JOHN WATERS: BRING BACK THE TINGLER!

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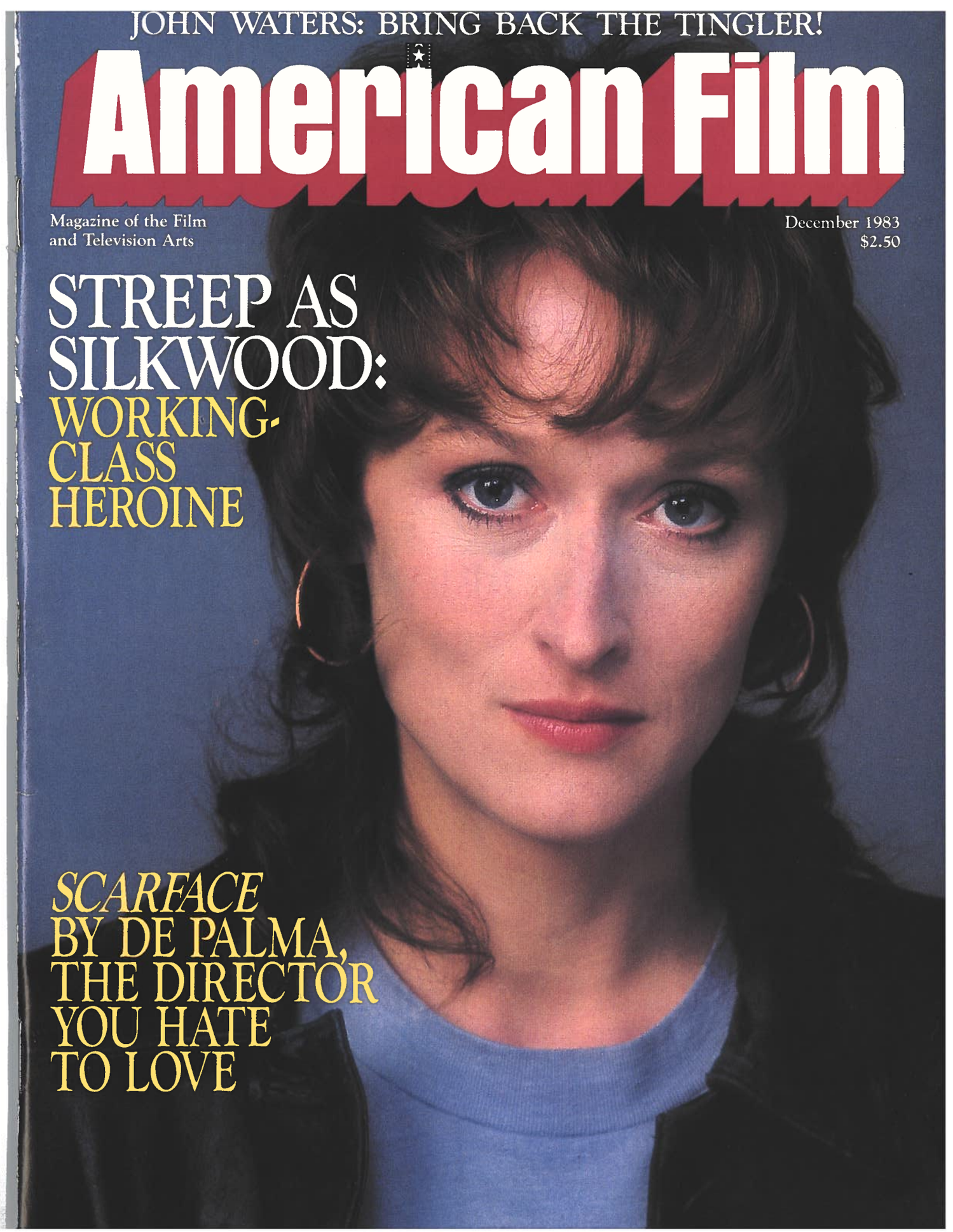
## STREEP AS SILKWOOD: WORKING-CLASS HEROINE



## *SCARFACE* BY DE PALMA, THE DIRECTOR YOU HATE TO LOVE

Stephen Rebello

# THERE ARE AS MANY UNPRODUCED SCREENPLAYS FLOATING AROUND HOLLYWOOD AS THERE ARE LIMOS IN BEVERLY HILLS. HIDDEN AMONG THEM ARE MORE THAN A FEW PEARLS.

One thing right up front about screenplays. No one ever meant for them to stay on the shelf or stuffed away in some drawer. Yet year after year, Hollywood shells out high hopes and untold millions on the preparation of scripts that are never produced. In a marketplace where only one in five films returns its investment, the great majority of script submissions get the brush-off—and many deserve nothing more. But a search through the stacks of dusty manuscripts in any Hollywood producer's office is bound to ferret out a few unfamiliar titles that stand apart from the rest. The dog-eared, Perrier-ringed covers are the giveaway. These babies have been through multiple readings.

Photograph by Clara Griffin

trip up even the most impressive of projects. "People are focused right now on making movies that are upbeat and entertaining," says David Madden, vice-president of production at Twentieth Century-Fox. "Material that isn't perceived in those ways proves an *extremely* tough sell." Susan Hyer, chief production executive for Lion's Gate Films, adds, "I get the feeling it would be an uphill battle selling *Hamlet* these days. Someone would probably say, 'Hey, it's a *downer*.'"

Screenwriter Walter Newman fires similar salvos at the industry's present infatuation with High Concept projects. "The "They insist that *only* those thirty million people go regularly to the movies, so those are the only people films are made for. It's a self-fulfilling situation. Since there's so little of interest for the rest of us to see, we don't bother going to the movies."

Certain highly regarded screenplays have been passed over as too "special" for the masses—that is, they won't make a dime. Lost in the shuffle are some awfully interesting scripts. Still, many Hollywood insiders complain about the quality of the screenplays from which they have to choose. Actor-producer-director Tony Bill, one of the industry's most receptive ears for Hollywood's richest producer or director. I think the really good stuff is closer to one out of a thousand." Susan Rogers, former director of development at Zoetrope Studios, argues, "People are always lamenting the lack of great screenplays. How many great books are written every year? All anyone has to do is look at the best-seller list for the answer to that one." Another Zoetrope alumna, Susan Ingleby, adds, "I think if a screenplay is seventy-five to eighty percent *there*, you thank your lucky stars and treat it like an old horse: Take it out and shoot it."

Nevertheless, in the frenzy of impro-

# One in a Million

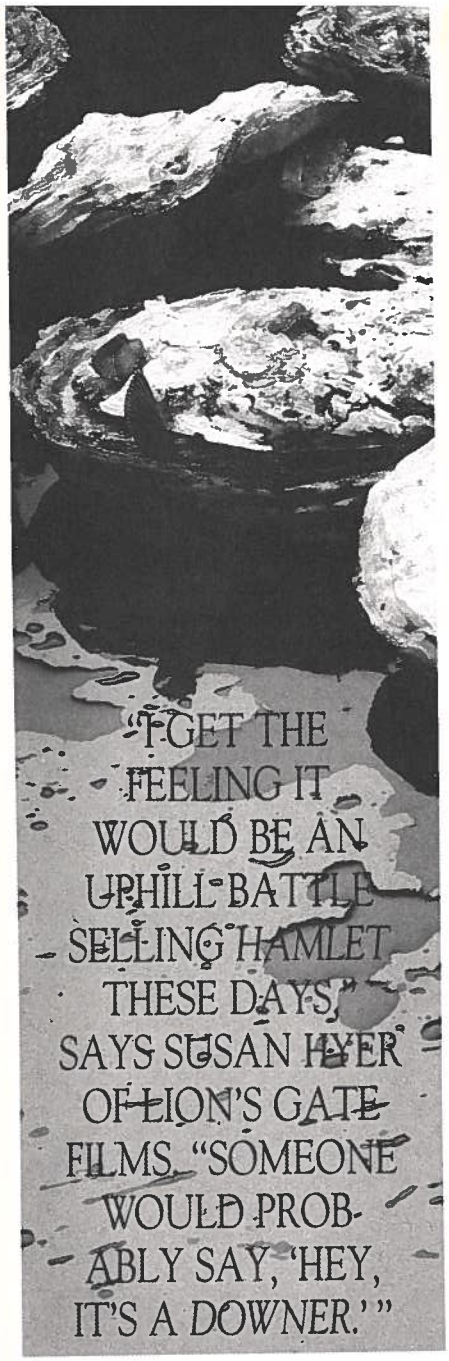
duced scripts dwells material that is admired, reread, even regarded with the melancholy ardor usually reserved for old flames or abandoned offspring. Four years ago, writer Andrew Laskos uncovered a number of pearls in these pages ("The Greatest Movies Never Made," September 1979). Earlier this year, two of the scripts Laskos picked were actually put to the litmus test. Bruce Jay Friedman's acerbically funny "Detroit Abe" got mashed in the rewrite wringer and became *Doctor Detroit*. The other test case, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, proved a well-intentioned but anemic rendering of Ray Bradbury's rousingly dark adolescent fantasy classic.

To update Laskos's list, a group of forty-five industry insiders were asked to name the best unproduced screenplays they had read recently. Each title mentioned was recorded on a master list, with repeat votes for specific titles duly reported. The master list produced a pool of sixty-two titles, from which thirty-six screenplays were read—twenty-seven from the "most frequently cited" list and nine intriguing renegade suggestions. The ten scripts chosen for this article include six front-runners that won the most votes and four chosen in a tie-breaking procedure based on the author's personal taste.

This list of screenplays represents the art and craft of screenwriting at its best. More than that, they'd make for some terrific nights at the movies.

Nicholas Kazan's screenplay "At Close Range" is as ugly as sin and just as seductive. Based on a true story that sparked a series of *Philadelphia Inquirer* articles, the script is a brooding and corrosive portrait of spiritual betrayal between father and son. Its focus is Brad, Jr., a hot-wired eighteen-year-old desperate to cut loose from his Pennsylvania farm country family. No wonder: Mother is one of the living dead, stepbrother a jittery hanger-on, and grandma a kind of one-woman Greek chorus in a rocker. Along comes Brad's long-estranged father, a petty crook capable of fathomless evil.

Natural attraction for his father lures Brad into a ring of thieves and emotional bankrupts. Their liaison ulcerates into multiple murder, rape, and a jail sentence before dancing on the cutting edge of patricide. Kazan's dialogue is rawboned and




the incidents vibrate with heartland rage and boredom.

Conventional studio wisdom pegs "At Close Range" too bleak and unsettling. Reasons one pundit, "Let's face it, if we bombed out with *Bad Boys*, you sure don't mess with something as dark and nasty as this." Yet writer Kazan—Elia's thirty-eight-year-old son, whose recent work includes *Frances* and the off-Broadway play *Blood Moon*—clearly isn't afraid of the dark. "When I read the *Inquirer* pieces," he says, "I reacted the way everyone in town did. I thought, My God, how horrible. Then I couldn't get them out of my mind." Although actor Sean Penn and director Bob Rafelson have discussed doing the film together, Kazan's experience with on-again, off-again deals makes him curb his hopes.

Bad timing squelched "Bad Manners," a Steven Zaillian coming-of-age screenplay sold to Ray Stark Productions. In the industry's dead heat to ape the success of *Animal House* and *Porky's*, someone sure missed a good bet in passing up Zaillian's sly, touching snapshot of high school tribal rites in Saginaw, Michigan, circa 1967.

The script tracks Bobby Fiore, the new kid from Grosse Pointe, who slowly breaks into a circle of wiseacre friends on his way to political consciousness. Writer Zaillian has an ear for the sprung rhythms of teenage banter and an even better take on the politics of being cool—late-sixties-style. Anyone else remember when being a wheel depended on whether you dug Roy Orbison, the Motown Sound, or the Doors? Yet beneath the screenplay's breakneck car chases, drive-in courtships, and suggestions for a rock 'n' roll sound track hides an art film. Embassy Pictures' development executive Lindsay Doran sees the script's beauty as part of its problem. "It's so rich it almost feels like a novel," she says. "Also, it's a period piece. I think a lot of people feel we've seen the sixties and young kids enough already."

In scope and mood, "Bad Manners" isn't kin to the current spate of party animal yuck fests, but to *American Graffiti* and *The Last Picture Show*. After the belly-ups of *Porky's II: The Next Day* and *Private School*, maybe it's time the moguls gave the fourteen-to-twenty-four-year-old crowd one from the heart instead of the gonads.

In a business riddled with second guessers, playwright-screenwriter Tom Pope is a gambler. "The Eagle of Broadway," his self-styled "historical romance," turns every standard assumption on How to Get a Screenplay Made in Hollywood on its ear—and still comes up aces. This is a sprawling, gutsy valentine set against the glitzy backdrop of the Big Apple in the Roaring Twenties. Tough-tender sports scribe Damon Runyon and old warrior Bat Masterson go head to head in a fictional battle with gangland kingpin Arnold Rothstein over a young boxer's fate. It proves to be Runyon's first and Masterson's last quixotic stand, but both come through heroically.

"Eagle" is a gloriously literate and red-blooded work, crammed with moments that might have been filet mignon for the

likes of Ford, Hawks, or Walsh. There's a splendid waltz where Bat sweeps young reporter Louella Parsons around the dance floor lamenting a lost love; a long good-bye card game between Bat and a dying Buffalo Bill; the Runyonesque likes of Izzy Cheesecake, Hymie Banjo Eyes, and Nathan Detroit strutting their low-life stuff; and a climactic shoot-out that manages to be every Western and gangster showdown rolled into one.

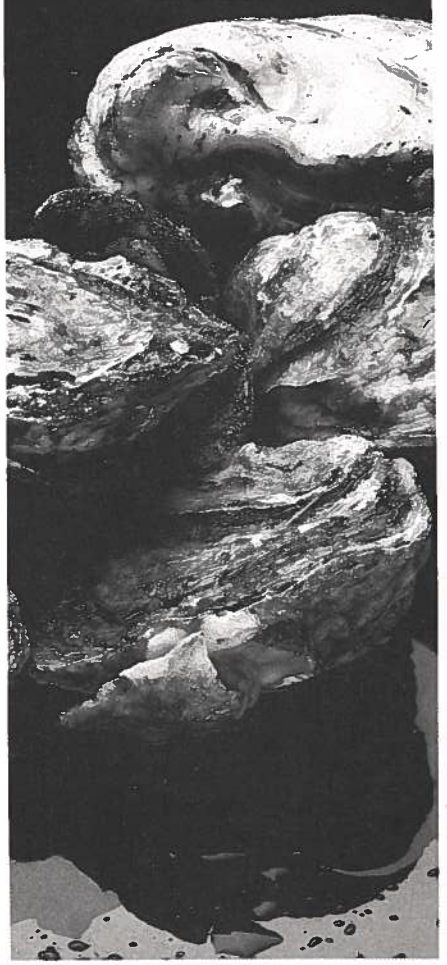
With *Ragtime*'s big-scale failure still fresh on Hollywood's mind, "Eagle" may be beating its wings against a gale. Initially, James Cagney was to have added Bat Masterson to his legendary list of roles, with William Hurt opposite him as the cockeyed romantic Damon Runyon. Health and age may have stripped Cagney of a career capstone, but the role might be suitable for another living legend, like Burt Lancaster, or the old grey fox himself, Richard Farnsworth.

"Harrow Alley," perhaps Hollywood's most legendary unproduced screenplay, comes freighted with twenty years of accumulated hype. Actors, writers, producers, development executives, story editors, and screenwriting teachers alike cite Walter Newman's screenplay with fervor edging toward evangelism. Happily, "Harrow Alley" doesn't disappoint. It may well be the greatest film never made.

Set in seventeenth-century England during the devastation of the Great Plague, the screenplay charts the lives of a remarkably varied group of citizens all living with the certainty that death looms closer by the hour. With the agility of a master craftsman, Newman (co-screenwriter of *Ace in the Hole* and *Cat Ballou*) juggles parallel story lines of elegant geometry: a love rekindled and lost, personal redemption, complacency, opportunism, heroism, greed, and spiritual collapse. Despite the screenplay's body count, a more exhilarating testament to survival would be hard to find. Newman's painterly prose style suggests the bursting-at-the-seams quality of a Holbein canvas.

"Harrow Alley" first caught John Huston's eye in the early sixties, a time when the commercial failure of *The Misfits* and *Freud* had undermined his clout with studio mavens. The film never got off the drawing board. In 1970, George C. Scott bought the property lock, stock, and barrel for $150,000. Since then, Scott has made several unsuccessful bids at launching the project with himself as either star or director.

SET IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND DURING THE GREAT PLAGUE, WALTER NEWMAN'S "HARROW ALLEY" CHARTS THE LIVES OF A REMARKABLY VARIED GROUP OF CITIZENS ALL LIVING WITH THE CERTAINTY THAT DEATH LOOMS CLOSER BY THE HOUR.



Producer-writer William Froug sits in the screenplay's cheering section. He says, "It's clear Hollywood people are terrified of the subject matter. But I also think that when producers or directors are delivered the really special script, they invariably find other reasons why they can't make it. They say, 'There must be something wrong with this,' or even more tellingly, 'Where can *I* contribute here?' They'd much prefer reading something where they can put in a new second act. Anything to make their imprint."

"Harrow Alley" is a majestic piece of work. Now, wouldn't someone on the order of David Lynch or Roman Polanski or David Lean care to transfer that passion and power onto the big screen?

Charles Proser's "Interface" is a Hollywood-circuit darling. The script made trade-paper headlines when Francis Ford Coppola sold it to Paramount in an early bid to save Zoetrope from the auction block. The going price? A cool million. Lengthy preproduction work had already been lavished on the project, with avant-garde filmmaker Scott Bartlett set to direct Frederic Forrest as the downed B-52 pilot whose ravaged body, but intact mind, is kept alive through the interfacing of high-tech wizardry and brain power. The hero's netherworld existence is brightened only by a sympathetic nurse and by his ability to take dazzling mind adventures. Eventually, his powers transcend the control of governmental do-gooders and scoundrels.

Proser fleshes out amiable sci-fi pulp like *Donovan's Brain* by creating a humanistic and technical tour de force on the order of a futuristic *Johnny Got His Gun.* In raising quality-of-life issues with a loose and funky touch, the piece is more punchy than the right-minded *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*.

Like its hospital bed–bound predecessors, however, "Interface" poses some knotty production glitches. The hero's psychic-adventure sequences read like they'd cost a mint. How *does* one visualize what must surely be the movies' first multiple cosmic orgasm? Coppola may try: At press time, he was rumored to be considering making the film for Paramount.

Admirers of Bruce Joel Rubin's "Jacob's

Ladder" flat out refuse to describe this screenplay. Their only entreaty? "*Read* it. It's extraordinary." And it is. A rabbity Vietnam vet in New York begins seeing demons—the long-tailed, horny-skinned, foul-breathed sort—on subways, at newsstands, hurtling after him in speeding cars, and taunting as they cavort about his bed. Synopsized, Rubin's hallucinatory morality play might come off as a hopelessly metaphysical hoot fest gimmicked up with bad-acid special effects. But, page for page, it is one of the very few screenplays I've read with the power to consistently raise hackles in broad daylight.

For Rubin's beleaguered hero, Jacob (part of the fun comes from the characters' biblical name tags), reality is a slippery proposition. Almost in mid-sentence, Jacob finds himself flipping between conversations with ex-wife Esther and with current lover Jezzie. Without warning, an ordinary party of friends and co-workers transforms into an orgy of lascivious beasties, and workaday city landscapes are peopled with misshapen creatures who insist that Jacob is stone-cold dead. The hero, a lapsed Jew and failed Ph.D.-holding philosopher, strikes out in search of answers as the screenplay moves from the nightmarish to the visionary.

More than likely, "Jacob's Ladder" has been hamstrung by the costly failures of films such as *The Ninth Configuration* and *Altered States*. That's a pity, because Rubin proves a confident trickster-dreamer with a lighter hand than either William Peter Blatty or Paddy Chayevsky. Though Rubin received story credit on *Brainstorm*, it was reportedly rewritten by two other screensmiths. It would be fun to see his free-flight imagination and philosophical bent let loose without the middlemen.

"Miracle Mile" is a rude and flashy piece of comic business by Steve DeJarnatt. Commissioned by Warners several years back, this script boasts a jivey writing style and a plot line with the pretzel logic of a nightmare. The premise: An itinerant trombone player mistakenly intercepts a predawn pay phone call in L.A.'s spacey Miracle Mile district. The news isn't good: In precisely seventy minutes, Soviet warheads will nuke the United States into kingdom come. DeJarnatt serves up a frenzied ballet of escalating greed, panic, and hysteria as his hero attempts to warn a motley crew of diner nighthawks that the Big Ones are on the way. The trombone player becomes the star of the ultimate Ark movie as he races to find his girl friend for a rendezvous with an outbound helicopter.

"MIRACLE MILE" IS A RUDE AND FLASHY PIECE OF COMIC BUSINESS BY STEVE DEJARNATT. HIS ENDING HAS THE HERO AND HEROINE MAKE TRIUMPHANT LOVE ON A ROOFTOP WHILE NUCLEAR MISSILES WHIZ PAST HOLLYWOOD LANDMARKS.

Thirty-one-year-old DeJarnatt, writer-director of a nifty noir short called *Tarzana,* realizes that his doomsday screenplay makes a lot of people skittish. At one point, he knuckled under to studio politics by toying with an it's-only-a-dream finale. But now DeJarnatt owns the script outright and is digging in his heels against compromise. His ending has been restored: The hero and heroine make triumphant love on a rooftop while missiles whiz past Hollywood landmarks. He comments, "If I would have changed the ending, I could have gotten it made before this. I feel you have to shake the audience up. I may be fatalistic, but I think a major nuclear accident will happen, for no other reason than something incredibly human and stupid."

To date, DeJarnatt has resisted buy-out offers on the screenplay because he hopes to land a shot at directing it himself. Actually, the film came within an inch of getting made, but politics reared its head.

In a moviemaking climate where High Concept calls the tune, Michael Kozoll's "Natural Acts" dares to stay compact in scope, grown up in sensibility, and rueful in tone. The plot revolves around Michael-Anne, a lovely emotional vampire who invades the lives of three men who've stayed buddies since college. The male troika—an earthy, restless potter, a ridiculously handsome upscale lawyer, and a schleppy, self-deprecating writer—are guys we've all known and maybe some of us have even *been.* And although Michael-Anne may be pretty poison, Kozoll's sense of balance renders her the most pathetic and victimized character of the lot.

Like John Sayles with *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* or Lawrence Kasdan with *The Big Chill*, Kozoll knows a thing or two about where the passions and ideals of the sixties lie buried. The screenplay is rich in irony and cynicism and has a bone-deep understanding of the little lies, deaths, and betrayals lurking just beneath the surface of pottery classes, weekend football games, and celebration of natural childbirth.

Kozoll, the co-creator of "Hill Street Blues," developed the screenplay for MTM Productions, which hurled its hat into the moviemaking ring with *A Little Sex* and doesn't look in a rush to chance it again. "I've gotten nice words on 'Natural

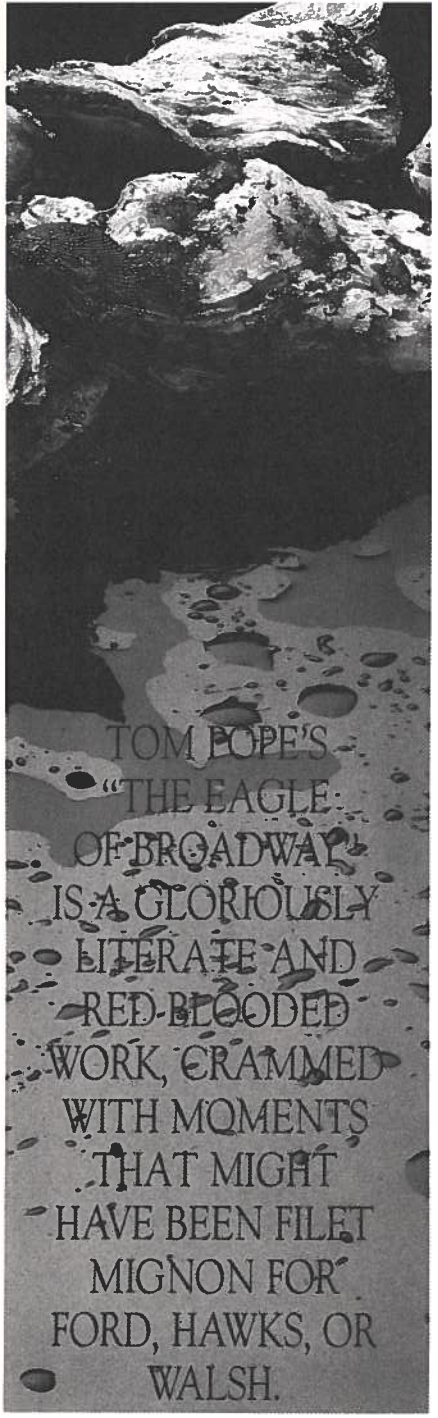
Acts,' " he says, "but what it always comes down to is people saying, 'It's not uplifting.' Well, that's *right*. It isn't the kind of film you'd come out smiling and popping your fingers to. It all has to do with what you admire. I could watch things like *Darling* and *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* every week."

The reaction of Ray Stark Productions executive Wendy Dytman typifies the industry's take on this low-key, downbeat project. She says, "It's one of the most beautifully written and painful screenplays I've ever read. It's the kind of thing I'd love to pay my five dollars to see, but there doesn't seem to be an audience for adult drama right now. I'd pay to see it, but are there enough others out there like me?"

In his provocative book *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, William Goldman—the screenwriter of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*—chronicles the trials and tribulations that even a heavyweight suffers in Lotusland. With nimble wit and restraint, Goldman avoids actually biting the hand that feeds him, but does give it one hell of a nip. "The Princess Bride," Goldman's four-year-old fantasy screenplay from his own novel, takes a similarly ambivalent stance toward the movies: gleefully flailing the conventions and benign absurdities of a Hollywood genre—in this case, the Graustarkian derring-do sword-and-chivalry epic—while at the same time romancing it.

"The Princess Bride" mates the fairy tale with the swashbuckler to handsome advantage. Framed as a Depression-era bedtime story told to an ailing son by his impoverished immigrant father, this is a classic revenge-and-pursuit story replete with outsize emotions, heroes and villains, and turreted castles. On the eve of her wedding night to dastardly Prince Humperdinck, the gorgeous airhead Princess Buttercup is mysteriously abducted by a brilliant hunchback, a dashing Spanish swordsman, and a Turkish behemoth with an endearing weakness for rhymes. And *then* what happens? I quote the screenplay's loving father in response to his son's same query: "Fencing. Fighting. Torture. Revenge. Giants. Hunters. Bad men. Best men. Beautifullest ladies. Monsters of all shapes and sizes. Chases. Escapes. True loves. Miracles."

Goldman's script is a gleaming, well-oiled entertainment machine. It moves like an arrow, racing from one cliff-hanger highlight to the next. But for all its winning




ways, "The Princess Bride" has built-in perils not unlike the "fire swamps" and giant rodents Goldman so magically conjures. Only the most confident and sure-footed director could fall in step with Goldman's glib, left-field humor. If the script works on screen like it plays on paper, it could be a pip—a hipster's fairy tale disarmingly brassy enough to con the video generation and the "Late Show" buffs in one fell swoop. If (perish the thought) it should fall into villainous hands, it could wind up another *Time Bandits*—a mean-spirited fantasy for folks who really don't believe in magic.

"Total Recall," a futuristic thriller written by *Alien*'s creators, Ronald Shusett and Dan O'Bannon, boasts a snappy neo-Hitchcockian setup. One gray "Losancisco" day in 2048, a melancholy drone named Quail discovers everything in his daily reality turned helter-skelter. His house is not his house, the woman he calls the missus is a stranger, and his fever for a Mars vacation won't break. Would-be assassins dog Quail's every move, and he must uncover the mystery of who and what he is, or die. A series of exhilarating, movie-hip flights and pursuits makes this a kind of interstellar *North by Northwest*.

Adapting Philip K. Dick's short story "I Can Remember It for You Wholesale," Shusett and O'Bannon keep "Total Recall" fresh with jabs of quirky humor and a giddy defiance of logic. Mars is imagined as an opium-hazed Casbah; there is a crack chase through an outdoor market between a dune buggy and a twenty-first-century "rickcycle." Beverly Hills is a ratty slum, the Beverly Wilshire a flophouse. Mutants man the shoeshine and newsstands. Best of all, the central character's frenzied voyage of self-discovery takes him through the likes of "Point Paradox"—where the compass whirls wildly—giving the whole affair a nice existential touch.

With so much entertainment potential in hand, why have directors like Brian De Palma and John Carpenter and studios like Walt Disney given "Total Recall" the once-over, then the brush-off? To be sure, this noirish universe recalls the sets of *Blade Runner*, that aridly gorgeous financial flop also based on a Dick short story. And the script's memory-sensory transference gimmick has already been mined by *Brainstorm*, among other films. Embassy Pictures' development executive Lindsay Doran suggests another hitch. She observes, "The setup to 'Recall' is so marvelous, but it has the worst third-act problems ever. I've read about fifteen alternate endings to it so far. I almost think on this one you have to break conventional rules and just commit to making it. I wish *someone* would so I can finally go out and see it!"

And there you have some of the finest examples of contemporary screenwriting, just waiting to be plucked from cult status and hurled into the moviemaking arena. Any takers? ■

Stephen Rebello is a Los Angeles–based writer.