollar (as in extremely low budget) sci-fi epic *Battle Beyond the Stars*. So I arranged to meet with him.

His name was James Cameron.

Jim showed me a very impressive 10-minute short he had made called *Xenogenesis*. It was a futuristic sci-fi robot/laser battle done for about a nickel on his kitchen table using miniatures. You just knew this young guy had one hell of a visionary mind and his tech genius would shine in the visual effects world. Jim reeked talent. Still, no one would have guessed he was going to become one of the greatest filmmakers of our time.

Jim has said that he had *Avatar* in mind for many years and was waiting till the visual effects world caught up to his vision so he could make the film. It's true. The short film I saw had a walking robot machine driven by a human inside it. It was the initial primitive model he had designed 25 years earlier which became the dazzling human-driven machine we all ogled in the finale battle of his unforgettable, jaw-dropping wonder when it premiered around the world in December 2009.

The industry was stunned when it broke the all-time box office record within weeks of release. He broke his own *Titanic* record, for crissakes!

Jim and I became friends. He liked the *Shriek* project, and was willing to leave Corman and come aboard as my production designer and visual effects specialist. He designed and built a very scary, hairy creature for *Shriek*, complete with an expressive facial apparatus that was remote controlled. It was probably the most advanced and inventive creature ever built on the pennies we had. He even built the giant box to ship it to New Orleans. Cameron was incredibly resourceful and a very hard-working guy. His focused dedication to his work, even then, was mind-boggling.

My producer Gary had been busy getting Quinn's other two films prepped and shot. Both had short preps and were shooting in Los Angeles while *Shriek* was more complicated to prepare and so was scheduled to shoot third. With prep completed,

Conceptual design drawings Jim Cameron drew for my first feature film *Shriek*. They are signed original paintings by Jim.

we were ready to travel on a Monday, a week before principal photography was to begin at the summer camp in Louisiana. Spirits were high as we had a great crew and cast assembled. I was excited that we were just a few days away from rolling cameras on my first feature. With a little luck, we would make an exciting thriller that would do well enough to keep me in movies for a while. I wasn't missing the TV directing world.

And then, Black Sunday happened. I was packing to leave for New Orleans the next morning, when I received the proverbial Hollywood phone call. The bad one! The career nightmare one! It was Gary giving me the horrible news: Zorba (Quinn) had canceled the movie!

Canceled? But the plane tickets on my desk were scheduled for the next day! The cast was traveling on the same plane so we could get a week's worth of rehearsals before shooting began. How could it be canceled now? Everything was ready to go, including Cameron's monster inside a huge box already awaiting cargo shipping at the airport.

I later learned that for the last six months, *Anthony baby* had been living the high life at a very expensive hotel suite in Beverly Hills. He was supervising the three films though I had never seen him during the entire prep. Anthony was traveling in a chauffeured limo and eating at the best restaurants every night. After all, he was a big international star.

The rumor was that Zorba had managed to spend $500,000 of the $3-million total budget on his own living perks. Since I was so damn fortunate to go third, with the first two movies already shot, there was no money left for my movie. The last million was now half gone. Such outrageous narcissism is common among some (not all) big stars. They have no problem if everyone is starving around them while they nibble on their favorite caviar and sip Dom Perignon.

The nightmare got worse as Tony tried to squirm out of the "pay-or-play" contracts with me and the cast. Such guaranteed union contracts require that salaries be paid even if a film is canceled. Quinn contended that he and his co-producer Gary had never approved the cast hirings, and that I had hired them without producers' approval. He argued that he was not responsible for their contracts—*I was*!

This was lame as the producers had hired the casting director and had given him the green light to "set the actors" and contract them through their agents. Directors never hire or set anybody nor do they sign actor contracts. Also, the production manager had gotten approvals (from the producers) for actors to be fitted by the wardrobe department, which never happens until an actor is "hired." Also, the producers had approved the purchase of round-trip first-class plane tickets for about ten actors and me, and had made hotel reservations for all starting the very next day in New Orleans. It was shamelessly obvious the producers were lying. It was an ugly time.

I went from the high of *almost* shooting my first feature to being the star witness for the Screen Actors Guild legal dispute against Anthony Quinn on behalf of the actors, and the Directors Guild dispute on my behalf. The guilds protect their members, which makes pay-or-play contracts the easiest to win. They warned Anthony to just pay up. He stubbornly refused and chose to take on both guilds and paid dearly for attorneys to defend him at two arbitrations.

Zorba had the gall to testify that he had never authorized my hiring, though I had been there for three months preparing the film, and had met him on day one when he wished me well. My producer Gary was no help during this nightmare and managed to stay under the radar. He knew Anthony was wrong, but he wanted to keep receiving paychecks from Quinn and keep the bad legal vibes from messing up his tennis schedule. I couldn't blame him. No one in this town wants to hear you're involved in a smelly lawsuit. Hollywood hates judicial anything.

A few months later, Quinn lost both cases as predicted. The actors got paid their full salaries, and I got paid my full Directors Guild feature film salary even though I never shot a single frame. I got fully paid for *not* making a movie. What a wacky business!

Anthony Quinn delivered only two movies for the price of three to his Mexican investors. It's a shame. My thriller had been the most commercially promising of the three, and the one he didn't make. The other two films didn't make a dime and no one ever heard of them. Gary kept playing tennis, and I never heard from him again although he went on to make a couple of films between serves.

At the time, I was living in Laurel Canyon with roommates, and we had thrown a kick-off party the Saturday before we were scheduled to leave for New Orleans—before Black Sunday. We

wanted to let loose before we began two months of intense work, including all-night shoots, on the grueling schedule. After all, it was a horror movie with few daytime scenes.

My production designer, James Cameron, showed up at the party looking bummed out. He told me he had bad news. He explained Roger Corman had found out he was leaving to design my film. Roger, known for his ability to spot talent, was not letting Jim go so easily. Roger promised to give Jim his first feature as a director if Jim continued working for him. Roger had correctly sensed Jim was a major talent. He fought to keep him.

Jim felt bad letting me down, especially a week before we started shooting, but Roger was dangling a dream apple. Cameron had no choice; he really wanted to direct a film. Two days earlier, after months of working together, we had packed the Cameron monster in its custom case, and got it to the airport. Now, at our kickoff party, he was handing me the keys to the case. We hugged and wished each other well. I'm sure he later heard *Shriek* was never made. He obviously made the better choice by staying with Corman. Had I unknowingly come close to ruining or delaying James Cameron's career had he left Roger to do my film? Would his career path have been altered? Destiny can be a strange, unpredictable force in Hollywood…ask anyone.

The creature Jim Cameron built for my movie *Shriek,* which had servo-controlled facial features. For the pennies he built it with, it was amazing and very effective.

Within a year, Roger kept his promise and gave

Jim his first feature, the very low-budget *Piranha Part Two: The Spawning*. I had heard it was a miserable film for Jim to make, and he was locked out of the editing room. I'm sure he had his own producer battles; most powerless, young directors do on their first films. But I am also sure the directing experience must have helped Cameron secure the directing reins on *Terminator*. As they say, the rest is history.

My co-writer and buddy Lee comparing his brain size and looks with the Cameron-built, servo-controlled *Shriek* monster head.

In my early days, like so many other wannabes, I wanted to work for Roger Corman. At the only interview I ever had with him, he sensed I was not willing to slave for crappy wages. Because of that, I wasn't a good candidate to work for him as most young film beginners were. Twenty years later, we met again in St. Petersburg, Russia, of all places, where my feature *Lookin' Italian* was honored with an invitational screening at the Festival of American Films. Roger was there getting a Lifetime Achievement Award. We talked about how he almost lost Cameron to me, and he smiled wryly as he remembered that time.

Jim was such a great talent, I'm sure he would have found a way to make his films with or without Roger. Nothing could have deterred him from his destiny to become one of our greatest filmmakers. As an old director friend who hired Jim early in his career, I am in awe of his amazing accomplishments and of the visual breath of his cinematic work.

Avatar is a mind-blowing wonder, a truly magical film experience in every sense. It is absolutely an industry game-

changer, and has helped reignite the 3-D craze. I also applaud Jim for providing a glorious vista to pantheism, which resonates with my personal beliefs that natural law, existence, and the universe (nature) all encompass God as an abstract principle and not a transcendent entity. I am no longer a mischaracterized atheist. I am now a pantheist.

Jim made both the first and the second biggest box-office, record-grossing movies in the history of cinema. I doubt any other director will ever match that in the history of mankind.

Bravo, Jim. In my book, you are indeed the undisputed king of the film world!

Chapter 10

Soap Operas and Leprosy

Though I was flush with my money award from the *Shriek* arbitration, I was desperate to direct. I had come so close to making that film, my mojo was burnin'. I needed a new gig. One day out of the blue, my agent called to tell me a new soap opera was starting up. *A soap opera?* They didn't want to hire the usual directors who worked in that genre, which typically involves directing shots of "talking heads" with zero style or visual creativity. They wanted film directors who could move cameras and bring a new visualization to boring daytime dramas. A noble quest.

Soaps are like sitcoms: They are shot on stages with lumbering video cameras. Directors are not even on the set—they're in a technical booth calling the "cuts" from one camera to another as they edit while they shoot. What you see on your home TV is the series of shots pre-planned (sitcoms and soaps) or spontaneously chosen by a director asking through earphones for desired shots (sports and live events).

"Stay on Favre and cut to Camera 2 when he raises his hands if the pass is caught in the end zone" is the kind of director chatter going on at the coverage of a Vikings game. (By the way, whatever youth pills Brett Favre is on, I want some!) The director chooses the order of shots to show the viewer the best possible story. The story of an 80-yard spectacular touchdown play could be told this way: *Camera 1* shows a side shot of the front lines crushing into each other as the ball is hiked. Cut to *Camera 2* (tighter) as Favre steps back to throw. Cut to *Camera 3* covering his favorite receiver doing a move on the cornerback. Cut back to *Camera 2* as Favre throws just as he's hit (ouch)! Cut to *Camera 4* covering the ball trajectory in the air. Cut back to *Camera 3* as the receiver catches it with one hand. Cut to *Camera 5* as he stumbles in the end zone with three defenders all over him. Cut back to *Camera 2* as Favre raises his hands triumphantly. Cut to *Camera 6* on the stands showing face-painted wacko fans with Viking horned helmets cheering wildly. Replay it all in slow motion. Whew! What a touchdown "story" told through editing six live cameras and with what each was assigned to show. *Now go to commercial*.

Film is always about telling the best visual story, whether it's a 30-second commercial or having a camera in the right place at the right time to catch that great Masters moment; Tiger hugging his dad at the 18th hole after he won his first Green Jacket. If the cameraman had not been there shooting their hug, the director could not have aired it, and we would've never seen it.

The producers of the new soap *Capitol*, at CBS, were looking for creative film directors who also had experience directing in a video studio setting. Few directors work in both media, as they are two different worlds. Luckily, I had single camera film (my two network shows) and a multi-camera video production under my belt. As requested, I sent both to the producers.

So where did I get this multi-camera video show? When I was in North Carolina doing my bicentennial miniseries *We the People*, I met John Sneden, dean of the School of Design and Production at the North Carolina School of the Arts (NCSA) in Winston-Salem. John loved acting and I had cast him to play Benjamin Franklin in my mini-series. He was terrific and we enjoyed working together. He told me he wanted to expand the school's offerings beyond music, dance, drama, and stage productions. He wanted to start a new video production department. When I offered to direct and produce the school's first video drama *gratis*, he was enthusiastic. He asked me to come up with a proposal. After finishing the miniseries, I decided to extend my stay in Winston-Salem to make my first dramatic short for John's school. (John Sneden went on to be the much-celebrated and beloved dean for 32 years at NCSA until he retired in 2002.)

One of my favorite short stories from high school was "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is a period piece (1850s) with great moral value about an old scientist who invites his old friends to his home where he offers them water supposedly from the fountain of youth. He promises it will magically make them young and beautiful again. The experiment confirms that if given a second chance at life, egos and narcissism take over and people end up making the same selfish mistakes they made their first time around. Though the story was quite ambitious to produce, Sneden liked it and agreed to make available the school's resources to create its first video drama under my direction.

Casting was great. Every student actor at the school wanted a part in this first-time video project knowing they would get a copy for their career promotion. The production department did a superb job building a period set for Heidegger's home, which they artfully decorated with antique furnishings, and the wardrobe folks designed and stitched beautiful costumes using ornate fabrics and trims.

Meanwhile, I had to find a studio to shoot this epic. We needed cameras and lights and sound equipment. I managed to persuade the state's PBS station in Chapel Hill to donate their video stage and crew for an entire day. We were getting one day to shoot it and we gambled that we could do it if we were fully prepared. It was going to be a very ambitious no-mistakes shoot.

We rehearsed for weeks at the school, which was great fun for me as the actors were truly talented and shined in their parts. But the makeup became a key issue. We had young actors who had to look very old (80s) and then transform back to 20-year-old characters after tasting the magical waters. It's not difficult to age an actor 10 or 20 years by adding wrinkles, droopy eyes, and changing hair pieces, but it's much more complicated to make them look 60+ years older. You need a specialist in prosthetics makeup to create molds of the actors' faces and use customized rubber pieces to reshape their faces as was done for Dustin Hoffman in Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* and De Niro as the older Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*.

When I discovered none of the makeup instructors at the school had prosthetics experience, I started looking to hire one from New York—on my own dime if necessary—as makeup was key to the success of this production. Coincidentally, Sneden announced the hiring of a new makeup department instructor who claimed experience with prosthetics—bingo!

As our shooting day got closer, I kept asking if the new makeup instructor needed to do a trial run, but she said it wasn't necessary and assured me I didn't need to worry. I was a guest director working gratis, and I couldn't make demands on a staff instructor at the school. I was more relaxed after she made the full face molds of the five actors without a hitch. Lots of people were supporting this first school video and contributed time and talent. I just had to trust it was all going to work out.

On the night before production, we traveled to Chapel Hill and the actors went into makeup at midnight as the instructor had asked for six hours to make them up before shooting. As the first actor came out of makeup, we were all in shock and disbelief. When the second one came out looking just as bad, it became clear we had a major nightmare on our hands. Something had gone very wrong. I remember one of the actors, John Sanderford, coming up to me open-mouthed and asking me, "Does this look real weird to you?" It was too sad to be laughable.

This makeup instructor was in complete denial of her abilities and was clearly the worst ever in the history of bad makeup! One by one, the actors came out of the makeup room and each was worse than the previous—especially the last one, who was the only female in the cast. This beautiful young actress looked horrendous and was crying as she looked in the mirror. The actors didn't look old—they looked like they had horrible makeup with pieces of rubber flesh hanging off their faces. They looked ridiculous.

It was bad. This was the only day we could have in that studio, and the gorgeous set was already up, the actors were beautifully dressed, and the free crew was ready. There was no turning back. On the phone, Sneden talked me into proceeding and hoped for the best. We did, but it was heart-wrenching and

torturous. Everything worked out great and exactly as planned with the rest of the shoot.

It was a magical production when we were done editing it, and it had a great music score. It all worked out except for the horrifying makeup which we knew all along was so bad we'd never be able to show any of this video production to anyone. It was unwatchable.

John Sanderford became a successful actor and a proud graduate of NCSA. Today he serves as the familiar, good lookin', silver-haired spokesman you see in the AARP and Cialis commercials. I have not seen John in a long time, but I have fond memories of our friendship. I am sure he never forgot the fateful production of *Heidegger.*

John Sanderford (left) in young-age makeup. The actor on the right has "old bad bad makeup."

Film is always a collaborative process, and sometimes no matter how hard you try, it just doesn't come out anything like what you had envisioned. In our particular case, which was extremely unusual and never happened again in my career, the makeup "expert" ruined the production. I am sharing this story to encourage filmmakers not to become discouraged if one of their films does not work out—not all do.

As founder of the Action/Cut Short Film Competition, I've seen thousands of shorts and many simply don't work. You understand what the filmmaker was trying to do, but it didn't come together. Sometimes a comedy you thought would kill just fizzles on the screen, or a poignant dramatic moment is missed

by everyone who sees it. When this happens, put it away and start your next project immediately. Do not allow failure to paralyze you or delay your career goals. Even Emperor Spielberg has made some duds and it never stopped him from making his next film, which was usually wonderful and spectacular. You have to keep moving forward.

Though my first dramatic video did not work out, I'm proud to have launched the first video production at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Since then, they developed a first-class film department and have become one of the very best film schools in the USA. Bravo NCSA, and kudos to Dean John Sneden for his ambitious vision of developing the school.

The only smart thing I ever did with *Heidegger* was *not* to throw the tape away. As bad as it was, this was the only multi-camera studio video drama I had ever done, and exactly what was required to show the folks hiring on the soap *Capitol*. But I just could not get myself to send it without some explanation about the makeup. So I wrote a note and attached it to the tape. It was the only thing I could think to do.

I wrote that this was the famed short story by Hawthorne about elderly people who imagine becoming young again after drinking water from the fountain of youth. However, I wrote that I had taken the liberty to add "an additional twist for dramatic tension" by making all the characters…well…lepers!

I explained that the characters had not just turned young when they drank the water, they also healed from their leprosy. When they aged again, they returned to being lepers. Of course, leprosy is never mentioned in the show by anyone. As lame as it sounds, it was the only damn thing I could think to justify the unwatchable, horrible makeup. It was a wild shot in the dark.

I took a deep breath and sent the tapes to the producer. I'm sure Nathaniel Hawthorne will kick my butt if we ever meet (maybe upstairs!) for messing with his story and adding my new "twist" to his classic piece of literature.

A week later, I received a phone call from the producer. I braced myself to hear him say that he was running me out of this industry for attempting such bullshit. Instead, he told me that "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" was one of his favorite childhood stories and…and…how "brilliant it was to add the leprosy angle." Whoa!

He went on to say that, indeed, it made the piece that much "more dramatic as a double twist." He was so impressed that he was hiring me right on the phone! I was stunned...awed... freaked...flabbergasted...and overjoyed! What a wacky business. I ended up directing about 35 hour-long episodes of *Capitol* and kept my career moving forward. And I learned to shoot a hard-to-believe 60 pages per day. Soaps air every weekday and just keep churning year after year. I'm awed by the sheer volume of soap opera productions.

As you may know, *Guiding Light* aired for the last time in September 2009 after running for 57 years—the longest run in TV history! I was (and still am) amazed by soap actors who have to memorize some 10 to 25 pages of dialogue every weeknight of their lives, year-round!

And the writers who have to write more than 300 pages a week, every week! If they stop writing, there's nothing to shoot. If you think you're moving fast to shoot 7 to 8 pages per day in one-hour drama shows, try shooting 60 to70 pages a day on a one-hour daily soap. I never experienced volume shooting like that again and, amazingly, I had a great time doing it.

I met some wonderful actors like Constance Towers (bottom left in photo), a very elegant woman married to actor and Reaganite ambassador to Mexico, John Gavin; Carolyn Jones (bottom right), a Golden Globe nominee for playing Morticia in *The Addams Family;* western cowboy star Rory Calhoun (right with bowtie) in his later years; and the beautiful model Debra Mullowney (center), who was always a good friend and became a successful actress in her own right.

One thing particular to soaps is the presence of censors during production. Every free network has a Standards and Practices Department where the legal boys hang and make absolutely sure they censor everything that may be offensive to "American values"—from language to Janet Jackson's naked boob. That infamous 2004 Super Bowl gaff that violated "decency standards" was due to a censor who was asleep at the wheel since there is a seven-second delay covering live events for this very reason. CBS was fined $550,000 by the FCC for that boob shot. CBS refused to pay and the case went to the Supreme Court. People around the world were laughing at us for being such silly twits and prudish jerks. Supreme Court? Boob indecency case? And we wonder why our courts are backed up for years?

Because soaps are shot a day or so before airing, there is no time for censors to see the final show and give it the stamp of "moral approval." So they are present on the set, watching like hawks. They will get right over your shoulder for every scene

involving a kiss or any hot activity. I recall arguing with the CBS censor when a love scene came up with naked actors under a sheet—a censor's nightmare.

"Wait, wait, wait! He can't be on top of her!" the censor cried out.

"Well, the script says they're making love," I replied.

"I know, I know, but no, no, no…he has to be on the side, he has to be off of her!" he declared, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Where would you like him to go?" I asked incredulously.

"Anywhere away from her…please, they should not touch!" he begged.

"How far away from her does he have to be to make you comfortable with their lovemaking?" I asked.

"Maybe two feet away?" he blurted, hopeful that I would comply.

"Well, I don't think he's *that* well-endowed!" was the only reply I could think of.

I had makeup spritz more moisture on their faces. At least they looked like they were sweatin' through a wild time, regardless of anatomical impossibilities. Back in those days, this is as good as it got on daytime. It's much hotter today.

I am grateful to Stockton B., the producer who hired me on *Capitol*. I always wanted to tell him I was sorry about the leprosy BS, but I needed the job badly. Stockton told me he enjoyed the *Capitol* shows I directed and we had fun working together, so it was a win-win in the end.

Two pieces of advice: Never throw away any film no matter how bad it is as you never know when you may need it, and if you ever have an unwatchable show due to really bad makeup, use the leprosy twist angle. It worked for me!

Oh Happy Day! Meeting The Jacqui

I had just turned 34. I was a happy camper in the dating world. For some, it's a pretty old age to never have been married, but the institution itself never carried much weight with me. Although I had as inspiration my parents' marriage (they've just celebrated their 64th!), getting hitched was never a high priority for me. I've never understood people madly intent on getting married at 18 or by 20 at the latest, let alone those who start popping kids as soon as they can. My thought was always, "What's the damn rush?"

It could have been due to the late '60s and early '70s culture of the love generation I lived through where intimacy, hooking up, and relationships were common and without melodrama. So was breaking up, which was never a big trauma, such as, "I'll kill myself if you leave me!" It was more of a respectful, natural parting of ways, and maybe included a friendly, "Thanks for the good times, and take this joint with you for later."

I'm no therapist, but in my opinion, such easygoing, non-drama interaction minimized two of the worst deadly torpedoes

of relationships: need and jealousy. These two monsters have caused the majority of heartbreaks and made divorce lawyers rich. They are slow poisons making their way into the very marrow of relationships, and that goes for straights and gays. They also cause other personality factors to rear their ugly heads, like the dreaded low-self-confidence demon. That one has caused more unnecessary heartache and ugly behavior than any other trait and is as true for men as for women in my humble observations.

To learn about personalities, watch the way people conduct themselves. This should be a requirement for being an insightful director since you're manipulating the behaviors of fictional characters. We know physical attraction is the first trigger—most people think that having great looks brings self-confidence—but nothing could be further from the truth. I have met amazingly blessed, superbly attractive women and men—many of them actors and models—and high self-esteem has never been a common trait in that lipstick crowd.

For me, hooking up was always a conscious decision to be with a certain female because I was intrigued and genuinely liked what she was about. It was not about fulfilling a variety of needs we all seem to have in various controllable (and uncontrollable) degrees. The long, needy list includes loneliness (a biggie), self-worth, daily functioning (cleaning, cooking, nurturing), sharing child care for single parents, sexual (more for men), and financial support (more for women). The problem with "need" is that it fosters the ugly need to possess, and then it triggers the real badass beast of all: jealousy.

I was lucky to have self-confidence and *need* was not a burden. I was comfortable in the company of women, and had an active dating life from high school to college, from Europe

to New York, and finally to Los Angeles, where I've lived for the last 30 years. Like most folks, I had my fair share of good relationships, a few great ones, and a few lousy ones.

But until September 19th, 1982, I had never been shot by as potent a cupid's arrow as the one that bulls-eyed me on that fateful evening when I met The Jacqui. It was the best day of my life!

In those days, I used to hang at The Improv, the comedy club that started in New York and made its way to Hollywood. Every comic you've ever heard of came through this club—from Jay Leno to Rodney Dangerfield to Robin Williams to Steve Martin. Back then, the Hollywood club was not as trendy as it is today. It had a relaxed atmosphere with sawdust floors and no fancy furnishings. The crowd was predominantly New Yorkers. A few nights a week, you could usually find me hanging out with my friends at the bar.

I almost never went inside the club itself. I found most up-and-coming comics rarely had funny routines. Stand-up is not easy, and few do it well. Those very few move quickly to the hungry-for-new-talent sitcom world, as Robin Williams did when cast as *Mork* straight from The Improv stage.

On that early September Saturday night, The Improv was quiet. I found Martin, a British actor, at the bar. He invited me to join him two blocks away at a party where there were "some hot babes, mate." We went to check it out. Not much was happening except for this knockout, ponytailed blonde, dressed beautifully and beaming with a playful girlishness that was charming.

Thankfully, Martin knew Jacqui and he introduced us. She was with a dark-haired girlfriend but all the guys were buzzin' around the blondie. After a few minutes, we nonchalantly invited the two girls to join us for drinks back at The Improv, and then we left the party. I was worried I had played it too cool with this Jacqui, and blown a great opportunity with a stunner I might never see again. But luckily, an hour later, the girls came in and took us up on the drinks offer.

Since it was obvious every guy at the bar wanted to hit on Jacqui, I decided to ignore her and focus on her girlfriend—always a good strategy with hot babes. After Eddie the bartender bellowed, "Last call," I turned and surprised Jacqui by simply asking, "Would you like to go to the beach with me tomorrow?"

"The beach?" she said, a little taken aback since I had ignored her up to now.

"Yeah, you know, sand, ocean, sun?" I said trying to be cool, and immediately winced. That was lame considering she was a blonde who doesn't tan much.

"You're a real nature lover, huh?" she asked with a "You got brass balls" look for asking for a date after pretending disinterest. Then she smiled and said, "Sure, I'll go walk on the beach with you tomorrow."

Bingo! That was 28 beautiful years ago.

It became obvious as we started dating that this was a special situation, maybe more special than I had ever encountered before. I sensed a woman uniquely gifted in infinite ways, and became aware this was a meeting of good fortune. Her world-class beauty

and sophisticated style made an immediate impact, but it was her smile that lit me up. Soon enough, I was simply overwhelmed by her very kind heart. I doubt it is possible to fall in love if you're not treated with great kindness and nurturing tenderness. Jacqui had it all in spades, and expressed it effortlessly.

One of the great things about falling in love is that you are aware of it while it's happening. There is no subtlety about it and it's a very exciting time. It feels like a life-changing event—and it is. In this case, it was about forging a deep magic, finding a life partner. Here's my personal take on it: At its highest, awestruck peak, experiencing true love feels like your heart is overflowing so intensely with profound emotions, you are absolutely convinced it would be utterly impossible to love that person just a tiny bit more—until the next morning, when you do, remarkably and effortlessly. That's it. As simple as that. I have been very lucky to have had more than 28 years of such morning revelations.

As I see it, love begins when you meet a kind soul and blossoms into caring for that person more than you care for yourself. For me, a loving relationship is all about kindness, given and received. Life is short and sometimes brutal. So when love comes into our lives, we should not only embrace it, but also be aware of how lucky we are to experience it. Appreciation of good fortune is a big part of true love. Appreciation keeps its specialness at a premium.

Control is a big bad issue in relationships. The need to control promotes "dark thoughts." When it emerges, kindness takes a hike. If a woman is thinking, "Geez, why is it so hard for him to remember to keep the toilet seat down as

a courtesy to me?" such a thought builds resentment, and then *Wham*—somewhere out of the blue, it reaches a boiling point. Feelings are hurt, retaliation begins, and a fight is underway when it's not even about the damn toilet seat. It's about "that thought" that caused the initial itching that eventually broke the scab, which is now bleeding. This is common, frustrating behavior. We hate ourselves when we do it, especially when it involves petty matters or slight misunderstandings. But when what you offer your partner comes from kindness, there is never a dark thought.

When you truly love someone, your sense of tenderness and kindness toward them stops malicious thoughts in their tracks. You simply no longer need to be judgmental. This does not mean you must find a "perfect person" to partner with, it just means that person should inspire your sense of kindness and not waste time picking apart your personality in search of negatives. It means your personalities are compatible.

In trying to define love's qualities to find the right adjective, I looked up "ultimate" in a thesaurus and found the usual "optimum" and "absolute," but also a much more interesting and qualitative "crystalline," which brought to mind some critical values. First, it describes something radiant—intensely luminous. A bright object that wraps around your soul, providing a sense of warmth and nurturing. And like a diamond, a crystal has definition, structure, density, and endurance. It has substance. It's not just a memorable yet passing moment in life, like winning an Oscar, as fun as that is. Nothing ever diminishes with a crystal.

Same with true love.

When we started dating, I was taken aback by the size of Jacqui's heart. She treated me with gentleness, consideration, and nurturing warmth—as she still does to this day. She learned quickly that my French background meant I enjoyed certain

gourmet cheeses, and my Middle Eastern background made me crazy for roasted pistachios. She also knew my favorite drink was the liqueur Baileys, on the rocks.

One day, I showed up at her place after a racquetball workout. I was sweaty and grubby. She invited me to take a bath, and before I knew it, she had filled up her bathtub. After I got in, she surprised me when she brought a cutting board wide enough to lay across the tub. On it were three of my favorite cheeses, a bowl of roasted pistachios, and my Bailey's on ice. Though she was not flush with dough, she had noted my preferences on previous dates and had purchased the specialty foods I enjoyed.

I was moved by the fact that she had stocked up on my favorite items for whenever the moment presented itself. She had thought about it. She had prepared for it. It was generous and caring, and a moment of kindness that obviously has meant a lot to me to this day since I still remember it.

Love is magical and grows endlessly. Every day my heart is full of love for Jacqui. When such a feeling grows daily for 28 years, it takes your breath away, and all you can do is be fully aware and most grateful for the good fortune of experiencing true love. And I am.

It may have taken sweeping the Oscars with *Titanic* to make James Cameron feel like the king of the world, but all it took for me was my first bath in Jacqui's home to feel like the king of her world. She has made me feel this way every day since.

The A-Team and "You'll Never Work in This Town Again!"

After serving my time on soap operas, I was ready to get back to prime time TV. The producers on *Capitol* discovered their original plan was just too ambitious, that adding style and visual movement took too much time (read: money). The daytime audience didn't give a crap. All they wanted was the usual dose of melodrama queens cheating on each other and pairing up like rabbits on steroids. This could be done with the usual "talking heads" shots (close-ups), which is much easier on shooting schedules since stationary camera scenes are shot much faster.

It was going to take a special opportunity to kick-start my career again. I needed a network show. As usual, it takes a little luck and someone you know to move you to that next plateau of work. For me, that person was Frank Lupo. He had come to town from Brooklyn with an English degree after a lit teacher had urged him to write for Hollywood. Frank had no film school background, or even a love for movies. He simply came to make

a living, and since he liked writing, he wanted to find out if he could break into TV writing and make a few bucks.

While living in a hotel for a few months, he had found a public library that carried copies of episodic screenplays, and read every one he could get his hands on. He wanted to master the one-hour format. He picked a show he liked on the air, *The Rockford Files,* and wrote a script for it on spec. *Speculation* means there is no commitment that anyone will buy it; the writing is used as a sample of work. Frank sent it to a few random agents, and waited.

None of the agents bothered to call him and, most probably, none had read what he sent. Agents receive submissions all the time—every day—and if unsolicited, they go directly in the trash. A sad fact, as there is no other way to deal with the humongous number of people who send in their work, nearly all of whom lack true talent. A lot of people think they can write because they can type or spell.

Frank figured he had struck out and was ready to return home. The TV writing biz was obviously a lot harder to crack than it looked. Frank was not a dreamer, and waiting for months or years for something to happen was just not his style.

The following is my interpretation of stories I've heard, with a little hyperbole thrown in. Frank called the agents one last time before leaving town. None returned his calls. Then, *one* agent answered the damn phone. By serendipity, Mark L. picked up the phone—the one time in decades that he had done so instead of his secretary. Mark had been recommended to Frank by a friend in New York. He also was from Brooklyn and had heard of Frank's dad, who owned a pizzeria on Bay Parkway. He had not read Frank's spec script (which was most likely already in the trash), but when he heard Frank was leaving town, he invited him to lunch in honor of his dad's tasty pizzas.

After lunch, Mark took Frank to Universal Studios to visit his big shot client, Glen Larson, to congratulate him on selling the most anticipated television series of its time: *Battlestar Galactica*. This happened a few weeks before my arrival at Universal, and I can just imagine how the conversation went since I got to know the players. As legend tells it, Mark walked into Glen's office with Frank in tow, gave Glen a big hug, and said, "Glen, meet my friend Frankie from Brooklyn," and added with pure agent brass balls, "who, by the way, is a terrific writer!"

Glen answered, "Well, we're looking to staff up our new show." He was flying super high due to his spectacular sale to ABC, which was expected to become the *Star Wars* of television. Glen was feeling so generous that day, he would have agreed to hire your hairy great-grandmother from Albania if she had accompanied Mark. It was Frank's lucky day, and he only needed one.

Right place, right time, and history was made. Mark said without missing a beat, "Frank would be great on the show—he loves writing space stuff—put him on a tryout contract?" Frank knew how to write space stuff? Mark knew that from not reading his *Rockford* script—a detective show? Only a seasoned Hollywood agent can ad lib that well and that fast.

Glen replied, "Sure, yeah, if you write sci-fi, then welcome aboard!" And just like that, Universal put Frank on the shortest trial contract, which I believe was for 30 days, and he became a writer on Glen's staff. One week later, I scored my Spielberg contract with Universal, and as Glen's new executive assistant, I met his staff and writers. Frank and I hit it off, and so began a great 30-year friendship. Three years later, Frank was one of my groomsmen at my wedding.

Frank's great success came from figuring out the one-hour episodic drama structure for screenplays (much tougher than

anyone thinks), and having a very inventive mind that allowed him to come up with storylines and lay out their beats in minutes. You've got to have a special writer's DNA gene to do that, and those few folks become millionaires in TV land.

When Glen would give him a plot point to figure out or an act to write, Frank stayed up all night and had it on his desk before Glen sipped his morning coffee. Soon, he became the go-to dependable writer on staff who could quickly fix scripts, outline a new storyline, or come up with a whole season of story ideas. He also was the smoothest, easiest guy to get along with. He arrived at the office before any secretary started the day. Besides hard work, his secret was his lack of ego about his writing, which meant no combative attitude, no proprietary resistance. He was just there to make a living, one that turned out to be among the most rewarding in TV history.

Frank met another producer, equally talented and proficient. The two were the only ones working early and late in the writers' building at Universal. Stephen J. Cannell was already a showrunner, coincidentally, on the *Rockford Files* show for which Frank had written his spec. Stephen soon left Universal to stake out his own successful company. He was smart enough to invite Frank to join him as soon as his Universal contract was up. Together they made history and oodles of dough with the popular TV shows they created, which included the biggest hit of their time: *The A-Team* (Frank was 27). It was followed by the successful *Hunter* (Frank was 29). At my seminars, I've introduced Frank as the "Steven Spielberg of Television." No person I know in TV history has ever been as successful at such a young age. Not even Aaron Spelling.

So when I needed a boost to get my directing career moving, my buddy Frank hired me to direct the #1 show on TV: *The A-Team*.

As soon as he saw I could handle the job, he hired me for another episode and for many other series he ran during the next ten years. As the biggest action show on television, *The A-Team* was a very ambitious series with a full second unit working just to handle the weekly stunt car chases and massive explosions.

The four stars were quite a crew: Dwight Schultz and Dirk Benedict were great fun and good guys; George Peppard was an ornery and moody control freak; and Mr. T was as gentle as he was menacing. On the set, I'd wonder, "Did Scorsese or Coppola ever have to direct a Mr. T to get a *grunt* just right?" A favorite episode I directed had Dwight's character (Howlin' Dog Murdock) impersonating the bride at a bad-guy's wedding. He wore a wedding dress and hid his face under a veil while Mr. T jumped out of the wedding cake firing a machine gun. Crazy fun days!

Scared as ever of new or original ideas, Hollywood developed *The A-Team* movie for longer than a decade. It was finally released in the summer of 2010. It starred the very talented (but slummin' for a paycheck) Liam Neeson in the "Hannibal" role, and cage fighting champ Rampage Jackson in the Mr. T role. The reviewers had a field day saying it was just an excuse for wall-to-wall gamer action. It sure was a disappointment for the studio that financed it. The same was true of the *Miami Vice* movie.

It's almost impossible to reproduce the magic of an original cast on a series, which is always so much a part of a show's unique popularity. They always forget that fact.

As far as I know, neither Cannell nor Lupo were involved in the writing for the film. You have to scratch your head and ask why the heck not? They created it, no? Who knows the characters and the concept better than those two guys? Could it be another example of the arrogance of the feature film world looking down on the "TV boys" as not being visually creative enough for big-screen cinema? Or did the producers prefer young gamer-world pups to write the film so the video game release would follow successfully? They had bastardized *G.I. Joe* beyond any recognition, so why not *The A-Team* movie? Who needs a great story when you have wall-to-wall action? Well, I do, which is why I still haven't seen it.

Once you work on a hit show, the gates open, the work comes, and the résumé builds. You get booked and re-booked for shows, and the bank account keeps growing. One-hour TV directors are nomads. They go from show to show and each one is a 15-day contract. The most interesting aspect about directing television is the many different types of shows and genres you work on. Every show is different, every show is unique, and every show has its own creative challenges.

You get to meet and work with many producers and writers. You get to bond with talented actors and crews on impossibly tight schedules, experiencing unforgettable shoots together in the production trenches. In those days, there were no reality shows and few investigative news vehicles such as *Dateline* and *48 Hours*. It was either sitcoms or one-hour dramas on prime time, and no such thing as five hours of prime time per week dedicated to *Dancing with the Stars*. There were no nation-hypnotizing

reality phenomena such as *American Idol* dominating the ratings. Of course, networks seek such shows because they are a lot cheaper to make than expensive action dramas or actor-pricey sitcoms. In its last year, *Friends* cost $6 million per show just in actor salaries before the studio lights were even turned on.

Enjoying steady work, I was finally starting to feel professional confidence and that I had found my calling as a director. Some of my fondest work memories are a whirlwind tour of television history. I directed a series at Paramount called *The Powers of Matthew Star* about a teen kid with super powers. It was tough to get co-star Lou Gossett, Jr. out of his trailer to do his scenes. Lou had just been nominated for a Best Supporting Oscar for the biggest picture role of his career in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Timing-wise, it sucked for him to have signed aboard this TV series when his feature career was suddenly zooming upwards. Since my butt was in a sling to bring it in on schedule (which in TV land is the holy mantra), I wasted lots of time going to his trailer, begging and cajoling him to come out for each shot he was in. A few months later, in 1982, he won the Oscar. You didn't have to sweat it, Lou. You were a shoo-in!

The cool thing about the series *Blue Thunder* was that we got to use amazing choppers and futuristic helmet gadgets, which first appeared in the big-budget hit feature of the same name directed by John Badham. It was very unusual to have a series based on an earlier feature film. It's usually the reverse order. Aerial companies had built high-tech, stealth-looking choppers for the

Paramount feature based on the Apache attack chopper developed by the military. They turned all the film's gadgets over to the series. It was like a giant erector set for us to play with. I had a blast designing flying sequences with the stunt pilots blazing the machine guns onboard as the special effects team provided lots of fake gunfire smoke.

The film came out in 1983 and starred Roy Scheider (*Jaws*) with Daniel Stern (*Diner*) as his co-pilot. The TV series premiered in 1984 starring James Farentino and Dana Carvey as his co-pilot. Years later, Dana found fame on *Saturday Night Live* and *Wayne's World*. I also became friends with the two co-stars on the show who were football legends slummin' as actors in their post-NFL days: Bubba Smith and Dick Butkus. They were both great guys to work with, and nobody messed with them.

I went to Orlando to direct episodes of the *Fortune Hunter* series, another Frank Lupo creation. This show was so ambitious that it was like making a James Bond movie each week. Besides being action-packed, each episode took place in a different country. This series was a creative challenge for the location,

art/set dressing, and wardrobe departments. Our access to the Universal Studios Theme Park, which had many exterior exhibits built with international themes, was crucial to keeping the budgets down. The park had an area that looked like Morocco which we could dress and shoot as a Middle East location for a possible *Casablanca*-inspired episode. For an Amazon jungle episode, it had lush forest parks with cool rope bridges. We could use a lake for stunt action-chase sequences "set in Europe" by dressing boats with various country flags. The especially talented crew could sell any location visually. The art department was all about "international" magic, week in and week out.

The only problem was the amount of time it took to clear the tourists from the camera shots. The Orlando park attracts thousands of visitors daily. To get around this problem, we shot as many of the scenes as we could at night. Though it was one of the most fun shows I have ever directed, I remember it with sadness. I became good friends with its wonderful star Mark Frankel who died tragically two years after the series ended.

Mark had all the British flair and charm needed to play James Bond and oozed the elegant heroic lead he was born to play. One crazy day, he had to fight a giant alligator with his bare hands in a Florida marsh, which of course was a large rubber gator. Later, using a wider lens, the second unit crew would film the fight again with a stunt double and a very scary real alligator. In the editing room, the shots from both units would be cut together seamlessly.

When I yelled "Action," Mark started an incredibly energetic fight, plunging in and out of the water and smashing the rubber gator on its surface. He fought so frenetically that the green paint was peeling off the gator. By the time I yelled "Cut," all the paint had peeled off and the now white rubber gator looked like an albino! Mark came out of the water huffin' and puffin' and in an "actor's moment of realism," he said to me, "If you need another take, I'd be happy to beat the crap out of that gator again." I couldn't stop laughing. I didn't want to remind him he beat the crap out of a piece of rubber. The guy was priceless.

Mark was one of the classiest actors I ever had the pleasure of working with, and he surely would have had a stellar leading-man career ahead of him. He died very young (at 34) in a tragic motorcycle accident just outside London. I send warm greetings to his beautiful wife Caroline and his two boys. We all miss him very much.

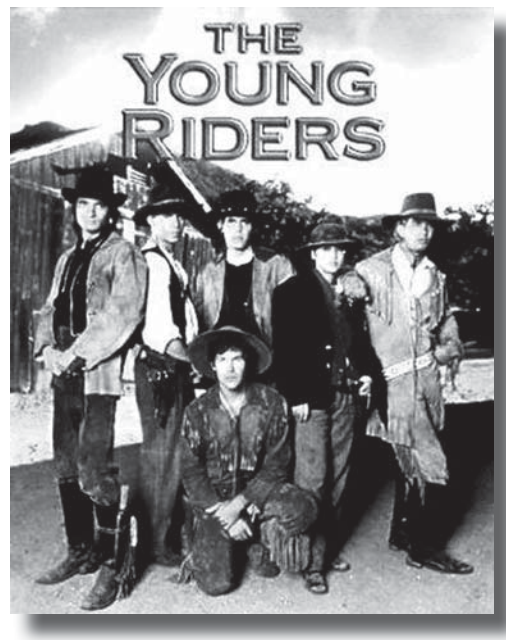
Partners in Crime was the ultimate chick action show. It was shot in San Francisco, which is one of the most beautiful cities I ever had the pleasure to shoot in. The show was memorable for starring two of the most glamorous stars of TV, Lynda Carter (*Wonder Woman*) and Loni Anderson (*WKRP in Cincinnati*). They played a private detective team for hire.

No matter the storyline, glamour was the name of this game and wearing miniskirts, low-cut tops showing plenty of cleavage, and high heels were more important than chasing bad guys down an alley or stairway. This was the "lipstick show" of all shows.

The puff-and-fluff teams (makeup and hair) constantly surrounded the two stars, attending to every last curl and layer of rouge. After lunch, when the girls had to be "redone," the crew would go nap outside or play poker in the trucks. The set was empty except for me looking at my watch, mumbling, "There goes today's schedule down the toilet. Along with my career!"

The show was always behind schedule and over budget with rampant overtime hours. The studio made just ten episodes, lost confidence when the bills came in, and shut it down. Lynda and Loni were class acts to work with, truly great ladies. But glamour takes time…and lots of it. And in this case, too much of it!

I am absolutely sure every director dreams of the opportunity to direct a Western. With *The Young Riders* series, I got to direct three episodes. They wanted to emulate the success of *Young Guns,* a popular movie starring Charlie Sheen, his brother Emilio Estevez, and Kiefer Sutherland. The TV show was an ensemble cast of young actors including Stephen Baldwin and Josh Brolin (who deservedly became a star in Oliver Stone's *W.* and the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men*).



The two played troubled boys working as Pony Express mail riders for the crusty old character actor Anthony Zerbe who anchored the young cast. As with all Westerns, this was a big, complicated

show with a gigantic crew. The wardrobe department was one of the biggest I ever worked with as actors had to be fitted from head to toe—from boots to cowboy hats. We also had a busy prop department to supply weaponry and blank ammo to everyone wearing a gun belt.

There was a department, called wranglers, dedicated to just handling the horses. It rented the animals from local ranches, transported them to the various locations, saddled, cleaned, fed them, and picked up what seemed like very frequent bowel movements. They also handled other animals, such as the camel they needed to find for one of my episodes. They couldn't locate one in Arizona, so they had to ship one in from out of state along with his expensive handler. They found a very smelly creature with a disgusting harelip, which snorted and spat revolting, nauseating phlegm. It was the ugliest camel to ever come before a camera!

Westerns need remote locations without telephone and electric poles in horizons, which for us meant locations far from our hotels. That translated into ungodly 4:30 a.m. work calls and sleepy folks shuffling into vans for a 90-minute trip to make a 6 a.m. start on our "Western town" location.

Westerns are mostly shot on exterior locations, so weather becomes a daily issue, as do moving clouds that require changing exposure settings during shots. Except for night work and interiors, Western shoots end when the sun sets. This was the only show I ever worked on where I could wear a set of six guns and square off into gun-drawing duels with whichever actor was pissing me off.

The stunt guys taught me how to ride horses and took me on weekend rides through the beautiful country surrounding Tucson. The show was popular and ran for three seasons, but it never reached the magic number of 100 episodes (four years' worth) necessary for syndication rerun sales, which is why you never see it now. When I watch great Westerns like *3:10 to Yuma* or one of my old favorites, *Silverado*, I treasure and miss the experience I had directing Westerns, though they are very tough and exhausting to make.

The most beautiful locations I ever shot were in America's paradise: Hawaii. When you go location scouting, you hope and pray to find the right and hopefully, most scenic locations. Usually you have to compromise and pick the best of what is available. In Hawaii, you don't know what the hell to pick—every angle, every spot, is stunningly beautiful. This place is a true feast for the eyes and thus, for cameras. I worked on two action-drama series in Hawaii: *Raven* and *Marker* and I couldn't wait to go back and direct more shows there. It was Jacqui's favorite location to come visit me on weekend jaunts.

To shoot in the beautiful mountains where Spielberg had just shot the amazing *Jurassic Park* or to shoot on a gorgeous sailboat at sea or to catch a spectacular sunset as a background to a love scene on the beach, is heaven for a filmmaker. It was the only time I directed barefoot and in swim trunks. If you've never shot in Hawaii, find a way!

The classiest series I worked on was *Our Family Honor* for ABC. It was about the fiery relationship between a Mafia family and a cop family. It had an amazing cast that included the great Eli Wallach and Kenneth McMillan (see photo) as heads of the two families. The series also featured Michael Madsen, Ray Liotta, and others in a large ensemble.

It was the only series I know that shot every show on both coasts—extraordinary considering the costs. Cleverly, they would shoot the Los Angeles parts of two shows, then move the entire cast and crew chiefs to New York and complete both episodes. Then they would start the next two shows in New York and return to LA and finish those. It was tough on the actors doing scenes from one script then jumping to scenes from another, as the company yo-yo'd from coast to coast. The writing was excellent and at the time we all felt we were doing something special…as special as, for example, *The Sopranos* meets *NYPD Blue,* both of which came later.

It was a special experience for me to shoot in New York City, where there is always a special energy buzz plus I could invite my parents to the set. I was directing an armed robbery scene, complete with gunfire and a foot chase across Columbus Circle, in the heart of Manhattan. We hired a team of cops to control traffic and had multiple cameras on tall cranes. The scene continued down into the 59th Street subway station with actors running along platforms as subway trains whizzed by and extras screamed and ducked for cover. I don't know who the

producers robbed to pay for this ultra-expensive series but it was a privilege to direct these shows, which were as close to feature film quality as I ever experienced in TV land.

I was especially fond of this series because it meant working with one of the best directors of photography of my career. Charlie Correll was a true film magician. He could light beautifully and he was a director's dream to work with. Charlie had taken the cameraman's job on *Our Family Honor* to start his directing career. As per his contract, the studio had agreed to let him direct a show.

We stayed up all night at the hotel as I wrote down everything he needed to remember on his first directing gig, which started the next day mine ended. It was a long list of many pages. Ten years later, Charlie honored me at a function by bringing with him those same instruction sheets, which he had kept through the years, and thanked me for them. That's the class act Charlie was.

I invited him to speak at my Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminars and took him to Malaysia in 2003 to teach film at an Action/Cut conference. He received a standing ovation at the closing ceremonies. Sadly, Charlie passed away a few years ago from an illness. I send warm regards to his wife Robin and his kids. I miss our laughs, our filmmaking, and our golf games, Charlie.

There were many memorable shows I worked on that shot outside of Los Angeles to save money. Other states and Canada attracted productions by offering tax credits. I directed a cop show in Chicago called *Lady Blue,* and worked with a young Johnny Depp playing the brother of a serial killer in one of his very first roles. I directed shows in Toronto and Vancouver including *La Femme Nikita* and *Welcome to Paradox*. I really enjoyed working in Canada, except in winter!

The most arduous technical series I directed was the TV version of Ron Howard's *Backdraft*. It was a nightmare to do

a big special effects fire show on a series schedule. They built "burn sets" on a tin stage and all the props had to be bought (not rented) since everything was going to burn. We shot this challenging show, *Fire Company 132,* during a hot summer in the San Fernando Valley. The stages were not air-conditioned, and we were surrounded by fire effects and burn smells irritating our eyes and nostrils during 12-hour shoot days. The actors hated wearing 75-pound fireman's clothing and equipment plus oxygen tanks and heavy helmets.

Of course, the fire scenes were exciting to watch when they aired on TV, especially when supported by a driving music score. Unfortunately, one of those dreaded exec changes at the top happened at the Fox network, and the new honcho buried the series before it breathed. Today, with the interest and appreciation we have for our firefighters, this ensemble show would be a hit.

I even teamed up again with my first *Galactica* boss, Glen Larson, when he went to 20th Century Fox to do the series *Cover Up,* which starred the beautiful model-turned-actress Jennifer O'Neill and Jon-Erik Hexum, one of the most promising actors of his generation. Jon had it all, from talent to great looks. I had heard he was on the short list to replace Sir Roger Moore as James Bond before they chose Timothy Dalton. Jon was a very playful guy and, tragically, as he sat bored on the set waiting for the next shot, he mindlessly picked up a blank-loaded .44 Magnum prop gun (which was to be used momentarily in the scene). He put it up to his temple

and, playfully, mimicking the Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter*, he pulled the trigger.

At point-blank range, paper wadding from a blank can be as deadly as a real bullet. Jon was rushed to the hospital where he died. A tragic reminder to everyone to always be careful on movie sets and never play with prop guns or any weaponry. After shutting down a few months, the studio recast his role and started up the series again. They asked me to direct the first one back and, though it was an uncomfortably tough time for the crew and cast, I agreed in Jon's honor.

I recall shooting a very difficult day's work on that first *Cover Up* after the tragedy. We were shooting deep in the woods where every set-up was a tough grind. It is easier and faster to shoot action with multiple cameras, but my request for an additional camera was refused due to costs. The day started badly as one of the main actors was two hours late, and then the one and only camera broke down and we had to rush another one in from Panavision.

As the sun was setting, the head of production at 20th Century Fox, a pencil-pusher named Ed, needed to talk to me on a public phone, which was a mile away from the woods. No cell phones in those days. I sent word that there was no time to get to a phone and for him not to panic as I planned to finish on time. A few minutes later, the radio crackle came through again from an assistant parked at that phone. *Ed baby* was insisting that I stop production and get to that phone.

So I did. He did all the talking as he explained that he was aware of all the screw-ups of the day—which were not my fault, but he simply did not care. All he cared about was my finishing the day's schedule no matter what. Then, he screamed, "And if you don't finish in time, I will make sure that your motherfokker's ass gets black-balled. I will take out ads in the trades and ruin

your career, and I promise YOU WILL NEVER WORK IN THIS TOWN AGAIN!"

I was shocked to hear that infamous cliché phrase we all laugh about and such disrespect for a director who was asked back to restart the series after the tragedy. Ed knew all the delays we had, but he still had to go there! In my opinion, directors who have proven they are responsible, prepared, and conscious of budgets and schedules should be respected and supported. Filmmaking is not an exact science, and production heads should know how to nurture rather than terrorize responsible directors. And so I answered the only way I could, "Ed, please make sure you spell my name right in those trade ads!" And with that, I returned to the set and finished my day's work.

I never worked at 20th Century Fox again. Funny story but they had no other drama series in production; there was no work there anyway. I would respond the same way again in the same situation. It's important to make a stand when you need to. Producers have told me they slept well at night knowing I was in charge of their shows because I was responsible and cared. Ed was a disrespectful jerk, doing what he thought was his executioner's job. Control by terror never worked with me.

A picture I treasure: In a football stance with the legendary Jim Brown who guest-starred for me on a *Hardcastle and McCormick* episode.

Some people are more suited to the fast-paced, wham-bam, pressurized world of TV directing while others much prefer the slower, more measured, quality pace of directing features. I very much enjoyed going

back and forth between both worlds, as different as they are. Directing series TV is one hell of a wild rollercoaster ride and you can make a great living doing it. It can be frustratingly challenging and wonderfully rewarding…all on the same day.

If television directing is what you want to do, go do it and good luck. But watch your back!

Drew Barrymore, Jamaican Wackywacky, and A Camelot Wedding Come True

The day after we met, Jacqui and I were sitting on a beautiful stretch of beach at the end of the multi-million-dollar waterfront mansions just north of the exclusive Malibu Colony. With the perfect breeze blowing, we talked about each other's lives, our journeys to date, and where we were hoping to go. It felt like I was talking to a best friend, which was unusual on a first date, especially since I was so physically attracted to her. I sensed something special, something more important than…well, my usual M.O.

She told me she wasn't looking to hook up at that time in her life. Her dad had passed away a few days earlier, and starting a relationship was the last thing on her mind. Years later she told me that when we were at the beach she was thinking she liked what I was about and that I deserved a great girlfriend and, eventually, a great wife. She was so unselfish, her thoughts were for my well-being.

"I want to know you, I hope we can always be close friends," she said as she smiled a killer grin. That's the kind of heart Jacqui

has always had. When someone special you meet wants to be in your universe as a close friend—especially someone of the opposite sex—that's one heck of a promising sign.

I shared my frustrations with finding employment as a director and the career obstacles I kept running into. But she thought I'd done the best with the opportunities that came my way and that my future was bright. She's always seen the glass as half-full. "Sounds like you're on your way to a great career. Hang in there until it happens for you," she advised. "It's not an easy gig...you'll find a way. You'll make it."

She knew. She understood what I was trying to do. She got my film dream. A year earlier, she had worked in the art department at Sid and Marty Krofft Productions, which produced children's shows and variety programs so she knew a bit about the industry.

Jacqui didn't discover her true calling until her sister Mercedes called her one night and said, "I'm coming over and bringing you keys. I need you to open and run the store tomorrow."

"Are you trippin'? I have a job, remember?" Jacqui replied.

"You have to do this for me!" her 18-months-older sister insisted. "I'm leaving town."

"What? Where are you going now?" Jacqui asked, used to her sister's sudden impulses.

"Vegas. I'm getting married. Tonight!" blurted her loony but lovable sister.

And with that, a new career was born. The next day, Jacqui opened the fashion retail store "Nicole" which her sister was managing at the time. She had quite some explaining to do when the boss called and had no clue who this "Jacqui" was who answered the phone and had the store keys. Mercedes never returned to her job and went off to make babies. Jacqui's been

working for that same company for 30 years now and became the general manager and buyer. She discovered her talents in fashion styling, dressing women, and running retail stores. She has a long list of loyal clients who come exclusively to be "dressed and accessorized by Jacqui."

As the weeks passed, I started falling hard for her though we had not yet committed and I was still dating other girls. Every time I saw her, I looked forward to seeing her again. Jacqui was a confident woman and savvy about dating. Though there was a lot of smoochin' when we saw each other, she knew the best way to get my heart was to let me come to her.

I went to a Halloween party where Jacqui told me she'd be. As I arrived, she was leaving with her girlfriend. I'm sure they had planned that elusive timing. She was wearing a nurse's costume with the shortest miniskirt in the history of nursing. She was a knockout, and it hit me like a brick wall: Why the hell was I still dating other women? Why weren't we an item yet? And where did she get those damn legs? I didn't want to appear too anxious, so I nonchalantly asked if we could meet later that evening since we were now going in separate directions. She told me she'd be at some underground club and mumbled an address.

Though the Halloween party was lively and there were with plenty of single girls, I couldn't get Jacqui out of my mind. I rushed to the club. It was a dark, weirdo-lookin' place, truly underground, deep in some building's basement. I kept leaving and driving to two other clubs nearby, thinking maybe I had misunderstood her directions, but I never found her. Finally, at 4 a.m., I left the bar scene, swearing never to let that woman out of my sight again.

Though to this day she assures me she *was* at that club, I know she wasn't. It was all part of her genius plan to make me miss her like crazy and come to her. She's a Viking warrior—she should teach women how to entice and capture their men.

I knew she was opening a new store with her boss the next day in Manhattan Beach. I picked up a plant as a store-warming gift, drove an hour south, found the damn store, walked in, and told her I had gone nuts looking for her all night. She feigned innocence and smiled coyly. In the middle of the busy store, I told her I was through with other women.

"Are you sure?" she asked. I said "Absolutely!" I was sure I wanted her. She asked how much. That did it! We instantly jumped each other in a major liplock, the kind where you moan and groan and don't care who the hell is looking! Her boss yelled, "Hey you two, this is a store, take it outside, for crissakes!" We did and we haven't stopped kissin' for 28 years.

Over the next months, being with Jacqui came to feel like the most natural partnership I had ever experienced. We would make out every place, anywhere, everywhere. It was difficult and we would literally suffer when not together in the same place. It's exciting when you know you're falling madly in love. It's not a subtle feeling. It's magical. It's thrilling!

Friends were starting to say, "You two are going to hitch up," and we'd be teased about our inability to keep our hands off each other. We went out of town for a few days to see how we'd do on a short vacation together. We were planning to head north to visit the wine country in Napa after a day of skiing in Big Bear. We ended up shackin' up in a wooden cabin

with a fireplace at a place called, of all things, "Honeymoon Haven" near Big Bear. We never got to Napa.

It became obvious it was time to end my bachelor days with roommates at my Laurel Canyon dump, and get my own place for the first time in my adult life. I was ready to sign my own lease and have my own home, though I was unemployed and could hardly pay the freight. But when you're young, you're bold and immortal.

For me, there are two optimal places to live in Los Angeles: the hills or the beach. My first choice would have been the beach; however, it's a long commute to the studios in Hollywood, and mud slides close down the essential Pacific Coast Highway too frequently for me.

Since I always had very early set calls when I worked, the Hollywood Hills is where I chose to live. We're in the same house I bought back in 1984. No other major city has green hills and mountain homes at its geographical center. It's like living in a tree house, surrounded by nature, and I can get to Universal, Warner Brothers, or Paramount in minutes. It's one of the reasons I love LA. I hear you, Randy Newman.

On our first Valentine's Day, Jacqui gave me a public present of her affection. She graffitied a street tunnel and almost got arrested at one in the morning when she spray-painted her Valentine's message of "Guy I love you!" with a friend who took this picture. Neither one of us was

shy about expressing our love—we were nuts about each other; we still are.

As soon as I moved to my new home in the hills, I invited Jacqui to move in with me. To my surprise, she said no. Though she stayed over every night, she did not wish to give up her apartment until I was sure about us. Amazin' woman! She wanted *me* to be sure, whenever I was ready, and with no extenuating pressure. Until she knew this living together would work out between us, she insisted on keeping her apartment, just in case she'd need it, though she never slept at her place again.

From that first day in my new home, Jacqui felt just perfect in it. Like a law of nature. After three months, I got inspired to take action though I knew it was a bold move that could backfire. I quietly slipped her apartment keys from her purse just before she was leaving to go to work. After she left, in my tiny Fiat convertible, I proceeded to move all her belongings into my new house including most of her furniture. The whole day, with all the trips back and forth, my car looked like the truck from *The Beverly Hillbillies* with ropes holding cargo down. I desperately hoped I wouldn't run into any cops.

When she got home, I didn't say anything. I held my breath and waited. If this was not going to work for her, the insanity of what I had just done without asking her permission would break us up for sure. As she looked around, she sure was surprised to discover her belongings were everywhere: wall hangings, coffee tables, kitchen stuff, clothing.

Jacqui finally turned to me and smiled. "Now I know you really want me here." BINGO!

Countless home improvements that Jacqui has made over the years turned our Spanish home in the hills into the house of our dreams. She knew I loved the beach, so when I was out of town

on a film shoot, she painted a beach and ocean on the rooftop, complete with real shells on the water's edge. To this day, I can see this painted rooftop on Google Earth. This woman never ceases to amaze me with her compassion and her wish to make me feel special. Our friends always remind me what a lucky SOB I am. I know it. I know I hit the jackpot. No secret here.

Crazy things have happened at this house. One night, around 2 a.m., we were awakened by footsteps going up our exterior stairs to our balcony deck. "Did you hear that…the stairs?" whispered Jacqui as she bolted upright from a deep sleep. "Yeah, don't worry, it's OK!"I tried to calmly whisper back as I quickly got up and grabbed my trusted machete from under our bed.

"Oh my god…what's that?" I heard her whisper behind me as I raised the machete over my shoulder. I shook my head, trying to clear the sleep cobwebs and focus on reality, as the steps were now creaking above us on the second-floor balcony. I hoped it was a deer or somethin' with four legs as had occurred in the past but now it was clear we had burglars! I answered, "Stay by the phone, dial 911 if we need to."

"Sounds like two of them!" Jacqui whispered. "Don't worry, I got this," I replied, as I moved in the dark to the door. I opened our bedroom door and felt my way to the front door of the house. "They're comin' back down the stairs," Jacqui whispered urgently as she appeared behind me, but I could hardly see her in the dark. "Please stay by the phone, Jacqui… move away from this door," I whispered to encourage her back into the bedroom, but she wasn't leaving my side. With her ear

on the door, she whispered with a panicky twinge, "They're comin'…they're here!" as we now heard footsteps approaching the front door. SOBs!

I was always determined never to be a victim, and to go on the offensive if intruders ever invaded our home. I had to make sure Jacqui was protected no matter what. Though I could barely see her face, I saw as determined a fearless warrior standing by my side. We were a team…even then! We were about to go to war! (Or maybe I had directed too many action shows?)

The steps could now be heard just a few feet away from the other side of the door. NOW! I unlocked it, flung it open, and screamed like a maniac, "AHHHHH!" as I wound up the machete over my shoulder, ready to swing it down and decapitate the intruders…uh, well, if need be!

Right in front of me, there were indeed two of them! With bug-eyes, and screaming even louder than me "AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" were two females, terrified out of their minds! There stood Jacqui's friend Ildiko, and her eight-year-old daughter Drew Barrymore! Yeah, *that* Drew!

I almost decapitated poor Drew, who was screamin' in fear of the crazy wild man about to swing this frightening machete down on her. She looked as terrified as when we had all seen her famous scream upon meeting Spielberg's E.T. just a few months earlier on our movie screens! Jacqui had been friends with Ildiko for years before I had met her, and had babysat for Drew when she was younger. Ildiko was returning an evening wear Jacqui

had loaned her from the store for a Golden Globe Award-type function, and had thought to return it promptly by leaving it on our balcony in the middle of the night! Bad idea to sneak around our house.

After we all calmed down and sort of laughed about it, we hoped Drew would forgive us and not have this horrifying machete experience mark her for life. They soon left with Drew still looking at me like I was a crazed wacko. Sorry Drew.

As I was putting my trusted machete back under the bed, Jacqui asked, "So *when* did you become a *samurai*?" I didn't want to flaunt my knowledge of Kurosawa movies, so I just fired back, "So *whose* nutball friend was *that* at 2 a.m.?"

All I heard was, "Good night, darlin'." *Yojimbo*, anyone?

When people ask me, "How do you know if you should marry someone?" I always give the same answer: You know when you are absolutely sure you'd be the biggest idiot in the world NOT to marry that person. It soon became absolutely crystal clear that I would be a giant fool if I did not marry Jacqui. We had been dating for a year and living together for six months. This time together ensured the chemistry worked and no major surprises lurked in our shadows. It's always a win-win to take whatever time is needed to build trust and establish a level of bonding in a relationship. Jacqui was too cool to put any pressure on me.

We had never discussed marriage so a proposal was not on her radar. Neither one of us was in a hurry. I've never understood why some folks rush to get married. What's the big hurry? When you see the horrifying animosity of trashy so-called couples on the shameless *Springer* or *Maury* shows, you wonder how demented these people must be to not have the slightest clue what love is about. Most people don't get it's about no expectations, no

ultimatums, no revenge, no payback, no hating the other's guts. You'd never know it watching those bottom-feeder shows.

You don't have to be a Tibetan monk to clear your head of negative thoughts about your partner and to simply love them for the person they are. I've always told Jacqui I love her for one reason and one reason only: simply because she's *Jacqui*. Because she is who she is. I celebrate Jacqui and what she's all about every day. We should all celebrate our soulmates…daily.

I had booked a vacation in Jamaica. Jacqui and I love reggae music. For the record, it's ridiculously easy (and funny) to score wackywacky in the Caribbean. The dealers waited in canoes; all the tourists had to do was walk out to them. Even though security guys were on the beach, when you walk out into knee-high ocean waters, they consider it offshore trading, as in "foreign commerce," as in legal. You really have to be there to sample their goods, and then you'd appreciate the genius of "Jamaican commerce" in two feet of water. *No problem, man, irie!*

I was ready to ask Jacqui to marry me. The anticipation of that moment had given me goose bumps for months. Finally I was going to pop the question on a beach in Negril, the beautiful north side of the island. In the Caribbean, every day feels like heaven on earth, and this day was no exception. I waited until sunset and suggested to Jacqui we both wear white for dinner.

It was an especially magnificent auburn-rust sunset as we walked to the ocean's edge. I sat Jacqui down on a bench, took a deep breath, and got on my knee. With her hand in mine, and her face registering complete surprise, I asked Jacqui to marry me. I proposed in French. Who would ask in English if they could speak French? I proudly said, *"Je serai le plus heureux des hommes avec le plus de bonne chance si vous m'épousez!"* For

all who flunked French: "I would be the happiest and luckiest of men if you married me!" It was exactly how I felt.

It took a few seconds for Jacqui to fully absorb this completely unexpected moment. She bit her lip. She brought her other hand up to her mouth. Her face lit up. She beamed a million-dollar smile, jumped into my arms, and gasped, *"Oui! Oui! Oui!"* It was a nirvana sparkle.

From the moment I heard those words, my life felt complete. Euphoria is the only way I can describe it. Jacqui had agreed to become my life partner. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there were lightning bolts in the sky on the horizon. But the weather never changed. It didn't rain; it didn't even get cloudy. We figured it was the gods of the universe expressing their approval of our magical moment. It was kismet.

We rushed to toast the magical night with champagne and phoned family back in the States to share the news. Then we danced the night away to the boogiest reggae music you ever heard. This proposal marked my second-best-ever lucky day! My first was meeting her.

I'm not a fan of traditional weddings. They never quite seem the joyous occasion they're meant to be. The bride and groom always look nervous and uncomfortable in their tight wedding outfits and brand-new achy shoes. It's supposed to be the most special and happiest day of your life. To stand or kneel silently for long stretches while a cleric is going on and on with the same crappy speech they give at every boring wedding is *not* my idea of a great wedding day. I mentioned to Jacqui that

same evening in Jamaica that I did not want a formal wedding, nothing traditional, and wished to do something more romantic, more unique, more fun.

"So, you've been thinking about this for a while, huh?" she teased.

"Well, uh, yeah, kinda…it's been percolating," I said, trying not to sound too prepared.

"Wondering minds wanna know!" Jacqui urged.

"I gave it some thought, and uh…I thought we'd do…a period wedding," I finally blurted.

She looked perplexed, but intrigued. "And what time period were you thinkin' about?"

I wasn't sure how this was going to sound, but I decided to just go for it. "A romantic time period…you know…with harpists and costumed dancers and jugglers, and a horse and buggy to bring you in, and hooligans to kidnap you in front of our guests, and you screamin' for help, and a knight in shining armor to rescue you, and sword fights and duels and…" I stopped as it sounded too huge even to me, like a blockbuster movie. She looked a little baffled. Well, more than a little.

"And this little epic you've been directing in your head, what period is it from exactly?" she inquired.

"The Renaissance. I see it as a romantic and joyful Renaissance wedding." I said, not too sure as it now sounded too grandiose.

She smiled, and with no hesitation, she said, "Wow! Sounds amazing! What a great idea. Let's do it!"

Religious traditions don't speak much to me. Jacqui was not religious either. Even though her Catholicism was not a deal-breaker by any means, I asked if she wouldn't mind converting, more for the sake of my family's traditions than for me. She said,

"OK, no problem." She wanted to be more closely connected to me and my family. I was very grateful for her consideration.

I wanted to make sure this did not turn out to be a major hurdle for her. There are many levels of conversion, and I didn't want her burdened by a strict program or year-long studies where she'd have to learn 100 times more about Judaism than I ever knew. How hypocritical would that be? She certainly didn't need to learn to read or write or speak Hebrew. I didn't. I simply wished for her to learn the basics about Jewish history, its culture and celebrations.

We got lucky when we met a terrific progressive rabbi with the kindest of hearts and the best sense of humor. Rabbi Jerry C. is a rare religious leader, the kind who makes you enjoy and celebrate Judaism without ever forcing it on you. He's very popular in industry circles in L.A.

In true Hollywood style, I heard he had credits as a comedy writer on sitcoms such as *Laverne & Shirley*. At the time, he was giving a weekly conversion class at his home. There were seven couples. Of course, all the men were dark-haired; all the ladies were blondes. There was even a celebrity in the group: Marty "Hello Dhere" Allen from the comedy team Allen & Rossi. After three months of classes, Jacqui got converted in a pool of water, which surprised me as I had no idea we shared that strange dunking tradition with other religions.

A Renaissance wedding? It took three months of work and was as intricate to put together as any film production. I turned down job offers during that time just to stay focused. About 30 minutes northwest of Los Angeles, we found a beautiful park next to a lake in Agoura Hills, that was surrounded by pristine trees and featured a ballroom cabin where you could feed 300 guests.

This fabulous place is called the Malibou Lake Mountain Club, and is located a mile away from the site of the annual Renaissance Fair. We attended the fair itself a few weeks before our late-June wedding and hired a Renaissance dance troupe, complete with costumes and period musical instruments, and a terrific comedy juggling team to entertain our guests.

Jacqui used her brilliant talents and creative styling to design our costumes, and had the store's clothing factory make them from scratch. She created an amazing period dress with brocade panels and row after row of pearls, and made a stunning headpiece with more pearls. She looked like she had walked right out of a fantasy romance novel. She was a vision, my lucky vision. All I needed was to rent knee-high boots and a princely jeweled hat. We went for the whole show!

We wanted to have a dramatic entrance and considered landing in a balloon on a field right in the middle of our guests. After talking to balloonists, I discovered they can't guarantee landing anywhere near a precise spot, or even a precise county! Wind factors of the day rule that world. We went ballooning soon after the wedding and indeed discovered the complete zaniness of the experience. It is customary to have a "celebration party" after every landing—to

celebrate living through it! For me, it was terrifying. You see the squares: *squares*—just like from airplanes!

Choosing a safer route for our wedding, we went back to the original idea of having a horse-drawn carriage bring in Jacqui and her maid of honor, her sister Mercedes. The colorful dancers surrounded the carriage and showered it with flower petals, to the sounds of British Royal trumpet music blaring from huge speakers. The trumpet theme that announces the arrival of the Queen of England outside Buckingham Palace—those trumpets. It was goose bumps time.

Though we'd sent out Renaissance-style invitations complete with Shakespearean *Romeo and Juliet* verse, *"Did my heart love till now? Forswear it sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night,"* our guests were still quite surprised by the colorful theatrics. Once the breathtaking Jacqui arrived and got off the flowered carriage in the middle of 300 open-mouthed guests, four "scoundrels" in costume regalia unsheathed their swords, grabbed Jacqui (who feigned a helpless maiden), and announced they were kidnapping the bride. Hey, it's a once a lifetime event!

"Unhand that woman for she is mine!" The hooligans froze in their tracks when my booming voice erupted. The hero had arrived. Everyone applauded. I exchanged nasty words with the scoundrels, and then we drew swords. It was a riot. I had rehearsed this blazing sword fight with my actor/stuntmen buddies the day before; now, with adrenaline pumping in front of 300 guests, we almost killed each other! Thankfully they remembered it was *my*

wedding day and the plot was for me to win the maiden's hand. I rescued my princess just like in the movies.

The wedding came off as magnificently as we had anticipated months earlier in Jamaica. During the ceremony, Jacqui and I spoke to each other as much as Jerry (the rabbi) talked, plus we laughed and hugged and kissed and made sure to enjoy every moment of our profoundly romantic Renaissance wedding. We had done it all, just as we dreamed, in a relaxed, non-traditional manner. It was our magical day. Friends still mention it as the most unique and colorful wedding they've ever attended.

I heard that famous chef Wolfgang Puck spent a million dollars on his Medieval-themed wedding in Europe. I love your cooking, Wolfgang, but how many guys did *you* duel for your bride? A salute.

In the order of our charmed history, this 24th day of June, 1984 was the third-best, luckiest day of my life, and certainly the most magical and regally wardrobed.

I got to be Errol Flynn! I got to marry my princess!

Chapter 14

Dark Monday 10:10 p.m.

Not too many things spook me. The last time I had been really frightened was when I was awakened at 4:30 a.m. by the 1994 Northridge 6.7 earthquake slamming into the Hollywood Hills where we live. But this particular Monday evening was much worse.

Jacqui and I were in a great mood, chatting and laughing in our kitchen on November 24, 2008, three days before Thanksgiving, when the phone rang just after 10 p.m. It was our trusted internist, Dr. Kamran Kalpari, which surprised us at that hour. When I kidded him that he was working too hard, and asked why this couldn't wait till morning, he quietly replied, "Well, when the blood numbers are critical, the lab does not wait. They just called me at home."

The urgency of that phrase and the word *critical* hit me like a sledgehammer. My brain suddenly felt numb, mushy. My mind was on time-delay trying to catch up, trying to absorb the information.

"The blood numbers?" I asked. I put Dr. K. on speakerphone as I recalled that Jacqui had been at his office that very morning for a blood test. Jacqui sat down next to me. "Jacqui's white and red cells and platelets are low," Dr. K. said. Jacqui, 53 and in excellent shape, had never had any major health problems. Working a successful career in high-end boutique fashion retail, she always maintained her weight, always looked great—the picture of good health. She hardly ever got a cold.

But in the last month or so, she had noticed bruises on her body that were not going away as they normally do and her ambitious morning walks with our dog Rocky through our hilly neighborhood had been getting more exhausting in the last few weeks. That morning she noticed a new, inexplicable, large bruise on her arm. We decided she should get a blood test to figure out why she was feeling weak and anemic. We thought she was probably low in some nutrients, like iron.

"Jacqui needs to get a bone marrow biopsy." What? Dr. K. was asking us to go to our local hospital to get a bone marrow biopsy? Bone marrow? "Guy, you have to take her first thing in the morning. This can't wait." *It can't?*

Jacqui was silent. "What do such low blood levels mean?" I asked. He replied carefully, not wishing to alarm us. "It could be a viral infection, or other possible things…it's just too early to know." I took a deep breath as Jacqui and I exchanged worried looks. We are the type of folks who like to know and face the reality of any situation and we were both getting alarmed. So I pushed for more info. "Well, what's the worst of all the possible things this could be, Dr. K.?"

After a short pause, he quietly said, "It could be…leukemia." What? My mind was rushing to catch up. I blurted, "Isn't leukemia…a blood cancer?" He answered, "Yes it is."

WHAM! There it was, the first time we had heard that word related to either of us, that scary-son-of-a-bitch "c" word: cancer. (I do not capitalize words related to cancer; it's my proactive way of stripping it of its power.)

I assured Dr. K. that we'd get the biopsy done in the morning and hung up the phone. Jacqui and I were both silent. We stared at each other. I felt an overwhelming surge of emotions concerning her well-being, an immediate need to do whatever was necessary to protect her. My love for Jacqui is absolute. It has no bounds.

We reached for each other and hugged tightly. We both knew something had changed. Our lives had taken a sudden unexpected turn. This was the beginning of a major crisis. I sensed the severity of the moment and instinctively looked at my watch. It was my way of attempting to keep some control, some reality, and absorb the news. It was 10:10 p.m.

"Whatever is going on, we'll get through it…you know that, right?" I assured her. We had no idea what we were dealing with. Until the biopsy, no one could know. When you don't know what you're facing, you don't say much. You're in a stupor.

We both started crying.

It was a long and difficult night. We were restless and didn't sleep much. I don't think we slept at all. In the dark, in the middle of the night, Jacqui quietly asked, "Guy, am I going to die?"

My heart shattered hearing those words. I immediately assured her that would never, ever happen. I encouraged her not to dwell on dark thoughts, and told her I had absolutely no doubt she would heal from whatever ailment she had. "Darlin', you're going to be just fine. You'll see. We're in this together, Jacqui." We hugged, trying to find some quiet solace.

In the morning, we got dressed and made breakfast like numbed, dazed robots going through the motions. One thing Dr.

K. had mentioned was to be sure Jacqui didn't get any additional bruises.

As we were getting ready to leave, I put a box outside our front door for FedEx to pick up later that day. Instead of meeting in the garage as usual, Jacqui unexpectedly stepped outside the front door and tripped over the damn box, literally flying over it. She landed hard on the ground in front of me. Horrified and panicked, I rushed to pick her up as Dr. K.'s warning, "Make sure she doesn't bruise!" pounded in my head.

And what did Jacqui do? She started laughing…and laughing…as we finally broke the brain-mush, paralyzing tension. I sat on the ground, hugged her tightly, and laughed with her. We took what felt like our first breaths in the last nine hours. Within minutes, the girl who was not supposed to bruise because of her low white cells had on her thigh the biggest, most severe-looking, softball-sized black-and-blue in the history of bruising! Crazy!

Once we got to Cedars-Sinai Hospital and were admitted to emergency, another blood test was taken. The results matched the same low level numbers Dr. K. had reported. The bone marrow biopsy was scheduled for that very afternoon.

I was relieved that we were at one of the top hospitals in the nation. Cedars-Sinai was partly built with philanthropic donations from movie industry folks. The hospital is at the intersection of George Burns Road and Gracie Allen Drive. I had parked in front of the Steven Spielberg Pediatrics Research Center. The food area is called the Ray Charles Cafeteria. This place is the film industry's hospital: first class. Jacqui was in the best of hands.

As we were waiting for the biopsy procedure, Jacqui asked me to step outside, where cell phones worked, to call her sister

Mercedes. Now that the second blood test had confirmed the low blood numbers, and the word *leukemia* had been uttered (again) by the emergency room doctor, I stood outside dialing my cell phone. At that moment, a wave of reality hit me hard like a missile from hell.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, I just broke down, sobbing. As hard as I tried to control myself, emotions about Jacqui's health overwhelmed me as I gave Mercedes the news. I was trying not to alarm her, but I couldn't stop crying. Then I called Nicole, Jacqui's employer of 30 years in the retail business, and delivered the news. It got worse when I called her closest friend Linda, and then I totally lost it talking to my parents and my sister. Hellish phone calls to make, especially because Jacqui is so dearly loved by all who know her. No one could believe the news. Jacqui, ill? Possibly leukemia? I quietly sobbed while I reported the improbable bad news to everyone.

At the surreal moment that I completed the calls, I knew that Jacqui had leukemia. Before the biopsy was ever done, I sensed it. The love of my life had cancer.

As I headed back into the hospital, I focused on becoming resigned to our new reality. I wiped my tears and took a deep breath. I gathered my strength for the battle ahead. Whatever it was going to take to heal Jacqui, I would make absolutely sure it would happen. Whatever the medical journey to become cancer-free, she was going to win it and I was going to do whatever it took to get her there. We were, indeed, in this together.

The biggest challenge and emotional rollercoaster of our lives had begun.

Chapter 15

Chemo Bear

The day before Thanksgiving 2008, our oncologist Dr. Green came to Jacqui's room at Cedars-Sinai Hospital to tell us the results of her bone marrow biopsy taken the previous day. It's one of those meetings you wait for while your stomach does the triple flip. His office called to let us know he would not be able to get there until the end of the day, giving us more time to worry.

"I have good news…and not so good news" were his memorable first words. With his kind, professorial bedside manner, he calmly explained the bad news: Jacqui had leukemia. It was the most common of four different types and known as aml (always capitalized, but not in this book), which stands for "acute myelogenous leukemia." The good news was that it was treatable and curable, though he warned it would be a bumpy road. It sounded surreal and came with a delayed nasty shock factor as it clawed its way into our consciousness. Jacqui's illness was now confirmed.

Though the doctor wanted to start her first chemotherapy treatment (called *induction*) right away, Jacqui asked to be released for the weekend. She said she was not mentally ready to do this, but that she would be on Monday. Shock denial can be quite powerful, but it was fueled by Jacqui's sense of responsibility. When Dr. Green asked her if she would explain the delay, she replied that she first needed to get her work and her home in order. Reluctantly, Dr. Green granted her wish after making her promise to return and begin treatments no later than Monday.

She had planned to dress the store windows for Christmas that weekend, and no illness was going to stop her from getting the clothing boutique ready for the all-important holidays. Jacqui's dedication to her work is legendary among all who know her. She's gifted with exquisite taste in fashion, and has developed a loyal customer base who come to her to be dressed and accessorized from head to toe with the latest fashions. She's a master stylist.

She also wanted to get the house cleaned up and well stocked with plenty of food for me and the pooch. Then, and only then, would she be mentally ready to deal with her own diagnosis. And people want to know why this woman is so special? It's her integrity, her values, her heart.

There are many different types of blood cancers besides the four leukemias, and they include multiple myeloma and hodgkin's lymphoma. They affect all ages, races, genders, and transcend all national borders. The first question asked by someone just diagnosed with one of these diseases is: "How did I get this?" Here's the shocking answer: "Nobody knows!"

This is the first of many mind-bending facts you discover. Here we are in 2011, gazillions of dollars have been spent on

research in the last half-century, and there have been great advances in treatments and improved mortality rates. However, no one knows how you get cancer. There are theories and studies, but no answers as to why these cancers develop for some and not for others. For example, no one has a clue why hodgkin's is the fourth most common cancer in kids aged 10 to 14. I have been incredibly saddened and moved by the courage of young patients in pediatric oncology floors. If there is a "man" upstairs, I've got big-time peeved-off questions about why he would ever allow any kid to have cancer. I'm sure all parents going through it with their kids share such frustrated feelings.

Some blame the rising incidence of cancer on environmental toxins. The water? The air? Pesticides in our foods? Weird exposure to chemicals or radiation that may have occurred earlier in life? Until they come up with better answers, cancers can be described as body breakdowns. Something goes wrong, just as it does in a mechanical breakdown of a car or an airplane.

I am not a doctor and I have no medical training. What I say in this book is nothing more than my opinion based on my experience. But as a caregiver, I can advise other caregivers that they must make peace with the "why," however difficult it might be. You have to accept that a body part has gone bad, without rhyme or reason. It's a tough one. In Jacqui's case, it was her bone marrow, her blood-making system. Though doctors have made great advances in successfully treating cancers of the breast and prostate, blood cancers are tougher and more complex, and good treatment options are lagging behind. Having aml-type leukemia means your bone marrow (located mostly in your pelvis) is not producing enough red and white blood cells and platelets.

Those are the three basic components of blood. White blood cells fight infection. They race to the rescue whenever you hurt

yourself and begin the body's healing process. Red blood cells transport oxygen from the lungs to all tissues in the body. Platelets assist in blood clotting and must be maintained at certain levels—too few and excessive bleeding may occur; too many and blood clots can form that cause strokes and heart attacks. New blood cells are made by blood marrow, which operates as a 24-hour factory because these cells have short life spans and need to be replenished. For example, new platelets only survive 8 to 12 days while white cells last two to three times as long. Red cells have a life span of about 120 days.

Bone marrow biopsies require local anesthesia via a needle shot in your lower back, just above your butt. Next, a corkscrew-type device is twisted into the upper part of your pelvic bone, creating a hole for a syringe to draw bone marrow. They then break a small piece of pelvic bone (ouch!) and pull it out for lab tests. In addition to confirming blood tests, biopsies are used after chemo treatments to determine if you are in remission.

Some people think remission means "cancer-free," but it actually means that there are no "present signs of the disease." Apparently, our best lab equipment cannot absolutely confirm if someone is indeed cancer-free, as some of the malignant cells may be too small to detect. This is why cancer patients keep testing for years after remission. Depending on the type of cancer, after three to five years of remission, doctors finally declare you cancer-free. Jacqui had seven biopsies in the first ten months of her illness; we're thrilled that she's been in remission the last consecutive four tests. I'm always there holding her hand, helping to get her through the trauma, though the biopsies only take a few minutes. Bone marrow biopsies are not fun.

As promised, on that Monday, December 1st, 2008, Jacqui started off with the standard chemotherapy treatment for aml-

leukemia known as "7+3," which is seven days of the drug *cytarabine* with *idarubicin* added during the first three days. These are two very powerful drugs designed to kill cancer cells, the goal of chemotherapy. But here's the hitch, they have not come up with drugs that can differentiate between cancer cells and healthy cells. So chemotherapy kills cells…all cells. The hope is that in controlled doses it will kill the cancer cells before it kills the patient. Whoa! This was truly a shock to me and seemed medieval in this day and age after decades and billions spent on research. It took me a long time to accept this reality.

Fashionable Jacqui made sure to include big lipstick on the front of her mask.

In November 2009, good news was announced on *Charlie Rose* (the smartest talk show on TV). The show featured the creators of "gleevec." Finally, the first chemo drug that can differentiate between good and bad cells but only for the "cml" type of leukemia, which is not Jacqui's. The cml patients are healing so well with this drug, they've stopped needing transplants. Though it looks promising that similar breakthroughs for other blood cancers will follow soon, they are more elusive because other blood cancers are more complicated and involve two or more defective proteins while cml is caused by only one faulty protein. Gleevec was developed once scientists were able to identify and isolate this particular protein, and designed a new drug to respond to it. It is a breakthrough.

The first seven days of chemo were not dramatic for Jacqui. The drugs were delivered intravenously through a 24-hour drip.

They had secured a "picc IV line" in her upper arm to facilitate delivery of the drugs she needed (better than getting pricked each time), and they used it to draw her blood twice a day to check her progress. She had no side effects that first week, and felt normal. Dragging her attached IV stand on wheels, Jacqui joined me in exploring the hospital grounds, which included a popular coffee bar and an outside promenade area.

Her sister and friends came to visit, and all went well during that first induction treatment. After the chemo, we hoped the malignant cells would be gone and the now-healthy blood marrow would start making healthy white cells again. Without white cells, Jacqui was "neutropenic," which means she had no defensive immune system and needed antibiotics to protect her. Frequent hand-sanitizing and surgical masks became mandatory for all who walked into Jacqui's room. No one with a sneeze or cough came within a mile of her.

After five post-treatment days, Dr. Green ordered another biopsy. Chemo doesn't kill cancer cells instantly; sometimes it takes more time to get a reliable test result. Some oncologists prefer to wait longer, up to a couple of weeks after chemo before doing a biopsy. We'll never know what the test would've shown if we'd waited longer, but we were agreeable and anxious to get it done as soon as possible. Who wouldn't be?

The biopsy results came back that same day and Dr. Green somberly told us there were still "blasts," which is what they call the "bad cells." Sometimes people have to go through a second induction—same chemo treatment again—to eradicate these bad cells. Dr. Green said about 25% of folks need a second shot at

it. This is not the good news you're hoping to hear after a first chemo treatment, but Jacqui had not suffered any side effects yet—not even a hair falling off. At the time, doing it again for another seven days did not seem like the end of the world.

Dr. Green recommended we start the 7+3 chemo treatment again, but Jacqui surprised everyone. "It didn't work the first time. Why would the same exact treatment work the second time?" she asked. Instead, Jacqui wanted a more aggressive approach to ensure her healing this second time around. I was taken aback by her courage. I'm not sure many people would have done the same; most are not that brave, including myself.

After we received second and third opinions confirming the safety of this more potent treatment, the doctors proceeded to double the dosages of the first treatment. I later asked Jacqui how she came up with that idea and she told me it was from her retail world. She said, "If you've got a sales rack that doesn't sell, why keep it as is? Change the rack and make sales happen." OK!

Jacqui was ready to undergo a triple whammy: the side effects of the first induction hadn't hit yet, and we were bracing for the double dose of the second induction. Within a few days it began. She started feeling nauseous and weak, and would show me her hairbrush with big clumps of hair in it. She called a hairdresser friend (Emilienne) to come shave it off. If she was going to lose her hair, it would be on her terms. Again, here was her bravery and resiliency in the face of a monster. I was determined to shave my own head as a sign of solidarity. Jacqui thought it was a lousy idea. She said she was under enough stress and didn't need me looking strange. Hmmm…I reluctantly kept my hair.

The next three weeks were the most difficult for Jacqui and the most emotionally painful of my life. She started spiking high fevers and the nurses would surround her body with ice packs. Sometimes she would go the other way and start shivering and we'd cover her with heated blankets. She stopped tasting food properly which, combined with a chemo-induced metallic taste, affected her appetite. Wrenching bouts of vomiting would sap her energy and spirit as the side effects mounted. Her stomach bloated and became a major concern. The doctors explained she had a bad case of colitis—a chemo effect that burns or inflames the lining of the intestines and colon which, in turn, limits nutrient absorption. She stopped eating completely and started asking for painkillers to knock her out. She would whisper to me that she preferred sleeping through this intense period. My Jacqui was very sick.

Jacqui's sister Mercedes, with husband (John) and daughter (Kristel), visited daily and brought the love.

I was commuting from home every day and was not a happy camper. I wanted to move in with Jacqui so I could be there 'round the clock, but she insisted I get a good night's sleep at home. Also our dog had to be fed twice a day. During long nights, I would clean the house or do laundry to bring fresh clothes back to her; she hated hospital gowns and insisted on wearing her own clothing. I would speak on the phone for hours to family and friends spread across the world who were all very concerned and supportive. My cousin Lily in Brooklyn was especially helpful as she had been a cancer caregiver for many years caring for her mother, Simone, who had multiple myeloma.

Jacqui did not have a bite to eat for 20 days and had to rely on intravenous feeding. On Christmas Day, her sister came to visit and brought a stuffed white teddy bear that became Jacqui's sleeping partner. She named him Chemo Bear. Mercedes also brought a feast, but Jacqui could not have a bite. Her stomach was distended and painful. The doctors became concerned about infections and a possible surgery, which really worried us. Doctors who specialized in infectious diseases were brought in, as well as a GI (gastro-intestinal) doctor and a dermatologist (to monitor her rashes). Each doctor added his or her own treatments until Jacqui had about 15 intravenous bags of drugs dripping into her. It was a tough time for Jacqui. I will always admire her strength and resiliency to have gotten through this nightmare.

I was grateful to Cedars-Sinai's excellent oncology nursing staff. Oncology nurses are a special breed. They showed great care and concern for Jacqui, which was the only reason I was willing to go home and leave her in their hands during the night. In the middle of the night, I would call the nurse assigned to Jacqui and get a progress report. Though her doctors visited daily, they could spend only about ten minutes examining her and writing up drug and test orders. Her nurses would spend a 12-hour shift caring for her. They were wonderfully attuned to her needs and would also calm my concerns. They are devoted to their patients and have seen it all. I have great respect for them and I'm now a big fan in appreciation of the nursing profession.

On my long walk from the fourth floor oncology unit to the parking lot (always late at night and with the hallways spookily

deserted), I would pass the hospital's multi-denominational chapel. On occasions, I would go in and sit. Since I do not believe in a god, I could not pray. I cannot be that hypocritical, even in such an hour of need. When I discussed this with friends, especially religious ones, they assured me that "god" is all-forgiving and would not hold it against me. What else would religious people say? I didn't agree and felt it was too deceitful to have it both ways. If you don't believe, you can't be a hypocrite and start praying when you're in trouble.

But what I did do was plead for Jacqui's case as her representative, as her lawyer. I argued that if there was anything close to a godly entity, then Jacqui deserved whatever attentive help it could give. "Do it for her, not me." I spoke out loud, arguing that she was just too special a human being to go through this suffering. Though I am grateful to the "universe" for Jacqui's eventual healing, I see it as a positive outcome of medical science and Jacqui's body chemistry. Her strong resiliency and brave spirit certainly helped to win the day.

As a caregiver, it is important to stay alert and on top of important treatment decisions. Your job is not just to be a supportive partner, but to also be the advocate who nurtures and protects the patient's well-being. Too many people feel inadequate to question a doctor's order or procedure but we have to remember that, as knowledgeable and dedicated as they may be, doctors are not infallible—no one is. You must ask all the questions you need to ask, you must do tons of research (I am so grateful I live in the Google age), and you must make consulting phone calls to other specialists who may have a good idea to offer.

Two weeks after Jacqui's 20th day of fasting, her stomach looked very distended. Her GI doctor wanted to put a suction

tube through her nose to drain her stomach of its agony. I didn't want Jacqui to have any additional discomfort or misery and asked the GI doctor if he was sure it would work. He said he was not sure and when I asked again, he said he thought it could work, but was just not sure. He was a young doctor who was a little insecure.

Unless told it was absolutely necessary, I was not going to put Jacqui through another added misery. She already had plenty to deal with. Finally, after polling her other doctors, it became clear that the suction tube was absolutely necessary to avert possible surgery, and we proceeded with it. Once she had it in, you could immediately see the greenish bile starting to be sucked out into a container. A liter of this poisonous bile was filled every 12 hours.

And that's what peeved me off! The GI doctor should have known it would work, for sure. Why *wasn't* he certain? It was so obvious this was what she needed, why did he have any doubts? The other doctors were sure. She needed this suction tube to drain her of this poison, and it was absolutely necessary to do it regardless of her discomfort. I won't forgive that doctor and, yes, it is very personal. Jacqui suffered two more days than she needed to because of his wishy-washiness and frankly, because he was a wuss about his medical decision. I stand behind my decisions and judgments during my film productions and I expect doctors to at least do the same with their patient care. When you're wrong, then you're wrong…but don't get paralyzed by fear of action.

Through all this trauma, on December 29th—ten days after the chemo ended—another biopsy was performed. This time an indecisive report said she still had about 10% bad cells. The dilemma was, as our oncologist explained, that all the bad cells might not have died off yet. Either Jacqui would soon be

in remission or the second induction had not fully worked. Sometimes, not often, patients need a third induction treatment. Third? No way was she strong enough to withstand it. To resolve this issue, Dr. Green recommended another biopsy ten days later.

More waiting, more agonizing days and nights wondering when and how she was going to heal. Her sister and her good friend Linda (*in photo*) and many others including Val, Dawn, Nicole, Dennis, and Pat visited and brought her support and moral strength. A lot of people were pushing hard for her, a true testament to how much love this woman generates, and I was always thankful for their support. Friends are gold, especially when you're in trouble.

Slowly over the next few days, as Jacqui's stomach was relieved of the poisonous bile via the suction tube, she started recovering. She was asking for less painkillers and her whispers that she was feeling "creepy" had ceased. Meanwhile, the talk about a "transplant" intensified. The honcho of the bone marrow program at Cedars-Sinai, Dr. Lill, is a very bright young Australian doctor we liked. Jacqui was about to be transferred to his care. From the very first biopsy report, the findings were that Jacqui had chromosomal damage. This meant she had a complicated type of leukemia that could not be healed—as 90% of aml patients are—with just chemo treatments. She was going to require a bone marrow transplant to replace her malignant marrow. And that meant starting a worldwide search for a donor.

This is a new world for anyone needing a transplant. Our search would take about six to eight weeks through the National

Marrow Donor Program (NMDP), which is part of a data registry of 11 million people worldwide. This gets complicated, but here's the short version: Like fingerprints, we all have our own unique HLA (human leukocyte antigens) tissue type. The goal is to find the closest possible match so that the tissues are "immunologically compatible" with each other. HLAs are proteins located on the surface of white blood cells. In a transplant, it's imperative that the donor's tissues avoid attack from the recipient's immune system, which is primed to fight outside invaders. Now in one body, you want two immune systems to live in harmony. When the immune systems are at war, it's called GVHD (graft versus host disease) and it can manifest in various forms and degrees—from minor irritations like skin rashes to possibly terminal outcomes.

Our HLA is defined by ten specific numbers, and doctors look for donors who match these numbers as closely as possible; hopefully, exactly. The numbers look like this: A0201/2601. When Cedars-Sinai put Jacqui's numbers through the matching algorithm system of the NMDP registry, 200 possible matches came up on the preliminary search. That meant 200 potential donors out of 11 million registered, and we were told this was a positive sign. Coordinators start with the closest best matches and start inquiring: Is the person (who may reside in another country) still alive? Did he (or she) change his mind over the years since he volunteered and no longer wishes to donate his bone marrow? Is he still in good health or did he develop AIDs or hepatitis or some other blood virus? Is he still a viable matching donor?

The MUD (matched unrelated donors) search coordinator examines the list to find the very best choices available. It's a slow, complicated, tedious process and every transplant center has such a coordinator in charge of these crucial searches. My kudos to all who do this noble and important work.

While the transplant team searched for a donor, we concentrated on getting through chemo. New Year's Eve 2009 was especially difficult. Jacqui was feeling miserable and went to sleep early. I sat next to her for a few hours as I would never leave unless she was aware of it. I never wanted her to wake up expecting me there when I wasn't. She woke up around 11 p.m., assured me she was OK but very tired, and encouraged me to go home. By the time I kissed her and wished her Happy New Year, she had passed out due to her heavy sedation. She had no idea of the date. As I drove home, I broke out crying. I was overwhelmed by my great love for Jacqui and I was feeling so frustratingly helpless that I could not help her fight this thing.

I cried the entire drive home as I passed cars full of merry party-goers and couples out celebrating the evening. I got home and broke out a bottle of wine. I don't drink much, but it was in Jacqui's honor and this is what she would have been drinking if she had been home. I sat next to our pooch, watched the N.Y. Times Square countdown, and toasted my Jacqui and her good health with Rocky. It was the first time in 26 years that Jacqui was not in my arms on New Year's Eve whether at home, at a party, a Caribbean beachfront, or an Indian-inspired resort in the magical hills of Sedona, Arizona, where we had spent two New Years. It was truly the loneliest moment I have ever experienced in my life. I was determined never to spend another New Year's Eve without Jacqui.

Within a few days, Jacqui was feeling better and her suction tube was finally removed. Her stomach, though still inflamed, was fighting its way back from its chemo ordeal. Finally, her fourth biopsy reported a full remission…her first clean bill of health. The second induction treatment had worked. We'll never

know whether the key had been to double the dosage but for now, she was cancer-free. We were ecstatic!

On Saturday, January 10, 2009, we thanked Jacqui's nurses with a giant cookie platter for their caring work over the 41 difficult, long days and nights of her stay. I was so very joyful as Jacqui got in the car and we drove away from Cedars-Sinai. We headed to the beautiful Hollywood Hills, and our love nest in the trees. I no longer had to make this drive alone.

She had slain the beast. She had beaten the dragon…for now.

Jacqui was returning home.

Making a First Feature Film: Retribution

Everyone on the planet seems to want to make a short or feature film. The magic of filmmaking is so infectious, the dream of expressing yourself through a film story is so universal, that you will find filmmakers in every country, every corner of the world, in the most unlikely places, wanting to or making a movie. We received entries from 42 countries to our Action/Cut 2010 Short Film Competition including films from China, Portugal, and Norway. Why? Because film, more than any other medium, has the magical power of transporting us to another world where we experience, visually and audibly, one thing and one thing only: *storytelling*.

In the intimacy of a dark theater, transported by the story flickering on the big screen, we each have our own subjective reaction to a film. The wonder of film is its power of storytelling to a mass audience—from the actors to the music to the special effects to the photography to the sounds to the wardrobe—all serve and contribute to the story. A director or filmmaker is the

All photos in this chapter are from the making of the film *Retribution*.

person who controls those elements to best tell the story he or she wishes to convey. How well one maneuvers the complex craft of filmmaking to tell the best possible, most engaging story is what separates the average run-of-the-mill director from the great ones.

Since the story is told visually, "visual storyteller" is the precise job description for a director. No matter how amazing the special effects or the high-tech equipment or the talented actors and crews you collaborate with, the success or failure of any project will always depend on how good is the visual storytelling. This is true regardless of whether you're making a 30-second commercial or a four-minute music video, in any genre from animation to documentary, whether it's a TV sitcom or drama or the big kahuna of the craft: a two-hour feature film. What finally matters is: How well was the story told? Was it interesting, engrossing, entertaining? Did it engage audiences? Did you or I like it? Will we tell our friends to go see it?

Through my filmmaking seminar tours, I have met many people planning to make a first feature without ever having made any shorts beforehand. Why would anyone attempt a feature before learning how to translate scripts to films by making inexpensive shorts? How to tell a visual story is something you learn and, as with any other craft, some learn it well and quickly

while others are slower to pick it up or lack the skills altogether. A very lucky few discover they have a natural aptitude for the storytelling craft in film, but the only human being who was ever *born* to tell movie stories is the Emperor-Caesar himself: Steven Spielberg. I tease the guy because he was "the man" of my generation, because I am in awe of his work and achievements, and because my first contract at Universal was named after him.

My best advice is to hone your storytelling talents before making your first feature. The majority of folks who manage to make a first feature never get to make a second film. There's a simple reason for that: If the money invested in the first film is lost, it is practically impossible to raise financing for another. Would you invest your own dollars in film #2 if you knew a filmmaker had lost all the dollars spent on his or her #1?

Most first indie features are not very good. If you ever attend foreign market screenings or most festivals, you'll see that for yourself. This is usually because the script is boring and inferior or has lousy technical craft (such as bad sound, bad lighting, or out-of-focus shots) or unimaginative visual storytelling, uninspiring music, slow-paced editing or, the most common sin for indies, poor acting performances. Those films do not attract distributors.

It's a very commercial marketplace and movie theaters want the largest box office audience. Wouldn't you if you owned a theater? When you're ready to make your first biggie, ask yourself how it will compete at the local cineplex against *Spiderman* or the

next *Harry Potter* sequel. What would *you* take your date to see on a Saturday night? What would *she* want to see? How special must your indie film be to stand out and attract an audience in a marketplace dominated by multi-million-dollar studio pictures? And if you're thinking your movie is for art houses, welcome to another competitive marketplace, which includes all the foreign flicks and where few make any money. When's the last time you saw an art house theater even half-full?

This is the reality of the feature film world. Will your first film be exceptional and break out, making lots of noise, as did *Reservoir Dogs*, *Boys in the Hood*, *The Blair Witch Project* (the most successful "gimmick" film), *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, and *El Mariachi* (the cheapest successful feature ever made for $7,000)? Everyone who sets out to make a first feature hopes to catch lightning in a bottle. So heed well the advice in this chapter.

The biggest flaw at most film schools, no matter how great the teaching staff and/or the equipment resources, is the lack of in-depth training in both screenwriting and in working with actors. I know because I attended two of the best plus I teach filmmaking and have visited film schools and colleges on speaking tours. Those two disciplines—screenwriting and working with actors—are not as sexy as cameras and lights and editing. Both take a lot of study and dedication. Having watched thousands of shorts as the founder and director of the annual Action/Cut Short Film Competition, I can attest that the

most common failing is not a lack of financing, as you may assume, but inferior writing skills and amateurish, uninspired acting.

When the film's opening is weak and doesn't pull you into the story, when the characters are not interesting, when the dialogue is boring, when there are no dramatic beats and thus no rhythm, when the ending is unsatisfying, you can bet that those problems first existed on paper and were never resolved. This is true in a five-minute or 25-minute short, or a 90-minute feature if the script is not well polished. This is why screenwriting is such an important and prized endeavor in Hollywood. If you can write and sell your work, then you'll enjoy a great career.

But the biggest killer in indie shorts and features is low-level acting. If you've never gotten training in the acting craft, how can you guide and inspire actors in front of your camera who look to you for direction? The respected British actor Ewan McGregor was recently quoted in an interview by saying that "Many directors have no idea how to speak to actors or pull good work out of them." Every actor on the planet—from Scorsese's dear (and brave) mother to George Clooney wants to be directed. They want to know what *you* want, what *you* are looking for, what *you* are trying to achieve with a scene or crucial moment. There is no actor I've ever worked with who didn't want to give the very best acting performance a director was seeking. And whenever I watch an actor deliver a dream performance, full of truthful in-the-moment behavior more poignant and nuanced than ever thought possible, I get goose bumps.

After 25 years of directing, I am always thrilled every time I experience actors bringing a masterful performance to the screen—when they are living the role, breathing the moment, and have merged into the character. Their characterization is truthful, natural, and while in that zone, every behavior is correct. Though

such excellence is difficult and rare, it is what every actor hopes to achieve with every acting job. Marion Cotillard's brilliant portrayal of French singer Edith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose* comes to mind, a well deserved 2008 Oscar win. Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line* (2005) was utterly brilliant and though nominated for best actor, in my opinion, was robbed of the Oscar in one of the Academy's most grievous injustices.

When I am asked why I became a director, I give a two-part answer: to tell stories and to work with actors. I love telling stories using cameras and all the technical wizardry of filmmaking *from prep to shoot to post*. And I love to guide and inspire actors to be the best they can be in breathing their characters to life. If you want to direct, you had better love those two things.

Every career is a journey. You have to remember to "live the journey" as happily and productively as you can. This is what it is all about in a movie career, regardless of the specialty that interests you whether it's makeup, stunts, lighting, sound, props, editorial, cameras, wardrobe, or any of the other jobs that contribute to making a film. It's about how much work you get to do and building your professional skills. How far you go, what achievements you reach, how many Oscars or Golden Globes grace your mantel, these are all gravy. Your actual journey depends on your ability to develop and build your work. All the rest of the hoopla is circumstance, timing, opportunity, and a witch's brew of luck like not finding yourself on an earthquake fault line when the ground rumbles in Los Angeles.

So how do you make a first feature film? After directing about ten one-hour TV shows, I felt experienced enough to tackle a two-hour film. I had been a big fan of *The Exorcist* and had an idea to make a low-budget "possession story," which I had written with my buddy Lee. It was called *Retribution*, as it had a nasty revenge theme, and its eventual marketing byline was "Don't get mad…get even!"

A revenge/action/effects-laden story is obviously a commercial one, an attribute I highly recommend for a first feature. Indie filmmakers rely on foreign sales which are more amenable to American movies than domestic markets where competition is much tougher. In foreign markets, three genres rule: action, sex, and horror. Stories that do not depend upon dialogue do better than a Woody Allen movie or a comedy—even a gross teen film with flatulence activity. Shame on us for catering to the bottom-of-the-barrel of slacker youth tastes. Could there be any further proof of such popular mediocrity than a blockbuster opening weekend of $50 million for *Jackass 3D*?

Unless you come from wealth or you can tap a relative or trust fund, you will need to raise money through private investors and for that you have to put together a business plan: a simple proposal that is easy to understand. I recommend a single page proposal. Yes, one page. Rich guys are busy. If you're going to meet with them, don't ask them to read pages of crap about how your boxing movie will make gazillions because *Rocky* did or how your fantasy kid story will be the next *Potter*. These guys are bright and have a particular sensitivity to BS. When you finally get a meeting with a potential investor, offer a precise and short professional presentation that explains the basics of your film deal. You should practice making your pitch in 15 minutes so

you can get an immediate answer rather than wait for "I'll think about it" delays, which almost never bring good news. Always try and get an immediate decision at the meeting.

Film investing is highly speculative. Why would a bright wealthy person make the worst possible investment in a small indie film that can't afford any name actors to enhance a marketing ad? I assure you it is not to help a very passionate filmmaker realize his or her vision. Investors couldn't give two craps about your dream, and none are willing to lose money by being nice to a lunatic filmmaker with a bad deal. Rich guys know how to make money and have no interest in losing on a high-risk film gamble. So why do investors ever invest in any filmmaker's indie project?

I believe there is really only one reason. We've got something no other business in the world has: GLAMOUR! Pure Hollywood Glamour, Baby! Why do you think the Oscars are such a glamorous event, broadcast in every country even if there is only one black and white TV with rabbit ears in an entire nation? Why do all the stars show up in their designer clothes, jewelry, and tuxedos? Because it is the night Hollywood shines! The night it glows like a bright diamond! That's the sizzle we are selling when we raise money for our films, a chance to bring a little Hollywood glamour into boring, yet wealthy, business lives. Since they don't have it, they'll buy it, because they can! If you meet a big rancher from Wichita making millions selling cow manure, he ain't got no glamour! The oil guy who owns the tallest buildings in Houston—no glamour there, either. The Wall

Street thief who secretly idolizes good ole Bernie Madoff, nice beach house in the Hamptons but no glamour!

These types of guys are loaded to the gills and if you present your deal on the right day, in the right way, they may just write you a check for $50,000 or $150,000 or, as was my unique case on my first feature: $1,250,000! That's right—one guy. It usually takes *many* guys. There is never only *one* guy. It will never happen to me again. It was my once-in-a-lifetime.

What do I mean by "glamour"? Rich investors telling their golfing buddies, "I'm goin' Hollywood. I'm producing a movie!" as they tee off. They now have glamour. The comment has already given them a thrill—maybe even better than their last Viagra moment—and their rich golf buddies are now jealous. Or it offers a vacation destination to visit with their screaming kids as in, "Hey kids, you wanna go on the set of a movie Daddy is making this summer?" And they all scream, "Yessss Dadddyyyy" to your horror as you make a pained note to order extra ice cream and cake from your caterer.

Let's be frank. Most millionaires (at least 51%?) have a young babe they are quietly seeing. Why? Ask Tiger. Simply because they can afford it and what more exciting and glamorous news to boast to your mistress than, "Sweetie, I'm producing a movie!" Why? Because most of the time (at least 75%?), if she's young and beautiful, then she's an aspiring actress or model (even if she lives in Oshkosh) and she shrieks and jumps your bones with, "Oh my god, can I be in it, pleeease honeyyy bunnyyy?" And you'll never guess the answer.

Caution: Through the years of meeting with investors, one of the primary reasons I turned down their offers to invest was their demand to cast a girlfriend in the starring role. I don't mind agreeing to a one-line role, like the waitress who says, "Do you want coffee?" But I have never agreed to more than that, and I don't recommend you ever do. It will ruin your movie so why bother to make it in the first place?

Once we had a final draft of our *Retribution* screenplay, we organized a 35-day shooting schedule based on the demands of the story. It was packed with special effects like glowing green eyes, rain machines, and expensive stunts like high falls and full body burns. The budget totaled $1.25 million, a substantial figure in 1985 dollars. Our project was ambitious and challenging. The special effects were to be done on-camera to keep costs to a minimum. This was before the digital age, before CGI (computer graphics imaging).

Why not choose to make an easier film story with just dialogue scenes and no special effects or stunts or rain machines? Well, there is nothing bigger than a feature film in this business. Few of us will ever realize a more career-defining achievement than a feature. So when you finally get a chance to make one, I encourage you to make your dream film no matter how difficult or complex an endeavor. Do all you can to rise to the occasion and make it the best it can be. If you win, it's the best way to get to make more films and build a career.

After three long years of trying to raise the financing for *Retribution* and meeting with everyone and anyone with a seven-figure bank account, one of my looniest/nerdiest friends introduced me to one of his college buddies from the Midwest who had just turned 30 and inherited a nine-figure trust fund from one of the wealthiest families in America. My new best

friend! Always stay buddies with your loony/nerdy friends—you never know.

I sent a limo to pick up the investor at the Los Angeles airport and had a room waiting for him at the swanky Beverly Hills Hotel. We met, I did my song-and-dance presentation, he liked it, and agreed to put up the entire $1,250,000. Just like that! One guy! It was an improbable freak event of nature. It took that kind of mad luck. Finally, I could make my first feature!

I recommend an investor's "presentation package" consisting of the following: a one-page business plan based on a 50/50 partnership, an attached letter of interest, the screenplay with a one-page double-spaced synopsis, the budget with the top sheet summary, the schedule with its summary, pictures and résumés of your lead actors, your own résumé, the résumés of your department heads who have agreed to make your film (the best director of photography, first assistant, art designer, and editor you can find), and finally, a letter of approval from a completion company. When I'm raising money for a project, I have copies of these packets ready to go at a moment's notice because I never know when such a meeting may come up.

An in-depth discussion of how to put together a one-page business plan and investor presentation is available on our 12-hour DVD Action/Cut Home Film Course Pro Collection and on our website at *www.actioncut.com*. You'll find tutorials about raising money, finding distribution, and demystifying tax laws for film investing. You'll also find an article about "How to Write Visually," which I wrote for the

ezine of the best resource store for writers: The Writers Store. If you write, subscribe to their free newsletter.

Once investors agree in principle to invest in your movie, can they later change their minds before signing a contract? Of course. Months later, the guy may no longer be interested or is not as flush as he was back then or maybe he broke up with the model-girlfriend and no longer needs to impress her. Maybe his wacky (Kardashian-type) daughter is suddenly getting married to the neighbor's idiot kid with a purple mohawk, and now he suddenly has a costly wedding to pay for. What can you do? You either start looking for a new investor to replace him or you go down the street, find the purple mohawk kid, and kill him!

Never ask investors to read your screenplay unless you're ready to wait months, if ever, to hear back. And if they do read it, why take a chance they won't like it? Instead, let them read the one-page synopsis in your package, which takes a minute. All they want to know is the type of movie story they are investing in: Is it a teen comedy, a family drama, a bank heist film, a sports story, a gangster film? They just want to have an inkling of its commercial viability.

Use the same strategy with the budget. Discuss only the "top sheet" summary, just enough for them to see it's organized and looks professional. Most importantly, if you are the producer and/or director and/or writer, show that those line items (yours) have zero fee amounts. Why? Because if someone is going to invest in your dream, they don't want to also invest in your rent or phone bill for the next year. Working without a salary for yourself is important to show trust and good faith. It's the best way to prove your belief in your film's profit potential. Investors like that kind of confidence. Remember, in a 50/50 deal you will own 50% of the movie, so if it makes money you will get some;

if not, you lose. Investors want the person they're investing in to be on the line. They want you to sweat it and make the best film you can so that there *are* profits for you, and thus, for them since they will own the other 50%.

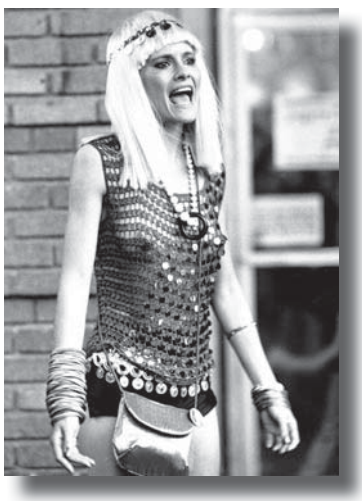
Having a good résumé is another key reason to make shorts and build a list of work experience. Wouldn't you feel safer investing in a filmmaker who has made a couple of shorts rather than none? And maybe won some festival awards? Also, you should present the résumés of your department heads and surround yourself with the best possible crew. Remember, you're asking investors to trust you with their money. It's your job to make that leap of faith palatable. Raising money is serious business and the gateway to making indie films.

The completion bond letter is the last item in your investors' package. It is the answer to the all-important question: "What happens if you run out of money and don't finish the movie?" All businessmen know that if a product is not finished, it cannot be sold, and if you cannot sell it, their investment is bye-bye. A bond letter from an insurance company "guarantees the completion of your film" with their own money if need be, and will assure your investors that no matter what happens, in the end, there will be a movie—there will be a film product to market and sell.

To get such a completion bond for a low-budget film is difficult. You have to satisfy the issuers that you have properly budgeted every scene and accounted for every contingency. They will want to know how you plan to crash that 747 airliner in

your finale for the $50 you budgeted! I recommend you take the production manager with you to answer the tough questions since he prepared the budget for you. If the bond company has confidence in your project, they'll give you the completion letter you need for your investors' peace of mind. Their service fee is between 3% and 6% of your budget, depending on how big a risk you are. They will have the power to take over your film if you're in trouble. If you turn into a Kubrick, doing a hundred takes of a simple shot or start wearing a beret and thinking you are Fellini making art, then don't let the door hit you in the ass!

When you prep a movie, you are preparing about 120 pages instead of 60 for a one-hour TV show (as outlined in Chapter 8) and you have months to get ready as opposed to seven days. In TV, you grab the best choices of locations and actors you can find in that time. But in features, you do not compromise because the quality level demanded by funders and expected by audiences is much higher. I had three months to prepare *Retribution*. I worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and it was barely enough.



I'm grateful to all the actors who worked on this movie, especially Dennis Lipscomb for his excellent work as "George"; Leslie Wing, who played his psychiatrist; Suzanne Snyder, who played the hooker with the heart of gold; and the only name actor in the movie, country western star Hoyt Axton (best known for writing the hit song "Joy to the World"), whom I had befriended while directing *The Rousters* series. Hoyt played the detective in *Retribution* and, as a favor to me, he worked for

SAG minimum wages like the rest of the actors. Hoyt was a class act and a loyal friend.

And speaking of actors, why let them have all the fun? Inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's silent cameos in his films, I play an ornery, foul-mouthed, New York cab driver—not only in this film but in all my movies. Same character, same wardrobe, same badass attitude…and I speak! I have dialogue in all my films and I always look forward to shooting "cabbie day."

The *Retribution* crew was amazing. Three who went on to forge exceptionally successful careers were director of photography Gary Thieltges, my AFI roommie who later won a technical Oscar; production manager Jeannie Van Cott, who became a busy line producer; and production designer Robb Wilson King, who makes film miracles happen and is one of the most dedicated visualists I have ever met.

The *Retribution* script included outrageous suspense sequences including trapping a victim inside a beef carcass on a conveyor belt on its way to the buzz saw at a slaughterhouse—a scene you just have to see to believe! The night we filmed it, the brilliant actor Mario Roccuzzo was outside the set, nervously pacing and smoking like a chimney. He told me he was freaked about getting inside a cow's carcass, especially with his head popping out of its back end! He was staring

at a huge, smelly, real carcass we had purchased for the close-ups of the cutting buzz saw. Mario is a seasoned actor who has seen and done it all, but acting inside a real bloody cow carcass would have freaked out Brando!

What Mario did not know was that I would never ask an actor to do something I would not do myself, and I sure as hell would never get inside a bloody beef carcass. We had a fake one built out of light rubber foam for him. When the truck pulled up and delivered the rubber carcass, I had never seen a more relieved actor looking up, thanking the heavens, and crossing himself. One of those golden moments.

I am most proud of this film because we were all passionate about its quality. We did a lot of research to figure out how to create complicated effects on camera. I'm not downplaying progress or new technologies; as I used plenty of digital post effects on my recent work and on my feature *Children of the Corn: Revelation*. But as I always mention at my seminars, it's passion, and only passion, that fuels and drives the making of all films, especially indie low-budget films which are so difficult to finance and make. And passion leads to the best possible level of quality.

Two of the special effects were great examples of passionate filmmaking. The first was making our main character's eyes "glow" green whenever he had bad mojo and was doing evil deeds. During our research, we discovered ophthalmologists used a certain product that made eyes glow bright green when lit with a black light. All we needed to do was fit our actor with contact lenses that had been soaking in the green liquid. The cameraman's challenge was

to figure out how to get low-level black lights as close to the actor's face as possible to get an exposure. And voilà: freaky green eyes as glowy bright as you could wish for, and it cost about $400 including buying the lenses. No CGI.

The second visual effect was creating a death tunnel—you know, the one we travel along on the way to the white light. We discovered that a laser stage light projected a round tunnel beam effect. We set up our camera to look "inside" this tunnel. By lucky accident, we discovered that by spraying water mist on the outside of this light beam, its walls would move in an eerie way, alive with moisture. It took 20 lined-up crew members, each with a water spray bottle, to shoot this death tunnel as the camera tracked forward through the tunnel toward the bright light. These shots were crucial to our storytelling. It cost us the rental of a stage light and some water spray bottles.

One of the special experiences on *Retribution* was the amazing on-camera makeup effects, which were designed by then first-timer and now big-timer Kevin Yagher (*Mission Impossible 2*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*). We could only afford one-shot takes with the prosthetics Kevin built on our measly budget, such as using a torch to graphically sever a hand in a tight close-up, which looked freakishly realistic and very scary. In a fright movie, great effects are the keys to success.

The passion of filmmaking is at its most intense when you get to make your first feature, and this becomes contagious to the actors and crew. Our dedicated bond saved the day by inspiring the crew and cast to work a grueling 32 hours straight on our final day of shooting. Amazingly, we fed five times—every six hours, as required. Not one person left early. We still marvel about it 25 years later whenever we run into each other.

That level of dedication resulted in an indie film that continues to be noticed. In *Fangoria* magazine (May 2008), *Retribution* was the subject of a two-page spread celebrating "Forgotten Horrors" as an unsung mid-'80s cult shocker. The article stated that "this gutsy film might have proved as subversively influential as Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or William Lustig's *Maniac*, had the industry-at-large not been caught up in economic and cultural upheavals," referring to the home video explosion at the time. Video stores such as Blockbuster were opening everywhere and needed product on their shelves. This put an end to low-budget fright films making it to the big screen, the only way a movie could achieve critical or popular acclaim.

Without a theatrical release, you don't get well reviewed, and the film remains obscure and is not much help to anybody's résumé. If your film is not strong enough to get theatrical offers, it will not make much noise. You have to hope for good timing and an opening that does not compete with big films released at the same time. Distribution is key, and it will only come if you make a good commercial film that attracts distributors. Then all you need is good timing and luck.

Jacqui, being awesome as always, wanted to do whatever she could to promote the film. On Halloween, she turned her store's fashion windows on Sunset Boulevard into a bold, artistic display. Bloodied mannequins holding saws stood in front of our posters, an effect so cutting-edge and

eye-catching that crowds gathered on the street to stare at the avant-garde windows. The landlord eventually asked Jacqui to take them down as the displays were causing too much of a commotion on the boulevard. Fashion and movies meet again!

A final word about making your first feature film. Bring all your passion to fuel the monumental effort because it may take months, and probably years, to get it made. From writing the screenplay to raising the financing, to the prep/shoot/post, to selling it to distributors, and finally, to its release to the public, it's one heck of a wild journey.

So when you get your chance at bat, take your audiences sitting in those dark theaters to the wonderful places where your captivating stories inspire and thrill their love of the cinematic experience, and always remember: Whenever you call "Action" and then "Cut," between those two words you create magic—your own film magic.

And that's why everyone wants in, and that's what it's all about.

Filmmaking is all about making magic.

Chapter 17

The Joyful Wonders of Stem Cells and of a Second Proposal

Swimming with the dolphins! It is by far one of the most thrilling experiences on this planet. Granted, they're trained and are nice to you to get a sardine treat, but to interact with giant fish and sense a gentle kinship with another "intelligent" species is uniquely magical. If you've never done it, plan on it soon at a vacation resort that offers it. If you want your bratty kids to broaden their Twitter-intoxicated minds into appreciating the nurturing of animal conservation and ocean wildlife on our planet, then take them to the dolphins. This photo was taken in Cabo, Mexico during our 24th anniversary, a couple of months before Jacqui's cancer diagnosis.

While in Mexico, I pondered how I could surprise Jacqui during the coming year by

celebrating a quarter century together since I had proposed in Jamaica. Some folks do a renewal of vows and some do a second mini-wedding, but it dawned on me that it would be more romantic and meaningful if I literally proposed a second time. We could never top our Renaissance wedding experience, and any renewal of vows would seem redundant. But the joy of a second proposal, this time witnessed by close friends, would be special. I just had to figure out the right time, sometime in the next year, to get on one knee again. I couldn't wait for that day to come.

One of the things that makes life both interesting and romantic is the element of surprise. Jacqui knows she's getting an anniversary gift on those dates, but she never knows how. On our first, we were at a beach resort and I suggested we hunt for shells. She thought I was nuts as it was early, before our breakfast coffee. As we got our feet into the ocean, I asked her to dig through the sand and feel for shells. As she gave me a "this is way too early" look, I had concealed in my hand a pearl bracelet, I reached for her hand while underwater and placed the bracelet in her palm. When she brought up her hand and looked through the sand, there it was: pearls from the ocean. Let's just say she had quite a radiant smile through breakfast.

Harry the Grouper provided us another unique experience I have to share. We were at Paradise Island in the Caribbean, and took a sailing cruise that promised "walking on the bottom of the ocean." We were intrigued because scuba gear or diving training

was not necessary. They used antique, Jules Vernes'*20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*-type helmets with a tube blowing air from above. They were not sealed (freaky), but the air blowing in created an air pocket that enabled you to breathe. It was unnerving seeing the open helmet with the water level floating precariously at your chin level. As our group was standing on the ocean floor, looking freaked and wondering when we would instantly drown, a Nassau grouper named "Harry" suddenly emerged from a nearby coral. Who ever heard of a trained fish in open ocean? With a name?

Harry came up to the first person in line, which was me, and posed right in front of me, staring at me. We had been told we could touch him (touch a fish?), hold him, but not squeeze too hard, while the trainer took a flash Polaroid. As soon as the fish saw the flash, he moved away from me and to the next person, and posed again for another picture. Unbelievably, this went on all the way down the line of our group. When finished, the fish ate food from the trainer, and swam back to his coral to await the next group of wacky tourists. We had just met Harry, working in the wild, the smartest capitalist sea creature making a living posing for tourist pictures. I still don't believe it, but you can see the two photos for yourself. Harry should be working in Disney movies. For a couple of bucks, you could probably get him to sing and dance!

In mid-January 2009, my "second proposal" plan was still forming. Thrilled to finally have Jacqui home and in remission

after her chemo treatments, we settled into a new routine focused on nutritional meals, taking medications, and resting to recover from the induction ordeal. She needed to get stronger and ready for the next treatment a few weeks away. A second chemo round after remission is called "consolidation," and is intended to prevent a relapse by killing off any remaining leukemia cells that didn't show up in biopsies.

Jacqui had lost 30 pounds in six weeks at the hospital; she was down to 98, which is much too thin for a woman who is 5'7". We had weekly appointments to check her blood counts and received intravenous drug treatments at our oncologist's clinic. When you have cancer, it's different from anything else you've ever experienced. It can be overwhelming and you have to guard against allowing it to paralyze your life or overwhelm your emotions. What helps is a great relationship. We were a team going through the process. I was at every doctor's appointment, every PICC line (intravenous IV catheter) cleaning, every blood draw, outside the door of every X-ray and MRI imaging room, and we always went through it with humor as a team, as partners.

One morning, Jacqui had been taken for X-rays early before I arrived. When I got to her room, the nurse told me to wait and they would bring her back within an hour. An hour? I asked where the imaging department was and she told me it was complicated to go there as it was in another building down the street. Jacqui had been taken through a connecting underground tunnel, not accessible to the public. She advised, "Please be practical, wait here. She'll be back shortly."

I lasted three minutes. I'm not an alarmist or a worrywart. I just found it unnecessary for Jacqui to be alone at imaging and silly for me to just wait in her room like a putz. What followed

reminded me of a scene from *The Graduate* where Dustin Hoffman is running like a maniac to find the girl (Katherine Ross) before it's too late and she marries someone else. I started running down hallways on different floors till I reached reception. I was told Cedars-Sinai imaging was indeed across the street. I ran outside, crossed the street, almost got run over, and ran down a block into a medical building that had a crowded lobby. It was well guarded, with security guys by every door. I knew they would never let me inside and I didn't bother asking or pleading with the front desk. I was so committed that when opportunity soon struck and a guard got distracted long enough for me to slip by, I *James Bonded* through the double doors that read NO ENTRY.

I started opening doors, peeking into rooms like a mad person. I reached doors with signs that read WARNING – RADIATION, and I was now terrified of opening a door at just the wrong moment when some giant X-ray beam would zap me and my testicles would fall off. But I was a man on a mission and could not be stopped as I moved from hallway to hallway. I was sure I was seconds away from being stopped by a security guard who would find me through the surveillance cameras, which were everywhere. He'd run in and just shoot me—shoot the crazy intruder!

Finally, kismet struck. I opened a door and saw rows of gurneys in a waiting room, but all I could see were their bottom halves because curtains separated each patient, leaving just the sight of a series of bare feet sticking out of robes. And then I saw them, like beacons flashing: one pair of feet wearing bright red socks, the same socks I had washed at home the previous day and had brought back to Jacqui. And sure enough, just like in the movies, I raced in and followed the red socks, and found my

baby. I had found the needle in a radiated haystack! Her face lit up and she gave me her million-dollar smile. She told me she was done with her X-ray, but they were backed up with patients waiting to be returned to their rooms. She whispered, "Get me out of here!" I raced to find the orderly and begged him to move her. I haltingly told him I almost got my balls zapped off looking for her in this *Frankensteinish* radiation building. He laughed, grabbed her chart, pulled her gurney out of a waiting line (sorry, folks), and we headed back to her room.

I had found the red socks. I *was* Dustin Hoffman. I got my girl back!

When we finally arrived home, I focused on nursing Jacqui, grateful to be enjoying every minute with her. We got updates from the transplant coordinator at the hospital about their worldwide search for a matching bone marrow donor. We had already received the lousy news that Jacqui's sister was not a match; siblings have a 25% chance of matching the ten HLA numbers. She had been our hoped-for only shot, and now we had to find a third-party donor. The coordinator told us not to worry but at the same time, she hinted that it may not be possible to find a perfect (10 out of 10) match due to Jacqui's particular HLA requirements. She was hoping for a 9 match. We were not excited about that because we knew that the less perfect the match, the more trouble with the GVH immunity wars after the transplant. Obviously, a perfect match is best.

One of the doctors on the transplant team had given me some information that haunted me. She seemed a bit too weirdly enthusiastic with the gory details. She told me Jacqui would need to be strong enough to survive the "massive chemo treatment" designed to kill all the cells in her bone marrow, a

procedure called *ablation*. This is a preparation regimen done to clear malignant bone marrow, to empty it of diseased cells, and make room for the healthy donor marrow. When I asked how "massive is massive," she said with a glint in her eyes and a somewhat gleeful smile, "Much more massive than was her induction dose." Whoa!

Jacqui had barely made it through the first treatment nightmare; how was she going to survive a "much more massive" dosage? When I expressed my concern, this doctor matter-of-factly told me that some patients never make it through the prep regimen. What? Never mind the blood marrow transplant—the preparatory treatment was now a greater concern? We were heading towards a "massive chemo" preparation followed by a "non-perfect-match" bone marrow transplant? Both steps were unacceptable. No way for Jacqui. Was this an episode of *The Twilight Zone* we were walking into? Warning bells were ringing like crazy.

And so began our own massive research as I became obsessed with finding an alternative treatment for Jacqui. I had no choice. I had bad vibes about the upcoming dance they had detailed. There was no way I was going to let this happen. I was not going to allow what I sensed would be Jacqui's suffering for a journey with bad odds. Sometimes, you've got to find another way, no matter what the brainiacs tell you. There had to be another way, a better, safer way for Jacqui.

It was a daily, all-engrossing, dedicated research period to learn everything I could about the latest aml-leukemia treatments from research centers across the country. I was amazed at the bountiful information available through the Internet. Just ten years ago, it would have been impossible to do such effective research on the Web. We are all lucky to be living in such an

information accessible age. Mornings, afternoons, and especially through long nights, I would search for answers to questions, which in turn would lead to more research. I discovered the latest cutting-edge clinical trials testing new drug treatments specifically for leukemia. I printed many hundreds of pages, and called and emailed research doctors at the top cancer centers in the U.S. I took Jacqui for consultations at nearby UCLA's Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center and to USC's Norris Cancer Center. We brought copies of her four biopsies, and got second opinions from their leading doctors about her options. I became a knowledge suction machine on behalf of Jacqui's quest to heal.

Finally, we discovered what can only be described as the miraculous future of medical healing known as *stem cells*. I will explain as simply as a layman can. Stem cells are young, immature cells that have not yet developed, not yet transformed or differentiated into functional cells. When such a transplant is done, stem cells enter the body and "transform" into the type of cells needed to replenish and repair whatever is wrong. In other words, when a patient with a bad heart receives stem cells, the goal is to guide those stem cells to the damaged heart as they circulate through the body. The stem cells will then "transform" into new healthy heart cells and begin repairing the damaged heart. Same concept to repair a bad kidney or liver or, eventually, nerve cells. I always hoped research would progress in time to repair the nerve damage in Christopher Reeve's neck vertebrae; I'm so sorry it did not. I now have the same hope for one of my favorite, most courageous people, Michael J. Fox, whose daily fight against Parkinson's disease inspires us all.

Luckily, stem cells were already in clinical trials for certain blood cancers including aml. The trials showed that when

given to aml patients whose bone marrow had been wiped out by chemo, stem cells traveled to the pelvis and transformed into healthy marrow cells producing blood cells and platelets, a process called *grafting*. And voilà: new healthy blood made from new healthy bone marrow that started as simple stem cells. Sounds miraculous? Sure did to us!

In certain cases, doctors can take out and store a person's own healthy stem cells, and use them later if cancer develops, to replace malignant cells. The process is known as an *autologous transplant*. When doctors use stem cells from a donor, it's called an *allogenic transplant*. Most of the clinical progress in this field has been achieved through the use of umbilical cord blood because it has a high concentration of stem cells. During birth, a mother will donate her infant's umbilical cord and placenta, which are otherwise discarded. Both are filled with a baby's brand-new stem cells, which can be analyzed for HLA markers (identifying protein numbers), and then frozen and catalogued in a cord blood bank until needed by an HLA matching patient.

This started about 20 years ago when the future of stem cells became apparent and hospitals started setting up cord blood banking through their delivery units. Today, some parents are choosing to have their own baby's cord blood banked in case they ever need it to heal a future blood cancer should it ever occur. The initial cost varies, but it's about $3,000 plus $200 per year for storage—not too bad if you can afford it. This could turn out to be the best life insurance you could ever buy for your kid if they are ever diagnosed (at any age) with a blood cancer.

Most importantly, umbilical cord blood requires only six HLA matching numbers rather than the ten required for adult marrow donors, making a potential match far easier to find. Also, research has shown that a five-out-of-six cord donor

may be a better match for transplant than a nine-out-of-ten adult marrow donor, depending on the specific missing match number. This has to do with the biggest problem for transplants, a disease mentioned earlier called GVHD, which is caused by two immune systems (the patient's and the donor's) fighting for supremacy in one body. As an adult's immunity is obviously more developed and forceful than a baby's much younger new cord blood, it would be a bigger challenge to win the GVHD battle against an adult marrow than it would a baby's cord blood. That's my take on it.

The other concern is that a small quantity of blood is obtained from an umbilical cord and a placenta (usually about 50 milliliters), which is enough for a child with cancer but not enough to replace an adult's immune system. Adult patients need *two* cord donors to provide enough volume to be effective. Were Jacqui to receive this treatment, after a few weeks one of the donor's cord blood cells would kill off the other's cord blood cells and also any of Jacqui's remaining blood-producing cells. To a layman, this may best be explained by the natural law of "survival of the fittest." Two cords—called a "double cord"—from two babies would be needed to make this work, but only the strongest would eventually survive. Its stem cells would transform to become Jacqui's bone marrow, her new blood-making system. Mind-boggling!

Without a perfect (ten for ten) adult marrow donor match, a "double cord blood transplant" became the obvious choice for Jacqui. A new search began. The database of volunteer bone marrow donors and cord blood banks is administered through a worldwide registry run by (worth mentioning again) the National Marrow Donor Program, a non-profit organization founded in 1986 and based in Minneapolis. It's a partner in the

Center for International Blood and Marrow Transplant Research (CIBMTR). I heartily applaud everyone who works for these organizations.

Once we knew the type of transplant we wanted, we needed a better solution for the preparatory regimen done before any transplant, which was still a massive chemo treatment. I continued my research and discovered that doctors had started using "low-intensity regimens" as an alternative preparation. These experimental preps still required chemo and radiation therapy, but at doses much less intensive and lethal to the human body.

So we had finally discovered what I hoped would be a much safer and less painful journey for Jacqui's healing: a low-intensity prep regimen to clear out the old malignant bone marrow followed by a double cord blood transplant of stem cells that would transform into brand-new, healthy marrow making healthy new blood. Bingo!

However, this treatment could not be done at just any hospital, not even at most cancer centers. It was, and still is, in clinical trials and not yet medical protocol. You have to find a cancer hospital that's conducting the right trial for your condition. Low-intensity double cord procedures are so new that just a few years ago they would not allow anyone over 50 years of age to participate. Jacqui would not have been a candidate. The younger and stronger you are, the better shot you have to get through these trials. These treatments could eventually prove successful and become protocol throughout the world.

My research led me to two terrific researchers who were doing some of the most advanced work in low-intensity preps and double cords. Dr. John Wagner was the scientific director of clinical research for the Blood and Marrow Transplantation

Program and Stem Cell Institute at the University of Minnesota. He was on the pioneering team that made medical history in 1990 by performing the first umbilical cord blood transplant in the world. I also found Dr. Colleen Delaney, director of the Cord Blood Transplant Program at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle, who was awarded the prestigious Damon Runyon Research Award as a top clinical investigator for her ongoing breakthrough work.

I was happy to discover that doctors in the world of cancer are accessible, and I am very thankful for it. We were able to talk on the phone with many doctors, including Wagner and Delaney. Both were generous with their time and invited us to visit so they could examine Jacqui as a potential candidate for their programs. They both had the appropriate ongoing trials that she could join. I made flight/hotel arrangements for Minneapolis and Seattle so we could check out both options. Once we chose one, it was not going to be easy as we'd have to stay there for the prep and transplant treatment and then the crucial 100 days of post-transplant checkups. We'd have to live in a nearby hotel for about three months.

During this time, we started hearing great things about City of Hope, a leading cancer center only 30 minutes west of Los Angeles. When I asked an oncologist where he would take his wife if she had leukemia, he did not hesitate to say, "I would put her in Stephen Forman's hands at City of Hope. You won't find a better world-class transplanter." I did not know such doctors were referred to as "transplanters," but I liked what I heard, especially the "world-class" part.

Coincidentally, the very next day Jacqui was dressing one of her favorite clients at the store, a woman named Denise, whose husband had gone through leukemia. Denise said, "Stop looking

and just go see Forman. He's the best and a friend of mine. I'll call him to let him know about you. Go see him!" Kismet?

On Tuesday, February 3, 2009, we met with the Distinguished Chair in Hematology and Hematopoietic Cell Transplantation at City of Hope: Dr. Stephen Forman. This guy is not only brilliant in his field and consults at the highest levels of cancer research all over the country, but he also seemingly invented a new high-bar of doctoral charm and bedside manner. As soon as you meet him, you immediately trust this guy. He understood our journey and our interest in a low-intensity regimen and a double cord transplant. It felt like we had finally met our medical guru. Dr. Forman smiled at Jacqui and assuredly said, "Come to City of Hope. We'll take good care of you here." Music to our ears!

We had found Jacqui's healer.

When Dr. Forman said he wanted to do a biopsy, Jacqui replied, "Well, how about now? I'm here." To our great surprise, instead of saying come back in six weeks when we could schedule it, he said, "OK. I'll do it myself. Give me a few minutes." Do it himself? The head honcho of the hematology oncology department? Sure enough, Stephen does his own biopsies. He gives such personal attention to his patients that it builds great confidence in his care. The biopsy results showed she was still in remission, which was great, but Dr. Forman still insisted she needed to go through that middle step of a chemo consolidation treatment before any transplant. He wanted to make absolutely sure there were no malignant leukemia cells still lurking.

We canceled our trips to the other centers and decided to do the upcoming consolidation under his watch so he would get to know Jacqui and see how she reacted to chemo. This was important before deciding on the best type of transplant. We were on the same page. He did not want Jacqui to receive adult donor bone marrow

that was not a perfect match. The good news was that City of Hope was just beginning its participation in a national clinical trial taking place in conjunction with other top cancer centers, and it was precisely for such a low-intensity prep and double cord protocol. Jacqui would become a participant in that trial.

We were elated as we drove home after meeting Dr. Forman. We had found our hero. I was finally sure Jacqui was going to receive the best possible treatment, and that this gifted doctor was going to heal her. The research we had done since this ordeal had started months earlier had paid off. We found a much more promising treatment option, much gentler on her system to endure, with one of the most respected oncologist/transplanters on planet Earth. Joy was bursting in my heart!

Meeting Stephen Forman was truly the fourth-best (chronologically) day of my life because I finally knew for sure that Jacqui was going to make it! This guy would heal her. There was no question about it. When you know, you know!

Just five days later, on Sunday, February 8, 2009, I experienced the fifth-best day of my life. Since Jacqui had left the hospital a month earlier, all our friends wanted to visit her. She felt strong enough to entertain, so we invited 25 of our closest friends to our home. They were elated to see her; Jacqui is truly loved by her friends. But it was about to get even more special.

I had looked forward to this moment since our Cabo trip back in June. This was the perfect opportunity. After bringing everyone up to date with our news of meeting Dr. Forman a few days earlier and deciding on City of Hope to continue Jacqui's treatments, I suddenly got on one knee. Jacqui was shocked as was everyone else except my cameraman buddy Geoff Schaaf, whom I had asked to video the moment. With gasps and "oh-my-

gods" heard in the room, I spoke the same words I had spoken 25 years earlier: "I would be the happiest and luckiest of men if you would marry me…again." Jacqui was stunned, blown away, truly surprised as was everyone in the room. I could see the love sparkling in her eyes, how special this moment was for her, how moved she was. She recovered in time to say, as she had said 25 years earlier: *"Oui! Oui! Oui!"*

I felt just as wondrously elated as when she had accepted 25 years earlier. Of course, we will always be together in love through time and space, but just knowing she was aboard with this second proposal rejuvenated me. I felt more joyous than I could have imagined. This turned out to be much easier and charming than a more formal renewing of vows with a rabbi or priest.

These were absolutely the best five consecutive days of my life. Jacqui was going to be healed by Dr. Forman, and she had just agreed to my second marriage proposal with a new ring to celebrate it. I was speechless!

A few days later, on Valentine's Day 2009, we were looking through our wedding album. As we browsed, Jacqui stopped at this photo of us and smiled. "We were so crazy joyful on our wedding day," she whispered. "Your second proposal made me feel that same joy all over again." It doesn't get better than this.

I recommend second proposals on the 25th anniversary. Nothing more is necessary.

Chapter 18

The Magic of Film Music and Surviving Film Distribution

OK, so you got super lucky and raised the financing to make your first feature film. Then you went through hell and back to get it made and now you're in postproduction finishing it the best you can. Congrats! And you're still alive to read this? Don't worry, when it's all done, you'll have one last little hurdle left: you'll have to sell it. Welcome to the toughest part!

Postproduction is crucial in the making of every movie. Its execution will decide your distribution fate and how it sells. In post, you shape and polish your film, and this is where your product truly lives or dies. No matter what you got in the can during the shooting, you maximize your storytelling in the editing room and ensure the final quality of your film. When you make a film, you are essentially shooting a bunch of shots that you plan to string together in a certain order to make a scene work as you had envisioned. All the scenes strung together become the movie. How skillfully you executed the shooting plan is discovered in the cutting room.

Hitchcock used to say that real moviemaking happens in the editing room, not on the set while it's being shot. For anyone who ever made a film, editing can be the best part of making a movie—or the worst. Best because you begin to shape the film, which if shot properly and assembled by a talented editor, will become a better movie than you had ever conceived. However, it can also be bad when you discover all the screw-ups in your shooting. For example, you might find a *lousy acting moment* in an important scene that you must cut around or even worse, cut the scene entirely out of the movie. Or you discover a *soft focus moment* during your beloved tracking shot, which makes it unusable. If a scene had five shots and two are no good for whatever reasons, you better figure out how to use the three you've got left to make that scene work. You may discover they work in a completely different order than originally planned. You hope there is enough good stuff to figure out how to fix the bad. If not, you have to re-shoot, which is too costly in the low-budget world though the big guys do it all the time. I heard Woody Allen once re-shot an entire movie from scratch. In the world of TV series, they don't know how to spell "re-shoots."

This is why it's so important to learn the editorial process early and well in your career. As a director, it's impossible to plan all the necessary shots if you have no clue about editing or the order they can be effectively cut together. The thrill of the editing process is one of the great magical experiences of filmmaking. Every single day that I was ever in an editing room, I came up with a solution to fix a problem or re-cut a scene differently than I had ever imagined or changed an entire sequence of scenes that made the movie/TV show much more interesting or exciting or mysterious or funny or sad or in the end, whatever worked best to enhance the story.

For example, if you always planned to open a scene with the *wide master shot*, in the editing room you may discover it is actually more powerful to begin this scene with *the close-up shot* when that wonderful tear rolls down the face of your actress. And you may never need to use the master shot after all. Wonderful editorial revelations will shape your movie into the best story it can be. Every filmmaker from Almodovar to Tarantino relishes every minute he or she gets to spend cutting and shaping their films and you will too, though it's a laborious process that takes many months. My shortest editorial time on a feature film was three months to lock picture with the digital process. On my first feature *Retribution*, we edited on film for eight months.

Though your music comes later, a helpful trick while editing is to *temporarily* lay down favorite music pieces to scenes and see how they play. For a while, you have the thrilling luxury of using an Elton John or Bruce Springsteen or Rolling Stones song in your movie. It helps not only to set the mood but to discover the right timing of a scene. If your temp tracks work, you can ask your composer to come up with something similar or at least with the same tempo or structure as those "amazing violins answering the horns" or that "cool guitar riff" in the melody.

I believe the marriage of film and music is one of the most gloriously natural, most cosmically intended unions in the human experience. Think about how many movies you could identify if you heard just a few chords of their theme music: *Rocky*, *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Good*, *the Bad and the Ugly* are the easy ones. Wouldn't you instantly recognize the five notes used for alien communication in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? And these two deep base notes: "DAAA DUMMM." Anything come to mind? *Jaws,* maybe? Since he composed four of the above along with so many others,

for me and for most filmmakers, John Williams is the reigning lord of composers.

I've literally had dreams while making my movies that somehow I met John through my buddy Steven S. (Hey, I was dreamin') and was watching him score my movie. It sounded awesome! But then I had to wake up! In fairness to the talented composers I have worked with, I am deeply proud of all my movie scores, and very grateful for their dedicated work.

Italian maestro Ennio Morricone's beautifully haunting flutes and clarinets in *The Mission* (one of De Niro's few miscasts) makes it one of the most glorious soundtracks of all time. Ennio also composed all the masterful Sergio Leone Westerns, the ones that launched Clint Eastwood's career with his infamous character: "The Man With No Name." One of my special career thrills was working with "Tuco," the "Ugly" in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.* The brilliant actor Eli Wallach was cast in the *Family Honor* series I directed. When I called him "Tuco" on the set, he would give me that evilish, cold-blooded "I will eat your heart out for breakfast!" look with that killer Tuco smile. Eli is a class-act professional. I was privileged to meet him and to work with him. Eli received an Honorary Oscar, on November 13, 2010, at the Academy's Governors Awards. His latest film role is in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. Eli is 95 years of age. A salute, Eli.

I had the great Bill Conti, who did the music for *Rocky,* at my home, trying to talk him into working for a poor indie filmmaker for the measly salary budgeted on my ultra-low-budget film

Lookin' Italian. I even had my two Italian lead actors there, Jay Acovone and Matt LeBlanc, to sway him to do it for the goombahs since Conti is, of course, Italian. He was very kind, but it was a no-go as he was too busy and gently turned us down. A few months later, he was conducting the orchestra at the 1994 Oscars, a somewhat better-paying gig. Oh well, next time, Bill.

The right music marriage is so important in film that I believe it was responsible for a Best Picture Oscar win. Though it is a wonderfully made movie (kudos to its director Hugh Hudson), the instrumental score by Vangelis made *Chariots of Fire* a huge worldwide winner in 1981. The theme music played on every radio station across all platforms. In the final Olympic race, the character Eric Liddell (a priest and a 100-meter sprinter running the 400 for the first time due to Sabbath scheduling reasons), throws his head back and (in slow motion) starts running faster than he ever has while the music soars. It is a magical, unforgettable film moment as we hear the actor's narration: "Where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure."

With the crescendo of Vangelis' hero music peaking, that scene was almost enough to convert me right then and there! Music and film are truly one of the great magnificent unions on earth—the closest thing I know to a divine marriage of crafts. You get to create your own magical combo every time you make a movie. It doesn't get much better than that for a filmmaker.

When you're finished editing, you can focus on your sound design. This is one of the most enjoyable parts of making movies. You attend ADR sessions (Additional Dialogue Recording) when the actors are called back to re-record their lines if there are problems with the original dialogue tracks. Maybe an actor mumbled an important line and it needs to be clarified or a nearby car honk muffled the exact moment when the girl said "Yes!" to a proposal. Months after shooting, you get to see your actors again and you get to direct a better moment of vocal performance. The actor has another chance to say the line with a different enthusiasm or better cadence than originally recorded on set. Of course, the timing of the words has to be the same so it stays in synchronization with his or her moving mouth since *that* you cannot change on the screen.

WALLA sessions consist of voice-over specialists who provide group sounds. I have no clue what "walla" stands for. If you have a crowd scene like a wedding party in your movie, on-set during the shooting the extras seen chatting in the background are silently mimicking. The reason is so the actors who are talking have clean tracks. The set is actually silent when the dialogue is recorded. But now, your party needs human sounds for the guests in the background, and so the *walla team* stand around a microphone and watch the film run as they provide crowd murmur, chatter, coughs, and laughs. Those are mixed and multiplied to bring your previously-silent, 500-person wedding party to life. It's fun to watch it happen; they do background for all group scenes.

Another post activity is laying down your FOLEY tracks. These are made by specialists called *foley artists,* who record human sounds. A foley stage has different surfaces (called pits) such as cement, wood, sand, gravel, and water. If in your jogging

scene you had no microphone or it did not pick up the sounds of feet running on pavement, your actors look like they're floating in air. The foley artist will put on sneakers, get on the cement pit surface, and start running in place at the exact matching speed as the actor on the screen and, amazingly, record every step perfectly. Your joggers now have the properly synchronized running sounds. You've got to be there to see it; it's trippy to watch them. I will just say you've got to be a stoner to do this job—you just gotta be!

Finally, you know you're getting near the end of making your feature when you get on the sound mixing stage. This is the most expensive part of post because you have to rent a sound mix studio with all the equipment and engineering staff and that's pricey. On the cheap side, it's about $5,000 per day. On a low-budgeter, you had better mix at least ten minutes of film per day. If your movie is 90 minutes long, you should budget nine days or $45,000 minimum for sound mix. On a studio movie like *Spiderman*, they're lucky to mix one minute per day. No hurry at that budget.

The sound mix is always an exciting time on every film. For the first time while watching your film play, you're hearing your complete soundtrack come together with dialogue, sound effects, and your music score. There are few things in life more thrilling. This is your movie being born, complete with birth-scream sound effects, and a hundred violins building into a crescendo!

Distributors want well-told stories with beginnings, middles, and ends. Audiences pay money at the box office to experience a full story, not wonder, "What the heck was that movie about?" Thus, with all due respect, I am not a David Lynch or Robert Altman fan. They are great filmmakers in their own right and

have made juicy films, but I am generally not a fan of work that doesn't value or prioritize comprehensible narrative or engaging character development. They would, of course, challenge what is *comprehensible* and what is *engaging*, and that's fair enough.

However, the idea that acting naturalness (sometimes confused with mediocre and boring improvisation) or the unpredictability of everyday life can be reflected by unfocused storytelling is, in my opinion, misguided filmmaking. From box office records, it seems clear that chaotic structure and non-traditional storytelling are not appreciated by mainstream audiences. French New Wave auteur Jean-Luc Godard prided himself on non-structure, and once said, "A film should have a beginning, middle, and an end—though not necessarily in that order."

In an unguarded moment, some filmmakers may admit they only care about the "smarter arty 10% of audiences" open to experimentation, and that's their prerogative. I don't recommend you adopt that viewpoint early in your career; making films for only 10% of the available audience is not promising for sales success. You can present a mysterious, complex-layered, perplexing whodunit, complete with flashbacks or flash forwards, but you had also better deliver the complete story goods by the end credits. I do not recommend the viewpoint of "let them figure it out for themselves" or "each viewer can take what he wants from it." For me, that's a cop-out.

If I've raised any hackles with my subjective opinions, in fairness, I have much enjoyed Altman movies such as *The Player* and *Nashville*, his early *McCabe & Mrs. Miller,* and of course *MASH*. They had engaging and accessible narratives, unlike the rest of his films. Lynch's *The Elephant Man* and *Blue Velvet* are great films which engaged me, but I'm less of a fan of his less structured works. We both attended the American Film Institute

(he was there two years earlier) but I wasn't a fan of the film he made there, *Eraserhead,* which launched him. Bizarre for the sake of bizarre just doesn't do it for me. In general, I'm not a fan of eccentricity run amuck. I prefer meeting an audience's expectation to provide an entertaining and comprehensible narrative.

I am always intrigued with films that present a new world through a filmmaker's visual prism like Ridley Scott's dark vision in *Blade Runner* or that raises questions and makes you think, like a favorite of mine about alien/god existence, Robert Zemeckis' brilliant *Contact*. In both, the narrative is complete yet an audience is presented with much food for thought. It's not necessary to present an oblique, confusing storyline to engage an audience. As mentioned, one of my favorite directors is Frenchman Claude Lelouch of *A Man and a Woman* fame, who made films with complex and intertwined, yet complete, storylines. Some critics didn't share my enthusiasm for his work. They didn't have the patience to wait until he masterfully brought together what often seemed like disparate characters from different storylines. For me, Claude was a master storyteller.

Assuming your film has commercial appeal, you should be able to sell it. You should also be aware that of the hundreds of indie-financed features made yearly in this country, fewer than 10% to 20% attract any distribution. Some are picked up for foreign sales or domestic DVD marketing but very few sell enough to make any profits. It can be difficult to find distribution because 1) some distributors invest in making their own products and don't need yours; 2) most indie films lack the production values to attract distribution interest; 3) the film is unfinished and can't be completed without more dollars invested (an unlikely scenario), in which case you can start cutting your

negative into guitar picks; or 4) you had a completion bond but screwed up and allowed them to take over, they spent as little as possible to finish it, and it now looks like a lousy cheapo movie no one wants. (That's the double-edged sword of completion bonds if they are triggered.)

However, if you wisely made sure you made an action, horror, or sexy movie, then you have a shot, even if the film is not so great. Foreign markets have an insatiable appetite for genre films, especially from the good ole USA, displaying American hedonistic lifestyle and carefree fun, fun, fun! Long live *Baywatch's* blonde babes (i.e., The Pamela) running in slow motion splashing foamy ocean water—in tight spandex swimsuits with major cleavage—on international TV channels around the clock in almost every country on the planet. Thus, "The Hoff!"

There are basically two film sales to make: domestic and foreign. I recommend you sell foreign rights first because 1) foreign markets are friendlier to the independent filmmaker simply by default whereas domestic is more competitive and demands higher quality; 2) you may be able to recoup part of the investment because you're more likely to get an advance from a foreign distributor who is in deeper need of indie pictures to stay in business; and 3) if you do well at the foreign markets, word spreads and it will enhance your leverage with the domestic jackals.

What you hope for is to get "advances" from both sales to pay back your investors and finally get to see some dollars from your profit split. You (the filmmaker) are paid in third position when profits are paid—after investors first recoup their money and after deferments are then paid. The dirtiest word in distribution is an "advance." They would rather you insult their mothers than hear you utter that word. It means just what it says, *cash now*,

when your deal includes a cash advance guarantee against your future earnings. Unfortunately, 99% of the time it's the only money you will ever see. The only way you will get it is if there is a bidding war between distributors who want your film so bad that they must compete to buy it by offering advances.

Basically, here is how distribution works: A distributor gets a fee of about 35% of gross revenues from sales of your film. After that, the expenses incurred on behalf of selling your film will be recouped by the distributor. The amount left over is known as the Producers Net Profits and is supposed to go to you. Expenses can be extensive depending on how much they believe in your movie, how many other films they are selling, the state of the global economy, the best way to rip you off, etc.

The distributor's expenses will be incurred to create the following materials for your film, 1) your artwork, designing your poster art used in promoting the film, advertising, and for the DVD cover, this can run between $5,000 and $50,000; 2) your trailer, this can run from $10,000 to $100,000 in the indie world; and 3) your lab and marketing elements (known as "delivery materials") to every country that buys your film and will need prints, optical soundtrack, your M&E (music and sound effects tracks so they can add a native language for foreign dubs), publicity stills, your edited cleaned-up TV version (meaning no swearing, no nipples, no gore), and these days, your digital master.

The marketing expenses will also include travel to and showroom rentals for the three annual indie markets where buyers come to hopefully buy your movie, which is being sold country by country by your distributor. Those four major expense items make it difficult to ever see a net profit from your distributor. This is why if you can get an advance, take it to the bank.

The three annual film markets usually take place in: 1) February in Berlin, Germany, the European Film Market in conjunction with the Berlin Film Festival; 2) May in Cannes, France during the Cannes Film Festival on the beachfront of the Boulevard de la Croissette; and 3) November in Los Angeles, the American Film Market which in recent years has been held at the Loews Hotel by the beach in Santa Monica. In the last few years, a fourth film market has grown in importance in September during the Toronto Film Festival in Canada.

Each market takes over a big hotel for a week and turns rooms into office presentation suites. Distributors rent these spaces and set up posters of the films they are selling along with TVs to show their trailers, food trays and booze bars to keep buyers there as long as possible, and maybe a couple of models in bikinis parading around the building while passing out film flyers to buyers from almost every country in the world. The sellers book screenings for their films at a nearby cineplex reserved for that purpose, and they run films available at the market all day long. If it's a big, expensive film, buyers will go see it before they buy. For a smaller film (as most indies are), if they know and trust the distributor to usually have decent product and are impressed with the artwork and trailer, they place a buy order in the hotel suite without seeing the film.

A distributor will buy all rights to their country, and delivery dates are contracted, as well as payment plans and royalty schedules in case it's a big hit. Sometimes, inexplicably, it will

prove popular in one country and a dud in another. Rights include theatrical, free-television, cable, pay-TV, DVD and video, soundtrack, and the Internet. They also have the right to (AHHH!) edit content at will to get it approved by their censor boards. Just a fact of life, so get over it. I did.

Like any other convention in any other industry—from selling shoes to cars to deodorants—a whirlwind collection of films are bought and sold all over the world during market week. You want your film represented by the best possible, experienced foreign sales agent you can muster who knows and does business with the international film buyers. Marketing becomes the new skill you have to master when you finish making your film. The hustle never ends.

For both foreign and domestic rights, you need to get in touch with acquisition executives. You can find their names and contact info by purchasing the latest of the three yearly "market issues" of *Variety* or the *Hollywood Reporter,* which have the companies listed. You can cold call them, but I recommend you invite them to distributors' screenings. Rent a screening room in Los Angeles and send out printed invitations. The honchos will not show up but they will give their invitations to underlings or a secretary to attend in their place. If they like your film, they will tell their bosses the next day, and they will call you to request a DVD copy of the film. If you do not get any calls the day after a screening, you're in trouble. If you get only one offer, take it and pray.

If you get multiple offers, negotiate the best deal you can. Here are the basics: 1) bring their distribution fee down to as close to

33% as possible; 2) ask for artistic consultation on the trailer and artwork so at least they have to hear your opinions; and 3) put a ceiling on how much they can spend on markets since it will be deducted from your revenue share. They will sell all rights within three markets anyway, so ask for a three-market cap so they don't expense you to death. Finally, give on all three items if you can get an advance as that's the only money you will probably ever see.

The unfortunate truth is it's easy for foreign distributors to screw us. This is a fact of life—quite unfair and unfortunate to indie filmmakers who sacrifice so much time and effort to get their films made. They will provide a Producers Sales Report listing the countries sold with dollar amounts, but how do you know they are correct? You don't, and unless you get on an airplane with an expert auditor, travel to each country and demand to audit their records and compare them with the sales contract, you will never know the real figures. Everyone knows you're not about to spend the money to do all that traveling. It is a shame there's so much shoddy accounting, but it's part of Hollywood lore. Whoever controls the revenues gets to cheat whomever they have to pay.

Distributors are notorious for fudging their books. It's a bit harder to get ripped off domestically because if they say there was no TV sale and you see your movie at 2 a.m. on a New York cable channel, somebody "forgot" to tell you of that sale and revenue. Now you know.

Every few years, a major lawsuit is filed that exposes the extent of such fraudulent behavior, and everyone acts shocked by how bad it is getting. After some cosmetic changes are made in accounting procedures, it basically remains the same system till the next time somebody gets pissed off enough to bother to sue. A famous case is Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America,* which

made hundreds of millions but the studio didn't pay royalties to the original story writer who, unfortunately for them, was the New York humorist/writer Art Buchwald.

Art won his lengthy nightmare suit after years of litigation. The court's determination was that the studio used "unconscionable" means of determining how much to pay this writer for his part of the net profits. Studio chiefs claimed that despite the movie's $288 million in revenues, it had earned no "net profits" and thus Buchwald was owed nothing. Nothing? If you'd like to read more about this case, get the book *Fatal Subtraction: The Inside Story of Buchwald v. Paramount*.

This is what we're dealing with: unconscionable accounting. And this is why stars and big-shot directors who have the power can demand their millions upfront. Their percentages are based on the "box office gross" which is reported daily in the trades before the accountants get their hands on the numbers and find the many deductions that shrink the elusive "net" to a minus.

On *Retribution*, we did very well. Because of my TV directing experience, I knew how to make scenes work while meeting tight schedules. I also knew how to lead a crew and take responsibility for getting a movie made. I was used to shooting 60 pages in seven days, so getting 35 days to shoot 120 pages was a luxury that allowed me to focus on a whole new level of cinematic quality. The stakes are that much higher in features.

Because the film was well-made, we stood out in an indie market where most movies are not. And because we were a commercial (horror/thriller) movie, a lot of interest came our way. We

received seven offers from foreign sellers. We ended up taking the largest advance, which was more than half of our invested dollars. My solo investor was happy that he was almost fully reimbursed since he was in first payback position, as all investors are. We got lucky with an experienced distributor who is well-liked at the foreign markets and who became a personal friend, Robbie Little. Through the years, he has earned the respect of buyers so the films he brings to markets get a fair shot at foreign sales. I admire him as a sales agent for indie filmmakers and I believe he was honest with his accounting of my film. He now runs The Little Film Company. I recommend you do business with him but only if you've made an exceptional film. He's very choosy.

Our domestic screening brought six new offers including one from a small company (at the time) helmed by Bob and Harvey Weinstein. Heard of them? As much as they wanted the film, Miramax just didn't have the financial muscle at the time to offer the largest advance. They were outbid by a distributor with deeper pockets. The best offer was $500,000 higher than all others. As much as I wanted to do business with the W brothers, my investor and I preferred the extra half-million in cash. I became friends with Bob and Harvey and consider them *mensches* who helped me secure my second film, *Stepfather 3*. Years later, Bob hired me to direct *Children of the Corn: Revelation* which turned out to be a fun film for me to make and on which he made good profits. It's still making runs on Showtime, The Movie Channel, and other cable networks.

Though we made a superb domestic deal on my first feature and collected a seven-figure advance, we got unlucky and fell victim to the ultimate Hollywood nightmare: an executive changeover. The president of the distribution company who bought *Retribution,* and believed in its commercial potential,

got fired. Immediately, everything we worked for took a dive.

Executive shifts are like musical chairs in this town. Sometimes when a studio has a bad financial quarter or makes an expensive loser movie or TV show, the exec in charge gets booted. If he's your hero who brought you to that studio or network, you helplessly watch as he is tarred, feathered, and strung up! Of course, the new exec thinks he or she is the new genius in town and kills all the deals the previous exec had made since he was such a dumbass that he got fired, right? This goes on till the next bad news explodes and the cycle begins all over again.

To my horror, the new president of our distribution company was one of those Hollywood caricature nightmares: cigar chompin', scratchy New York voice, a bully with zero manners, and allergic to anything truthful or honest. As this was not his film, he canceled the promotions and changed our great tagline: *Don't Get Mad…Get Even!* He also canceled the TV ad buys that are the key to any box office life.

When I yelled and protested, he shut me up by buying a vanity billboard on Sunset Boulevard right next to the infamous Chateau Marmont (where John Belushi died), which cost him less than 1% of the original promotion budget we had been promised. He dumped the movie with no advertising, and just booked it for a week in a few theaters in Los Angeles and Oklahoma.

It was a great shame because the screenings I attended in Hollywood and Westwood were unforgettable. Audiences went wild and reacted with loud screams to all the scary moments. They exited the theaters giggling nervously and saying how terrified they had been. The few who saw *Retribution* got one hell of a thrill ride.

The film received great reviews: the *New York Daily News* called it "Scary…one for the fright fans!" The *Film Review* said, "Horror is back with a vengeance!" *Video Weekly* said, "A very accomplished slice of demonic possession!" *Cinefantastique* magazine wrote, "One of the most remarkable achievements in the low-budget thriller field!" I still wonder to this day what could have been if this picture had been given a proper chance with the initial marketing plan.

Securing distribution is the key to success. You want to work with a company that treats you respectfully and will deliver some of the dollars owed you through advances and/or profits. You want to at least pay back your investors so they invest again in your films. Finally, you hope to make a few dollars for yourself so you can survive until the next project.

Every few years, an extremely lucky filmmaker wins the all-elusive "dream lottery." The most recent such freak phenomenon is *Paranormal Activity.* It was a clever, gimmicky idea for a real cheapo, one-location movie that supposedly only cost $15,000 and was shot in seven days in the director's home in San Diego. It made noise at Screamfest and Slamdance and attracted Spielberg as its Obi-Wan Kenobi mentor. With Spielberg aboard, the film attracted a big agency and secured a distribution deal at Paramount. It made $108 million at the box office. Not a bad profit margin. The Hollywood dream luck lottery is worth it if it works. Big IF!

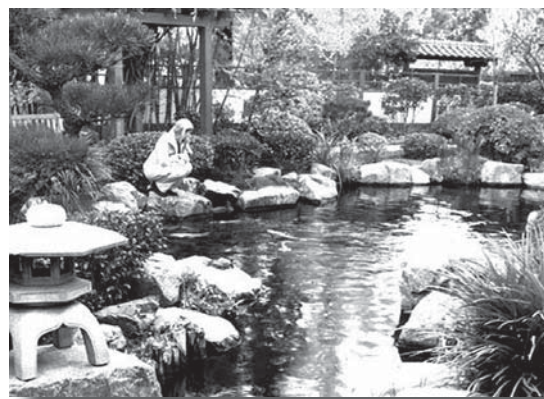
Finally, there may yet be good news for *Retribution*. As mentioned in Chapter 16, we are arranging a 25th anniversary re-release as a first-time on DVD. It was originally released only on VHS. This will introduce the film to a whole new audience not even born yet when we sold it in 1986. If you wish to see an edge-of-seat suspense/thriller with special effects done in-camera before there was ever CGI, then don't miss this DVD release. Coming for Halloween 2012!

Movies never die!

Chapter 19

Thank You, City of Hope

It began in 1913 in a large tent, providing compassionate hospice care for terminal tuberculosis patients. Today, City of Hope is a marvel of medical healing and state-of-the-art research on life-threatening diseases from cancer to diabetes. It has become one of the nation's leading institutions in setting standards for cancer care, and is known for its relentless mission to seek breakthrough treatments. This medical center is so devoted to developing medical advances and tackling the toughest diseases that it has earned its name as "the place where hope begins." I would personally add, "and where its contributions to defeating illness are certain."



It is located in Duarte about 30 miles east of Hollywood at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains. Most hospitals look somewhat forbidding from the outside, but not COH. The center has a beautiful, collegiate-like campus with lush, green grounds that offer a serene oasis of medical healing, complete with a lovely rose garden and a meditative park with a koi pond. The place is so advanced that they have their own pharmacy/labs to make most of the drugs they use while also developing new ones, and with more than 50 buildings, the property is so vast that they have their own on-site garbage disposal facility. It is indeed a small city.

Three weeks after meeting Dr. Forman, we checked in for a consolidation treatment. It was another round of chemotherapy to keep the leukemia in remission, and to give time to the MUD (matched unrelated donors) coordinator to complete her meticulous worldwide search for the best available matches from adult bone marrow donors and cord blood banks. All available choices and options are reported to the physicians to decide on the best transplant procedure for each patient's specific needs.

We moved in on Tuesday, February 24, 2009, to begin treatment at their new and very modern six-story Helford Hospital. We were concerned about the upcoming treatment because it used the same chemo drugs Jacqui had been given during her difficult first induction at Cedars-Sinai. It helped a lot when the always-caring Dr. Forman showed up unexpectedly at 8

p.m. to welcome Jacqui to COH, and calm her anxiety about the treatment that was to begin within the hour. He explained that reactions to consolidation treatments are different even if the same induction drugs are used, and that she would not go through the same suffering she experienced previously. He assured her that he would handle whatever came up and that she would be OK. It is difficult to put into words the respect and admiration that Jacqui and I have for Stephen Forman due to the care, comfort, and focused dedication he gives his patients.

This guy oozed so much medical knowledge that he made me wish I had followed a more academic career and had gone to medical school (as my mother always hoped). His dedication to combating cancer and saving lives seemed a bit more satisfying than my work, which included figuring out how to get a foul-smelling, hare-lipped camel to growl on a TV Western I directed. He has written books and papers on medical research, and has been named numerous times in "America's Top Doctors for Cancer" lists and consumer guides. Dr. Forman not only handles his own patients and heads his department, but he also serves as a consultant to other oncology centers. He travels as an ambassador for hematology research and in his spare time, he goes to Cal Tech to develop new drugs for future treatments. The guy is a traveling medical center!

I felt inspired to give him something personal as a token of admiration, something light that would help him relax, or at the very least be a fun bathroom read. So I gave him a book I was reading at the time on poker gambling strategies. He graciously accepted it but he must have thought I was a little nuts. He just didn't seem to have that kind of frivolous time, never mind a possible interest in *aces full of kings*!

It is so important, especially while undergoing serious treatment, to know in your gut that you have the best doctor on earth. We salute City of Hope for setting the bar so high and having such world-class healers on their staff. Forman also works with a terrific nurse practitioner, Barbara Stehr, who is a very caring, insightful, and a dedicated healer in her own right.

This time around, I had discussed with Jacqui the dog situation. As we were moving toward more serious treatment, and eventually a transplant, I wanted to be with her 24/7. Every room at Helford has an easy chair that folds out into a cot. I no longer was willing to go home every night to deal with the pooch, and COH was a much longer commute than our first hospital. Leaving Jacqui in the evenings was no longer an option. We put out feelers for someone to board Rocky for about eight weeks. We found two kind gentlemen who had a beautiful home in the Hollywood Hills, and had their own dog who needed company. Everything went great during a trial stay for ten days before we went to the hospital. By her second night at Helford, Jacqui had already started her chemo. She felt terribly nauseous and broke into a high fever with chills. We were familiar with such side effects from the induction drugs, but it is never easy.

Just after 10 p.m., my cell rang and I heard, "Come and get your damn dog now. You got 10 minutes, then we're letting him out on the street!" The words were loud and angry, and I could hear someone in the background screaming. Apparently, our sweet, darling doggie had grabbed their chicken dinner off the kitchen counter and had run around their immaculate home dripping barbecue sauce on their pristine white carpet as they chased him to retrieve it. When they reached to grab it out of his mouth, he bit one of them (what were they thinking!). Though I explained this was very bad timing, they were too upset to listen. I guess dripping blood will do that. Jacqui,

who adores our dog and has the world's biggest heart, somehow succeeded in talking me into very reluctantly leaving her for the evening, and going to rescue the chicken thief.

I drove back to Hollywood to pick him up around 11 p.m., my heart heavy from leaving Jacqui in a bad state. The SOB dog had ruined the perfect home we had found for him, and now I was stuck with him again. I was dreading the moment when I pulled up to their driveway, and knew it was final when I saw his bed and food bowl stacked outside, just like when you break up with someone and they throw all their crap out of the house. In retrospect, it was a funny moment. All I could do was say sorry, grab the dog, and get out of there. When I called the hospital around midnight, I was so glad to hear Jacqui was feeling better, and that her temperature had dropped. The next day, I checked the dog into a kennel, and booked his thieving ass as a long-term boarder.

The rest of Jacqui's chemo went well and she had no more bouts of fever, but the nausea was present and zapped her energy, as she felt exhausted most of the time. Dr. Forman was right, the consolidation treatment was a milder experience than the first treatment. He controlled the flare-ups in her tummy that had been so problematic during the induction. He kept juggling her drug regimen through her neutropenic stage, when she was most prone to infections, while waiting for her white cells to grow again.

She would put on a mask and gloves to do her daily exercise walks through the hallways—an

ambitious 20 rounds of the fifth floor. What they hoped would be about a five-week stay for the consolidation treatment turned into a full six weeks due to Jacqui's sensitive GI tract. She had lost 30 pounds during induction when she went through the colitis nightmare, and though she was now eating somewhat normally, she did not gain any weight back. Dr. Forman had her on intravenous nutrition that provided 2,000 calories a day, but she was not absorbing food properly because her intestinal lining was still inflamed from the first chemo treatments, and needed more time to heal.

As for me, night after night, I was not getting much sleep. I was too large to fit in the small cot in Jacqui's room. Also, I would force myself to stay in a semi-alert state so I would awaken when the nurses came in throughout the night. I wanted to keep up with the drugs they were administering. It is the caregiver's responsibility to know about the drug regimen and dosages. If you have concerns about a new drug, you can refuse it until you talk directly with the doctor who ordered it. The nursing staff on the oncology floors at Helford is great and just as wonderful as the nurses at Cedars-Sinai. It takes a special breed of nurse to work oncology, and though you always have favorites who go the extra mile, most were kind, knowledgeable, and caring.

The transplant coordinator at COH, Mei Chung, reported that the best they had found was a 9-out-of-10 adult bone marrow match. This was not good news as you always wish for a perfect transplant match. However, she excitedly told us she had identified and located two umbilical cord blood stem cell units, each with a perfect 6-out-of-6 HLA match. Bingo!

Once the two cord bloods had been found, Dr. Forman agreed to proceed with the healing treatment we had discovered through our research, the one we had asked for when we had

first met him: a low-intensity prep regimen followed by a double cord blood transplant. As previously mentioned, City of Hope was participating in a new national clinical trial for that exact treatment protocol, and Jacqui qualified. Destiny and timing can be truly awesome!

This cutting-edge clinical trial specifies the chemo drugs and radiation given during the six days of prep to clear out the malignant bone marrow as well as the immune-suppressing medications given after the transplant. Trials are a long and arduous process and take years to complete. They provide as large a database of patients as possible, noting in meticulous detail the reactions and outcomes of each patient. This is how new medical protocols are developed and become the prescribed treatments for specific ailments. I was immensely proud of Jacqui's contribution to this aml-leukemia trial, which will make the treatment Jacqui received the more widely available and accepted protocol, and therefore, covered by all-important insurance plans.

Though we had no clue what this transplant experience would be like, we had done our homework, we had found our expert doctor, and we were ready to move forward as soon as Jacqui could catch her breath and regain her strength at home for about ten days. During this time, the City of Hope transplant staff would coordinate the transportation of the two cord blood units they had identified from wherever they were stored in the world. Frozen for years within a half hour of their

Dr. Stephen Forman

respective births, the two cord units would remain frozen until minutes before they were connected to Jacqui's IV catheter.

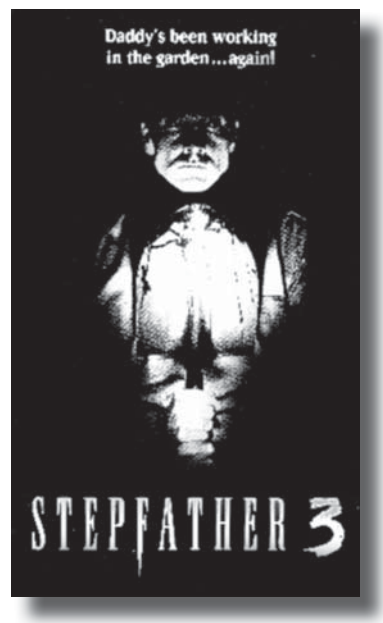
On our joyous ride home, we picked up the Rockster from the kennel. He seemed to still be smiling from the memories of that barbecue chicken he had grabbed. The blood transplant was the big kahuna still to come, but phase two of Jacqui's healing—the consolidation—was now complete and behind us.

Thank you, City of Hope.

Chapter 20

From Stepfather to Italians to Corn

The Weinsteins were instrumental in the *Stepfather 3* project and had enough clout to recommend me for the writer/director job. As previously mentioned, they were fans of my first film *Retribution*. I looked at the first two films in the series and came up with a cool concept for the third story. I pitched it, the production honchos liked it, and I was off and running on my second feature. If you want to direct, it really helps to know how to write and pitch ideas.



It is a good horror franchise about a super-straight, nerdy, sick wacko who is obsessed with having the perfect dream family complete with a white-picket-fence home. This guy has seen too many *Father*

Knows Best episodes while on triple dosages of LSD. His *modus operandi* is to prey on single mothers, marry one, and presto, have an instant family. If anything ever goes wrong with that obsessive fixation, he kills everyone involved and moves on…to the next sequel.

For the third film, I thought it would be interesting to have him inadvertently get involved with two single mothers, not one as in the previous two films. He could then deal with the new dynamic of being stuck between two competing family obsessions. This would double the McGuffin (a plot element that gives a *raison d'etre,* or suspense element, to a story) by providing a real dilemma, turning up the dramatic heat on a super-straight-yet-very-twisted "American values" psycho.

One of the interesting hurdles came when the original star of the first two films, Terry O'Quinn, sent word that he had no interest in #3. We heard he had not liked #2 and wouldn't even take a meeting for #3. I'm not sure if he was tied up at the time or if it was a money thing, but he eventually went on to find stardom in the *Lost* hit series.

This led me to plan an effective opener for the film: a moody, creepy scene where the "stepfather" is hidden in a hooded sweatshirt so you can't identify the actor. As the scene progresses, we discover that he is seeking a sleazy plastic surgeon who practices his craft in a dingy, deserted warehouse infested with rats by dilapidated shipping docks.

Since it was the opening scene, I budgeted rain machines to add to the spooky night mood exterior, and spike some production value for the all-important film opener. It's always a good idea to start big, look expensive, pull the audience into the story. The slimy plastic surgeon was played by the excellent Mario Roccuzzo, who was so memorable inside the butchered

carcass in my first film, *Retribution*. It's good karma to be loyal to actors whose work you respect and who delivered for you in the past by rehiring them again whenever they are right for a role.

It was important to sell this plastic surgery idea. We needed to convince the audience, as our credibility hinged on the loyal fan base from the first two films believing that this was the same "stepfather" but with a new face. If that didn't work, the rest of the film would be a hard sell.

We had to find just the right actor (same height, same weight), who not only understood this deranged character, but also had the acting chops to project the same mannerisms, speech cadence, and personality—which ranged from sweet-and-caring-passive to ultra-violent-psychotic. Not an easy feat but we got lucky with the talented Robert Wightman, who seemed born to play this role. He brought great excitement to *Stepfather 3*, and I'm grateful for his good work.

We needed footage of facial plastic surgery to sell the opening, but nothing great was available at the stock footage libraries. It needed to be tight enough to see the surgery without seeing or recognizing the face since we didn't have O'Quinn. We got in touch with doctors and asked if they would persuade one of their patients to let us film close-up shots of their surgery for the world to see on a giant movie screen. Needless to say, no one agreed or was interested in the slightest until we finally got a "Yes." Of course, the guy was an elderly actor getting a facelift and he said, "Why not? I can be workin' in a damn movie while I'm passed out." Love this town!

The funniest part of shooting the plastic surgery was that my talented cameraman and good friend Alan Caso was not too good around blood, and the poor guy had to look at it through

the camera in super tight close-ups. I had to stand behind him and hold him up. Every few minutes he'd get so grossed out that his knees would buckle. That's when I knew this was going to be great plastic surgery footage and our opening sequence was going to work as planned. The audience would buy it; it was the real stuff. Just ask Alan.

If you'd like to see an example of the magic of editing, you should watch this film's opening. It's available from Netflix. You'll be surprised to see how the real surgery close-ups worked so well intercut within a sequence of shots to create this opening scene. We added mood shots of rain splatter on windows, lightning effects from the night storm outside, and cut it all together with great spooky music. The edited intercuts worked great. The story of *Stepfather 3* was off and running. Sorry, Terry, we had to figure out how to make this work without you.

The rest of the cast was also terrific. Both women who became involved with the stepfather were played by excellent actresses. Priscilla Barnes had found fame when she replaced Suzanne Somers in the hit sitcom *Three's Company*. Her work included productions from *Loveboat* to the James Bond film *License to Kill*. Season Hubley was equally wonderful and her credits ranged from her unforgettable portrayal of Priscilla Presley in the TV movie *Elvis* to her memorable work in Paul Schrader's dark film *Hardcore* about the porno world, which starred George C. Scott. She had a son with Kurt Russell before he hooked up with Goldie Hawn. Season is one of those special dear people you always stay friends with even if you lose touch for years.

There was also an outstanding kid actor played by David Tom, who was 11 years old. In the exciting finale, he finds the courage and conviction to get out of his wheelchair to save his

mom and outwit the stepfather in one of those you-gotta-see-it-to-believe-it terrifying sequences involving a bloody wood chipper. Shredding the "stepfather" to mulch should end the franchise (maybe?). David went on to a busy career which included a long stint on *All My Children*.

The reviews were hot. NBC Radio gave it a four-star: "*Stepfather 3* is a roller-coaster ride of tight-fisted terror—undoubtedly one of the best horror films of the decade." *Video Today* said, "A very well made, entertaining, gripping thriller!" Those reviews were from the video release as, unfortunately, the all-important theatrical release was canceled at the last minute. The film tested great and survey audiences loved it. But we got an unlucky break as the executive who supported the film and was in charge of theatrical at the distribution company (Trimark) suddenly left. We lost our hero who had planned a great marketing campaign. Of course, the new exec would never get behind the previous guy's movies. The Hollywood nightmare of musical chairs for executives struck again on my second feature. Nothing you can do about bad timing—it's a cruel business.

A theatrical run is the only way to get reviewed by major publications, the only way people get to hear of your film. Straight-to-video is the nightmare death of every director's movie. It doesn't help move your career forward regardless of the quality of the film you fought so hard to achieve. The film disappears in VHS/DVD hell without a whimper, and no one who worked on it wins anything career-wise. It's part of the movie gambling game, same as throwing dice in Vegas.

When I got to my third feature, it proved to be the most fun and gratifying of any production I ever worked on. Once per career, there comes a project you have so much passion for, so

much belief in its story, so much confidence in its potential, you are willing to do the one thing they always tell you *never* to do: invest your own money to make it!

Lookin' Italian was my homage to Scorsese and a celebration of Italian-American culture. Most of my friends are Italian and I love the food, the fashion, the sing-song language, the whole damn country, and the wonderful Andrea Bocelli. "Lookin' Italian" to me means "lookin' good." The story was a melodrama about a New York Mafia guy who accidentally shoots his best friend while on a mob job. Guilt-ridden, he retires to a depressed life in Los Angeles. Ten years later, his happy-go-lucky nephew from New York comes to visit, and that opens long-buried memories. The nephew ends up healing his uncle of his haunting past even after he discovers the man his uncle accidentally killed was…his dad.

As I wrote this story, I designed it to fit a very low budget of about $385,000—all I had in my savings and whatever loans I could borrow. As a director, your goal is to squeeze in as many shooting days as possible to give you the most time to make the film. Though I had very little money, I was able to budget a 25-day shooting schedule. In comparison, the $2-million (five times larger) budget I had on *Stepfather 3* had also only afforded me a 25-day schedule. For *Dark Avenger,* the CBS Movie-of-the-Week I directed (which was sort of the TV version of *Darkman)*, we had a budget of $4 million, but the most we could manage were 19 shooting days. Every film is different, every budget is different, and sometimes you can stretch dollars by being wise and clever and being willing to make certain compromises.

A lot of the budget depends on whether you use an expensive union crew (you must at the studios and networks) or you go with a much less costly indie crew. It's all about the choices you make. For example, on *Dark Avenger*, CBS could afford

Rick Baker to make the mechanical steel arm of the hero. I enjoyed working with him. Rick is one of the best, but he ain't cheap. He received the first Academy Award for Makeup for his work on *An American Werewolf in London*. One of the most fun visits you can make in Hollywood is at his studio, which warehouses his creatures and monsters. But I had no Rick money on *Lookin' Italian*, so I didn't write any scenes that needed his expertise. Sometimes your writing has to fit a budget, especially when limited.

Budgets can sometimes be affected by the competence of producers you work with. Some are director-friendly, appreciate the creative process, and make sure the schedule reflects enough time for quality work. Others are jackasses without a clue and wonder why a director needs more than *one day* to shoot any movie. Those you ignore and move on; life is too short. They'll never make anything good or a film or TV show that matters, so there's no reason to work with them.

When it's time to cast, the salaries you can afford will decide who will audition for you. For example, how many crowd extras do you want to show cheering in the stands at the football game scene or can you change it instead to a scene of a lonely pingpong match with no audience? Writing scenes needing few extras (also known as "background") is part of low-budget script considerations. Shooting various scenes that need extras during a day can be affordable if you request they bring a different shirt to change into so they look like a different bunch in each scene.

For the lead role of the uncle, I always had in mind Jay Acovone. Jay's a terrific actor with a long list of credits including the popular series *Beauty and the Beast,* which also starred Linda Hamilton (later of *Terminator* fame) and Ron Perlman (later of *Hellboy* fame). Jay still gets invited to attend those wacky

"tunnel people" conventions, which draw a strange, dress-up-in-costumes crowd. I don't get those or the other wacko conventions like for Trekkies or Obi-Wan Kenobi get-togethers, but I guess those folks must like Halloween more than once a year!

Jay was born to play this role and brought his A-game to the party. For the nephew, we auditioned every Italian-American actor in Los Angeles between the ages of 18 to 25 until we found Matt LeBlanc. The role fit him like a glove. Everyone knows Matt as dimwitted Joey from *Friends*. As great as he was in that comedy series, he can also deliver excellent dramatic work.

At the time I met him, Matt had had some setbacks. He was ready to quit and return to his Boston home. Just a few days before he was due to move back East, he told me he was tired of auditioning and was not going to this "stupid audition about six friends living in an apartment." I encouraged him to go and advised him that as long as he was an actor, he should never miss any audition. You just never know when it's your lucky day. He reluctantly went and, amazingly, won the acting super lotto! Instant stardom and great wealth in America comes when you're cast in a #1 TV series. Without this star-making TV machine, would you have ever heard of Robin Williams or Ted Danson or Kelsey Grammer or Shelley Long or Jennifer Aniston?

George Clooney recalled saying, "I think my life is going to change," when he heard *ER* was scheduled in the prized 10 p.m. Thursday slot at NBC. Jim Burrows, one of the most respected and successful sitcom directors in the business who can smell a winner better than most, told the six *Friends* right after directing the pilot, "Guys, your lives are about to change." Matt's life did change. Ten years later, he had many millions in his pocket. I call that winning the lottery big time. Moral of this story: If you're an actor, never miss an audition.

When you do a feature, it's all on the line; the career stakes are jacked up. In contrast to TV directing, where you only have seven or eight days to prepare the best possible show, you can't settle or compromise in features. With two months to get ready, and with my own dough on the line, I needed to make sure Jay and Matt were the very best I could find for the two leads. I asked my casting director, "What about New York?" There are plenty of Italian-American actors there, what if there was better talent for this film? She agreed to go check it out.

It cost me $300 for her airfare, she stayed at her sister's, she borrowed a friend's studio which had a video camera, and she put out the call to the New York agents. In a week's time, she put every *paisan* actor in the New York area on tape, came back, handed me the cassettes and said, "Here's New York." As great as some of the New York actors were, no one was better or had more magical chemistry for the two roles, and I proceeded to hire Jay and Matt. I knew I had the best possible actors for these roles. You should always have confidence in your lead choices before starting any feature. If you don't, you're in trouble and should not shoot. Wait and keep auditioning.

We've all heard directors say they would not have made their film without a certain actor, and it's true. I thought Sam Worthington was terrific in *Avatar*, but he was a complete unknown. Of all the actors on the planet, Cameron had to go all the way to Australia to find this unknown actor to star in a $300-million movie? The answer is YES! For Cameron, Sam was

the guy. Nice lottery win, Sam. Isn't the Hollywood dream grand when the fairy dust settles on you?

Casting is an absolute key to a successful film. Directors dream of working with wonderful actors and guiding them to memorable performances. When an actor delivers inspired work, it is magical to watch it unfold. Everyone's favorite actor, Morgan Freeman, who played Nelson Mandela in his Oscar-nominated *Invictus* performance, recalled being at a screening of the film in South Africa and sitting next to the great man himself. Mandela leaned over, pointed at the screen, and said, "I *know* that fellow." For Morgan or any actor, it doesn't get better than this.

We hired a trainer to work daily with Matt to help him develop a sculpted body in six weeks. Being a babe-magnet was part of his love-of-life character and our storyline. One of the babes we cast was a young Denise Richards (later Charlie Sheen's second wife) in her first speaking role. Jay took the young Matt under his wing. They became inseparable from rehearsals to the last day of shoot. Matt trusted Jay's advice and guidance and used it wisely to deliver a beautifully layered characterization which, in my opinion, is his best dramatic performance to date. It was also special to see a great friendship develop between the two, which has lasted to this day.

Lookin' Italian was also legendary singer Lou Rawls' first movie. Lou wanted to increase his exposure so his agent was looking for film auditions. It was apparent that he "had it," though he had never taken an acting lesson in his life. Lou's cool

persona made his work as natural as a seasoned actor's. He had the magic charisma of a star, which he had honed on live stages with a microphone in his hand. Sinatra had great respect for Lou's work and used to say that the two of them were the only true "saloon singers." He was one of the gentlest, kindest souls I ever had the privilege of meeting, and a class-act gentleman to work with. On the set, we would try and get Lou to sing a note, a bar, anything, but he would just smile and start humming with that deep, silky, base voice. Thank you, Lou, for your wonderful artistry, your greatest hit "You'll Never Find (Another Love Like Mine)," and for your telethons, which raised $200 million for the United Negro College Fund and helped 65,000 students obtain a higher education. You're in a lot of hearts, buddy (Lou called everyone "buddy"). Sadly, he passed away in 2006.

When you're tight on dough, you have to do a lot of searching for the best crew you can get. When you're asking people to work very long days but can only pay a third of their usual weekly rates, you're not going to get too many to agree. For a $385,000 budget, you've got to beg, steal, cajole, and do whatever it takes to get the best cast/crew team together to work 12 to 16-hour days (weekly deal/no overtime), and in my case, for five weeks. One way to show appreciation is to hire an excellent caterer and pay him enough to prepare good meals and great snacks.

Two of the most memorable events in my life happened within six hours of each other while on this movie's journey. The first was a screening of the film on the closing night of the Palm

Springs International Film Festival. We screened twice earlier that week, and the film was so popular and well received, they scheduled it as the closing night screening and invited the cast and me to a Q&A on stage. This festival is well-run and has been growing in stature over the years. They have discovered many gems, both features and short films, and we were honored by this special invitation. About ten of us, including Jacqui, made the two-hour trip to attend. We were all filled with excitement and anticipation for the evening ahead.

The theater seated about 500 and was packed.The majority of the audience was Italian-American. They had heard about the film from friends who had seen it earlier in the week. It was a special moment for all of us including the excellent character actor Ralph Manza, who played the elderly bookstore owner "Ralph." Manza was a true *Italiano*, whom we all loved. After the screening, we were called to the stage while the audience gave us a standing ovation. It was one of those goosebump moments none of us will ever forget. Afterward, we feasted like kings at a nearby restaurant and partied like joyous mad people before the two-hour ride back to Los Angeles. I remember getting to bed around 3 a.m. Jacqui and I were elated. It had been a magical night for *Lookin' Italian*.

About 90 minutes later at 4:30 a.m. on January 17, 1994, we were abruptly awakened by a thunderous roar from hell! We woke up panicked as we felt our bed literally jumping in the air. Desperately trying to turn on lights did nothing—the power

was gone. We were screaming in pitch-black darkness. I was reaching for Jacqui and yelling for her to follow me out of the house, which felt like it was coming apart and sounded like an evil animal roaring! Upstairs we could hear glasses and dishes hitting the kitchen floor. As I opened our bedroom door, I tripped over a huge object in the dark and Jacqui fell on top of me. The mountainous object we tripped on was a pile of 300 books that had fallen from an upstairs bookcase and was blocking me from opening the front door. As we started digging in the dark, throwing books like crazy panicked people to free the door to get outside, it stopped.

By the time we finally dug our way out, we joined the eeriest scene I ever witnessed on our street. Like a bad nightmare zombie movie, we found shocked and traumatized people walking aimlessly, barefoot, and in pajamas. Sirens and car alarms rang from every direction. People were yelling for help to turn off broken water and gas pipes. Flashlights whirled and made the street look spooky. We were part of a collective experience of a disastrous, shattering event of nature. It was the scariest moment of my life, and I don't scare easy. Along with ten million people in Los Angeles, we had experienced the Northridge 6.7 earthquake, which is the costliest, most damaging earthquake in U.S. history. Fifty-seven people died, 9,000 were injured, and another 20,000 were displaced from their homes. Thousands of buildings and infrastructures were red-tagged as unsafe, and repair costs topped $20 billion.

When daylight broke, we felt surreal as we went back inside our home to check the damage. Everything had been torn off the walls and was broken like a tornado had hit us. In the kitchen, the pile of glassware and china debris was three-feet deep. We used shovels to dig out the rubble. My home office was impenetrable

with every piece of furniture overturned. A strange, dusty smell of catastrophe permeated the air.

The most joyous film celebration night of my life was followed by the biggest morning nightmare of my life. Big time yin-yang, baby. Big time!

Selling the film. We carefully screened *Lookin' Italian* to a few distributor reps, just to feel them out, with the understanding that this was a "confidential unofficial viewing" to get their thoughts, their opinions. But we got unlucky.

In retrospect, it was stupid on my part to trust one particular guest whom I didn't know and whom my publicist had unfortunately invited. He was a well-known indie rep named Jeff Dowd, who had repped indie filmmakers including (supposedly) the Coen brothers in their early years. Rumor has it they based their "dude character" from *The Big Lebowski* on this goofy-lookin' guy. The day after the viewing, his big mouth spread a negative review to a very small distribution world. He called the film "a tweener." It was the first time I had heard that term. Apparently he thought it was "in between" being a commercial action film and being an art-house film, making it neither, which hurt us coming out of the gate. They prefer easy labels in Hollywood.

When I called him about it, he was apologetic for

opening his big mouth when he was trusted not to, and invited me to come by his office to "discuss the mistakes I had made." This guy's ego was off the charts. He was disrespectful, and he deserved to be treated in kind. So I told him to shove it and that he was lucky I wasn't running over to beat the arrogant crap out of him. In my view, he had betrayed an indie filmmaker though he prided himself on helping and nurturing filmmakers. His early negativity hurt our chances to churn up a good deal after further polishing the film. Though he's a successful rep, I'm not a fan of his because he proved untrustworthy and narcissistic. Just my opinion, one of those things, part of doing business.

Eventually, we did get foreign and domestic distribution, and were able to recoup our costs because the film's budget was super low. If you know how to make films, it's difficult to lose a $385,000 investment unless your film is entirely out of focus and in a Martian language. It sold in about 15 countries, and we got a Blockbuster deal in the U.S. where the title was changed to *Showdown* by the distributor. Many years later, it was reissued on DVD under the original title. Also, we were honored to have a piece of our music soundtrack licensed by the producers of Tom Hanks' *From the Earth to the Moon,* a great 12-hour miniseries about the NASA space program. Those royalties bought us lunch for two for a couple of years.

Just as we were getting ready for a small domestic release, Matt scored *Friends*. His new rep team were telling him to forget about promoting *Lookin' Italian* because he was about to become a big TV star. His wacko manager at the time told me, "Sorry, but Matt is no longer on the B train and cannot get involved—he is now on the A train." I told her to shove her "A train up her A-ass!" She knew better than to talk to me like that. Matt felt terrible about it as we had become as close as brothers during the making of the film. You can call it the folly of youth when the Hollywood lottery seduces your brain cells into gaga. You can't think straight when fame and fortune intoxicate you. All you can do is put on your seatbelt and let it take you where the dream goes. I'm very happy for Matt as I would be for any great friend who struck gold.

Jay is still good friends with Matt. They get together often and go dirt biking or to car races; they're both gearheads who love anything with speed on wheels. I heard Matt bought a ranch in Ojai. I hope it brings him joy. I know someday we'll get back together and the love and friendship will still be there. Friendships come and go but when you've experienced going through the trenches of production together, a special bond is created—a lifetime bond. Through it all, we shared the dream. I would do anything for either of them if they needed me.

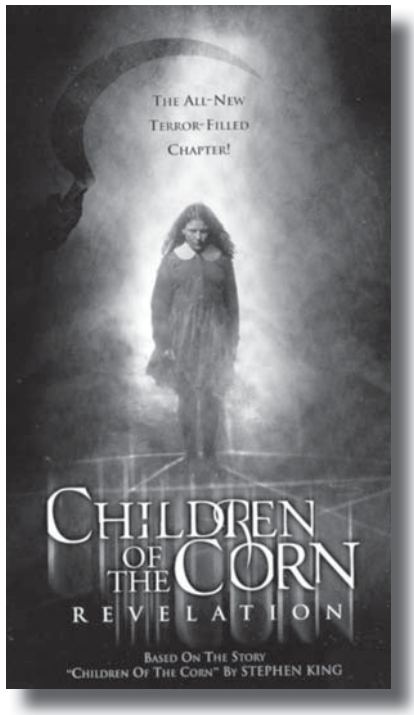
We tested the picture with a three-theater release in Providence, Rhode Island where there is a large Italian-American community that lives in Federal Hill. We had no

money, not even for one TV spot, and we just couldn't compete with the big boys in the cineplexes. Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* was in its initial run and packing them in. But we did get some cool reviews from *The Providence Journal*, "Emotionally riveting... LeBlanc has charisma in spades!"; *The Times Entertainer*, "Jay Acovone is outstanding...a good story seasoned with emotional highs and lows that leave the cast drained!"; and *The Press-Enterprise*, "A powerful, smart and sassy independently made film that comes together so well—blending comedy and drama, issues and entertainment—for the low Hollywood cost of under $1 million!"

Oh yeah, never tell anyone your real indie budget…just say, "Under $1 million."

Prague? They wanted me to go to the Czech Republic to make *Children of the Corn: Revelation* for Bob Weinstein's company Dimension Films, which at the time was the low-budget commercial division of Miramax Films. Dimension Films has scored successes with the *Scream*, *Scary Movie*, *Hellraiser*, the *Halloween* franchises, and other titles including Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* and *Sin City.*

Prague had recently become a production haven offering inexpensive crews, cheap location fees, and perks like quick visas, hotel discounts, and rebates and tax breaks on local expenditures, such as labor hires. Every now and then a new city becomes the hot production center. One of the new hot spots in 2010 was Sofia in Bulgaria. Burgeoning East European countries are trying to expand their economies and attract cash investments including film productions. Who can blame them? Canada has been doing it for years. It stole Hollywood right out of Hollywood in the '90s!



I agreed to do *Corn*, though I was never a fan of the series, as my way of paying Bob back for being a true *mensch* when he helped me years earlier during a financial stumble. But favor or not, there was no way I was going as far as Prague to do a small picture of $2 million. First, I'm not a fan of flying—especially halfway around the world—back and forth for the three to four months of prep and shoot it would take, let alone being away from Jacqui. Prague was too far and it would have been impossible for Jacqui's work schedule to allow the weekend visits she had previously managed whenever I would shoot out of town.

Bob didn't care where the hell the movie was made as long as he could make the picture as cheaply as possible and he didn't have to move off his comfy New York couch. He was never going to visit the set, he had underlings he could send to terrorize us (read: control) if he needed to. And yes, I warned his underlings to wear flak jackets if they ever did visit. I don't allow intimidation and never give people reason to exercise it.

I had directed shows in Canada and was familiar with the film scene there. Between directing episodes for the *La Femme Nikita* series in Toronto and a cool new sci-fi series in Vancouver called *Welcome to Paradox,* I was fond of shooting in hockey land. I talked my producers in Los Angeles, who also had families and had no interest in traveling to Prague, to go on a scouting trip to

prove to them—and eventually to Bob in New York—we could do better with the budget in Canada.

We flew up and, in a matter of days, were hooked up with office space, a shooting studio where we could build our sets, and a local crew every bit as competent as we had hoped for. Not easy to pull off as Vancouver was buzzing at the time with more than 35 productions in town—that's 35-deep full crews. Once we proved to New York we could do this for better numbers than Prague, it was a "go." Dimension ended up saving many hundreds of thousands of dollars using the same office, studio, and crew we had set up to make three more films in succession, including *Hellraiser 5* and *Halloween 6*. I paid back Bob's financial favor many times over.

The day I got the *Corn* directing job, I told Jacqui when I got home. She was surprised and her response was "Oh my god, you're never going to believe what I found today!" She took me down to our backyard and there they were: never-before-seen freaky corn stalks growing on our property! They were gigantic—12 feet tall—truly monster corn! Spooky? How did they ever get there? When did they grow so big? I always wondered if months earlier Bob had sent one of his underlings in the middle of the night to plant giant corn in my backyard, just to freak me out and tell me it was kismet for me to make this movie. Hey, those brothers are very resourceful and wild and crazy guys. When they want something done, you better duck. That's why they're the Weinsteins. Ask anyone in the industry.

We cast an excellent actress for the lead, Claudette Mink, with whom I'd previously worked on a TV show. I also hired Michael Ironside, one of my favorite intense actors. We could afford Michael for a day as a "DVD name" to help sell the movie. But the most fun time was working with the terrific kid actors

who loved portraying "possessed, evil kids," especially the talented Taylor Hobbs and Jeff Ballard (left and right in photo). They were wonderful, Vancouver-based young actors.

We got lucky with our main exterior location, a dilapidated apartment building. We not only found just the perfect-looking, broken-down four-story building but it uniquely and weirdly stood within 15 feet of a railroad track, a usable one where freight trains would rumble by throughout the day and night. Although the sound and vibrations from the passing trains would interfere with shooting and cause delays, they added rich production value and an unusual spooky atmosphere to our low-budget movie. We rented the building for the location's exterior. The interiors were shot on sets we designed and built on stages.

The story opens at night with an elderly woman sleepwalking out of the building. The script originally required her to be run over by a passing truck. Better yet, I now had a steaming locomotive to run her over instead, digitally of course. This was much more effective and high-value production visuals. All we had to do was set up our cameras when we knew the trains were coming. If a camera messed up, we'd reset cameras and shoot again with the next train. All the trains were free thanks to the Vancouver rail system.

We also had to figure out how to plant a corn field outside this building—no easy feat. Eventually we figured out how to attach eight-foot high corn stalks (bought, cut, and transported from a farm hundreds of miles away) to sheets of plywood so

that we could transport them to the set and place them where we wanted by laying out the plywood structures. The corn field was designed to be functional so we were able to move it around, which allowed us to efficiently work inside the scary corn field. Lighting, fog, and wind machines did the rest to set the spooky atmosphere.

A cool idea was to build the apartment hallway in a way that could be easily adjusted from normal to tighter widths. Since the film took place almost exclusively inside that building, it was great to have the hallway set change dimensions, getting tighter and more claustrophobic around the actors as the movie progressed and the story got more intense. Though this is the kind of visceral visual trick you get to do on a big-budget movie, if you come up with such an idea before the set is built, you can design it to have movable walls quite cheaply.

We shot fast in 21 tight days and came in under the $2-million budget. No executioners from the New York office ever had to visit the set. Bob called me to say he appreciated my dedication to the film, and thanked me for coming in under budget saving him oodles of money.

When the picture was released, *Screentalk* magazine did a cover story on the production of the film, which was great publicity. I'm proud of this *Corn* picture, and grateful to all who worked on it. Now that I made the seventh one, I like this franchise, which started with a Stephen King original story. But to this day,

we are still baffled by how that giant corn grew in my backyard just when I got the offer to direct this picture. Anybody out there know the real story? Spooky business working on horror thrillers.

Oh my god…what's that BEHIND YOU?

Chapter 21

A New Birthday and Jacqui's Secret

Matched Unrelated Double Cord Blood Transplantation. This was the title of the papers Jacqui signed on April 14, 2009, when we returned to City of Hope. Jacqui had spent two weeks at home recuperating from her second chemo treatment. We were back for the final therapy to permanently heal Jacqui, the Super Bowl of treatments for her aml-leukemia: the cord transplant.

Jacqui would be entering a new Phase 2 clinical trial administered at participating cancer centers across the nation. Joining such a trial is called "Participation in an Investigative Activity." This trial, like most, will take a few years to complete and uses specific drugs for the preparatory phase and the post-transplant stage of this treatment. If the results are positive and it works, this particular scenario will soon become an acceptable, proven, FDA-approved protocol for aml patients in the near future and will become an insurable treatment. I was and am very proud of Jacqui for contributing to this important research.

This is a good spot to again remind readers that I am not a doctor and have no medical education or training. Everything I write in this book is my personal opinion and observation as a caregiver during Jacqui's healing and as a dogged Internet researcher.

The purpose of Jacqui's research trial study was to have patients undergo a *hematopoietic stem cell transplant* (HCT) and then follow their medical status for the rest of their lives. The researchers will be recording "any possible long-term complications in order to continually find ways to improve the success of such transplant treatments." This trial included a low-intensity prep regimen intended to "empty the bone marrow" of cancerous cells before administering the cord transplant. As previously mentioned, this is in contrast to the standard treatment which uses a massive chemo preparatory regimen followed by an adult-donor marrow transplant. These are two very different approaches. Each has its pros and cons, which I'll explain shortly.

We certainly didn't want a massive chemo prep for Jacqui, and a perfect-match adult donor was never found. We researched and pursued the treatment we thought was best for Jacqui. In our case, finding the right clinical trial and the best transplant doctor to administer it was the key to success. That's the legwork you have to do, and we are very grateful it paid off.

Finally, we were ready to rock 'n' roll with our commitment to the trial treatment protocol. When people hear "transplant," they usually think of very complex procedures such as open-heart surgery or major kidney or liver operations. A blood transplant is far less dramatic. There is no surgery; instead, it uses an IV-drip delivery system. We took a deep breath, sucked it up, gave each other a high-five, and said, "Bring it!" Throughout the process

that had brought us this far, Jacqui's spirit and courage never ceased to amaze and inspire me.

The first order of business, the prep regimen, was to rid Jacqui of all possible cancerous cells. Though her last two City of Hope biopsies confirmed she was in remission, Dr. Forman needed to make absolutely sure that no undetectable cancer cells could be lurking. This low-intensity prep involved five days of intravenous chemotherapy with specific drugs prescribed for this trial. One of the concerns about low-intensity chemo is that it may be *too low* to kill all bad cells. If any cancer cells survive, the transplant may not be effective and a re-occurrence of the cancer is possible. This is called GVL, graft versus leukemia, and addresses whether the immune system contained in the new blood will be strong enough to eliminate any recurring cancer cells.

Massive chemo would result in a more efficient killing field of bad cells, but it would also bring many more, and possibly very serious, side effects. As mentioned, chemo drugs kill *all* cells not just the malignant ones. The hope is that the patient will, literally, survive the assault. This is why researchers came up with a low-intensity approach, so more people could get through the prep regimen. Folks over 50 who could not handle massive dosages, could now be transplant candidates, including Jacqui.

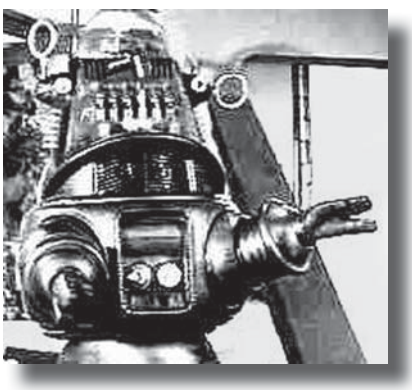
This became possible after recent discoveries found that umbilical cord blood may provide stronger protection against recurring cancer than previously thought, thus providing a better GVL outcome. Blood cancers are basically a failure of immune systems. During our lifetimes, many of us develop cancer cells, but we're not aware of it because our immune system quickly kills them. Whether the transplant uses adult blood marrow cells or umbilical cord stem cells that transform into bone marrow

cells, blood transplants replace the recipient's immune system with the donor's.

The low-intensity chemo drugs were easier on Jacqui's system, which reassured us that we had picked the right treatment. Though the drugs made her feel nauseous, weak, and generally crappy, these cancer meds were milder than the chemo drugs she was given during induction and consolidation. There were no major fever spikes, no vomiting, no GI flare-ups, and her demands for painkillers were infrequent as opposed to her 24/7 requests during the previous treatments.

After five days of chemo came one day of radiation, part of the required prep for this clinical trial. This was new to us as Jacqui had never had radiation before. It's a bit weird; who the heck wants to be *radiated*? Also, the radiation department is spooky with WARNING and DO NOT ENTER signs everywhere, strange buzzing sounds, rotating red lights in hallways, and weird-lookin' staff walking around with heavy rubber gloves (just kiddin' about weird-lookin').

But it's a big deal. You even have to go in for a rehearsal where they measure precise distances from machine to various body parts (nose, elbow, knees) as you lie on a gurney facing a gigantic machine with a huge lens that looks right out of the Twilight Zone. It rotates around the room, makes scary, loud knocking sounds, and it looks like…well, it looks like Robby the Robot in the 1956 cult classic *Forbidden Planet*! Remember the robot with the bubble head? (See photo.)



It gets worse. The techs put goggles on you and tell you to

keep your eyes shut tight no matter what! NO MATTER WHAT? And they assure you that if you have any problems, you can just yell (YELL?) in the direction of the microphone and they'll hear you from where they'll be, which is 10 MILES AWAY! Behind very thick lead walls! That's how it goes down, ask anyone who's done full-body radiation. The process feels like bad sci-fi from the '50s. And one last thing: When you're done with your 20-minute zap, you turn over so they can zap your other side, just like steak on a grill. Medium well-done, please!

After the six-day prep, the next day on the schedule is known as Day 0. On paper it simply read, "UCB [Unrelated Cord Blood] Infusion." Infusion means the transplant will be done intravenously. It also read, "Start Isolation." After the chemo and radiation, Jacqui was now "neutropenic" again, which meant her white cell count was practically non-existent. Our biggest fear during this period was an infection because she had no white cells to fight it. From this day forward, Jacqui was not allowed to leave her room—not even to walk down the hallway. Everyone coming into the room had to wear a face mask, including yours truly who lived in the room with her. I never washed my hands so often in my entire life, the promise I made so I wouldn't have to wear latex gloves 24/7.

That very morning when Dr. Forman came to see her at his usual 7 a.m., he told us this would be a very special day: "A day of a medical miracle," a day we would never forget. He explained this day would become Jacqui's "new birthday." She was about to receive two units of umbilical cord blood that were less than an hour old when each was collected at birth and frozen for years, until now. It's like being born with brand-new blood. And thus, April 21st became Jacqui's second birthday.

The floor staff is aware when a transplant is scheduled, and nurses stopped by to wish Jacqui "Happy Birthday." We were

surprised at the excitement in the air. I wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't ready. I had no prep time. I had no idea this was considered a birthday. Celebration was in order, but how? As soon as Jacqui went for her morning shower, I raced down to the gift shop.

Thankfully, they had balloons that said CONGRATULATIONS, which I grabbed along with a stuffed gorilla. When Jacqui came out of the shower, I was ready. I had managed to surprise her once again. Festive balloons were attached to her bed and a cuddly baby gorilla sat on her pillow. It worked. With a big birthday grin, she hugged the big gorilla first, before me.

We had a special nurse assigned named Yoli (photo), who was experienced with transplants. She was terrific. Around 1 p.m., a transplant official arrived carrying an ice chest. Inside were the two frozen bags—the umbilical cord blood from the two donors. Official forms were signed by Jacqui and Yoli for this "special infusion delivery." The official who brings the cords does not leave until she or he has personally witnessed both bags transplanted.

The bags were defrosted at room temperature and just when they got a little slushy, they were hung and connected to Jacqui's hickman intake IV tube, and that was that. Each bag took about 15 minutes to drip empty. There was not a lot of volume because it was blood from a placenta and umbilical cord after birth—isolated baby blood rich in stem cells—not the mother's blood. That's why volume from two cords is needed for adult patients. The first came from a boy in Pittsburgh, born years earlier. Surprisingly, gender is not an issue.

More surprisingly, neither was blood type. He was "O positive" and Jacqui was "B positive." The second bag was from a girl born in Spain about eight years ago, and her type was

"O negative." Amazingly, Jacqui's blood type changed with this transplant. She adopted the girl's type and is now "O neg."

Because each blood cord contains its own immune system, there is a battle for supremacy between them. Like a science fiction movie, the two systems battle it out for weeks until one of the cords proves its dominance and the other cord literally disappears. My best guess for this phenomenon is that the hardiest immune system wins *a la* survival of the fittest. A blood test within six weeks of the transplant revealed the Spanish girl as the winner. The test showed the Spaniard's blood was 95% of the total blood, Jacqui's old blood was 3%, and the Pittsburgh boy was 2%, with the latter two fading fast. This was a good thing, the whole idea is to have bone marrow producing robust blood cells strong enough to kill any leukemia cells that may show up in the future. You want the strongest possible immune system protecting you.

Maybe one day Jacqui will meet her donors but until then, we are extremely grateful and thank, from the bottom of our hearts, a young girl in Spain and a young boy in Pittsburgh, both now about nine years old. We especially thank their parents for their kind-hearted donation of the cord blood when their kids were born. We are also extremely grateful for the Blood Cord Donor Program, all the hospitals that participate in it, and the registry that organizes the cord blood units banked all over the world. A hearty BRAVO to all who work for donor programs.

After the transplant infusion, it's a waiting game. You wait to see if the new stem cells have "engrafted" (transformed) into bone marrow and started making healthy blood cells. The success rate is high at 85%, but it's a long wait that usually takes about 21 to 28 days. In a little-understood but seemingly miraculous process worth mentioning again, the donor stem cells discover

the empty bone marrow in the pelvis, move in, and "transform" to the needed bone marrow cells. That's the medical miracle. We set up camp in Jacqui's room and waited it out.

Aside from being neutropenic and taking antibiotic drugs to fight any possible infections, Jacqui felt more or less normal during this time. There were not a lot of major discomforts except for waves of nausea and what Jacqui described as "feeling creepy." She would take Vicodin for pain or Lorazepam for nausea and to calm her nerves.

Every day I'd get into her bed and we'd hug tightly as she'd wrap herself around me while we chatted or napped. I always made sure she felt totally surrounded, completely cocooned, by my love, my strength, and my positive attitude. As a caregiver, you have to supply that grounding, that safety net. No matter how bad or creepy or doubtful a patient may feel, you have to provide an unconditional, unbending, concrete tower of absolute certainty about the treatment and its positive progress, as well as an ocean of love that will not allow anything to happen but the very, very best that can be. This is crucial for caregivers to bring to the table. This is why you are there for your partner. You must be the unmovable rock of strength and security. Granite-strong!

You don't just do this with your presence. You do it in partnership with the patient—as a team—by being involved and engaged in the process of talking to doctors, asking questions, doing the research, covering all the "what ifs," double-checking with the nurses the drugs they're hooking up, making sure the bed is made or freshened while the patient is in the shower, making sure the physical therapists show up to keep your partner limber, dealing with the three meals and food orders, and the many other details that make up daily hospital life.

Sometimes it's just being there to open the shades and point out how beautiful the sunrise is that morning. The caregiver must become the dependable partner for the patient, and if you can do that effectively—24/7—the patient knows it, feels it, and senses it. He or she can relax and know the train has a co-driver and all is well with the arduous journey. All the patient has to do is focus on the healing part and get through the all-important treatment. The more you take on your shoulders, the less remains on the patient's. Needless to say, this includes everything else going on with your home, financial concerns such as paying monthly bills, and keeping family and friends informed. I was busy, as all caregivers are.

During this time, doctors gave Jacqui drugs to weaken her own immune system to prevent an all-out war (GVHD) with the dominant cord blood's immune system (the Spanish girl's) provided by the stem cells that were transforming into Jacqui's new bone marrow. The hours and the days went by as we went through our daily routine. We started watching the *Food Channel* (tough to do on hospital food!) and *Oprah,* discovered *Ellen* whose happy show always put us in a better mood, and we kept up with the breaking news on *CNN*. Daytime TV was new to both of us. It was great to see President Obama, still in his first 100 days, tackle so many important and long-neglected issues and, of course, get crap for it from the right-wing extremists who had nothing better to do than blame him for, well, tackling too many issues! What else? There was even some stupidity about him taking off his jacket and being too informal in the Oval Office. Ignorant, hateful, petty, divisive people boggle the mind, and impede the progress of our nation.

On March 9, 2009, in the first six weeks of his presidency, we watched Obama move America out of the Bush dark ages and

sign the all-important "Stem Cell Executive Order and Scientific Integrity Presidential Memorandum," which will hasten medical research and healing. This executive order was about the use of "embryonic stem cells." These are *not* the stem cells collected from umbilical cord blood, which have always been discarded after birth deliveries. If the use of cord blood is curing so many now with blood cancers, imagine the promise of the more serviceable embryonic stem cells, which can be even better manipulated to successfully replace diseased tissue. Though the use of embryonic stem cells is a controversial issue for some, their potential benefit to medical science is so critical and undeniable to future healing treatments that, for me and for Jacqui, it's a no-brainer.

I mention stem cell research for its undeniable impact on cancer and other diseases, and I quote the President's remarks: "Scientists believe these tiny cells may have the potential to help us understand, and possibly cure, some of our most devastating diseases and conditions. To regenerate a severed spinal cord and lift someone from a wheelchair. To spur insulin production and spare a child from a lifetime of needles. To treat Parkinson's, cancer, heart disease, and others that affect millions of Americans and the people who love them."

And indeed, history was made in Atlanta on October 18th, 2010, when a patient was treated for the first time with a therapy derived from embryonic stem cells manipulated into specialized nerve cells to repair a damaged spinal cord. I wish it would have happened years ago in time to save one of my heroes, Christopher Reeve, and thousands of others afflicted with spinal injuries including so many of our brave soldiers returning from war. May we learn to be wiser and more rational without ridiculous and senseless delays, in allowing medical science to progress forward.

On day ten, Dr. Forman invited me to the 33rd Annual "Celebration of Life" Bone Marrow Transplant Reunion. This is the wonderful gathering of City of Hope transplant survivors, which takes place each year on their beautiful grounds. Obviously, Jacqui couldn't go, but he assured her she'd attend next year. Though I hated leaving her even for a couple of hours, she encouraged me to go. I had no clue what was awaiting me.

As mentioned, City of Hope is set up like a college campus with expansive grounds and lots of grassy areas and beautiful trees. The groundskeepers do a great job maintaining the place. I was told a special meeting would begin by the rose garden, a serene area with every type of rose bush imaginable. At 11 a.m., I watched from a nearby spot a private ceremony that I can only describe as a magical meeting. Every year, the City of Hope hematology folks who organize this event, arrange to bring in one or two bone marrow donors to meet their recipients for the first time.

Though I was respectfully standing to one side, I could see the emotional reunion and could sense the incredible "celebration of life" being shared by the only two people in the world who shared the very same bone marrow that had saved the recipient's life. A 49-year-old gentleman from Germany had become a bone marrow donor in 1995, but it wasn't until 12 years later that finally someone needed his exact marrow type. It was an 8-year-old girl in California. His bone marrow was extracted in Germany, frozen, and sent to COH. And then, in 2009, they flew him in to meet the recipient of his marrow. Wow!

As they were introduced for the first time, I was deeply privileged and moved to watch them hugging in the rose garden.

Hey, I'm a filmmaker, and I know how to crank it up on the screen and do a slow-motion emotional scene with violins reaching a musical climax that would rock your boat, but this was different. This was much, much better than any movie could be…this was real. It was a beautiful, breathless moment I will never forget.

An hour later, in front of 2,500 happy guests made up of transplant recipients and their families, nurses and staff, we listened to the master of ceremonies at the podium. He represents what City of Hope is all about, and is the celebrated head honcho of the hematology transplant unit—our very own Dr. Stephen Forman! After a standing ovation welcomed him to the stage, he told the crowd, "This is the embodiment of the idea that where there is hope, there is life." Truer words were never said nor so thoroughly appreciated by a crowd who truly lived it. Attending this reunion was a special, humbling experience in my life, and to feel the spirit and life force of so many transplant survivors was an unforgettable honor for me.

One of the coolest things I saw at the reunion were recipients wearing name tags with a large numeral that signified how many years they had survived after transplant. The largest number in the crowd was the longest-living bone marrow transplant patient at COH. He wore the amazing number 33! That's why this was the 33rd annual reunion. It all started with this brave guy, who had the first bone

marrow transplant in 1976. He got a standing ovation. *U da man, sir!*

Indeed, "Where there is hope, there is life."

And when it was over, after feeding everyone with a food-fest barbecue, they always take the time for one giant "Celebration of Life" group photo of recipients. (See photo by Amy Cantrell on previous page.) And then, they serve ice cream to everyone.

The gentleman marrow donor who had flown in from Germany for this 2009 reunion (I am respecting his privacy by not naming him here) said, "To know someone's life was saved by my donation is the best feeling one can have, and I am so overjoyed to have been chosen for this act."

Which brings me to my one and only solicitation to the readers of this book. If you want to do something very special during your lifetime, contact your nearest cancer center and become a bone marrow donor. You have to qualify, but the test to join the registry and get HLA-coded is easy and painless. You rub a Q-tip inside your cheek and give a blood sample. You will only have to donate marrow if and when a match is ever needed. Most volunteer donors never actually get to donate their marrow; it's that difficult and improbable to find a match. We never found a perfect match for Jacqui out of 11 million registered bone marrow donors from around the world. But if you ever do match, remember the German donor's words: "… the best feeling one can have."

The same goes for the volunteer donation of cord blood at birth, which all parents should agree to because the umbilical cords are otherwise discarded. If you wish to donate bone marrow and you live near the City of Hope or just want to see a list of "donor qualifications" used by most hospitals, you can find it at: *www.cityofhope.org*.

As of January 2011, City of Hope has performed more than 10,000 bone marrow transplant procedures and maintains one of the most successful transplant programs in the U.S.

Outstanding and bravo to COH! Jacqui's transplant is included in that milestone.

Normal, healthy white cell counts range between 4 and 11 K/uL. Within a few days after the good vibes of that reunion, Jacqui's white cell blood count started climbing. The numbers went from an almost non-existent daily .1K/uL reading to a .3 and then a .4, and then a .6 as the numbers crawled upwards. But before we could get too excited, Dr. Forman warned that it could be Jacqui's old cells having a last hurrah before disappearing and therefore, a false reading of new blood cells. It just wasn't high enough to show a successful graft of the cord blood stem cells. He reminded us it was still too early; it usually didn't happen before three to four weeks. This was the only time the man was a party pooper.

And then…and then, on Day 17…Friday, May 8, 2009… after the usual blood draw at 5 a.m., Dr. Forman walked in, woke us up as always with his usual too-early 7 a.m. visit, and with a big grin, said to Jacqui, "Your white count just hit 1.1… congratulations, you've grafted!"

WOW! Hurrraaayyy! Definitely (in chronological order of our love affair) the sixth-best day of my life! It was an incredible moment! Gigantic! And here I was, Mr. Tough Guy, sobbing once again as I got on the phone and called the world at 8 a.m., yelling over and over to everyone, "JACQUI HAS GRAFTED!" I was nuts with joy. A truly wondrous day.

Grafting so early (17 days) is a great sign that the transplanted cord blood is strong. The transformation from cord blood stem

cells to bone marrow cells had happened successfully. The stem cells from that little girl from Spain were cookin' like a powerful engine in Jacqui's pelvis and her new bone marrow was busily making healthy blood cells. It was effectively doing what healthy bone marrow does. The next few days, the white cell count kept shooting up until it reached normal range. Dr. Forman was right: We had indeed witnessed a medical miracle. And since she had a baby's brand-new blood system, in a year, Jacqui would need all the same vaccinations that babies get at age one to guard against polio, diphtheria, influenza, etc. Amazing!

Seven days later on Thursday, May 14th, Jacqui was released from City of Hope. She wore a mask to protect her from infection. I will never find the right words to convey the elation, joy, and happiness I felt as we drove away. It was one of those magical moments you never forget.

Jacqui no longer had cancer.

The day before she came home, I had the house super-cleaned including steaming carpets and deep-vacuuming air vents. I needed to make our home as dust-proof and bacteria-free as possible. The first 100 days are crucial: Jacqui would be as vulnerable as a newborn during its first three months. I also picked up the doggie from the kennel and had him bathed. He was happy to be home and be allowed around Jacqui. Pollen and dirt particles are culprits for

lung infections, so whenever she went outside, even just on our balcony, she wore a face mask. She couldn't do her usual gardening that she loves. When her birthday came up, her group of BFFs came over and wore masks so she would not have to. Jacqui has great women buds such as Linda, Val, Dawn, and Cyn.

For the following months, we travelled each week to City of Hope to get Jacqui's blood drawn and have Dr. Forman adjust her numerous medications. As this was all part of the clinical trial, there were no set protocols. Every patient reacts in his or her own way to the transplant, and every patient must be monitored and the dosages carefully calibrated to produce the best results. Dr. Forman was skillful with this juggling process as he closely monitored Jacqui's progress.

When all the data from this national trial is concluded, I am confident that new "low-intensity prep and double cord transplant" healing protocols will be established if Jacqui is any indication of the success of this treatment. She's certainly an exemplary ambassador for its effectiveness.

After 100 days, Jacqui no longer needed to wear a mask outdoors. Going to public areas like markets and movies became possible. But she carried a mask in her purse in case someone with a cold sneezed at a nearby table or she ran into a dust flare-up in the Hollywood Hills on her dog walks at her favorite Runyon Park. As her strength slowly built up and her energy levels returned to normal, she started pondering her future.

Jacqui is multi-talented and she's famous for her homemade salad dressing, which I can best describe as a wowy-zowy lemon/garlic, spicy-rich taste explosion. Since she was home healing and with spare time on her hands for the first time in her adult life, she did not shy away from the opportunity to enter the food business, a brand-new world to both of us. From her kitchen, she designed delicious salad dressings for the specialty food market. Like her taste and style in clothing, her salad dressings are high-end. She had previously taken marketing classes, and now she put them to good use designing her packaging and creating her business plan.

Her niece Kristel, a gifted graphic artist, was hired to execute Jacqui's vision of her artisan label designs. We got lucky and found a food manufacturer who graciously taught us the food biz. Jacqui launched her *Jacqui's Secret* salad dressings at the Fancy Food Show in San Francisco in January 2010. By the time you read this, it will hopefully be available at your specialty markets for your next salad treat.

As with this book's revenue, Jacqui is donating a portion of her salad dressing profits to City of Hope. So please make those delicious dressings a stock item in your fridge. Jacqui adapted her stylish expertise from dressing women to dressing salads.

Look good, eat well, and as we had been reminded with her illness, enjoy precious life. Make it all memorable and delicious.

Pass *Jacqui's Secret* and bon appétit!

Action/Cut, Film Festivals, and Final Magic Notes

When I super-hustled and lucked into my first professional hire as a director in Hollywood (Chapter 8) on a prime time TV show, I wasn't ready. At all! Yes, I had gone to two film schools, made shorts and a miniseries in North Carolina, and won festival awards, but when it came to a directing methodology, I had no clue. I needed a technique to organize my first 65-page script on a professional hire (*Buck Rogers*) for a major studio (Universal) and a network (NBC). Facing an unimaginable, lightning-fast schedule of seven days of prep, followed by a mad-fast seven days of shooting, I had absolutely no idea how to begin such a gargantuan task.

I did not know how to break down a dramatic script by scenes, organize the storytelling into a workable shoot, visualize characters for casting choices, make crucial departmental notes, and gather location list ideas, all at breakneck speed. For example, descriptive writing in TV land is sparse. Most of the time a location is written "EXT. SCHOOL" or "INT. RESTAURANT,"

etc. There are many types of restaurants, but which would work best for this particular scene and how it reads? Do you need a bright, family-type restaurant, or an ethnic specialty, or a romantic place with mood lighting and green plants, or harsh red-leather booths for a Mafia dinner scene, or a biker's den with sawdust floors and wooden tables to choreograph a fight scene like the one in Patrick Swayze's *Road House?* I'll take this opportunity to express my respect for Patrick's incredibly brave cancer fight and for his love affair with his wife Lisa. Though I never met him, we shared a friendship with fight coordinator and martial arts legend Benny "The Jet" Urquidez. I send Lisa my strength to find her smile again.

There is a professional methodology to filmmaking, to directing—a creative and organizational approach—and no one at both top film schools I attended taught me any of this. I discovered it's something you start figuring out in the trenches with your back to the wall and, hopefully, with help from industry peers. At the time, Rod Holcomb (*ER, The Good Wife*), one of the top TV directors who is still working today, was kind enough to show me how to break down a script on one of my first series jobs. Twenty years later, I was thinking about how to help others learn this methodology of creative filmmaking and assist them in their professional pursuits. My inspiration was to provide the training I wished I had been taught, starting with something as simple as how to break down a script and prepare departmental notes. This is how you develop a director's vision for the story you're about to tell, how you organize the making of your film, and communicate your visual intentions to your crew. For example, when I once directed a murder mystery, I had visualized bright red as the stylish color of the film. I asked all the departments from wardrobe to props to set decorating to

work on a black and white palette devoid of color so whenever there was blood (or lipstick), it really stood out and stylized the storytelling. It worked well and gave the episode a unique, 1950s *film noir* appeal. None of that was in the script. This is an example of the creative vision a director brings to the storytelling.

After years of making notes on teaching ideas, it finally occurred to me that the best way to learn creative filmmaking was by spending time with a director and reviewing his (or her) film process by studying actual scenes he had directed. A director had to be willing to share his work process but, unfortunately, it's usually a private matter few care to explain. Of those willing, not very many are gifted communicators. Also, dailies (the raw footage) are almost always discarded after a job, making it more difficult to develop the type of efficient "learn by showing" seminar I had in mind. But I had kept my dailies on most of the shows I directed, just for my own reference process. If I had the opportunity in film schools to spend this kind of time studying scripts and dailies with an industry director, it would have been much easier for me when I finally managed to get hired professionally to direct.

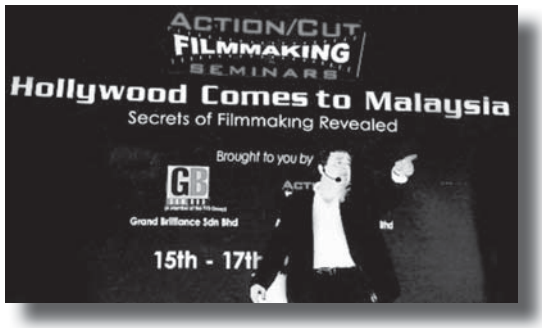
So I designed such a film course using a wide range of scenes I had directed to empower filmmakers to develop an approach to tackle any scene that might come up. The most efficient way to quickly learn creative filmmaking is with *scene study screenings*, which start with scenes on paper and the director's explanation of his vision. The director's shot list is then reviewed using location drawings, and

every planned shot is explained to make clear its purpose within the editing scheme for that scene. Next come the viewing of the crucial shot-by-shot raw dailies, which show every shot on the shot list as it actually happened. Of course, it's only necessary to show *one take* of each shot, each set-up. This is followed by viewing clips of the final edited scenes complete with sound mix, effects, and music as it was shown on TV or at movie theaters. To *see and hear* the actual making of that scene, and then show its *final outcome* shortens the learning curve dramatically.

This effective "from page to screen" teaching method became the two-day, 16-hour creative film course: the Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminar. It has taught thousands of attendees at over 100 seminars I've conducted over the last ten years across the USA. I also added invaluable topics during the seminar—from how to raise indie financing to finding distribution—identifying the passion to inspire every filmmaker's career, and how to assemble an all-important showreel for directors as a work sample to break into the industry.

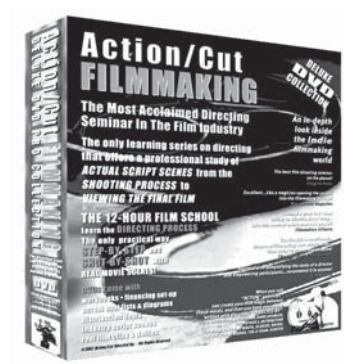
I gave my first Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminar in 1999 at the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences lecture hall. It was such a success that some of the folks who traveled from other states to attend volunteered to bring it to their cities as our event producers. Working around my production schedule, we organized spring and fall seminar tours in major cities including Miami, Chicago, New York, Austin, Los Angeles, Houston, Boston, and Philly. It was a pleasure to meet filmmakers and screenwriters across the country while teaching this seminar. It was gratifying to see how jazzed and focused attendees became when their passions were reignited to pursue their film dreams.

The Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminar went international when we were booked to bring it to foreign lands—from



the beautiful city of Vancouver to the exotic Kuala Lumpur capital of Malaysia, where over a thousand Southeast Asian attendees hungry for film knowledge made up our largest audience ever. Many came from nearby Singapore, which has a thriving film industry. Three years later, we were invited to return to Malaysia for a second Action/Cut Conference. This time Jacqui and I stayed longer to discover one of the most remote and beautiful resorts in the world. This was a paradise dream spot on its own private island called Pankgor Laut. One of the cabins there is named "the Pavarotti"; it was Luciano's favorite vacation spot.

After receiving requests for the seminar from folks who did not live in the cities or countries we visited, we taped a seminar and made it available on DVD as a home film school collection of scene studies, complete with script pages, dailies, and finished clips. We offer it at *www.actioncut.com*, and thousands of filmmakers from around the world have purchased it. It has become a popular educational film course, available in film stores and online. Many film schools have purchased the DVD Collection for their libraries.



Within a few years, we were receiving emails from seminar graduates who had followed my advice to start making shorts if they were serious about pursuing a film career. They were asking what to do next. As we all know, there is almost no

commercial market for short films. They are primarily used as showreels, samples of work to help find financing for projects or to find representation in the industry or, best of all, to secure employment. The primary showcase for shorts are film festivals and competitions where you hope to make some noise and get exposure by picking up awards and winning valuable prizes. You also get to rub shoulders with bigwig agents, managers, and producers who can help move your career forward.

Most festivals, however, are really geared toward the bigger fish—the feature film. The short film section is usually treated more as the black sheep or second cousin. This is true for most festivals. The exceptions are the better known events such as Toronto, Sundance, and South by Southwest who value their shorts programming. There are more than a thousand film fests across the U.S.; most cities have one. Some specialize in shorts and offer prizes such as plaques, trophies, wine bottles, and T-shirts, but such prizes don't help further a film career. I had no idea this was the sad state of affairs for shorts filmmakers until our graduates brought it to my attention. I started to research the fest world.

When I realized there was a need for better career assistance for promising filmmakers who make great shorts, I organized a unique package of 100 meaningful prizes that can be helpful to festival winners. They include invaluable networking meetings with industry players including execs, producers, screenwriters, distributors, a legendary production designer, an Emmy-winning cinematographer, and world-class animators. Other prizes offer production software from Entertainment Partners, free Panavision equipment, and cash to assist with the cost of flying to LA to attend meetings. We launched the annual Action/Cut Short Film Competition in 2004. Word spread fast within the fest world, and it was an immediate hit with filmmakers.

I wanted to make sure Action/Cut was not going to be just another festival in a very packed field. Besides the unusual prize packages offered, the two most distinguishable differences between Action/Cut and most other fests are: 1) all films entered are "accepted" into the competition and go through the industry jury process—there is no pre-selection to qualify, and 2) rather than screen winning films in a program for a night or weekend to a limited audience at a local movie theater (usually not well attended), we were one of the first to stream the winning films online to a world audience.

Action/Cut promotes the winning films and their filmmakers with personalized award presentations and their screenings on our website year-round. It's Action/Cut's intention to help filmmakers gain recognition, provide networking doors to the industry, and assist in moving their careers forward. That's what winning a competition should do for a filmmaker.

I'm proud of all our winning filmmakers in our five Best of Categories Awards: Fiction Live Action, Student Films, Documentaries, Animation, and Music Videos. I'm especially proud of the very talented Action/Cut Grand Prize Winners: the best film, selected annually, across all five categories. Winners are listed by year on our website. It is my sincere hope they become important filmmakers in years to come and were inspired and encouraged by winning Action/Cut. Every year, I look forward to meeting the next year's winners and seeing their cinematic shorts.

As with all the arts, passion is key when pursuing filmmaking, and my closing comment at seminars and on the home film school DVD set is: "Every time you call *ACTION* and then *CUT,* you create your own film magic in between those two words. When you're finally all done, you get your name written with the credit *Directed by*. It doesn't get much better than that!"

As I write these final notes, two years have passed since Jacqui's initial diagnosis. I am so grateful and delighted that she is doing great. She is looking terrific. Her strength and energy are returning, and she is active with her interests and friends. I have basked in delight in having her home every day. We are truly happier than ever.

I would encourage everyone to fully appreciate and nurture the sources of love we are lucky to have. If not, we may lose them one way or another. I've seen close friends suddenly file for divorce. What we all thought was working, obviously wasn't. It's always rough for the person who's being left, who never saw it coming, and it's always terribly hurtful if kids are involved.

This is not a Dr. Phil advice book, but I strongly feel that before you can truly love, you have to be secure and confident with yourself. Before I met Jacqui, no matter how a relationship ended, I always welcomed my time being single again. Even if I had been dumped, I welcomed being alone and regrouping. I always felt this was important.

For me, it was an opportunity to refocus, to recharge. I felt a process of renewal, of growth in moving on, and looked forward to my immediate future. Maybe it was because I saw my life as a great journey, a great adventure, and I readily accepted there were going to be good days, bad days, and some *blah days* that were just going to get rained out. I accepted that paradigm. I

was at peace with it and so it was easier to roll with the punches. This attitude has come in handy on many life issues. This is a pragmatist point of view: Enjoy life but it is not always rosy, deal with whatever issue is the reality, no BS, and let's get on with it as best we can.

It's imperative to be a happy individual living the most interesting and fulfilling life you can while single. Hurray for work, careers, dating, hobbies, travel, family, and good friends. You have to stay busy and find fulfillment in the joys of life, and most of all, you have to *enjoy being you*…to like who you are. That's a biggie. You have to be inspired to live your great adventure and make it the most fulfilling and most fun it can be. This is a responsibility we all owe ourselves and we must embrace it, whether we find true love or not. We only get one shot at it.

I was a secure and happy single guy till 34. Then, I got especially lucky. Each day of the past 28 years has been joyous because of the luck I had when Jacqui came into my life. I nurtured it and value living a life of true love. I never take a day with Jacqui for granted. I know I am lucky. I am aware of it and I cherish it. All my friends and family know I do. It's not a secret.

Film. Whether it was making film magic or seeing great films, my life in filmmaking is, and has been, full of riches I will always treasure. I have worked with some wonderful people, and every project has had its own unique challenges to overcome. I am proud of the shows and films I have made. I always gave them my best visual creativity. I've been asked if I would make my films and TV shows the same way if given a second chance, and my answer has always been "Yes." I've never understood people who say they would change all their work if they could.

I am grateful for the opportunities that came my way, and I never sweat whatever were the ones that didn't. I wish I had done more but that's because I am passionate about filmmaking. I love the craft and feel privileged for the work I did accomplish and for making a good living in the film industry. I found the all-important passion in film school, which has served me well throughout a 30-year career that took me from London to the lights of Hollywood.

As for cancer, its future is bleak. Every day, many wonderfully bright and talented folks work tirelessly to eradicate it from the human experience. With the wondrous treatment that healed Jacqui, I can confidently state that the magic of manipulating stem cells into specialized cells is one of the great keys to the future of medical healing. We should do all we can to hasten the process; we owe it to ourselves and to the next generations.

Jacqui at her first City of Hope Bone Marrow Transplant Reunion with the man himself, the master of ceremonies, and her world-class transplanter, Dr. Stephen Forman.

With Jacqui, there is always magic in the air. On April 30, 2010, I had the pleasure of accompanying her to the 34th City of Hope Bone Marrow Transplant Reunion. It was her rookie year and she had a proud #1 on her name tag. Just a year earlier, Jacqui was in neutropenic isolation waiting for her transplant to graft. Taking her to this reunion was especially joyful and gratifying for me since I had attended alone the previous year. This was again a very special, life-affirming event which we now look forward to attending every year. And as the head of hematology oncology,

and representing the doctors and nurses who work in that department, Stephen is the one they all come to see to simply say: Thank you.

The day I met Dr. Forman, I told him that doctors who heal angels get extra special kudos from upstairs, and now I can assure him he has won a ton of kudos from the gods of the universe. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you, Stephen, for healing my angel.

There is, indeed, magic in the air!

Epilogue

Mandatory: An IQ Test for Politicians

On May 11, 2010, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Jacqui and I received a phone call from my urologist, who had performed a biopsy a few days earlier. It was the second call in our lifetime announcing that one of us had cancer.

As disturbing as such news is, I had a completely different reaction than when I first heard about Jacqui's leukemia. I was much more devastated by Jacqui's news than mine. I had read articles that reported a caregiver's emotions may be more intensely triggered by a loved one's diagnosis than his or her own bad news. I can vouch that it's true. As soon as I heard and for weeks following, I felt like I was in a daze, a twilight zone, functional but in some hazy ether. Of course, I knew that prostate cancer is a much slower-spreading cancer and has nowhere near the same urgency for immediate treatment as leukemia. But when you know you have cancer, it weighs on your mind, your mood, your sense of doom. Your body, even if painless, feels broken.

After looking at my few options, I chose to do the surgery to remove my prostate. Wait for what? I didn't see any point. Some men prefer to ride it out, especially if they are elderly with not much time left anyway. Others decide to take action when it's too late and the cancer has spread to other organs. It's a complicated surgery, a delicate procedure. The latest technique uses a Da Vinci robotic system to steady a surgeon's hands into precise movements and allows a minimally invasive operation that runs about three hours. I was lucky as my cancer hadn't spread, and I was declared cancer-free after my prostate was removed and the biopsies were completed.

It disturbs me greatly that both Jacqui and I have had cancer. That's two out of two in our household. We know and hear of so many around us who also have some type of cancer. People worry about pandemics of bird flus, but what about cancer epidemics? Why are so many affected? Is it something in our air, water, or food? Could it be an environmental disease caused by something quite basic that no one has yet figured out? Why are healthy cells breaking down? After many decades of research, it is still a mystery why some become afflicted and others don't.

The prevalence of cancer is increasing around the world and is expected to grow by 50% in the next two decades. The National Cancer Institute, which tracks more than 100 types of cancer, reported more than 1.5 million new cases diagnosed in the U.S. in 2010. What's going on?

Jacqui and I are lucky and so grateful that we are both in remission. We are planning to volunteer to join the speakers' program at City of Hope, which coordinates with organizations across the country to provide speakers who have walked the walk. We look forward to meeting with the growing number of people interested in sharing experiences about this disease, to

helping educate the public regarding cancer awareness, and to raising funds to continue the fight to eradicate cancer from the human experience.

I love cinema. Good movies invigorate me. Whenever I see a special film, it reminds me of my passion for the craft and why I chose filmmaking as my career. It doesn't happen very often, maybe twice or three times on a good year. When I see a run of lousy movies, it depresses me. I just can't believe the amount of money that was wasted. I'm not a fan of the high-stakes studio system betting each year that their couple of outrageously expensive blockbuster sequels (tent poles) will save the day and make up for the many mediocre films they throw out there. Each new studio film comes with an ad campaign of at least $25 million, enough to buy one good weekend of business with a barrage of TV ads, before the lousy word of mouth spreads. How many unfunny romantic comedies and boring teen slacker films can they make? It boggles the mind.

Jacqui with a cool monster on the *Retribution* set.

Can you name your five favorite movies? Why do we even have favorite movies? What's so special about the shared experience of sitting in a dark theater watching reels of film going through a projector at 24 frames-per-second? Film has captivated audiences ever since the first public screening showed (on a hand-cranked silent projector) the shot of a steaming locomotive approaching the camera, causing panic among the audience who thought they were going to get run over. Cinema has spun its magic ever since,

its imaginative stories have taken us from Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp" character to the spectacular visual wonders of *Avatar's* Pandora world.

Unfortunately, the celluloid film strip days are just about gone forever. The digital age is exploding, and "digital" is the new film sheriff in town. Within the next decade, film projectors will no longer be used. Instead, movie theaters will beam a digital signal from a satellite feed onto their screens. A great new age of film recording and distribution is upon us, but so is a very sad historical changeover. The death of perforated film stock is here and yet it served us so brilliantly, delivering magical storytelling and cinematic gems during its first century—from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *On the Waterfront* to *Casablanca* to *The Godfather* to *Jaws* to *Gladiator*. Film purist and legendary director David Lean (*Lawrence of Arabia*) must be rolling in his grave.

One of my few regrets is not getting the opportunity to befriend great filmmakers I admire, such as Steven Spielberg. He was my idol early in my career, and I am in awe of his work. The closest I got to meeting him was when he spoke to my class at the AFI and by name when Universal signed me to the Spielberg Deal (Chapter 6). I wish I could hang and talk film with greats such as Ridley Scott, his brother Tony Scott (who directed one of my favorite films *Crimson Tide*), Chris Nolan, Peter Jackson, and of course, James Cameron, whom I had hired for my first feature (Chapter 9) 30 years ago when he was just getting started. These guys are always involved in fascinating projects and dedicate their absolute best to making masterful films.

When it comes to passion and dedication to the film craft, I stand with these wonderful storytellers of cinema whose works always inspire me. They include Wolfgang Petersen, Robert

Zemeckis, Barry Levinson, and so many others. And yes, I wish I had shared glasses of good wine and talked shop with Martin and Francis into the wee hours of the night. As mentioned, my *Lookin' Italian* film was an homage to Scorsese and Italian-American culture. The closest I got to Coppola was when my cousin Philip Harari played James Caan's kid when less than a year old in *The Godfather*. He was the crying baby (dressed in blue) at the dinner table and when the family welcomed Brando back from the hospital. And yes, Philip still gets residuals for crying on cue 40 years later. I also had the privilege of directing John Marley (see photo) who guest-starred for me on a TV show. We teased him mercilessly about that infamous horse's head in his bed. That's what you get for refusing an offer you shouldn't refuse! And finally, a nod to a film outlaw who just passed away at 74, Dennis Hopper, another legend I wish I had befriended.

I am grateful for all the projects that came my way—every documentary, short, TV show, and feature film I got to direct, produce, and/or write. To take words on a page and interpret a creative cinematic storytelling vision on a screen is truly one of the most thrilling and passionate endeavors I can imagine. I encourage all who love the silver screen to use their passion to create their own film magic. There are few professions more thrilling on this planet.

Finally, I will take the liberty to digress and share a political thought or two in the last pages of my book. Why? Because I truly love our country and feel compelled to speak out. I am

proud of President Obama and our First Lady Michelle. It feels special to, once again, trust and admire the leadership of our country. Regardless of your politics, surely we can all agree that the moral compass and acute intelligence Obama brings to the job are superlative, and should be required character traits for all our political leaders. Thus, I earnestly propose that all who wish to run for any major public office should qualify by passing *an intelligence IQ test for politicians*.

Why should we not have our best and brightest lead us, from all parties? We certainly want the brightest doctors to operate on us and the best pilots to fly our airplanes, right? Why is there such an ultra-low bar for leadership, as exemplified by super-numbskull Rod Blagojevich? Jesse Ventura or Christine O'Donnell, anyone? We give tests for college admissions, law schools, driving, flying, citizenship, and a myriad other qualifiers. Why not a required *intelligence exam for public office*? You don't pass, you can't run, no matter how much money or ego you've got. We could sleep at night knowing Palin would never qualify even with a cheat sheet written on her palm, full use of Glenn's moronic blackboards, and unlimited phone lifelines to Rush, the hypocritical king of all divisive buffoons!

I am also disgusted (as I believe most Americans are) by politicians who blatantly lie because they believe we're all morons ready to buy anything they sell. John McCain's "Country First" presidential campaign motto was a shameful utter lie. McCain knew he could never win the presidency with yawn-boring old suits like Romney or Huckabee for his VP, and wanted the "idiot American voters" to think he was making a bold, new-generational move to thwart the Obama Express by picking unknown Palin. The fact that he hardly vetted her clearly shows how shallow and manipulative his decision was. I believe that

presidential candidates who don't bother to thoroughly check a potential running mate should be charged with an offense against the nation.

If McCain knew that silly Sarah was so intellectually challenged that she would inanely claim that the proximity of Alaska to the Russian border gave her foreign policy expertise, would he still have picked her *if* she guaranteed him a win? Absolutely! You bet he would have, because all John McCain wanted was to become president at absolutely any cost, including the unacceptable cost of our nation's well-being. Given McCain's age of 72 (in 2008) and his history of heart trouble, Palin as president was a very possible nightmare disaster for our country!

Even if McCain cringed at thoughts of her possible succession (as surely he must have), his megalomania for power at any cost ruled the day. "Country first," my butt! That was blatant "Country last—JOHN FIRST!" We must watch out for self-serving hypocrites, especially the ones waving patriotic flags, no matter how many smokescreens they put up. For example, the repeat-it-forever-for-the-dummies farcical jackass creation of "Joe the Plumber," as if Republicans were ever known to favor the working man, who's always at the bottom of their trickle-down mantra. And how can we forget Palin's winking promise as she robotically parroted that John was the world's "greatest maverick." Puke bag, please. I bet Sarah has no clue what being a maverick means. McCain himself has said (when not running for office) that he is no maverick, and has no such record as his peers in Congress would attest.

We need much more honest, bright folks to lead our nation. We must demand true moral character and intellectual ability of our candidates, on both sides of the aisle, before we vote them into office. Our two parties must become much more responsible

in representing us and abandon the current model where the minority party stops anything and everything the majority tries to do. Our system has become a moronic display of paralysis, regardless of which party is in charge. What happened to the idea of a dynamic and progressive government that moves forward on all fronts to keep the American Dream alive and well? America surely deserves it. (Don't we?)

In the 2010 elections, the Tea Baggers were so fed up with the status quo leadership that in mindless desperation, they were willing to elect the most idiotic to lead us. Candidates wearing Nazi uniforms for fun, swinging baseball bats as weapons, assuring us they're really not a witch? In *our* America? That's the best we got? This is so shamefully scary. I propose a new group to keep those crazies in check called the Coffee Grinders, led by Bill Maher. Let's grind the Baggers!

Is getting our brightest minds to lead us such a bad idea? We need and deserve great leadership. We cannot afford the paralysis and decline of America due to inferior leaders and senseless, moronic partisanship. I trust and hope this nation's destiny is not to fail ourselves, our founders, and the world. Life on this planet is about to get real serious.

Which brings me to *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, which should be required reading for all. There should be mandatory classes to educate everyone on the upcoming worldwide "Energy-Climate Era" crisis he describes. As Tom warns, "This is not about the whales anymore. It's about us. And what we do about the challenges of energy and climate, conservation and preservation, will tell our kids who we really are." This sobering, scary, and brilliant book explains how America can lead the green revolution

in the 21st century. I implore President Obama to implement the progressive ideas and build the new energy infrastructure outlined in this book. As Friedman encourages, the president should leave as his legacy the commitment to "transform the future of America and the world from natural disasters, deprivation, and suffering …to hope, coexistence, and cooperation." Yes, YES we can! Yes, we MUST! Read Tom's book!

When it comes to intellectual thought and political wisdom, it doesn't get better than journalist Fareed Zakaria. He writes a worldview column at *Time* magazine and hosts *GPS*, his own political talk show on CNN's Sunday schedule. He recently wrote a "Last Chance" article in his column about America being at a strategic impasse. He argues that 2011 will be crucial in how we handle our budget deficit, which may be the most important barometer of our country's future well-being. Zakaria rightfully warns that Washington's inability to grapple with major long-term problems, and the paralysis of any significant progressive reforms from the right's "alternative universe" of fear and nonsense (my two words) thwarting any rational decision-making, could turn out to be "the point at which the U.S. began its long and seemingly irreversible decline." Sad and very true. The financial health or sickness of America will undoubtedly decide our fate.

We are at a critical historic time when we need to be our best and bravest, not our most fearful and idiotic. The extreme right is reacting out of ignorance and fear of adaptation. They are desperately hanging on to an American way of life that is no longer a reality. They want things to be like the old simpler days when America watched *Father Knows Best* from affordable homes with white picket fences, and Confederate flag stickers were displayed on pickup trucks with rifle racks across rear

windows. Mindless fantasies and inane white trash time is over, folks. The real world is catching up.

Everyone wants the government to bring the "jobs" back. They're never coming back. The blue-collar factory life that built this country in the last century is over. Those assembly line jobs no longer exist. Technology and outsourcing is the new global reality. We're never going to get our unemployment rate lower than 10% again unless we improve our educational system and graduate brighter people with 21st century skills. We have to adapt to a more challenging world and a technologically competitive job market. This will take a few generations, even if we do it right. Life on this planet changes, moves on, progresses forward, whether you want it to or not. We must embrace the coming new world and adapt to its complex realities. We must find the wisdom to solve massively difficult problems while staying strong and focused to win the harsh challenges ahead which include inevitable wars and critical shortages, such as energy and water. Our world is quickly moving into crisis mode and only the strong, if any, will survive this century.

May we make sure our brightest get to lead us so we can tackle U.S. and world challenges ahead with intelligence and sensible rationale. May we find the courage and wisdom to make the bold decisions, and be free from the shackles of fear and mediocrity. May the Force be with us!

And may the Force always be with Jacqui, who is strong and healthy, more beautiful than ever, and keeps getting excellent reports at every check-up. She's a great success story of the national trial she participated in with her cord transplant. Hopefully soon, this treatment will become protocol and help many aml-leukemia patients with a milder and more efficient cure.

I end with a kiss to Jacqui, and a couple of pictures of favorite moments from our Renaissance wedding. Not many guys have dueled for their bride, and not many guys consider themselves the luckiest and the happiest of men. For that, I am extremely grateful to the universe, and I look forward to every day of my enchanted journey with her. For me, Jacqui is my heaven on earth.

And finally, thank you to my readers for sharing the cappuccinos, the stories, the dramas, and the laughs. This is how I've rolled through it all, a magical life of filmmaking and loving, and I continue to do so with great delight. I encourage each and every one of you to appreciate your very own great life journey, every day of it, and the unique wonders of your own special magic.

Dare to dream…I did. From one magician to another: Peace.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my parents, Suzy and Ed, for all they did for me, which is obviously more than I can ever express. I especially admire their courage to immigrate to America to give the best possible future and opportunities to their kids. It was a scary time for Jewish refugees after World War II and I'm sure it was tough leaving the only world they had known in Egypt. But they worked hard, persevered, and succeeded in providing the American Dream for their family.

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And with thanks to all my readers, I wish you good health, great love in your lives, and I'll see you at the movies. *Roll Camera!*

About the Author

Guy Magar was nine years old when he left Egypt in 1958. His family immigrated to the U.S., where he grew up in Middletown, New York. Graduating from Rutgers University with a B.A. in philosophy, Guy began his film career at the London Film School. *Soup Run,* his first short about the homeless, won a Special Jury Prize at the 1974 San Francisco International Film Fest.

In 1978, Guy relocated to Los Angeles to attend the American Film Institute.His first dramatic short, *Once Upon an Evening* (made for $500 at the AFI) earned him a seven-year deal at Universal Studios. He soon began directing network TV dramas in the action/adventure genre. Guy has over 100 film credits including episodes of series *La Femme Nikita, Sliders, The A-Team, Blue Thunder, Fortune Hunter, The Young Riders*, *Lawless*, *Hunter,* and the CBS pilot/Movie of the Week *Dark Avenger.* He also directed 35 episodes of the studio daytime drama *Capitol*. In 1995, Guy was nominated for a Golden Reel Award for his television work on the series *Nowhere Man*.

Guy's feature film credits include *Lookin' Italian* (starring TV "Friends" co-star Matt LeBlanc and singer Lou Rawls in their

first film); *Stepfather 3* which launched HBO's World Premiere Series; and the cult thriller *Retribution* which will be released for the first time on DVD on its 25th anniversary in 2012. His most recent feature directing credit is *Children of the Corn: Revelation* based on Stephen King's original story for Dimension Films.

Guy is founder of the Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminars, which for the last ten years, has provided the acclaimed "page to screen" industry workshop—a two-day educational overview of the creative filmmaking process. Action/Cut has taught thousands of filmmakers at over 100 weekend seminar events during annual USA and international tours. His seminar is offered as a 12-hour DVD home film course which sells worldwide in stores and online.

Guy is also founder of the annual Action/Cut Short Film Competition, which provides an opportunity for filmmakers to showcase their talents. The one-of-a-kind prize packages are designed to help launch film careers and assist in opening industry doors. Action/Cut was one of the first to stream winning films on the Internet, which can be viewed year-round on its website. *MovieMaker* magazine reviewed the Action/Cut Competition as one of the "Top 10 Shorts Festival in the World for Filmmakers."

Guy provides a consultancy service for directors and screenwriters, and private coaching for actors. In 2011, Guy published his memoir entitled *Kiss Me Quick Before I Shoot*. He can be reached through this book's website *www.kissmequickbeforeishoot.com*, or at his Action/Cut Filmmaking Seminars and Short Film Competition website *www.actioncut.com*. Guy lives in the Hollywood Hills with Jacqui, his beautiful wife of 26 years.