



Staff/Contributors

Publisher/Editor
Chris Wehner
(chris@moviepartners.com)

Associate/Copy Editor
Craig Griffin

Art Director
Chas Weygant

Interviews
Fred Topel
Harry Caul
Kenna McHugh

Contributors
Michael B. Druxman
Jean-François Allaire
Jim Vejvoda

Production/Advertising
Phil Melfi/Joe Melfi
(phil@moviepartners.com/joe@moviepartners.com)

Production & Business Affairs
Amy Laczkowski
(amy@moviepartners.com)

Screenwriters Monthly

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Screenwriters Monthly
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P.O. Box 9010
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editor's note
dancing in park city

If you've ever been to these little ski towns then you know that you're in for some walking, and I'm not talking about a leisurely stroll. It's treadmill time. Uphill, power walking. Often you're frantically trying to get to the theater in order to get in line early enough to get a seat. I've been attending the Telluride Film Festival for several years and it's a similar experience, though it's not as big or as Hollywoodized as Park City, Utah.

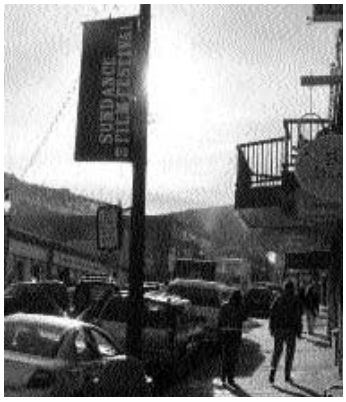
Sundance is a trip. I mean literally, for some people. You'll see long legged blondes in high-heels and mini skirts slipping and sliding down snow covered Main Street, just hoping to spot Val Kilmer or Ben Affleck.



Before I get into my thoughts on this year's festivities at Park City I want to give those of you who are considering attending for the first time next year some advice. When traveling to a "mountain town" film festival (I'm from Chicago) you'll need three things most of all: First, carry a small backpack containing reading material, bottled water, camera, and chocolate. Second, bring money, as much as you can spare. Third, and lastly, have reservations and do so months in advance. Why? I'll tell you.


forest whitaker

When you're waiting in long lines to see a movie you'll get bored after the first 45 minutes, and then realize you have 45 to go. You'll want some water, because you just hiked up a mountain to get to the theater. You'll want substance too. I suggest chocolate as it's a good way to meet people. Just offer some and you'll have a conversation going. Helps pass the time. The camera is for when you spot J-Lo, looking absolutely stunning, and that guy she's with, hanging out on Main Street. You'll want a picture. Money is a good thing. You can't buy a sandwich, a bag of chips, and a drink for less than ten bucks. And, oh yeah, a room. I was standing in line waiting to check-in at the Radisson (a great out-of-the-way location with easy access to downtown.) and a couple walked in asking if there were "any rooms available." They were from out-of-town, and in Park City for the festival. You just don't find any rooms in a small ski town. Going to a bigger city where you can find a cheap hotel a few miles from the events does not happen here. And on top of that, bring some friends so they can help pay for the room. It will be a couple hundred dollars a night. Oh, and before I forget, always wear black. Everyone else does.



Here's some of the highlights from my experiences in Park City: (Note, there are several festivals going on: Slamdance, Nodance, Shedance, Tromadance, and the list could go on. I checked out as many as I could.)

SLAMDANCE: There was considerable buzz over *Melvin Goes to Dinner.* It was a nice film with some good laughs. The story is about Melvin, a loser who sleeps in his office. The story goes nowhere fast when Melvin goes to dinner, and during the course of the entire evening, and after several bottles of wine, deep secrets are revealed. An interesting film and a taut screenplay by Michael Blieden. For me, though, the most intriguing film was *Robot Stories* by writer-director Greg Pak. It is one of the better screenplays of independent film in 2002. Exploring the human condition by constructing four separate stories, all connected thematically, *Robot Stories* proposes deep intellectual questions. Mr. Pak has brought an interesting point of view to our technology driven culture.

NODANCE: Wasn't able to spend as much time here as I wanted. This year's event was hosted by Forest Whitaker. Unfortunately, perhaps the worst movie I've ever seen took place here. Mike Figgis' *Hotel* is an abysmal mess of a movie. A plotless movie, as Figgis was proud to proclaim before the showing. A spineless, soulless movie that somehow attracted such actors as Salma Hayek, John Malkovich, and David Schwimmer to participate in it's absurdity. Figgis is the kind of director that auteur's everywhere love to see succeed. His "improvised" multi-camera, split screen, MTV style movies are becoming scary. His movies are about "the shot" and the moment, not a cohesive story that one can actually understand. There is nothing redeeming about this film.

SHEDANCE: Attended a free screening of several short films, a couple of which were dreadful, but the one that wasn't made it all worth it. *Daddy's Day*, produced by Elizabeth Sweeten. The short film tells the simple story of a little girl getting ready for school. She is perplexed about the upcoming day's events. It's "Father's Day," and apparently her father can not make it. You get the impression he is simply out of town. Her mother consoles her and sends her off to school. But something is not right, and you get a sense of it. Then, at school, when the other kids are finished and the little girl asks to tell the class about her father, who we learn was a firefighter on September 11th. When the short film was over I do not believe there was a dry eye in sight.

SUNDANCE: The most interesting film that I saw was the *The Station Agent*, written and directed by Tom McCarthy. Fin McBride is a young man who on a daily basis is stared at, laughed at, and also photographed. The reason? He is a dwarf. Wanting only to be left alone, he hides away on trains where human interaction is minimal. When he ends up living in a defunct train station in New Jersey he is drawn into the lives of two loners, Olivia and Joe. The interaction that is captured between them is subtly humorous and affectionate. A charming and simple movie isolated in a unique environment. A story that is surprisingly lacking in drama and plot, but makes up for it with some fine writing and acting. *Thirteen* was a captivating movie. Co-written by Nikkie Reed, 13-year-old co-star, the movie is a cautionary tale of teen angst. Tracy is thirteen and sick of being the golden girl. So she starts fooling around, and experimenting with oral sex, drugs, stealing, and tongue piercing. The movie was a bit sensationalistic, but effective and with a lot of truth to it. Finally, *Levity*, by writer Ed Solomon. A somewhat overhyped film that was a little disappointing. I wanted to love this film, not just like it. It's the story of an ex-con (Billy Bob Thornton) freed from prison after 19 years for killing a teen during an attempted robbery. The whole time he kept the picture of the teenager on his cell wall. After being released he takes a personal journey of redemption, with the help of a minister (Morgan Freeman) and two women (Kirsten Dunst, Holly Hunter). The story wanted to operate on a much deeper level than most of the movies you'll see nowadays. I commend Solomon for that. This was a personal film, I have no doubt. But in the end, it doesn't work because of a sub-par screenplay. The performances, as you can imagine, were wonderful.



Attending these small ski town festivals is a lot of fun, and you'll always make new friends. I strongly urge you to attend at least one and see for yourself. *

-- Chris

Jeff Nathanson on *Catch Me If You Can*

by Fred Topel

Jeff Nathanson is shy. When he comes into an interview, he leans all the way back to put as much distance as possible between himself and the interview. He also prefaces each response with a deep breath. Perhaps the critical lashing he took from *Speed 2* made him cautious. Even the successful *Rush Hour 2* was no critics' darling.

However, Nathanson has reason to be proud now as *Catch Me If You Can* lingered at the top of the holiday box office and earned various award nominations. The film stars Leonardo DiCaprio as Frank Abagnale, a real life con artist who traveled the world, forged checks and impersonated pilots, doctors and lawyers. It was a fun journey, but all he really wanted was for his mommy and daddy to get back together.

Catch Me if You Can was a novel first, and even Abagnale admits that things were embellished for drama, such as the extent of his French prison stay. The movie does emphasize the character of Carl Hanratty, played by Tom Hanks. In real life, several agents were pursuing Abagnale, but in the film, Hanratty is the one we follow. With a powerhouse like Steven Spielberg directing, it's hard to know how much of the writer's vision remained in the film. So, we asked the writer.

Why do audiences love con artists?
Because I think deep down we all want to get away with things and we're all bored. This is a way for boredom to manifest itself.

At what stage did you get involved with the project?
I was sent a tape of Frank talking about his life, as he does occasionally at different seminars and things. About four or five years ago, I took that tape and then I found out there was a book and took it to Dreamworks and said I want to make a movie. They were nice enough to option Frank's life story and hire me to write a script. I actually read the book pretty much after they had hired me.

How did you decide the story should essentially be about Frank's family?
I went to interview Frank. That was the first thing I did. I really didn't know what to expect or how I was going to write the movie, because it was very episodic and there was a tremendous amount of fun, great cons but there wasn't necessarily a structural cohesive storyline that you could latch onto and say, "Well, that's the movie." My first couple interviews with Frank, I was just like "I don't know how I'm going to do this. How can you possibly write this as a movie?" It was very late, like in our third or fourth interview, that he finally started talking about his family. And he started talking about his father in detail. It was just one of those moments where I was literally seeing the movie as he was talking



Tom Hanks in Catch Me If You Can. *Photo by Andrew Cooper*

because he just loved his dad and clearly was devastated by the breakup of his parents. He had a very difficult childhood and all these things just let me go off and write.

Was that a way to make an audience sympathize with a criminal character?
Definitely. Not just that they're divorced but that he is so clearly searching for what he had and trying to get back to that. I'm hoping that's what they get out of it.

Did you always have Leonardo DiCaprio in mind for Frank?
Well, the truth is, when I started writing it, was around the *Titanic* time and there weren't a lot of young actors around that were like Leo. There just wasn't. So, I have to be honest, I'm not saying I wrote it for Leo, but we certainly would joke about it all the time. "Where are we going to find an actor to play a guy from 17 to 28? Oh, maybe we'll get Leonardo DiCaprio." It was really just a joke until he actually signed on and said he'd do it.

Do you see yourself and your youth reflected in Frank?
I'm 37. I certainly felt a little bit of the searching for identity part of it as a screenwriter in Hollywood. We're always searching for an identity. But, it really had more to do with the films I'd grown up watching and loving. *Cool Hand Luke* and *Papillon* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and a lot of films that really had a tone that I just hadn't seen on screen in a long time. I'd always wanted to write a film that tried to have that kind of tone.



Leonardo DiCaprio as Frank Abagnale Jr, director Steven Spielberg, and Tom Hanks as Carl Hanratty. Photo by Andrew Cooper

Did your work on action scripts play on how to make a great chase film?
No.

Okay, why not?
I think that the chase sequences you do in action are really specific to those genres. In this film, the chase scenes come out of character and situations. It was actually a new way of thinking for me to try to keep tension and excitement high without the natural moments you've seen in *The Fugitive* or other kinds of chase films where you have big action set pieces. That's not the movie that this was, so that was a challenge.

This film is actually less embellished than the book. Were you conscious of that?
Yeah. As I interviewed Frank and I learned that some of the stuff they had done in the book was just for the book, I really wanted to know as much of the truth as I could get and get as much accuracy as I could. Then I started questioning everything that was there. Frank was very open and there's no way to write the script without Frank's participation, obviously.

What's something from the book that was total fantasy that you took out?
Gosh, I haven't looked at it in four years. Let me think.

What about the prison scene?
Yeah, definitely, he almost died in a French prison. The tone of this film was never to be [that serious]. Steven wanted to make a really fun, wonderful, accessible film that hopefully also has a heart to it and all that other stuff. So, we didn't want to show the bleakness to the degree as it was in the book.

Were there any scenes that got lost that you were attached to?
I fought for some things. I fought for a few more cons here and there. I remember near the end, there was a little scene that Steven decided to cut and he wasn't even going to shoot it. I was making my case on the set. I was saying, "Steven, it's this and this could be great." He said, "Jeff, you know, I've shot 99 percent of this script. Leave me alone." And I thought, "Yeah, okay. I'll go away now." And it's true, he really did have a tremendous amount of respect for the script and he did shoot 99 percent of it.

What notes did you get from Spielberg when you were writing?
Steven was very focused on the father-son relationship, the surrogate father relationship with Tom Hanks' character. Really, the script was very long and he condensed it and brought those two stories into focus. Kind of very early on, he said, "Here's the movie I'm going to make" and that's what he did.

How did you handle the film's sense of humor?
I think it's almost an impossible tone to pull off and I don't think you'll see a movie with this particular tone in 20 years because it's very rare for a film to have a sense of humor, to be fun, funny and also deliver on the other stuff. It's just hard to do. Steven's a funny guy, has a great sense of humor. I had no idea what he would do with the script, whether he would sort of embrace the comedy that was in the script or remove it and make more of a Spielberg kind

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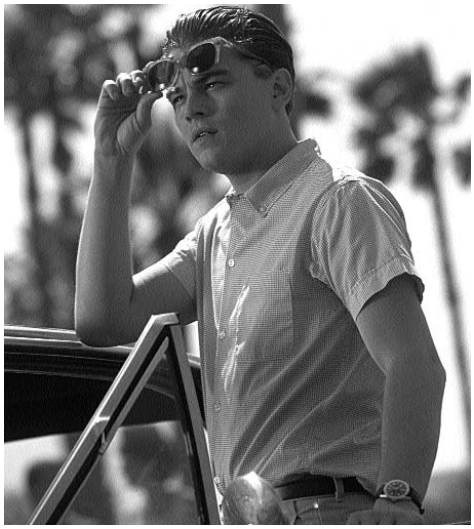
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of film. I think at the end of the day, he was having so much fun with it and the actors were so great that a lot of it stayed in the movie.

Were there any scenes that surprised you to see visualized?
There's the big scene where Hanks comes into France and sees Leo on top of the printing press. Just watching Steven direct that scene and those actors, what they do in that scene. It was just one of those things where you just feel really fortunate to be there. It's not that you learn a lot because you're watching people that are kind of operating in another zone, so it's not like you need to say, "Oh, I see what he did there and now I'm going to copy that and use it in my own life." It's really like being a spectator and it's like watching Michael Jordan play basketball or Barry Bonds hit a baseball. You're just watching people do something that only they can do. For me, I would just sort of hang out.


Photo by Andrew Cooper

What impressed you about Spielberg?
Steven is involved in every aspect of the movie. He is obsessed with moviemaking. He loves moviemaking. There is no detail, no minutiae that he did not want to know about. So, of course, performance is something that he is right on top of. He is a guy who loves his job and it's just so much fun to see. People wonder why he's so successful. It's because he loves what he does so much, it becomes contagious to be around a guy that's literally giddy about getting to the set everyday and getting to play with his toys. It's very fun to look at.

Where did the Tom Hanks character come from?
It just came from the theme of the film which was trying to show what the world was like back in the 1960s and to show a guy who's really stuck in the conventions of that time. Tom's character is completely boxed in and he's chasing a guy that's breaking all the rules. So, while it's based on two real characters, that part of the character was what I invented—the guy who couldn't even get his slide projector to work, everything around him is broken. Nothing works for him because the world is changing and everything is changing. Technology's changing, attitudes are changing, the United States is changing, kids are changing, and Vietnam is about to happen, the whole world is about to be completely thrown on its head. Tom is sort of the last guy to know it.

What did you learn from the FBI?
The truth is, you get a lot of good technical stuff, but at the end of the day, you have to create characters and you have to create scenes. So, all you can do is get accuracy and hope that that helps you create these things, but that's about as far as it goes. Especially because this is set in the 1960s and there are just certain things that you have to be aware of. Tom Hanks was very aware of his character, creating a character that was completely real to the time, who never said or did a move that wasn't something that was based on the real thing.

How did you capture the innocence of that era?
I give a lot of credit to the production designer, who I thought did an amazing job. I thought Janusz [Kamisnki]'s photography is beautiful. And most of all, Steven, who just was able to capture that time. Just because I write little things in the script about what his apartment looks like or what this looks like. It doesn't mean I know how the heck he's going to shoot it. He really was able to capture the time in a way that I haven't seen in a long time.

Is Hanratty the villain?
No. I think that Frank's mother is the villain. I think that all kids have this basic trust with their parents growing up, and when that trust is betrayed, then kids usually have to find another outlet and another way to find themselves. As I was writing the script, Columbine was happening, all these horrible things with kids and I really used that because what Frank did was so innocent. Yet, I think the things he did are sort of acted out of the same reasons why kids do the things they do today. I think his mother's inability in the end to love his father, and probably her inability to love him, is what pushed him. Like all kids, I think he really, truly loved his parents and loved the myth of his parents. He loved the story of "I met your mother and we fell in love" and all that stuff. He loved the idea that it was this kind of fantasy, this romantic fantasy. Then to have that taken away was what sent him running.

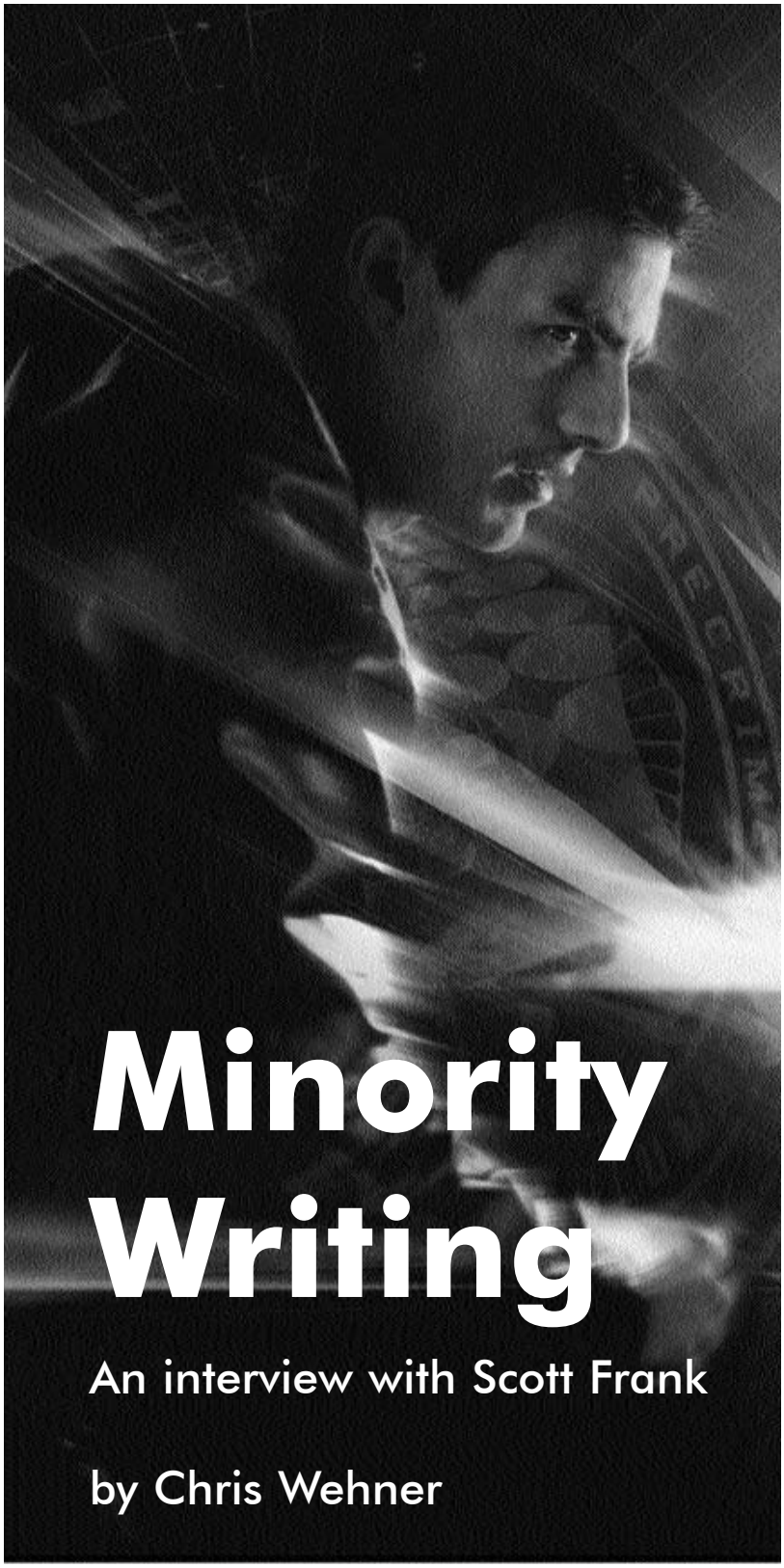
What have you learned from your experience on the big action movies?
I always try to do the best I can, write the best scripts I can for whatever I'm trying to do. Those films are incredibly challenging and logistically a nightmare. The script doesn't always come first, but I just learned that I can go to war and come out alive on just about anything.

And a lot is determined by technology too.
Yeah, *Twister* was the first film where they sent me out there to write car dialogue. It was almost one of my first jobs. They said they didn't realize the movie would take place in cars so much. So, I had to write dialogue for the cars like "Look out" and "Here it comes" and "Get out of the way."

What are you working on now?
I just did another script for Tom Hanks called *Terminal* which I think they're going to shoot in November. Then I'm directing a small comedy for Disney called *Providence*, which is also a true story and also about the FBI. Based on an FBI sting operation in 1987 where they went out to Providence, Rhode Island. They took an unknown filmmaker from LA with them and they decided they would make a movie. The reason they were making the movie was to hope to get the mob in New England to middle deals for them and the teamsters. They were trying to bust mobsters in Rhode Island and they thought that by making a movie they would accomplish this. It's a comedy about the FBI making a movie.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?
All I can say is find an idea and write it down on paper and your chances are as good as anyone's. This was nothing. This didn't exist in the world. It was just an idea and now it's a Steven Spielberg movie with Tom Hanks and Leonardo DiCaprio. I guess the possibility is there as long as you write it down and you write a good script. I think you have as good a shot as anybody. *

Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca College. He currently writes and has written for online news outlets and magazines such as *Herald Tribune Online*, *Daily Radar*, *eUniverse*, *Cinefantastique* and *The Hollywood Reporter* since graduating in May 1999.



Minority Writing

An interview with Scott Frank

by Chris Wehner

On the surface Scott Frank, the writer of *Little Man Tate*, *Dead Again*, *Get Shorty*, and *Out of Sight*, would appear to be utterly the wrong guy to write a Sci-fi movie. By his own admission he's a character screenwriter. What I mean is, he doesn't start with a premise, or a cool idea, he starts his thinking process with interesting and unique characters and builds a narrative from there. His scripts are always character-driven. That's not usually how Sci-fi movies are born. They usually start with some new idea or concept about the future, and go from there. The characters in Sci-fi movies usually are only there to service the concepts, and the ideas that make up the Sci-fi landscape.

The *Minority Report* script, and the subsequent movie, injected a little life into what I think had been a tired genre of late. Scott Frank's script reinvigorated science fiction storytelling with a fresh perspective. Told in an interesting story idea (the ability to see into the future and stop a murder before it occurs), *Minority Report* is a narrative that is driven by its characters, and by the needs of its important characters. It stands up on its own two-legs without the help of its "high concept."

Recently, *Screenwriters Monthly* got the chance to sit down with Scott Frank before he took some time for himself, and his family, snowboarding in Aspen, Colorado.

Looking back, will you ever do another science fiction movie?

I don't know. It depends, I never thought I would have in the first place. It depends on the story.

Science fiction tends to rely on the conceptual to produce the narrative thrust of the story. How did you approach it?

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

You've taken that identity approach before with your characters.

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

I'm very impressed with what you and Jon Cohen did with Phillip K. Dick's short story in your drafts. You really took a very non-cinematic source material and turned it into a movie.

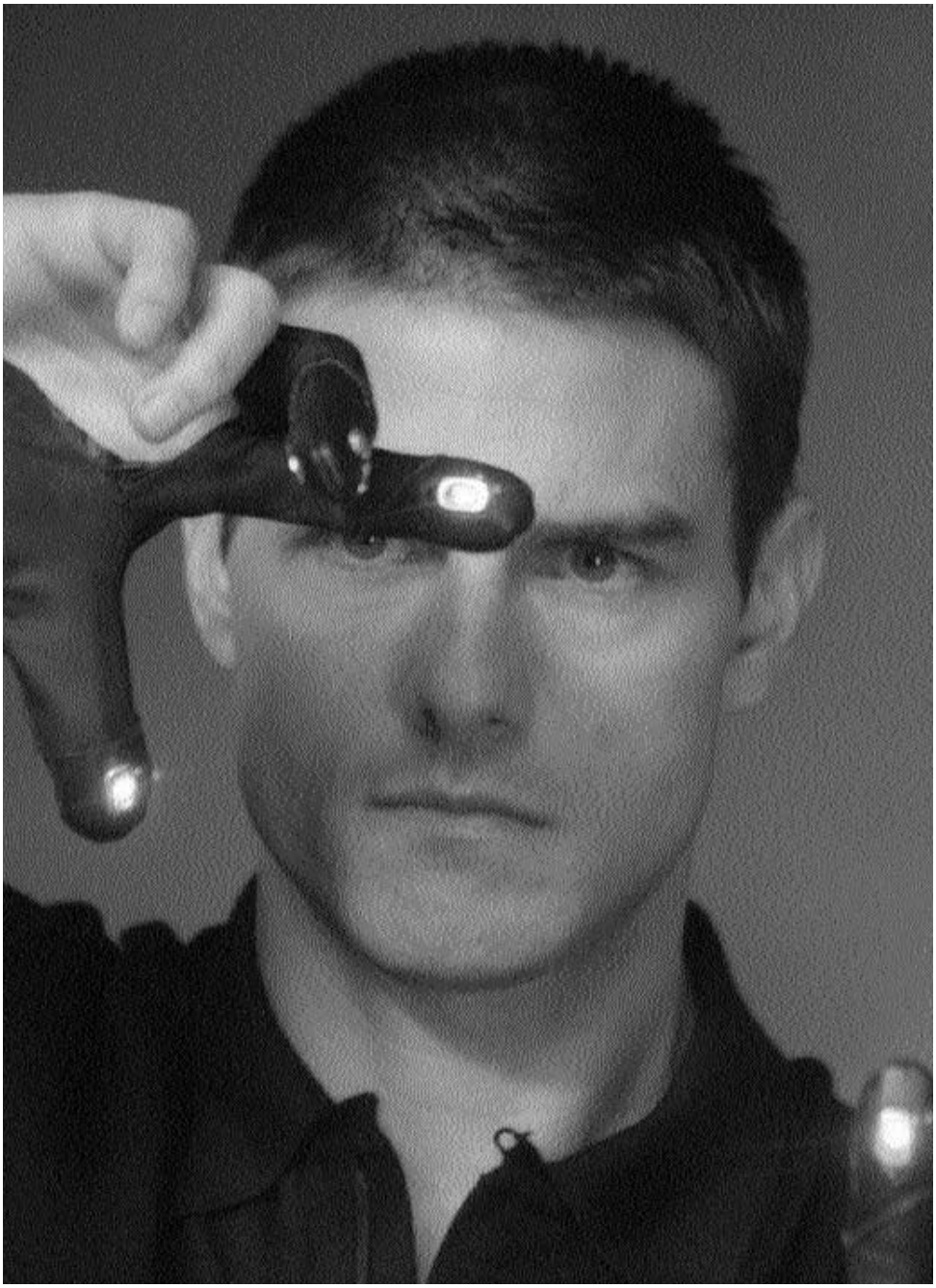
Dick's short story presented a no-win situation. What I would have rather done is turn it into a novel. What I found most interesting about his story was purely literate, not cinematic. I had to get over that right quick. There were problems that were really inherent to the material that made it difficult to structure a movie story.

How were the challenges of adapting Phillip K. Dick dif-

ferent than those of Elmore Leonard?
Very different. Because I begin with character and write from that perspective, and Elmore Leonard is all character. There is so much material you can draw from to create plot and new characters. Leonard creates such rich and delicious characters who help generate the narrative. Phillip Dick's stuff, at least for *Minority Report*, operates on a purely conceptual level and his characters in the short story were very flat. They had no arc. So for me they weren't all that interesting. There wasn't much to draw from in the short story in terms of character.

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

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



Tom Cruise as John Anderton. Photo by David James

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

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

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

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

ishing their M&M's.

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

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

Was there ever a concern that Spielberg wouldn't have the same vision for *Minority Report* **as you did?**
We had conversations from the very beginning, and as I started forming an outline we were talking about what the story might be, and in the end it ended up being much different than what we thought. The constants were that it was always going to be a mystery and a complex story. The irony of an age where homicide detectives were no longer needed, and then Anderton having to become a detective again to save himself was very appealing to both of us.

I was disappointed that there weren't any deleted scenes on the *Minority Report* **DVD.**
I haven't even looked at it yet. They didn't do it, really? I heard I was in it, that's all I know.

The voice over at the end of *Minority Report* **was not in the script. How did that come about?**
The ending of the script was more ambiguous, whereas the movie was distinctly unambiguous. It was much more of a happy image. In the script the last images of the story are the Precogs in a truly isolated place. The two male Precogs are trying to grow things on this rock hard soil, and Agatha is sitting inside this tiny little cabin with only one image of her mother, which is the image of her being killed. That's all she's left with, which is a little ironic, her one and only memory of her mother is one of murder.

In the film it's much more safe and sound and we see them reading books. It's a happy ending. For a long time the script ended with Anderton reconciling with his wife, but the country approves Precrime, the national amendment was passed. Which I thought was a great irony. Even though people know it's flawed they still want it. Which speaks volumes with what's happening today.

We added a voice over because, as I said, the way Steven shot it, he really wanted a happier ending. So then we wrote the voiceover to explain the situation, initially they were titles as we thought it would be interested to hear Tom read them. So what I did, hoping to kind of mitigate some of that effect of the ending, was add a last line. If you recall, it went something like this:

> "In the year 2054, the Precrime experiment was abandoned, all prisoners were pardoned and released though police departments across the country kept watch on them for years to come. The Precogs were remanded to an undisclosed location where they could live out their lives in peace from their gifts."

And then as you fade to black, the last line of the film was to be, "The following year there were 133 homicides in the District of Columbia." But I think at the last minute Tom Rothman at Fox convinced Steven that it was too cynical of a way to end the film. Though I never saw it as cynical, I felt it was more of an ironic flourish. Having said that I still happen to love the movie.

The one scene that wasn't in the movie that I really missed took place after Anderton was caught and placed in Containment, and his son comes to him in a dream.
Everyone loved that scene. Steven loved it. We had it in the film for a long time. It got cut not because anyone didn't like it, but because it was confusing people. Every time we did a test screen-

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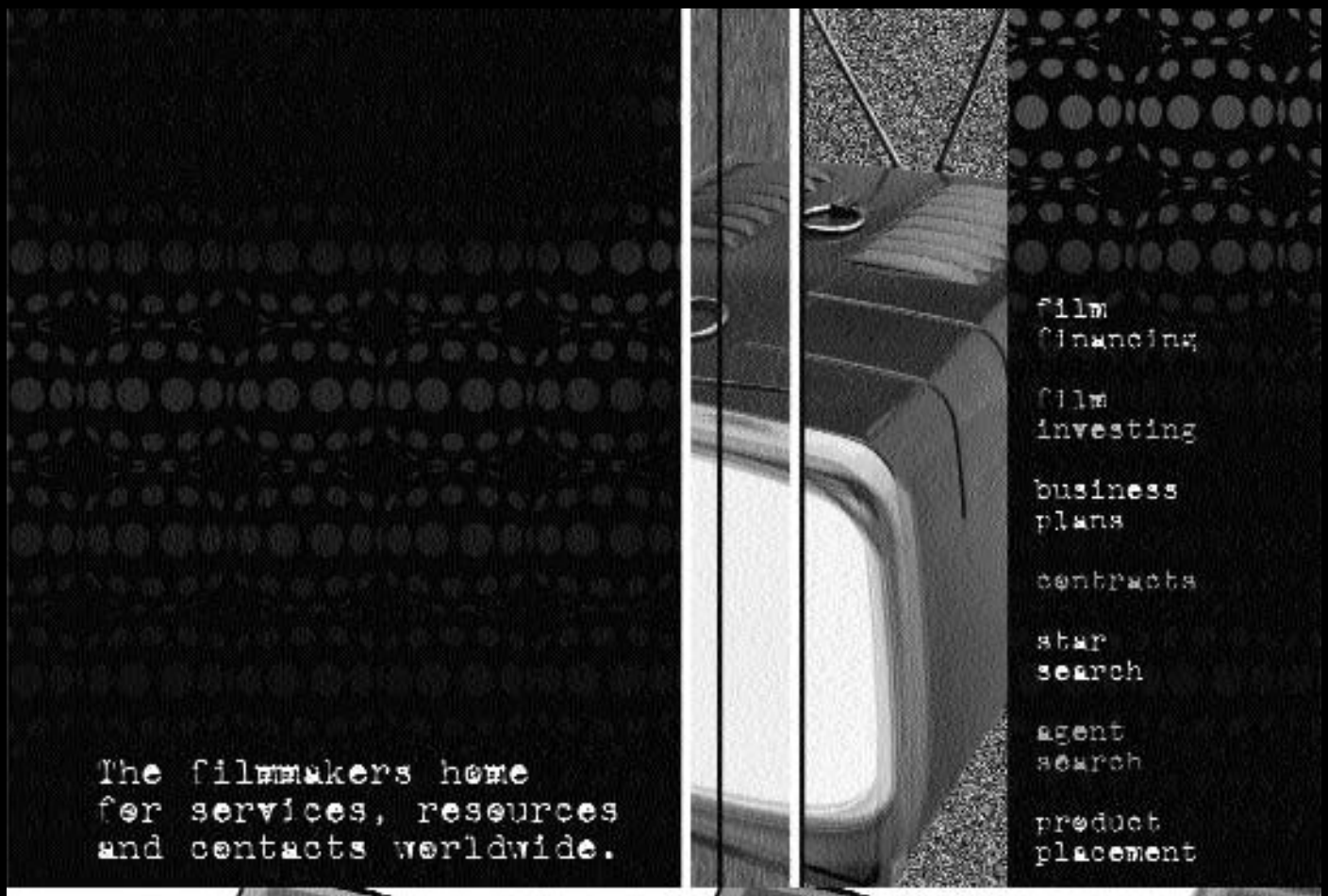
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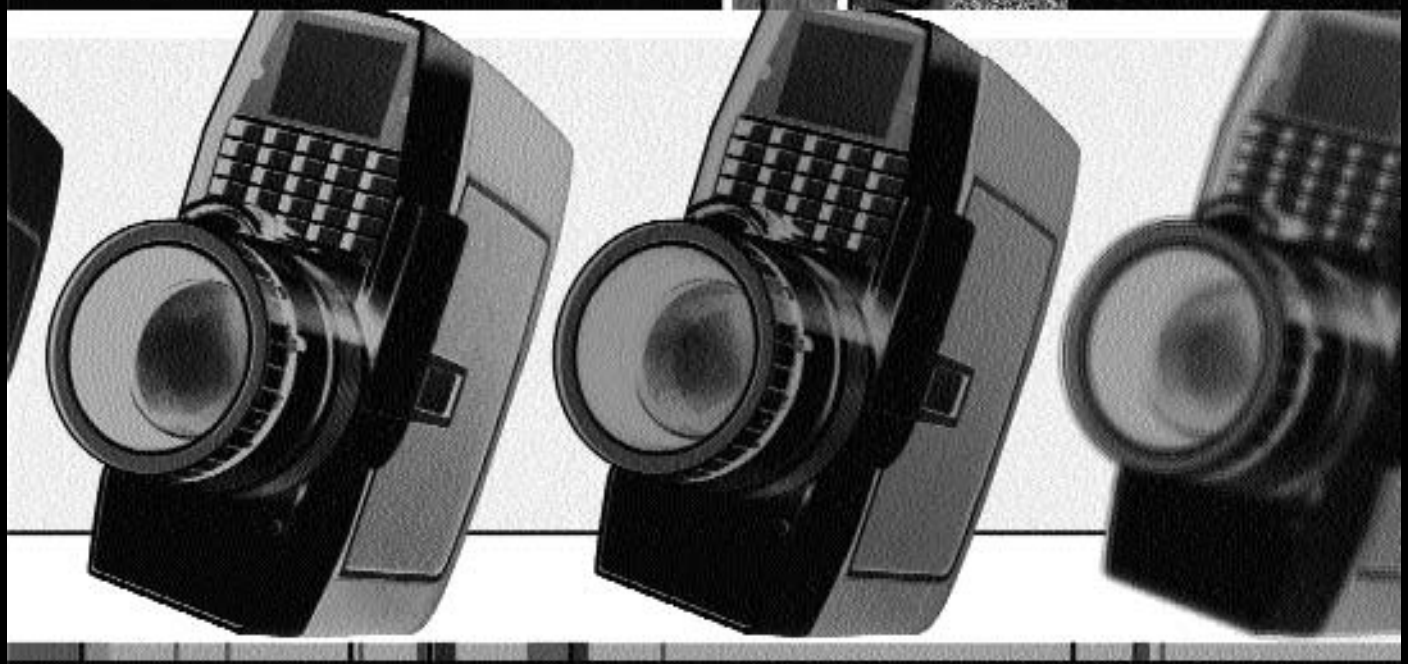
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ing it confused people as to what was real and what wasn't. It stepped on the earlier scene where Agatha talks about the son. Also, at that time we were running for the curtain. We just felt it brought everything to a halt. Also, Tom was truly incredible in that scene, absolutely wonderful, so it's a shame it didn't make it into the movie.

Well I think people were confused over whether or not Anderton's son was really dead.
The son is dead. You don't know conclusively, but you can assume that he's dead. As we know he never finds the man who took him.

For me, the Containment scene helped to establish without a doubt that his son was dead.
It did the opposite. Every time we showed the movie people had the exact opposite feeling. They were asking way too many questions of the story at that point.

How often does a scene not translate (once it's filmed) as you had originally intended?
I don't know, it happens to me at least once every film that something doesn't work the way I thought it would. So it happens all the time with me [laughs]. You just have to deal with it. Sometimes it's really clear in your mind, but the audience won't get it, they can't make those logical leaps and you have to address that.


Robotic spiders threaten to identify John Anderton

One of the themes of *Minority Report* **could be the loss of privacy. What were the major theme(s) for you as you were writing it?**
I think the loss of privacy is a contextual issue, not a thematic one. I think that's more of the context of the film. I'm not even sure I can speak to that because I usually stumble onto my themes accidentally. Or I look back and realize it later. I try not to write with theme in mind because then the story tends to feel too "built." I find that you can rewrite to a theme once you've established it. You tend to uncover a theme right away whenever you're adapting a novel because it's already something that's been written. This was very much starting from scratch.

Doesn't having a unique voice as a writer provide the formula for having something to say with each story, your theme essentially?
Well, I think you're aware of theme and its necessity. I don't think you can start with it. It doesn't feel organic that way, at least not for me. Whereas if you start to tell the story with real characters behaving in real and authentic ways, the theme will present itself. And you should be looking for themes as you write, because often times they'll present themselves during the writing process.

Do you know your ending when you start writing a story for the first time?
Nine times out of ten, yes. I usually have to know because I often write things with a mystery element in them and I have to know the solution in order to write effective setups and payoffs. I should say I may not know what the exact scene is, but I have a general idea. The middles are usually my big problem.

Do you find it more difficult to get started or to finish a script?
Getting started. Once you're finishing it all comes at once and you can't stop. It's usually very intense. Getting started is always the hardest. And it's not so much the act of sitting down and getting started, but finding the momentum, that's what's really hard. I can face the blank page, but getting into a rhythm is always most difficult. I often get stuck around page sixty or seventy, and I keep having to go back and back again to break through that wall, but once I do it all comes together.

Looking at it technically, what is it about the second act that you struggle with?
It's always different things and different places. You'll realize you've lost a character for too long, or can't figure out how to get from here to there, or it's too repetitive. The problems are always different.

How often are you considering how an audience will react to a particular scene?
I think it's fun to be entertaining. I'm always asking myself, "Is this entertaining?" "Am I telling a good story both visually and to the person reading the script?" So I'm really doing two things. I'm describing the story for an audience and to the person who's going to read it. "Am I telling a good story, one that's entertaining?" I don't think scripts should be dry. I think they should read like a good novel.

Is there a consequence to always starting your thought process with characters in terms of the narrative spine of the story?
Well, though I start with character, I ultimately create a spine and plot. I'm very meticulous about that, about structure. But I create it after I have thought about my characters and a lot of that spine has been presented to me from my considering the characters.

Some of your scripts have actually been uniquely structure, *Out of Sight* **for example, but you don't use structure as a ploy**?
No. In fact, often times whenever I've created an interesting structure it's been a result of trying to solve character issues. In *Out of Sight* I fractured the structure because I had to figure a way to get the story going and at the same time had two characters who are only with each other three times before they sleep together. There was also a lot of story to tell and the only way to make it satisfying was to break it up.

Speaking of *Out of Sight*, **and our discussion about the ending of** *Minority Report***, why was Soderbergh able to endorse an ambiguous ending and Spielberg wasn't?**
They have different sensibilities. Soderbergh is much more comfortable with ambiguity. Spielberg is more black and white. It just comes down to them being two different kinds of filmmakers.

I consider *Minority Report* **to be a very anti-summer blockbuster kind of movie, yet ironically, Spielberg is the founding father of the summer blockbuster. Did you ever**

get a sense that he was conscious of that?
No. Again like theme, I don't think as an artist you can be conscious of those themes ahead of time. It should come out of an organic process. It is just a place he is at in his career and artistically. He is very true to himself that way and that's what I admire most about him, even if I disagree.

Yet you were able to take the director into a genre he had never attempted before.
When I started, I was working for a guy who said he was never going to do a mystery, he didn't like them. And in the end we made one with a mystery within a mystery. He allowed me to do my thing in a way many directors of his stature would never have allowed, and I'm grateful for that.

On more than one occasion I picked up on a phrase in the script that was repeated, "The more you want to believe something, the easier it is to be fooled."
Yes, you're absolutely right. People believe what they want to believe, and all of that was informing every choice I made when writing the script. How much of that actually comes through in the movie I do not know.

Once you knew what the story was going to be for you, how long did it take to find the spine and then begin constructing the script?
It took months of meetings and talking about the story, and then it was months of outlining where we had to rethink the shape of the movie. During some of the early story meetings Steven and I had talked about a style for the movie and we both liked the idea of doing a kind of *The French Connection* in the year 2050. Yet at the same time we're marrying that film style with a science fiction narrative where the hero of the story has a very dark side. Steven and I actually ended up watching *The French Connection* together.

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

What was it like working with Spielberg, he's a modern day John Ford. You're working for God essentially.
The greatest and hardest thing about Steven is he has access to everything and everyone. So I'm constantly getting information during the process. He'll talk to whomever about this idea, or that technical thing, or whatever. I remember when I was working on *Saving Private Ryan* I had two large binders full of historical facts that he had accumulated about D-Day, and all this stuff he wanted in the movie. It's wonderful because it gives you ideas for scenes and character, but at the same time it is very overwhelming in the sense that you have to be careful not to write to the research. He reads scripts with a tape recorder in hand, and he takes copious notes. I would then get the transcriptions. Steven has a tremendous instinct for what an audience is going to feel. Often times when we hit a problem he is the first to find the solution.

Was the failure of *A.I.* ever a motivating force for Spielberg on *Minority Report*?
No. I don't think they're connected at all. *A.I.* had everything to do with his relationship with Stanley Kubrick. I actually admire him for doing it. There are sequences in *A.I.* that really illuminate how amazing he is as a director, regardless of any problems people had with it.

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


Anderton uses Mag-Lev, or magnetic roads, to escape Precrime officers

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

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

You're one of the few screenwriters who can get involved in the editing process of their films, and you even did some Second Unit directing on *Minority Report*.

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

You once told me you weren't inspired by movies anymore.

It's because they're not good; they're not written anymore. The writing is all about servicing the concept. It's not about writing real characters. It's about putting in a movie star and figuring out how to get them from point A to B.

To be honest, I'm not sure where I fit now in the whole mix of where film is heading. I don't know if I write the kinds of movies people want to see anymore. I believe that some sort of new wave is going to eventually happen, and that we'll get back to making more character driven movies, and better ones. At least I hope we do. *

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A Screenwriting Life: Scott Frank

Born in Fort Walton Beach, Florida (c. 1960), but raised in Los Gatos, California, Scott Frank graduated from college with a degree in film studies (1982). The screenwriter got started in the industry doing research for documentaries. His first writing efforts found their way to the screen in impressively short order. His teen comedy *Plain Clothes* (1988) was made into a modest feature helmed by Martha College. By contrast, Kenneth Branagh's *Dead Again* (1991), a more ambitious and sophisticated effort, was an imaginative and highly romantic thriller with past life complications. Frank, moving into the big leagues, next sold a very different screenplay, one he had written in college, for Jodie Foster's directorial debut, *Little Man Tate* (1991). Despite his genre-hopping, Frank's study of a child prodigy suggested ongoing interest in precocious (if sometimes scheming) types and intriguing plot twists. These later manifested themselves in his work on the standardized thriller fare of *Malice* (1993) and his well-regarded adaptation of Elmore Leonard's tangy, satirical novel about Hollywood, *Get Shorty* (1995). A few years later, Frank took a second crack at Elmore Leonard when he adapted *Out Of Sight* for Steven Soderbergh, garnering him an Academy Award nomination. Shortly thereafter, he teamed with Steven Spielberg and co-wrote *Minority Report*.

Milestones:

> 1982 - Moved to Los Angeles after college graduation; worked for the Landsburg Company as a researcher on documentary films (date approximate).
> 1988 - First produced screenplay, *Plain Clothes* (directed by Martha Coolidge).
> 1991 - Signed with Columbia to make debut as director with *The Big Wow*.
> 1991 - Scripted *Dead Again*, directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh.
> 1995 - Adapted Elmore Leonard's novel *Get Shorty* as a feature.
> Reportedly did uncredited script polish on *Saving Private Ryan*
> 1998 - Wrote second film adaptation of a Leonard novel *Out of Sight*; received Oscar nomination for Best Adapted. Screenplay.
> 2000 - Co-wrote *Minority Report* for Steven Spielberg to direct and starring Tom Cruise.

Awards:

> 1998 - Boston Society of Film Critics Award Best Screenplay *Out of Sight.*
> 1998 - National Society of Film Critics Award Best Screenplay *Out of Sight.*
> 1998 - Online Film Critics Society Award Best Adapted Screenplay *Out of Sight.*
> 1999 - Writers Guild of America Award Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Published or Produced *Out of Sight.*

For more on Scott Frank and others visit: www.baseline.hollywood.com

WOMEN IN FILM



Writer-director NICOLE HOLOFCENER

by Kenna McHugh

Nicole Holofcener on the set of Lovely and Amazing

Nicole Holofcener films are no where near mainstream, yet they are more real, genuinely funny and true to life than any blockbuster of late. Her films *Walking and Talking* (1996) and recently released *Lovely and Amazing* are slightly autobiographical in that Nicole writes about true experiences, explores them and alters them for dramatic purposes.

Nicole grew up in New York and Los Angeles in a creative family environment. Her mother a set decorator, her father a stage-actor and her stepfather a film producer. She first became interested in directing film when she studied filmmaking at Columbia Graduate School. There she received recognition for her short film, *It's Richard I Love.* Then she wrote and directed another short film, *Angry*.

Her stepfather, Charles Joffe, helped her get her first job in the business. As a production assistant on a Woody Allen film (*A Midsummer Night's Sex*) which Charles was producing. She worked on another Woody Allen film, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, where she apprenticed in the editing department handling the dailies, getting coffee but not cutting film. She never got within 30 feet of the celebrated director.

Between her two features Nicole worked in television directing HBO's *Sex and the City* and recently *Six Feet Under*. She also does rewrites and she says, "It's where the money is, but its not as much fun as directing a good show like *Six Feet Under* or *Sex in the City*. Rewriting allows me to stay home with my kids (two five-year-old twin boys), which is very important to me."

When you write do you direct and when you direct do you write?

When I am writing I am directing. I imagine every writer does this because the picture is being said in a very specific way, the tone. While I am writing I am always aware of how I would like the movie to look. When I am directing, hopefully, I am not writing it at the same time. I am only writing when I am directing a scene that is not working. I'm thinking "What can I do? What can I do to save this? How can I rewrite it?" But, if it the scene is working, I'm not thinking about changing a word.

When you write do you envision who is going to play the characters?

Sometimes it helps me to picture people in the role. Even just people I know in my life. Some characters I have actors in mind. Like Catherine Keener as Michelle in *Lovely and Amazing*. I wrote that part with her in mind hoping that she would do it. That helps me as a writer to picture how something is said or how that character would behave because I know what Catherine is capable of doing. I don't think I had any other actors in mind while I wrote *Lovely and Amazing*. If I did, they weren't necessarily somebody that I could get or even try to get.

How did you happen upon casting Emily Mortimer as Elizabeth?

I didn't really know who Emily was. Brenda Blethyn, who plays

Jane, the mother, suggested that I audition Emily. That is how I found her. It was really hard finding the right person to play that character. A lot of terrific actresses came in to audition. Everybody is cast through regular channels, watching a million tapes and doing a million auditions. Until I met Emily, I didn't have her.

It must be amazing to find somebody who fits a character exactly as you wrote?
Yes. Especially with material like *Lovely and Amazing*–it's all about casting. Having such great actors makes my job so much easier. I didn't have to explain anything to them. I really had to stay out of their way. Of course, I tweaked things here and there. But for the most part I just cast it right. Like Woody Allen does that really well. I learned that aspect from him. Get the right person in the part and it just flies.

It's doing your homework as a director?
Yes, and trusting my instincts right off the bat. Feeling that the people I want for the part are the right people. That everything works out. As a director you can't second-guess yourself, or you will not make any progress. I rely a lot on my instincts.

You have worked with Catherine Keener before?
I like to be able to work with somebody more than once because the trust is there. So much of directing actors in a movie is earning their trust. Once they trust you they are willing to try things. If they are guarded or think they know more than you forget about it. The day is long.

Catherine actually trusted me a lot in my first movie *Walking and Talking*. By the time we got to my second movie, *Lovely and Amazing*, she was like "All right I will do whatever you say. Where do you want me to stand? I know you are not going to make a fool out of me. If you are it will be in the right context."

I would love to work with the other actors in *Walking and Talking* again. I had a great experience with Liev Schreiber and Kevin Corrigan. They were wonderful. I would work with them again in a second.

What led you to tell the story *Lovely and Amazing*?
I had a few ideas and didn't really know exactly how it would turn out. What the main themes would be and so forth. I knew that I wanted to write about weight obsession. That was the prevalent of my life, my friend's lives and everyone in LA—everyone in this country for that matter. My mom adopted a black son that inspired me to write the character Annie.

So you really are taking pieces of your life?
Yes. I couldn't say the whole film is autobiographical. It is autobiographical in a general way. The film is about experiences that I had. Things that other people had gone through. The film is very personal. Just pieces of it are my experiences. I blend it. Like I take something that happened to me and just explore it, make it more dramatic than in real life.

Since your mother and stepfather work in the industry, how did that help your career?
My mom married my stepfather when I was about eight. From about eight on I was on a lot of film sets. Woody Allen film sets because my stepfather Charles Joffe of Rollins and Joffe produced Woody Allen films. My mom was a set decorator and a writer as well as a housewife for many, many years but a creative person.

The best part about having creative parents who have supported me and didn't think that pursing a creative career was insane whether I wanted to be a writer or an editor or whatever. It was really fun. I guess it obviously had an effect on me when I grew up.

Is it hard for a woman to make it in the film business or get a film produced?
I think it's hard for everybody, and especially hard for women and minorities. Just look at who's nominated for the Academy Awards: a lot of white men; the Golden Globes: a lot of white men. Oscars every year with a few exceptions is very telling. I think it is getting easier for women and minorities. I am always very aware of how lucky I am. I really can't believe how I slipped through the cracks. I am able to do this for a living.

What was the main point in your career that enabled you to slip through the cracks?
I didn't try to be like anybody else, nor do anything like something I had seen. I was very focused on telling my own personal story. People in the business right away saw that I might have something original to say. I was taking my own life and using it for comedic purposes and dramatic purposes. I can't recommend that to everybody. It really works for me to be telling very personal stories. Not just try to make a great movie for great movie sake. It was really about me expressing something. What I needed to express. I saw a lot of kids, like in film school, who want to make movies and being passionate about it, but wanting to make a thriller short film. There are so many great directors who make thrillers. For a short film, here is your chance to say something about you. To show what you can say personally. Not capture a genre. I think that really helped me when I was making my short films. Those short films are what got my career started. They show people in the industry that maybe this girl has something neat to say and kind of funny, too.

Do you strongly recommend film school?
If you have the money, film school is great. It's a great way to explore. A really good place to make mistakes. I was lucky to do that. I don't mean that film school is absolutely necessary. I didn't realize I wanted to be a director until I got into film school. I got a lot out of it. I was pretty focused and loved making short films. In film school you focus on making short films. Once you're out in the real world it's hard to devote your time to it. When you are in school all you are doing is short films. So it's good. I liked it a lot. *

Kenna McHugh has been freelancing in the film industry for over 15 years. Her writing credits include the book, *BREAKING INTO FILM*, three screenplays, seven produced plays and numerous articles on the adventures and mishaps of the constantly changing film industry.

Oscar™ Prognostications

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Best Original Screenplay

Kenna McHugh: *GANGS OF NEW YORK* by Jay Cocks, Steve Zaillian and Ken Lonergan
Michael B. Druxman: *MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING* by Nia Vardalos
Jean-François Allaire: *TALK TO HER* by Pedro Almodovar
Fred Topel: *Y TU MAMA TAMBIEN* by Carlos and Alfonso Cuarón
Harry Caul: *FAR FROM HEAVEN* by Todd Haynes

Best Adapted Screenplay

Kenna McHugh: *CHICAGO* by Bill Condon
Michael B. Druxman: *THE HOURS* by David Hare
Jean-François Allaire: *CHICAGO* by Bill Condon
Fred Topel: *ABOUT A BOY* by Chris and Paul Weitz
Harry Caul: *CHICAGO* by Bill Condon

Best Picture

Kenna McHugh: *CHICAGO*
Michael B. Druxman: *CHICAGO*
Jean-François Allaire: *CHICAGO*
Fred Topel: *THE PIANIST*
Harry Caul: *CHICAGO*

Best Director

Kenna McHugh: Rob Marshall for *CHICAGO*
Michael B. Druxman: Martin Scorsese for *GANGS OF NEW YORK*
Jean-François Allaire: Martin Scorsese for *GANGS OF NEW YORK*
Fred Topel: Rob Marshall for *CHICAGO*
Harry Caul: Martin Scorsese for *GANGS OF NEW YORK*

Best Actor

Kenna McHugh: Adrien Brody
Michael B. Druxman: Adrien Brody
Jean-François Allaire: Jack Nicholson
Fred Topel: Jack Nicholson
Harry Caul: Daniel Day-Lewis

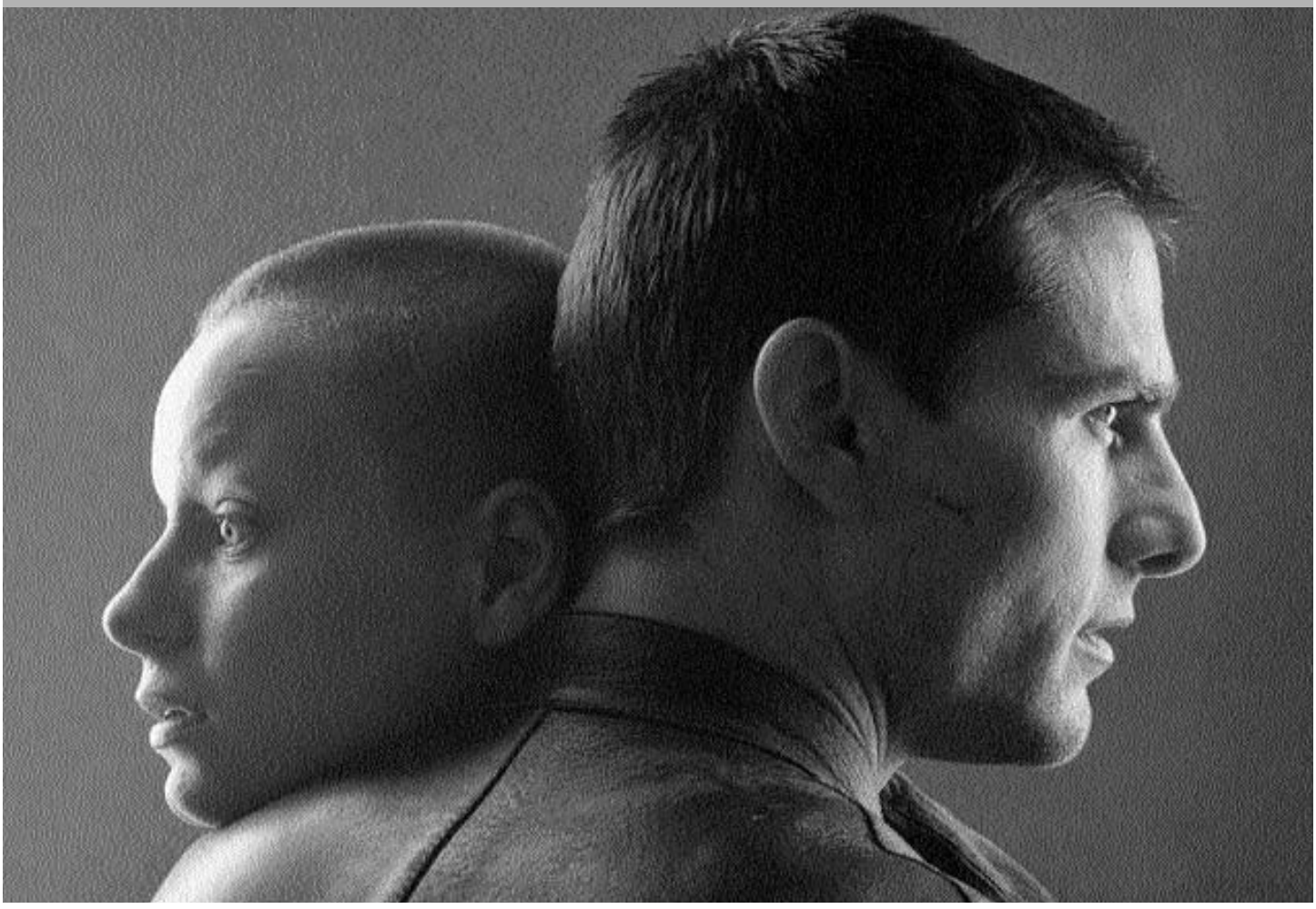
Best Actress

Kenna McHugh: Nicole Kidman
Michael B. Druxman: Nicole Kidman
Jean-François Allaire: Nicole Kidman
Fred Topel: Salma Hayek
Harry Caul: Julianne Moore



2002's Best Screenplays

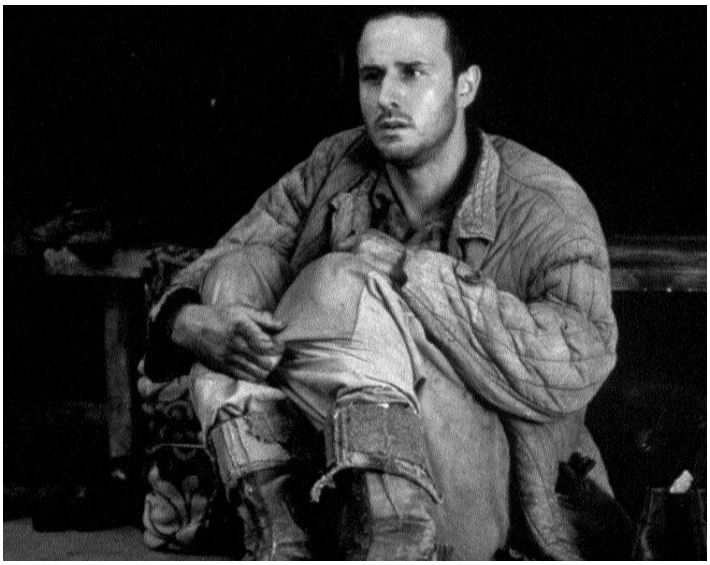
By Chris Wehner & Jim Vejvoda



2002 established itself as one of the better years we've seen in recent memory, witnessed by some outstanding movies. An outstanding movie means an outstanding screenplay. We here at *Screenwriters Monthly* would like to tip our hats to those professional screenwriters who pushed the envolope, who took some chances, and, to those few, who broke new ground. Without further delay, here are our choices for the top screenplays of 2002, broken up into two parts, and in alphabetical order.







PHOTOS: (top to bottom) Edward Norton as Monty Brogan in 25th Hour (photo by David Lee)*; Dennis Quaid as Frank Whitaker and Julianne Moore as Cathy Whitaker in* Far From Heaven*; and David Arquette as Hoffman in* The Gray Zone.

25TH HOUR

Writer David Benioff adapted the story from his own novel, *The 25th hour*. The script for *25th hour* is an interesting and poignant character study about a young man's last few hours before turning himself into authorities to serve seven years in prison.

It's the kind of story that builds slowly and eloquently, and in the end will provoke the audience to feel the regret, shame, and fear a young man would feel before having to face imprisonment. The script does not tell the reader, thus the audience, how it should feel with any heavy-handed or melodramatic improvisations.

Monty Brogan is a streetwise kid who managed to get into an elite private school, become a star on the basketball team, and then throw it all away for a life of crime. As a petty drug dealer he eventually got himself in way over his head. On the surface Monty has a lot going for him. He has a beautiful girlfriend, Naturelle Rivera, who appears to love him dearly. A few of good friends, Jakob Elinsky, Frank Slattery, and Kostya. Monty's closest friend is his pet dog Doyle, a pit bull he saved in the opening sequence of the script.

During this roughly twenty-four hour period before he has to report to prison, Monty prepares himself by tying up some lose ends, saying goodbye, coming to grips with his past, and most importantly, trying to figure out who the hell ratted him out. It has come to his attention that someone cut a deal and told the Feds everything, leading to his arrest. This subplot weaves in and out of the main narrative raising suspicion about his friends. Who can he trust? Monty has started to suspect his girlfriend, Naturelle, as she was with him when he was arrested and was one of the few who knew everything about him. But that's too easy. Or is it?

One of the more touching subplots is Monty's relationship with his father. It's obvious that a father and son would have problems in a relationship such as this. Monty threw away everything. He was a prep basketball star at a good school, something a father would be proud of. Now he is a hoodlum going to prison. This subplot resolves itself at the very end when Monty's father volunteers to drive him to prison, and though Monty is reluctant, he accepts.

The interaction between characters is subtle, and yet at times, powerful. This is a story that will build in the subconscious of those viewers willing to absorb the details and the underlining theme of the story. It's not a story of redemption, which I was concerned at first it was—been there and seen that too many times. It's much smarter than that and in the end it feels real. I wasn't completely sure while reading the script that Monty was or wasn't going to go to jail. I never could put a handle on it. I wanted him to run, but knew he wouldn't consider it as his father would lose his bar, which he used as collateral for bond. This is a Hollywood film after all, but how we get the Hollywood ending works for a change.

ADAPTATION

Charlie Kaufman is our screenwriter of the past year, having written three outstanding screenplays: *Adaptation*, *Confessions of A Dangerous Mind*, and *Human Nature*. Kaufman is also a surrealist. He sees the world a lot differently than do most people, and that is why his writing is like a breath of fresh air. His screenplays are rich, provocative, humorous, imaginative, melancholy, and most importantly, play with perceptions of reality. Kaufman's original voice and unique point of view make his screenplays deliciously consuming. His central characters are usually, well, freaks uncomfortable with themselves and their existence within their environment, struggling with their own perceptions of reality. Kaufman himself has confessed that solipsism plays an important part in the development of his stories. His characters tend to only see how the world effects them, not how they effect the world. This is especially true with *Being John Malkovich*, *Human Nature*, and *Adaptation*.

Adaptation is the name of a story Kaufman tells about his failed attempt at adapting Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*. It's a book that Kaufman truly fell in love with, which of course was his downfall. He was too close to the material. It was personal for him. *The Orchid Thief* deals with John Laroche, an exceedingly eccentric and weird person. The book is based on Orlean's trek to the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve in Florida to research an article for *The New Yorker*. Laroche was caught, along with three Seminole Indians, stealing orchids. What she discovered was an intriguing character with a sad story and an interesting point of view of the world. The book beautifully handles her growing respect for Laroche and keenly educates the reader on orchids and other mysterious fables and facts. This, combined with his passion to adapt the book and keep true to its spirit, placed Kaufman in a debilitating mind freeze. Trapped in writer's block hell, an intellectual inferno, Kaufman created a wickedly funny satire about Hollywood movies, flowers, romance, relationships, and human passions.

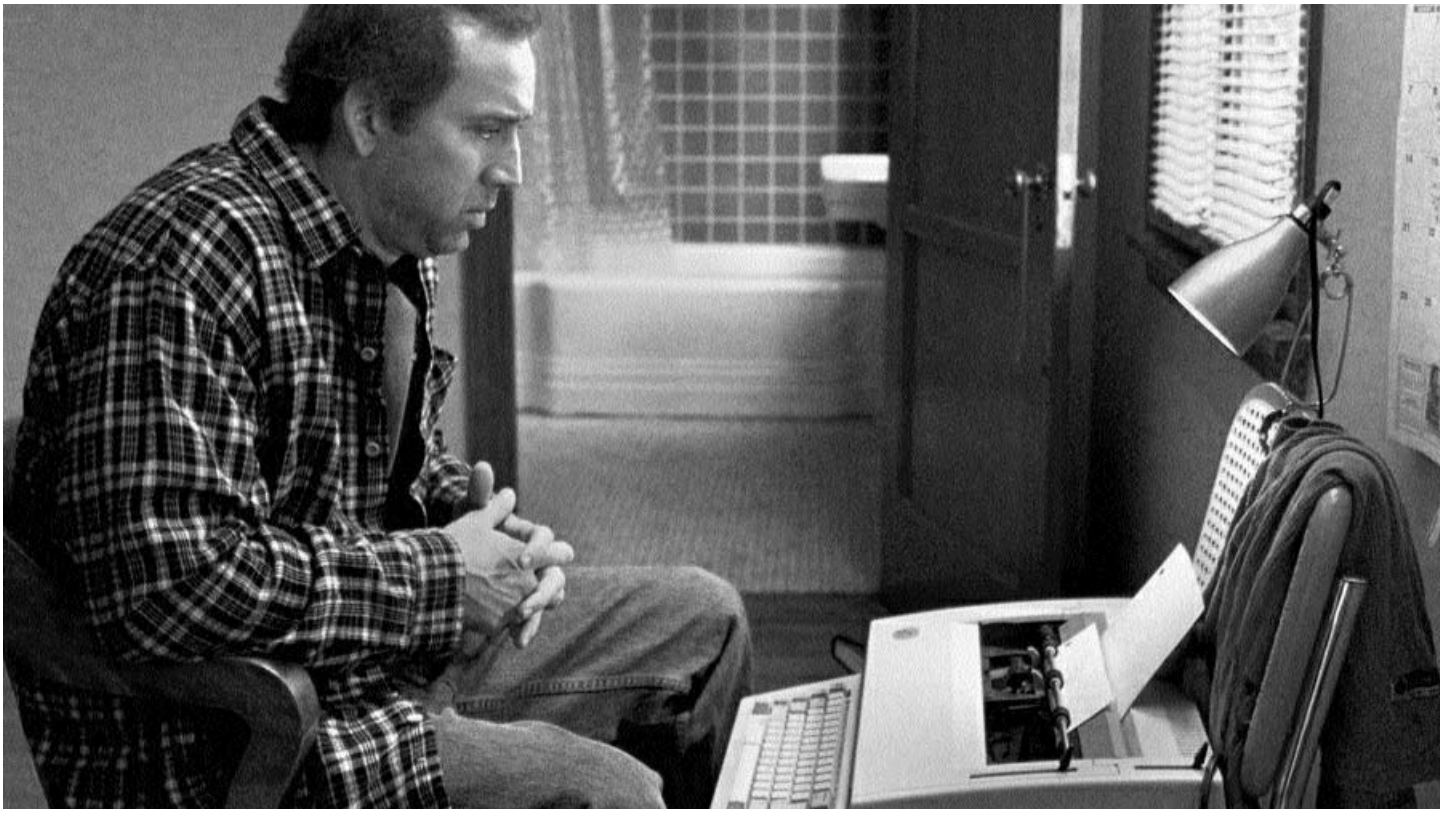
There is a unifying theme at work in *Adaptation*: passion. Orlean wants to find someone, something, she is really truly passionate about. Laroche uses passion to adapt to the hardships he has faced in his life. So he attaches himself to something: turtles, fossils, fish, flowers, whatever. The thought of not learning everything there is to know is worse than death for him. Charlie has been consumed by his passion for Orlean's book, for her, and for women in general. And, because of his passion, he has lost all objectivity. He has no self-esteem and sees himself as a total failure. He has to change and adapt as a person. Meanwhile, Donald, his twin brother, who should be the one with low self-esteem, starts to thrive. Donald can succeed where Charlie failed because he has accepted himself, and only allows himself to have limited amounts of passion for any one thing. Laroche and Charlie are consumed by their passion. Towards the end of the second act, Charlie realizes his failure, accepts who he is, and undertakes the decision to change.

The main criticism of the material is that it's very self-indulgent. But to simply dismiss *Adaptation* as such is to forget that in Orlean's book, John Laroche may be the title character, but he is only its object. Susan Orlean is its subject, and this must have been inspiration, if not motivation, for why Kaufman would inject himself into his story, and therefore become a co-subject. It was, if anything, a natural progression for the screenwriter to take.

It seems clear that ultimately *Adaptation* is Kaufman's manifesto on the current situation in Hollywood for writers. How the writer who wants to write important movies with subtext and meaning ultimately loses out to the exploitative and formulaic Hollywood drivel.

FAR FROM HEAVEN

In 1950s Connecticut, Frank and Cathy Whitaker and their two children appear to live a cheerfully innocent life in picturesque



Nicolas Cage as Charlie Kaufman in Adaptation

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Michael Connelly	E.R., JAG
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- Premise, Idea, Counter Idea, Controlling Idea
- Story Structure: beat, scene, sequence, act, story
- Mapping the Story universe: Archplot, Miniplot, Antiplot

DAY 2

- Act design: the great sweep and body of story
- The most major story event, the inciting
- Scene design in Story: turning points, emotional dynamics, setup/payoff, the nature of choice
- Ordering and linking scenes
- Exposition: dramatizing your characters, the story setting, creating back story
- The principles of antagonism
- Crisis, climax and resolution

DAY 3

- Putting the elements of story together
- The principles of character dimension and design
- The text: description, dialogue, and poetics
- The spectrum of story genres
- Story adaptations
- Scene analysis: text and sub-text; design through dialogue versus design through action
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Rachel Weisz in About A Boy

New England. Cathy is a housewife, socialite, and organizer of the best social functions in town. They are adored and idolized by friends and neighbors alike. But, of course, the Whitakers are not perfect, and trouble is brewing. Frank has a secret that could ruin him and his marriage. He no longer can hold back homosexual urges that have been buried away for years. In an effort to save his marriage, he agrees to see a psychiatrist. As Cathy tries to keep it together, suffering confusion and grief, she finds consolation in the friendship of their African-American gardener, Raymond. The story bends ever so slightly exposing the social undertones and consequences of taboo relationships. The story is extremely flexible as it bends and turns to address these issues in an almost effortless manner, while never losing sight of its narrative goal. Screenwriter Todd Haynes beautifully captures both the good and bad of 1950s small town life. Haynes effectively examines the social and political restraints of the era that seethe and stew beneath a simple society. The drama also contains some nice humor laced within the narrative. By crafting a layered screenplay, the result is an enticing and fresh story that avoids cliché. The story of Frank is never given to demonstrative writing. And, that is why Haynes' screenplay is one of the year's best.

FRAILTY

Brent Hanley wrote an edgy and intelligent thriller that neatly blends genres to produce an effective and dramatic narrative. The story centers on a family and a terrible secret they managed to keep for many years. A serial killer who calls himself "God's Hands" has terrorized a small town in present day Texas. Fenton Meiks approaches the lead FBI investigator on the case, claiming

2002's BEST SCREENPLAYS
Part 2

By James Vejvoda

(In alphabetical order)

ABOUT A BOY

Adapted by Peter Hedges and directors Chris & Paul Weitz from the novel by *High Fidelity*'s Nick Hornby, this amusing yet moving yarn revolves around Will (Hugh Grant), a charming but lazy cynic who finally matures into manhood after befriending troubled young Marcus (Nicholas Hoult). In the great Hollywood tradition, each protagonist forces the other to change by the story's end.

After initially joining a single mothers group in the hopes of easily scoring with desperate young women, irrepressible bachelor Will eventually finds true love with Rachel (Rachel Weitz), the mother of one of Marcus' classmates. In the end, Will embraces responsibility and sincerity. He is no longer about nothing (as he so proudly used to be) and now has a family, of sorts, that he can belong to.

A highly entertaining romantic comedy, *About a Boy* was far smarter and more adult than I'd expected it to be. What could've been just another movie about a louse and a cute kid instead became a hilarious and poignant story about growing up and the need everyone has to be loved.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

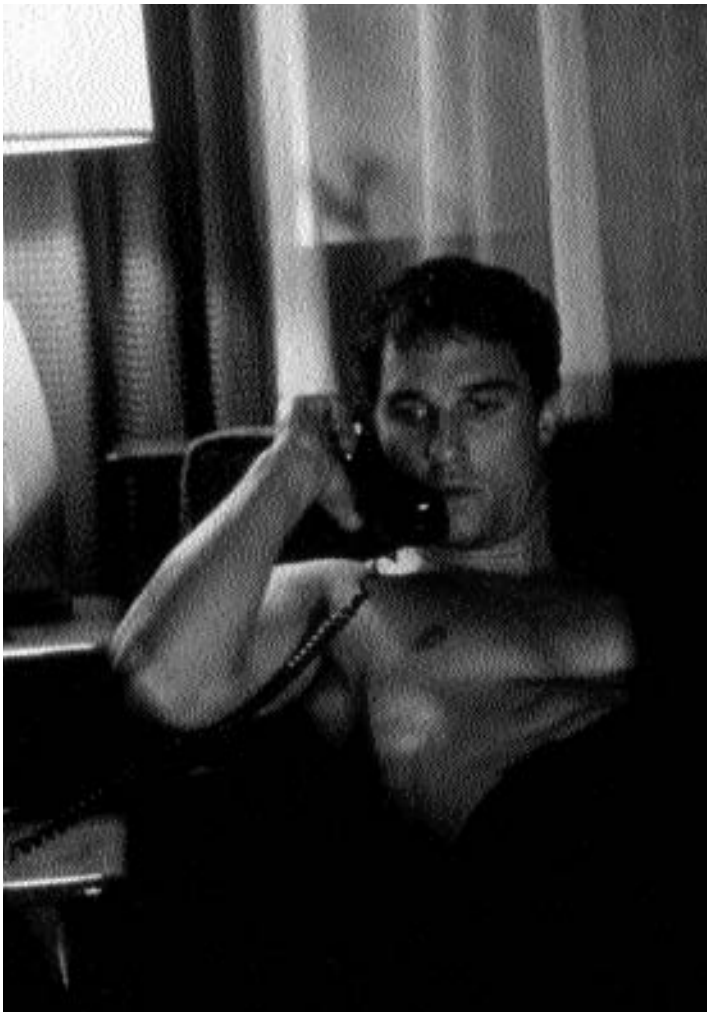
Jeff Nathanson penned this briskly paced, charming adaptation of Frank Abagnale, Jr.'s autobiography. Leonardo DiCaprio portrays the Peter Pan-like con man/impostor who milked banks of more than a million dollars while still just a teenager. Frank makes his own way into the world after his parents' divorce shatters his seemingly idyllic home life. Desperate for money and being a compulsive liar and trickster, Frank realizes he has a gift for making people believe almost anything he wants them to.

Soon he is impersonating an airline pilot, a doctor and a lawyer and is raking in plenty of cash and women along the way. However, Frank's life of deception unravels thanks to the ruthless pursuit of FBI agent Carl Hanratty (Tom Hanks), a driven but goodhearted lawman.

The magic of *Catch Me If You Can* is that it makes you empathize with Frank even though your moral compass tells you it's wrong to. After all, Frank's nonviolent spree seems like fun, a mere adolescent wish fulfillment. But as the latter half of the story clearly shows, there's a price to be paid for every transgression. Frank is ultimately redeemed thanks to his relationship with the fatherly Hanratty.

CHICAGO

This critical darling scripted by Bill Condon is based on both the classic Broadway musical staged by Bob Fosse and Fred Ebb, and the play by Maurine Dallas Watkins. That play was itself inspired by a real life murder case in Prohibition-era Chicago. Aspiring performer Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger) is arrested for the murder of her lover (Dominic West) and ends up finding the fame she's always craved. Thanks to the shenanigans of her slick



Matthew McConaughey in Frailty

he knows the identity of the killer. When the FBI agent scoffs at him, Fenton calmly reveals that the killer is his younger brother Adam.

From this point the story is told in flashback with Fenton providing the narrative of his childhood. He and his brother at first appear to have grown up in a normal single-parent family, raised by their widowed father. But one day everything changes when they are awaken late at night by their frightened father who tells the boys that he was just visited by an angel and given a holy mission to destroy evil "demons." He tells the boys that on the outside these demons are normal looking people, but on the inside they are pure evil. After recanting his vision to the boys he enlists them to help destroy the demons. Fenton refuses to participate in the killings while his younger and impressionable brother obeys. Needing more evidence, the FBI agent follows Fenton to the family's rose garden where the bodies are buried, only to learn that neither good nor evil is what it seems.

THE GRAY ZONE

It's hard to imagine, but Tim Blake Nelson's *The Gray Zone* goes deeper and is more courageous than Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. His screenplay, based on a book by Miklos Nyiszli, is unrelenting and unforgiving. It never waivers and never succumbs to cliché. Blake avoids the heavy-handedness of some Holocaust films with what can only be described as the relentless depiction of life and death in a 1944 Nazi crematory in Auschwitz.

defense attorney Billy Flynn (Richard Gere), Roxie is transformed into a victim rather than a victimizer. But can Roxie hold onto her newfound celebrity? As the saying goes, all glory is fleeting.

The biggest threat to Roxie's freedom, and stardom, is Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a starlet who is also on trial for murder. Velma makes the grave error of not ingratiating herself with Roxie soon enough. Both Roxie and Velma vie for the attention not only of Billy Flynn but of the media and the masses. Perhaps they'd make out better if they learned to work together rather than against each other?

Chicago is a fun, timely and deeply cynical story about fame, the American justice system and getting away with murder. Its characters are unrepentant and duplicitous yet you'd be hard-pressed not to be entertained by them.

THE HOURS

Screenwriter David Hare's adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Michael Cunningham seems to have made for a love it-or-hate it experience for most filmgoers. *The Hours* examines the lives of three women in three different eras: 1940s novelist Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman, wearing a now infamous prosthetic nose), 1950s housewife Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), and contemporary book editor Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep).

The tale examines the loneliness, desperation and anxieties each woman faces. *The Hours* also grapples with the themes of love, sexuality, life and death as the three protagonists consider the choices they've made (or didn't make) in their lives.

An Oscar contender for both Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay, *The Hours* is not for all tastes. Some will find it ponderous while others will be deeply moved. Is its dialogue poetic or simply affected? Are these fully realized characters or just Big Important Themes dressed up as people? Regardless, *The Hours* will certainly provoke audiences into contemplating the many issues its story raises.

MINORITY REPORT

This tautly paced yarn, credited to screenwriters Scott Frank and Jon Cohen, is loosely based on a short story by science-fiction author Philip K. Dick. Set in Washington D.C. of the near future, *Minority Report* is a "wrong man" thriller about celebrated lawman John Anderton (Tom Cruise) who is on the run for a murder he doesn't know if he will commit or not. In the future, it has become possible for law enforcement to use scientifically engineered prophets in order to arrest people for murder before the crime is ever committed. The seemingly infallible visions of these "precogs" are enough to make constitutional protections a thing of the past. "Future murderers" are arrested, convicted and incarcerated without due process.

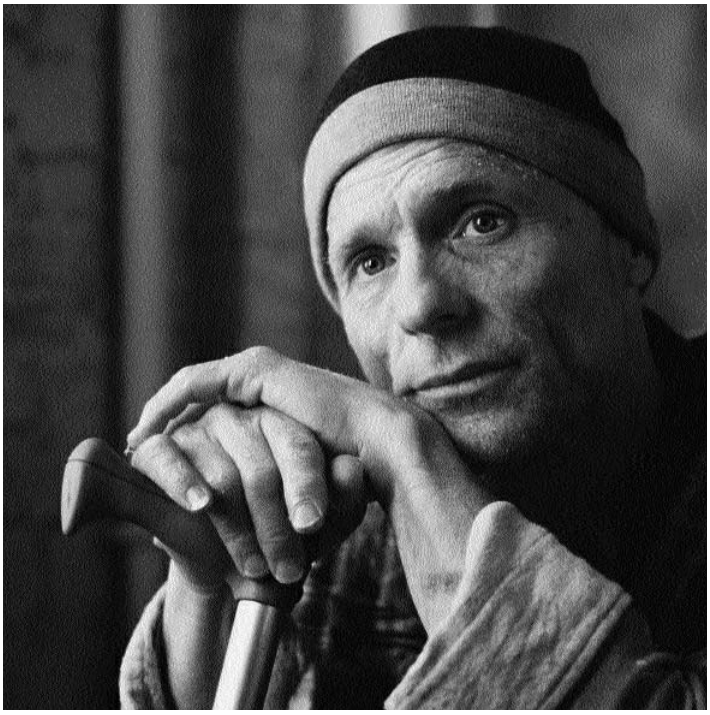
John Anderton, one of the top proponents and enforces of the "Precrime" program, now finds himself its latest quarry. Anderton refuses to turn himself in and sets out to find out who set him up and why. But was he really framed? Perhaps Anderton will indeed kill his future victim and, if so, for what reason?

Minority Report is a thinking man's genre piece. It is not content with simply being another "wrong man" thriller or "bleak future" tale. The story manages to make its political point about not letting law enforcement's power outweigh its constitutional responsibilities without ever sacrificing its flare for "popcorn flick" fun. It is an example of how intelligent and entertaining a summer blockbuster can be if Hollywood tries hard enough. *

The story centers on the Sonderkommando, a unit of Jews that are forced into the processing of new arrivals to the death camp and, later, must dispose of their corpses. If anyone who is chosen does not want to do the "work," they are shot. These death camps at times killed and cremated up to twenty-thousand or more Jews in a single day. The Sonderkommando would accompany their fellow Jews into the underground chamber where they undress for "cleansing." They place their clothing and belongings on hooks that are numbered, and are reminded to remember the number so they can collect their things once they are cleaned. They are then herded into the showers, the massive steels doors are locked behind them, but instead of water they receive the deadly gas. The Sonderkommando then go in, collect the bodies, and hose out the urine, feces, and blood. The bodies are then take to the massive ovens, the Crematorium, where they are cremated into a gray powdery substance that is discarded into nearby pits and fields.

There are no bright spots in the story, and humanity is all but erased. These are robots doing a job, awaiting their own death. No Sonderkommando unit is kept more than four months, at which point they are then killed. They know this. In return they get four extra months of life, and are rewarded with special foods, wines, and clothing, ironically, all confiscated from their fellow Jews. There are no speeches or manipulate gestures by the writer to explain how someone can do this to someone else. They are simply living, doing what anyone would do, and hoping that they can see another day.

In the end, the Sonderkommando plan a revolt where they will blow up the Crematoriums and hopefully stop the cycle of death. On the eve of the revolt a young girl is miraculously found alive in the gas chamber. Now their quest is to save her life. What's interesting here is that the script avoids cliché and does not somehow make this quest into one of redemption. There are those within the Sonderkommando who do not want to help her as it would interfere with the revolt. *The Gray Zone* is a powerful story, and one that arguably portrays these events as honest and forthright as any film ever has, making it one of 2002's best screenplays. *



Ed Harris in The Hours

James Vejvoda is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Filmic Writing Program, where he received both the *Jack Nicholson Award* for Excellence in Screenwriting and the *Abraham Polonsky Award*. He has won The Writers Network Fiction and Screenplay Contest and was a quarter-finalist in the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. He can be reached at jamvej@msn.com

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The Last Word

by Jean-François Allaire

WILLARD

Before we begin this review, I'll admit that I have never seen or heard about the original *Willard* movie that opened in 1971. I had only read bits of information about the storyline. The draft I'm reviewing is by Glen Morgan and James Wong (*Final Destination*, *The One*).

A shy young man named Willard (Crispin Glover) lives with his sick mother. He works at the steel company his late father started. The current owner of the company, Frank Martin, persecutes him constantly. After saving a young rat from a trap, he befriends the rodent community that lives in his basement. He feeds them and they become his servants. The group has two leaders: Socrates, who is Willard's favorite, and the grown-up rat he saved; and the horrifying Ben. After being continually humiliated, Willard finally seeks his revenge with the help of his army of rodents.

The screenplay is a well-paced horror story. From beginning to end you're left wondering, "What's going to happen next?" There are two excellent sequences in the screenplay. One is when a co-worker's cat is left alone in the house with all the rats, and there are thousands of them. The entire chase sequence is to the music of Michael Jackson's "Ben." Which he wrote for the original film. The second is a terrorizing scene of what could happen to you when you download porn off the Internet. You'll never do that again without looking over your shoulder. My only problem with the script is that it feels too dark. Perhaps the original was like that itself. There's no happy ending to this tale.

I have been a long time fan of Crispin Glover, dating back to when I first saw *Back to the future*. He's probably one of the strangest actors to ever grace the screen. I'm extremely excited about his casting as Willard. No other actor is tailor-fit for that part. He has the look and the attitude. In the first act he seems to be another George McFly, but slowly he becomes more and more strange.

The two leading rats, Ben and Socrates, are also nicely written. Socrates is Willard's favorite and the true leader of the pack. Ben is jealous of him and his psychopathic tendencies make him very menacing. They have managed to do a remarkable job updating this film. With dazzling casting and some superb special effects for the rats, this movie could be a sleeper hit. You'll never look at rats in the same way after this movie.

THE CORE

```
INT. MISSION CONTROL

Stickley also has the ghost of a smile.

                STICKLEY
      I am sure, Major. Endeavour, you are
      go for re-entry on my mark.

                BECK
      Roger that, Houston.

                CHIEF ENGINEER
      What the hell —-

A klaxon screams. Some engineers stand, others shout franti-
cally into their headsets. Stickley raises a single eyebrow.
All eyes go to the TRACKING WALL MAP.

                STICKLEY
      Endeavor, y'all are deviating from course.
      Verify re-entry coordinates, please.

No response. The SHOUTING of engineers fills the room. In a
perfectly normal tone of voice. Stickley says:

                STICKLEY (CONT'D)
      Quiet.

The room immediately falls dead silent.

                STICKLEY (CONT'D)
      They're in the ionosphere, we've temporarily
      lost radio contact.

EXT. ENDEAVOUR

The ships careens into the Earth's atmosphere., the HEAT
SHIELD BURNING with extraordinary intensity.
```

This excerpt isn't from a TV movie based on the shuttle Columbia calamity; it's from *The Core*, pages 13 to 15 of the screenplay. They sound eerily similar to the awful accident. Some images from that sequence were featured in the trailer for the film. Following the tragic event, Paramount Pictures immediately yanked the trailer and had those shocking images removed. After juggling with the idea of pushing back the release of the movie, they finally decided on a March 27th debut.

After strange catastrophes spread throughout the planet, Dr. Josh Keyes (Aaron Eckhart) discover that the Core of the Earth has stopped spinning. The electromagnetic field becomes more and more unstable. Unless they somehow jump-start the Core, life on this planet will cease to exist. Humanity has four months to live. The American government enlists Keyes to assemble a team to save Earth. His solution? Blow-up nuclear devices in the center of the planet. He assembles a team of misfits called "Terranauts" (nice term, eh?) consisting of: Major Rebecca "Beck" Childs (Hillary Swank), the female pilot of the Endeavor; Josh's friend Sergei (Tcheky Karyo), a Russian nuclear expert; Brazzleton (Delroy Lindo), the inventor of the vehicle they're using; and his arrogant ex-partner Zimsky (Stanley Tucci). Together they must risk their lives to save the human race from extinction.

Been there, done that. This screenplay is basically a reverse of *Armageddon*. Both films have spectacular scenes of mayhem on Earth and in space to start, followed by some sort of scientific explanation of the phenomenon. We meet our unlikely heroes, inter-cut with laughs, while the mission is prepared. The misfit's crew launches, and some sort of trouble arises. A sacrifice needs to be made so they can save the planet. They unleash nuclear power, run like hell, and make it back home safely as saviors. That synopsis could be for either *Armageddon* or *The Core*. This film might have bigger scientific terms or explanations but it's still boils down to the same formulaic plot elements. There's no original hook or twist to this story. But I'll give credit to the writer, it's not a boring story. Another film that reminds me of this project is Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*. That film isn't scheduled for release till summer 2004. I hated that script. Thankfully, the script for *The Core* managed to entertain me.

The movie marks the introduction of Aaron Eckhart as Action Star. While he's been shunning these types of roles for a few years, he's finally got around to it. His new beginning is nothing too spectacular. It's the typical All-American hero part. He won't stretch his acting muscles like in the films of his buddy Neil LaBute. One of the script's other big disappointments is Hillary Swank's role of Beck. Such a talented actress wasted on a so-so role. She's highly underwritten in this story. What an appalling follow-up to the exquisitely written *Insomnia*.

Article continues on page 30

P.O.V.

REMEMBER TO FOCUS

By Michael B. Druxman

I watch a lot of movies on DVD. Just recently I saw a pair of films that reinforces one of writer William Goldman's (*Hearts in Atlantis*) cardinal rules: "Protect the spine of your story at all Costs."

If you let your story go off on a tangent, it's going to lose its focus, and without focus, your audience's attention will wander.

What's your story about?

Answer that question as succinctly as possible, identifying its beginning, middle and end, and you'll have found your spine. *The Godfather*, for example, is not about the Mafia. That is its background. It is about the moral disintegration of Michael Corleone (Al Pacino).

Who is your story's protagonist i.e., its central character?

Keep your action focused on him/her, and you should be able to keep your story on track. In *The Godfather*, despite the fact that Marlon Brando has first billing, Pacino is the protagonist. This story is about him.

For example, the 1961 British gangster movie *The Frightened City* does not seem to focus on any one of it's three principal characters. Top billed in the movie was Herbert Lom (Peter Seller's boss in *The Pink Panther* pictures). He played a ruthless accountant who organizes London's major racketeers into one ruling syndicate. Also, in the cast list was John Gregson (*The Lavender Hill Mob*), cast as an honest police detective pledged to bring down the crime syndicate. Finally, there was a pre-James Bond Sean Connery, who in his role as a mob enforcer with a conscience was, in fact, the film's true protagonist. It is his character's decisions and his ultimate change-of-heart that moves the story along.

Connery, unfortunately, doesn't make his first appearance until well into the movie, and then his storyline shares screen time with those of the other two actors. As a result, one is not sure if the filmmakers were hoping for a "rise and fall of a mob boss" picture (a la *Little Caesar* or *Al Capone*), which would have revolved around Lom's character; a "police against the Mob" movie (such as *The Untouchables* or *Serpico*) from Gregson's standpoint; or a "crook goes straight" melodrama, centering on Connery.

Plot wise, this picture is a mess.

The sad thing about the other movie I viewed is that it could have been good. It's an intriguing, atmospheric low-key thriller that works right up until the last fifteen minutes or so when it seems to lose its way.

Wendigo stars Patricia Clarkson and Jake Weber as a happily married New York couple who, with their young son (Erik Per Sullivan) travel to the Catskill Mountains for a winter weekend getaway in a friend's cabin. However, before they even get to the house, they have a nasty run-in with a local nutcase (John Speredakos) who proceeds to terrorize them during their stay.

There's also the Wendigo, some sort of Native American spirit that haunts the woods, but as far as the story is concerned it was totally unnecessary and only added to the confusion. I presume that the producers felt that the film needed a supernatural element for marketing purposes.

The climax of the picture occurs when Weber is shot in an ambush and Clarkson rushes him to the local hospital. Now, while Patricia and her son wait at the hospital, the local sheriff goes out to arrest Speredakos, who winds up killing him.

Speredakos jumps into his truck to make his escape, but then crashes it in the woods where the Wendigo, something that looks half like a deer and half like a tree, gives him his just deserts.

So, what's wrong with this ending?

For the first two-thirds or so of this movie our focus and emotions have been with the family (Clarkson, Weber and Sullivan). We've come to care about them. Yet, once they arrive at the hospital, they virtually disappear from our view. The rest of the film, except for the final scene, is dominated by Speredakos, the sheriff and the man dressed up in the half-deer, half-tree suit.

As I see it, writer-director Larry Fessenden, who displays a tremendous amount of talent in this film, made his mistake by losing the family.

What if, with Weber in the hospital, Speredakos, after he kills the sheriff, now goes after Clarkson and Sullivan, trying to break into their cabin to rape her and kill them both? That would certainly have kept the characters we like in jeopardy. At that point, since young Sullivan has been fantasizing about this creature throughout most of the movie, it would be perfectly legitimate to have the Wendigo appear and save the day.

On the other hand, I wonder if the real reason for this story misstep is due to filmmaking economics, rather than Fessenden's lack of good storytelling technique. Having directed films on a low budget, I'm well aware that sometimes compromises must be made in your story because of shooting time, a particular location, props, or the unavailability of an actor.

Patricia Clarkson, for example, is currently an in-demand performer who, at the time of this writing, is being touted for a Supporting Actress Oscar nomination for her fine work in *Far From Heaven*. It's quite possible that Fressenden's limited budget did not allow for her participation for the number of extra days that would be needed to shoot an alternate ending such as the one that I have suggested. *

Michael B. Druxman is a screenwriter-director whose credits include *CHEYENNE WARRIOR* (1994), *DILLINGER AND CAPONE* (1995) and *THE DOORWAY* (2000). He is also a produced playwright, a published novelist and the author of *THE ART OF STORYTELLING* (The Center Press, 1997), which is used as a writing textbook in several schools and colleges


Robert Forester and Donnie Wahlber in Diamond Men

DIAMOND MEN

An interview with writer-director Daniel M. Cohen

by Harry Caul

Daniel M. Cohen's *Diamond Men* (Lions Gate Films) is a little known movie, though it was out in select theaters for nearly a year, and is also one of the better films of I've seen of late (I didn't see it until it was out on video last year). In the movie Robert Forester plays a traveling jewelry salesman who must mentor a young replacement (Donnie Wahlberg). During their time together both men gain a new friendship, and much more.

What was the basis for *Diamond Men*?
I needed a low-budget idea, something I could make for very little money. I was writing other scripts and getting options, which didn't amount to anything in the long haul. I had a little bit of money and knew a producer who might be interested in a low-budget script. I knew I could do this in Lancaster (PA) for next to nothing.

Beyond the need for a low-budget story, how did this story evolve? It's fairly original.
One day I was sitting around talking with my uncle, he plays one of the jewelers (George Coe), and I said to him it would be neat to do a movie about a young jewelry traveling salesmen replacing an older one. They're trying to push the old guy out of the business. At first we were just laughing about it. My uncle kidding me, asking how it would end, and I said he'd get off with a million dollars in diamonds. We both had a laugh and I went home and wrote the script.

The cast was wonderful. Robert Forester and Donnie Wahlberg. How did you get them involved?
They loved the material, it certainly wasn't for the money. It wasn't anything mysterious. A good friend of mine knew a good casting director, and Linda Berger had the most imagination with the script. We all thought of Robert Forester, and Donnie was a nice surprise. He had done some films, including a small part in *The Sixth Sense*, and was impressive. He's very versatile. If you saw him in *Boomtown* you'd never know he was capable of being funny.

You took the buddy situational drama-action story, popular with cop thrillers, and placed it in an unusual environment.
Yeah, exactly. I like genre films, but I didn't want to do the same thing and didn't have the budget to even if I wanted.

What is your writing process?
I wrote a bunch of scenes, numbered them, laid it out, and wrote the movie. I write one of two ways, either very quickly or very slowly, depending on how many notes I have. I don't do a lot of rewriting while I write. I prefer to fix things later. I think, if I can get it down then I have something to work with. I'd rather have something down, even if it wasn't really working, than not having written anything.

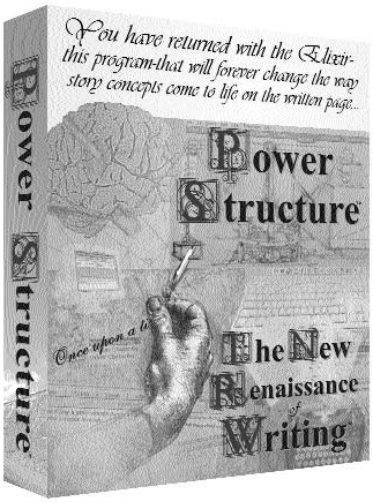
With smaller, low-budget indie films, the movies have to be so character-driven and usually start with character, but it sounds like you started with a situation or a premise.
It happens almost simultaneously in your mind. It's the characters and the story. When I sit down to write I have a really good idea of where I'm going. I found when I don't, I was working with my first agent on a Sci-fi, and it was really all over the place. It took a very long time to get the script right, until I felt like the story was making sense. I like to know who the characters are and what's going to happen. And then there are a million little things that can happen, and take you in new directions. That's the fun part.

Eddie was a wonderful character. Both main characters

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were fleshed out well, but particularly well with Eddie. I thought there was a major aspect to him that was very much out of *A Death of A Salesman*.
I took the dialogue straight from *A Death of A Salesman*, on purpose. That's a hint to the audience that not only are we doing a buddy film, but we're taking the "death of a salesman" and making it into a "life of a salesman."

The marketing on this one, especially the DVD package, made me think I was getting a formulaic heist thriller, which of course it wasn't.
It was schrewed marketing on Lions Gate's part. The movie isn't at all what people will expect. It isn't just a run of the mill movie. It's also a movie that a lot of people know about. It played in theaters for over a year. Here's the thing. In the long run, I wanted the movie to be touching and funny. I want the audience to be watching the movie and find themselves vested in the characters. I don't like movies where it's about the character and you're suppose to feel bad for the character, the ones that are way over the top. I'm not into that. The sadder elements of Eddie's character are subtle, and actually it's humorous most of the way through the movie.

There is a real sense of loneliness with Eddie's character. His wife passed away. The heart attack. He's on the verge of losing his job. There's a hard edge to his character. Was the title meant as a metaphor?
Well, that's what they're called in the industry. It's very interesting though as people have said that to me before. I think what happens is the title takes on the resonance of the movie, not the other way around. In other words, the movie resonates back to the title. The movie gives the title more significance. If it's a terrible movie the title won't resonate. A lot of times a film has a clever title and it was a terrible film, the title then has no meaning, really. It's the value of the film. For example, *About Schmidt*. You look at the title and it means nothing to you until you've seen the movie. You can then reflect on it. Having an intriguing title and a good story is the key.

Was there a dominant theme in the movie? What was it about for you personally?
It's about character transformation. There were several themes woven into the characters who change their destiny. As the story unfolds we're witness to these revelations.

I thought the script had a great setup an even better payoff, and a nice twist at the end. How long did it take you to come up with that structure, and did you have it before you started writing?
I had that before I sat down and wrote it. I had the beginning, middle, and end. The hardest thing was making the character interaction natural. The interaction between Eddie, Bobby, and the girls was difficult to capture the way I wanted. The script was 106 pages and my first assembly 110 minutes and at that point I had thrown out six scenes. So really the movie that you see there is really about 94 pages, because I throw out so much material. It was always designed from the get go.

How much did you allow actors to ad lib? This was your directorial debut.
I filmed a lot of footage. I was advised when I started, not to be too concerned about them repeating the words exactly as written in the script, but to make sure the sense of it was translated. Actors sometimes have their own way of saying things and doing things. In certain scenes it's very evident what I'm looking for and that there isn't much room for improvisation. *

The Last Word continued from page 26

HEAD OF STATE

A black president? It could happen. Rev. Al Sharpton might make a run for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 2004. But you won't have to wait too long to see one on the big screen. This month, Chris Rock becomes President of the U.S.A.. In a movie that he co-wrote and directed, Rock follows in the footsteps of James Earl Jones (in 1972's *The Man*) and Dennis Haysbert, who play one on the TV-Show *24*. Chris Tucker also has his own black president comedy in the works. Fortunately for Rock, he will get to release his film first.

After a tragic event, Alderman Mays Gillam (Chris Rock) of Washington D.C. gets the call from the Democratic National Party. Seems like they need a candidate:

```
          LASSITER
We want you to run for President.

          MAYS
        (incredulous)
Of what?

          LASSITER
The United States.

          MAYS
Of what...

          LASSITER
Of America.

          MAYS
Which America?

          LASSITER
North America.

          MAYS
Get the f**k outta of here.
```

Unknown to Mays, is that the party has set him up to fail. They expect him to lose only to strengthen themselves four years down the line. After shelving the campaign agenda, Mays begins to speak from the heart. He rallies more and more Americans to his cause. He decides to pick his own brother as running mate (Bernie Mac). Could he possibly have a shot at becoming President?

It was a quick and humorous read. The script is around 93 pages long. I breezed through-it in less then 45 minutes. It had me laughing out loud numerous times. Rock and his co-writer Ali LeRoi did a very good job of pacing the story. They also invented an interesting narrative device. They use rapper Nate Dogg as the narrator. He appears every once in a while to rap (narrate) the script. Very cool stuff! They also put him all over the place. He goes to a basketball game and even a wrestling event.

Mays Gillam is probably the best character Chris Rock will play on-screen so far in his career. It's easy to see on the page that Rock had fun writing Gillam. He manages to put the Presidential hopeful in all sorts of amusing situation. He gets the biggest laughs by contrasting white and black culture. One of my favorite scenes is a fundraising event for Gillam. He somehow manages to turn it into some sort of party, with guests doing the electric slide and other things. The supporting cast isn't very important to the storyline and are really window dressing for Rock's antics. Bernie Mac doesn't have much to say, but I'm betting he improvised plenty during shooting.

Chris Rock managed to craft himself a really hilarious little film. Hopefully, he'll continue doing that in his next few projects. Bottom line, I would most certainly vote for President Rock. *

Narrative Structure: RUN LOLA RUN

by Chris Wehner

Part 3 in an ingoing series on screenwriting structure.

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."
-T.S. Elloit, "Little Gidding

"After the game is before the game."
-S. Herberger

German writer-director Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* opens with the above quotations. T.S. Elloit's quote speaks of reflective knowledge. I don't want to go off on a philosophical rampage, but the idea is that we really have no idea where time begins, and will theoretically end. Is what we believe to be real, real? *Run Lola Run* also explores the notion of cause and effect.

The non-stop motion of *Run Lola Run* can be a little overwhelming at times, but it is not the work of a hack. There is a method to the madness and a story does exist. It's a journey into the cycles of habitual learning, and refractive and reflective realty. How the events, occurrences, and happenings of everyday life and the chain reactions of those events determine the course of our life. You're running down a street, you stop to help an old lady, and up ahead of you where you would have been had you kept running a window from a high-rise building comes crashing down. You've just taken a detour. What was destined to happen to you did not, because an unexpected event occurred. You stopped to help the old lady.

The story gets going when Lola receives a phone call from her boyfriend, Manni, who proceeds to tell her that he's in a lot of trouble. Manni has lost a bag of money, $100,000 marks. Worse yet, the money belongs to a German gangster. They're going to kill him if he doesn't meet them in twenty-minutes with the money. Manni is also upset with Lola as she was suppose to pick him up, but failed to show when her moped was stolen. Manni was forced to use the train. And when a bum stumbled while getting on, and Manni helped him up, the police appeared. They flustered Manni, an already nervous and twitchy individual, who promptly exited the train only to discover too late that he forgot the bag.

Manni is calling Lola from a phone booth. He's afraid and panicked, so he decides he'll rob a store. He'd rather be thrown in jail then not show with the money. Lola pleads with him, and tells him to wait for her. She'll be there in twenty-minutes. What can she do in twenty-minutes? Manni's not convinced and tells her before hanging up that he's going to rob the store. With that Lola is off and running. Her only hope is her father, a banker. Being without motorized transportation Lola takes off running to her father's bank. Along the way a series of events unfold and a chain reaction occurs which seals her and Manni's fate. She arrives late to see Manni going into the store to rob it. She gets involved in the robbery, and is herself gunned down in the street. Lying on the ground, taking her lasts breaths of air, she looks at us and says "Stop." And with that the second of three scenarios begins with Lola beginning her run all over again to see her father.

Each twenty-minute segment is similar, but with important differences. While she is running essentially the same route, Lola makes minor choices during each segment that have profound effects.

During the second "running" her route is altered only in a very minor way. But a major event (plot point) at her father's bank alters the segment significantly enough that it ends with Manni being shot outside the store he is robbing, as Lola runs up to him with a bag of money she has herself just taken from the bank.

Each segment has a major event, or plot point, that propells the story forward and off in a new direction. At the end of both segments a scene occurs where Lola and Manni are lying in bed. Each of them poses questions to the other such as "Do you love me?" and "If I died what would you do?" The underlining theme of the story is that love can conquer all.

The third segment ends happily, and of the three, is most different with Lola taking a slightly different course to her rendezvous with Manni. The results of certain actions propelled her into this new line of action, and an unexpected plot twist occurs. The chain reaction of which frees both Manni and Lola from their prior tragic endings.

The unique structure of the script adds to the layers of themes and meanings in the movie. The structure itself carries some philosophical weight. Are these scenarios just possibilities that Lola imagines in her mind as she is running? Is the first scenario the real outcome? Are the others simply her mind's last gasp of "Why did this happen" kind of desperation?

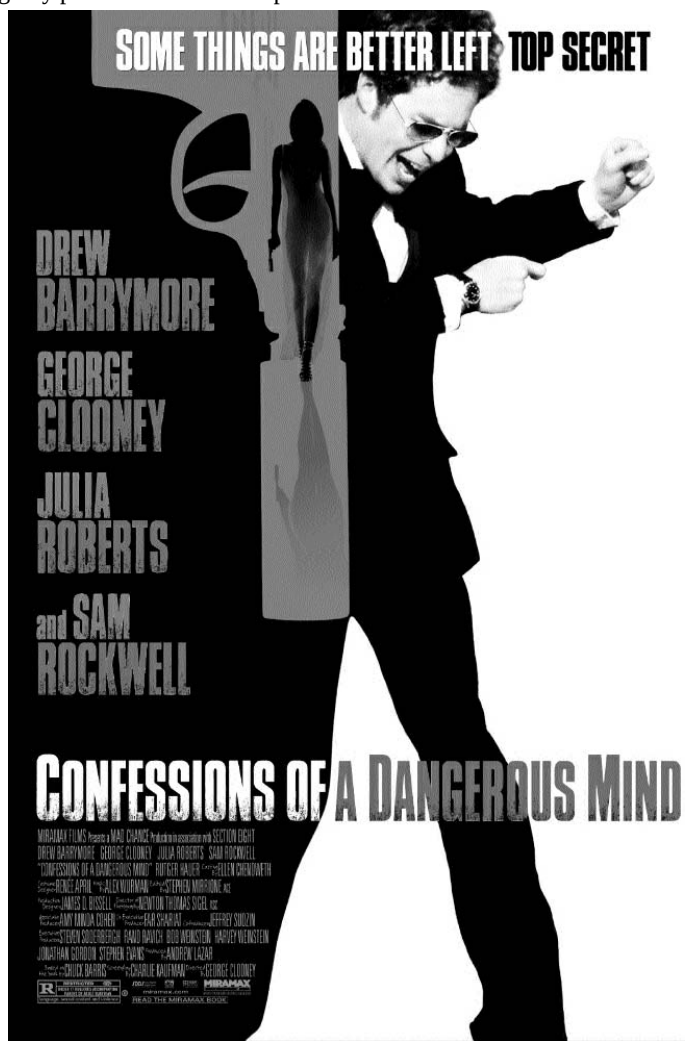
The main question to be answered is: Does the sum of the three scenarios add up to anything? I think they do. Whether it's the desperate love shown in the frantic movement and motions of Lola, or whether it's the sadness and regret of Manni, there is a story that is told within the confined space of twenty-minutes regardless of the outcome.

Recently at the Nodance Film Festival, held every year in Park City, Utah during the Sundance Film Festival, I got the chance to see Mike Figgis' movie *Hotel*. As an improvised, split-screen, multiple camera non-stop motion action movie, *Hotel* is a scatterbrain creation without any logic or reason. A movie that has less dependent basis on any script than it does realtime streaming of hand-held video cameras that bump into plants, walls, and actors. Whereas Figgis' *Hotel* fails to take any shape, visually or viscerally, as a recognizable story, Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* succeeds because it takes a form. Its action and camera work are fluid and at times alluring, and it's held together by its unique structure.

In the last issue we discussed Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, where the script's structure is really more of a device. It did not add richness or layers to the story. With *Run Lola Run*, the structure is more than a means, but also an end. *

A Screenwriting Life: Charlie Kaufman

In contrast to his verbal characters, screenwriter-producer Charlie Kaufman is close-lipped about his own life and background. Taking great pains to avoid allowing any personal detail to slip out ("I don't like talking about myself"), he has deigned to let a few details come to light. "I grew up in the equivalent of Levittown" he told salon.com while a September 15, 1999 *Variety* profile touted him as one of "10 Scribes to Watch" mentions he graduated from NYU's film school. Beyond that, Kaufman clearly prefers to allow his work to speak for itself.



After knocking around NYC for a while struggling to break into show business, Kaufman finally caught a break in 1991 when he was hired as a staff writer on the quirky Chris Elliott sitcom *Get a Life!* (Fox, 1990-92). The two episodes he penned, about a female ex-con who takes Elliot prisoner and about Elliot drinking a concoction that allowed him to travel back in time both displayed elements of the surreal which would come to be a Kaufman hallmark. He went on to write some 30 episodes of TV shows ranging from the ensemble sketch comedy *The Edge* (Fox, 1992-93) to more conventional sitcoms like Fox's *Ned and Stacey* during its second season (1996-97).

While earning a living working in television, Kaufman was nurturing his dream project. Begun as "a story about a man who falls in love with someone who is not his wife" the script eventually evolved to include elements of whimsy and inventiveness. He included such oddball details as having his hero be a puppeteer who eventually finds work on the 7 1/2 floor of a Manhattan office building, a randy centenarian boss, and eventually the actor John Malkovich. Reportedly Kaufman selected the latter for several reasons, including the fact he is a gifted actor as well as for the lilt of his name which when repeated frequently can seem hilarious. Convincing the actor to give his permission to use his name and to play this version of himself took some doing, but once he agreed, the project moved forward. The cast, including Catherine Keener, John Cusack and Cameron Diaz, all signed on because of the originality of the material. As Diaz described it, "they say in Hollywood there are only 14 scripts. Well this is number 15." From its initial screenings, *Being John Malkovich* generated positive buzz and its inclusion at various film festivals before its theatrical release led to its cachet. Kaufman and its director Spike Jonze were set to re-team, with Jonze as producer on *Human Nature* (2001), another surreal relationship story about a hirsute woman who falls for a man with a tiny penis.

On the big screen, Kaufman continued to cultivate a close relationship with director Jonze, producing his script *Human Nature* in 2001. In 2002, the pair re-teamed for the remarkable reality-bending film *Adaptation*, which featured Kaufman himself (portrayed by Nicolas Cage) as the central character, a timid, flabby, balding, sweaty, anxiety-ridden screenwriter struggling to adapt author Susan Orlean's best-selling novel *The Orchid Thief* into a motion picture script. Inspired, existential, loopily funny, poignant and unabashedly eccentric, *Adaptation* was a work of extreme originality, flip-flopping between fact, fiction and fantasy while depicting both the apparently self-loathing Kaufman's angst-ridden life and major plot elements from the book by Orleans (played by Meryl Streep), which chronicled her encounters with real-life Miami orchid thief John Laroche (Chris Cooper). Kaufman employs a fictional twin brother, Donald (also Cage), as his own opposite number, a carefree, script-structure-savvy aspiring writer who, unlike Charlie, slavishly and successfully figures out the formula for cranking out typical Hollywood fare—ironically Donald is the vehicle for teaching the on-screen Charlie the kind of epiphany-style life lessons Kaufman vehemently resists in his own work. While the Donald character serves as an alter ego for Charlie, he is never directly revealed to be an imaginary creation in the film—Indeed, "Donald Kaufman" receives co-screenplay credit and Charlie dedicated the script in Donald's memory.

Also in 2002, George Clooney made his directorial debut with the Kaufman-penned *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, an adaptation of the presumably fictionalized and farcical autobiography of game show producer and host Chuck Barris (*The Gong Show*), who claimed to lead a double life as a CIA assassin. *

All data from Baseline-FilmTracker. For more biographical information on Charlie Kaufman or other writers, directors, actors, and producers, please visit www.baseline.hollywood.com.

INDEPENDENT VISION

an interview with

Greg Pak

by Chris wehner

While attending the Sundance Film Festival this year I found myself spending more time at the Slamdance Film Festival than I thought I would. One of the reasons was a little movie called *Robot Stories*, written and directed by Greg Pak, one of the better independent (in the true sense of the word) films I saw in 2002.

The movie takes four stories, all with a common theme, and all in some way use robots as a symbolic representation of the conflicting nature between man and machine. How, as our lives become increasingly inundated with technology, we have found ourselves more and more isolated from each other and our emotions and feelings as human beings. The four stories are: "My Robot Baby," about a couple having to take care of a robot baby before they can adopt a real one; "The Robot Fixer," where a mother, whose son is in a coma from an accident, discovers for the first time who her son really is and his passion for toy robots; "Robot Love," where two robotic workers, one male and one female, fall in love; And the final segement, the only one without the word "robot," is called "Clay," and centers on an aging artist who attempts to find affection through computerized holographic simulation.

Robot Stories is a finely written script with layers and deep themes that bind the four separate stories into a cohesive narrative unit held together by its unique structure.



Greg Pak (writer-director-actor) and Julienne Hanzelka Kim in Robot Stories

Is *Robot Stories* a Sci-fi movie? Your "technology vs. the human condition" theme seems to make this more of a Sci-fi. It's certainly the main element that holds all of the stories together.

You bet it's science fiction, but with a different spin. I've been calling the film "domestic science fiction." The film deals with imagined technology in the near future, but fundamentally, the stories are about the human heart, about couples and families struggling to find each other.

What are you saying about the human condition with this movie?

I think I'm saying that no matter how much technology changes our world and how much our conception of what is human changes due to advances in artificial intelligence, we're still going to struggle with the fundamental longing of sentient creatures for meaning and love and connection.

What lead you to write this story? How did you come up with the concept?

Several years ago, I heard about a company that was looking for short films for a Mother's Day television show. I did treatments for the "My Robot Baby" and "Robot Fixer" stories with that project in mind. The company didn't go for my treatments (I don't think they were looking for quirky Mother's Day science fiction.) but I wrote the short screenplays anyway. I loved the stories and felt compelled to finish them. Awhile later I had the idea for "Clay" and wrote it. And some time after that I looked at the three pieces together, realized they shared themes, and began to work on them as a feature. I wrote *Machine Love* as a final piece, and the project became *Robot Stories*.

You're mixing genres with each story, which helped to produce an interesting result. Was that intentional?

I didn't think about it explicitly—I was just trying to tell the stories I wanted to tell. But I think many good genre pictures mix genres in some way or another. *Seven Samurai* is a Western set in feudal Japan. *Blade Runner* is a film noir in a science fiction world.

Why use technology (robots) to explore such human expressions and characteristics as: love, death, family?

I love genre movies in general—science fiction, Westerns, ghost stories. I think what's attractive is that the fantastic genre elements let you escape, let you imagine a different world and see things you'd never see in real life, which is a big part of most people's movie-going experiences. But those fantastic elements—like the robots in *Robot Stories*—then become an amazing vehicle for exploring what really matters to us in everyday life. It's a great way to mix pure entertainment with deeply moving storytelling. And robots in particular make for great subject matter because the questions about robots and artificial intelligence are the same as



Writer-director-actor Greg Pak discusses the next scene with actress Eisa Davis.

the great questions about human existence. Who am I? What am I here to do? What is this thing called love? What is this thing called death?

Was the 'anthology' structure of the movie a result of your short screenplay background?

I love short films. I've written and directed about ten of them. So yes, I felt very comfortable writing the shorts that became *Robot Stories*—I felt I'd written, directed, and watched enough short films to know the rhythms, the structure, the rules and how to break them. But I've written many feature-length stories as well. I think the reason *Robot Stories* became my first feature film wasn't necessarily because it was a stepping stone from shorts for me as a storyteller, but because it was the only feature-length screenplay I had which I could produce for the kind of money I could raise.

What process do you enjoy most: the writing of the screenplay or the production (directing/editing) of the film?

I've been a writer almost all my life. When I was ten, Ray Bradbury was my hero and I tried to write every day. And these days I'm actually starting to get paid to write, which is mind-blowing. But I think I'm most in my element when I'm actually on set directing, working with actors, making a scene come to life. I like to think I'm a very good writer, but it's as a director that my storytelling energies and talents are most challenged and focused.

Have you written feature-length screenplays, and if so, what are some of the different challenges for writing shorts and features?

I've written a number of features, and while the bricks-and-mortar work of dialogue, visual storytelling, and scene building remain the same with shorts and features, there's an incredible world of story structure challenges which feature-writing brings.

One thing I realized early on was that with a short film, I could have the whole story, the whole piece in my head at one time. I could sometimes know the whole thing, know if it would work before I even started writing.

But a feature film is a much more complicated creature, with longer story and character arcs. Early on I'd often make the mistake of starting to write as if I were tackling a short, with only the first section of the story in my head. Invariably I'd get stuck, because what ends up as the final payoff in a short is just the setup of a feature. I have a half-dozen forty to sixty page scripts. I'd write out everything which was in my head in that first instant, and then I got stuck. The discipline I've learned, and am still learning, is to take the time to figure out the entire story, to know what the whole movie is about, what the main plot points are, how it twists and turns to reach its end, BEFORE I begin writing.

When you start your writing process, do you begin with theme, structure, characters, or premise?

Different projects begin differently. With a number of my short films, the ideas came to me almost fully formed. I made my short film *Mouse* after having lived through a mouse infestation in my New York apartment. I knew it could be fun to write about a guy chasing mice around. But I didn't have the story until it occurred to me to use fear of pregnancy as subtext. As soon as I knew the guy was chasing mice in order to escape a conversation about pregnancy with his girlfriend, the story came together in my head and I was able to write it. So with *Mouse*, I started with an activity, then found the theme or subtext, and the characters and plot became evident.

My feature screenplay *Rio Chino*, on the other hand, was born from an image—a Chinese gunslinger in the Old West. I'm an Asian-American kid from Texas. When I learned about the Chinese immigrants in the Old West, I became obsessed with the idea of a Western with a Chinese hero. So I had that image, and with that image a kind of theme about a different vision of the American dream. But it took me years to develop the story, structure, and characters. I actually wrote three bad screenplays about Chinese gunslingers in the Old West before writing *Rio Chino*—in a way, I learned how to write features with this project.

What main piece of advice would you offer other writers interested in making their short or feature-length screenplay into a movie?

First, write something which you can make with the kind of money you can get your hands on. I spent four years after film school pushing screenplays for which I needed millions to make. Only when I wrote *Robot Stories* was I actually able to get a feature film into production.

Second, find a partner. I think almost anything's possible if you can find one other person who's willing to make crazy sacrifices to get a movie made. *