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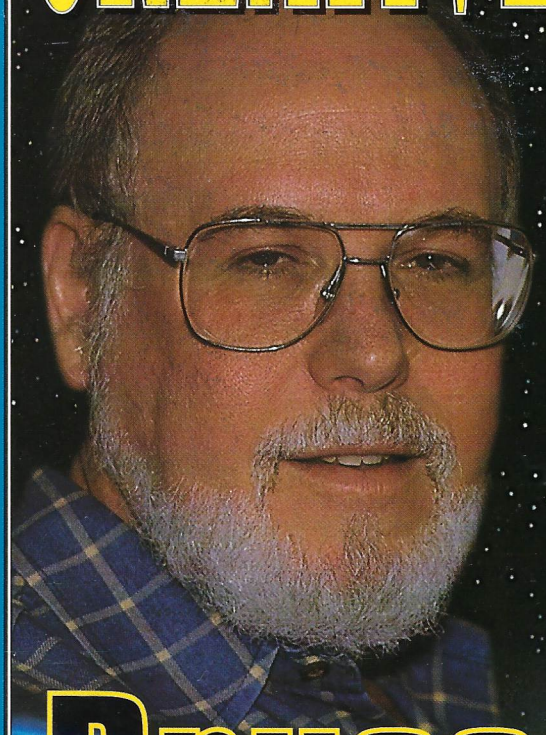

Bruce Joel Rubin

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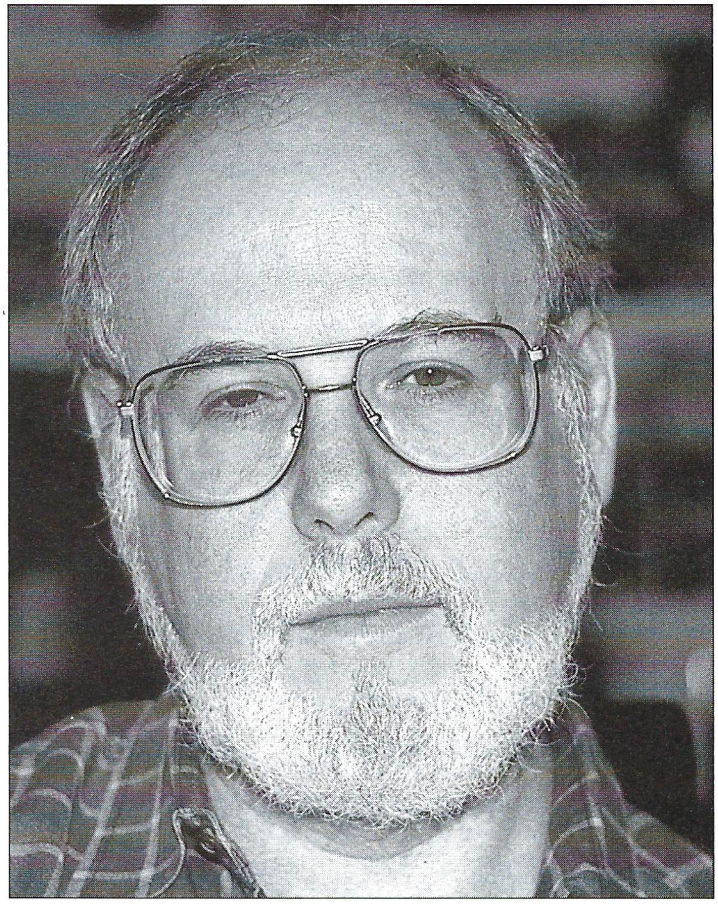


AN INTERVIEW WITH:

Bruce Joel Rubin

by Erik Bauer

Bruce Joel Rubin is a graduate of New York University where he majored in motion picture production and direction. After nearly failing his single screenwriting class at NYU, Rubin wrote his first screenplay with a friend, David Beinstock. That script, *Quasar*, was over 250 pages long, the last eighty pages one monologue, "describing the nature of the universe to whoever would listen." In the mid-sixties Rubin left his job as assistant film editor at NBC News to hitchhike around the world, an experience which he describes as very formative. This journey helped unlock Rubin's interests in death and the metaphysical, constant themes in his writing. By looking within and finding his own passion, Rubin crafted his writing with a vision that attracted attention.

Carried by spec scripts from the open fields of Indiana and Illinois into the heart of Hollywood, Rubin's vision received quite a reception. After selling his script *The George Dunlap Tape*, Rubin saw his vision for the film disintegrate the day after he signed the contract. The resulting film, *Brainstorm*, was a critical and box office failure that did not include even one word of Rubin's original dialogue. But Rubin persevered, writing *Jacob's Ladder*, a spec script that better showcased his unique voice and writing talent. While *Jacob's Ladder* would remain unproduced for many years, it made the rounds of Hollywood and was noted as one of the *American Film* magazine's ten best unproduced screenplays.

After moving to Los Angeles and writing several scripts (including *Deadly Friend*), Rubin got his real break. Selling the concept for *Ghost* on a pitch, Rubin's original screenplay received an Academy Award. The huge critical and box office success of *Ghost* lent Rubin the necessary heat to finally direct his screenplay *My Life*. Looking back on that effort, Rubin isn't sure he'll direct again. He said, "As a director of my own material, it was really interesting for me to see that I could hurt my own material as much as anyone else. I came away from directing thinking I was a mediocre director and why should I let a mediocre director direct my material?" Mimi Leder directs Rubin's current film, *Deep Impact*, co-written by Michael Tolkin (*The Player*) for executive producer Steven Spielberg. While *Deep Impact* is technically a disaster film, it is clearly influenced by classical science fiction, and bears the marks of Rubin's distinct voice. That continuing success in creating a body of work sets Rubin apart from many writers in Hollywood, and motivated my interest in discussing his career.

How did you go about learning the craft of screenwriting?

I never did learn it, I always thought of myself as a director. I always thought that's where my skills were. But of course, nobody just lets you sit down and direct movies. So, at some point I realized that if I'm going to survive in this business or have a career, I have to write. When I wrote *Jacob's Ladder* I had never seen a screenplay so I didn't know about "interior," "exterior," "fade in," and "fade out." There weren't books available at that time to show you what a screenplay looked like, so I just kind of guessed. I wrote it like a play, except I kept my dialogue in the middle. It read very well; it actually read better than a lot of screenplays because it didn't stop you for those sorts of mechanical, interior/exterior slug lines.

When you sent *Jacob's Ladder* to Hollywood was it still in that form or had it been converted?

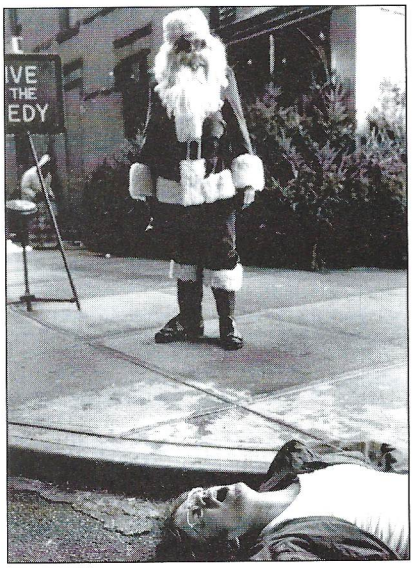
It wasn't converted until after Adrian Lyne came on board. But what *Jacob's Ladder* had was a good story. It compelled, scene by scene, as it went along. I just wrote it with a kind of instinctual understanding that I didn't want to be bored. I created what I called the carpet-laying theory of screenwriting: you keep pushing the carpet until the bump is gone, you push it all the way down 'till there's nothing between you and the smooth lay of the floor. I would just write it 'till there was nothing that was obstructive, until it all worked, it just flowed.

When I came to Hollywood I started to understand how little I knew about screenwriting. I remember an executive talking to me about "character arc," and I had never heard the term before. I knew the character had to go through changes, but I didn't know it in the way that I actually planned it. Once I started to understand it, that became helpful to me in terms of the writing, to know that there is an arc to the character. Jerry Zucker, when he started doing *Ghost*, said to me, "What's this movie about?" Nobody had ever asked me that question before. To me the movie was about a man who dies and becomes a ghost. He said, "No, no, no. What's it *about*?" And he kept

pushing me with that. It was very difficult for me because I realized that I didn't understand my movies in a deeply dramatic sense. I didn't understand their purpose. I just knew them as stories, that they had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and they sort of told what happened to somebody. I realized that this was the problem with many screenplays, that they aren't about anything. That's when I started to grasp that my movies were about something and I had to identify what that was.

How did you approach writing those early scripts?

On two occasions, when I was living in Indiana, I locked myself into a hotel room for a week and wrote a screenplay. They were each films where I said, "I'm not moving out of this hotel room until I finish it." I had very little money, so one was finished in eight days and the other in ten days, and they were desperation attempts to get my career going, to make something happen. And they're both interesting. Definitely first drafts of a movie, but I didn't have time to go beyond the first draft in those days. And those movies didn't do anything for my career. Then I moved to Illinois and that's where I wrote *Jacob's Ladder*, and *Jacob's Ladder* just kind of started happening. I started writing one day, and my wife looked over my shoulder and she said, "What are you writing?" I said, "I don't know," and I didn't. I had no idea. I was just writing and it kind of just came through. It was a very powerful experience and my breakthrough script.



JACOB'S LADDER

When you're writing a script do you try to just get it all out there, I mean just get the story out there, and then go back in and fix it so it works?

Yeah. I have a theory of screenwriting, which is called "putting the lump of clay on the table." Until the lump of clay is on the table you can't shape it. So the first job is to get it there. And so I try to get anything I can into a 120-page form on paper. And then I can start to say, "What is this movie? How does it work? What's working? What's not working?" So I like to get things out there as quickly as I can.

The way I work is that I write a scene in the afternoon, and the next morning I will come back and re-write and hone it down a little bit. And the energy of re-writing that scene propels me into the afternoon's work, which is the new material I will generate that day. That's usually how I do it. But it's really, to get the script out there as fast as you can so that you see the whole thing. Then you go back and start to shape it and make it into what it's supposed to be.

I've heard that from other writers too, as far as re-writing a little bit before and then moving into...

It helps a lot. Also, I find that you don't know where you're going until you're done. You don't really know your characters until you get to the end of the script and then you go back and make them what they were trying to be. So it's an important part of the process of writing to just be willing to make mistakes. To be willing to just write.

Before I start to write a new movie I create what I call a bible. I just sit down and scribble stuff, any idea that comes to mind, thoughts from the furthest reaches of my brain. I just put them on the page and start to see the shape of it, start to see what I'm interested in right now, where it's going, what this character might be for me, what the theme of the movie might be... all these things. When it reaches a certain kind of critical mass I know I'm ready to start typing. Which is why I think research is often so important. It's really a delaying tactic on one level. It's waiting for that moment that everything in you ignites and you take off.

That's well put. What was your situation like when you decided to make the move from Illinois out here to Los Angeles?

Well, I felt like I was dying in Illinois. I was meant to be a screenwriter and I was teaching public speaking at the university there. We didn't have enough money to live well, and my career was nowhere. I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing. My psyche was drowning. We came out to L.A. for the premiere of *Brainstorm* and the producer had to loan me the money to fly out. I thought that because I'd worked on a movie that was opening, I was now a writer in Hollywood. But it wasn't true. It was a terrible realization that a movie that doesn't make money is like having a baby that died. You don't talk about it. It's not part of your life. Nobody brings it up. And *Brainstorm* was a movie that didn't make very much money. Not only was I not a player in Hollywood, I was non-existent in Hollywood. It was my first experience and it didn't go anywhere.

But the best part of that trip was that my wife and I had lunch with Brian DePalma, an old friend and classmate from NYU. And he said, "Bruce if you want a career in Hollywood you have to move here." I had heard that a thousand times and never wanted to believe it because of the terror of moving to Hollywood and not having anybody answer your phone calls. You know, that's pretty horrible. But my wife took it to heart, and when we arrived back in Illinois she went to her department head and quit her job. She put our house on the market, and said we're doing it. It was the most courageous act I've ever experienced. So we ended up moving to Hollywood, with no money. I felt I'd be really lucky to be able to rent an apartment. I had two kids and it was scary. But we came out here and within a week I had a house and an agent. I had a writing job. I was very lucky. I've been writing ever since.

Now, that success was built off the reputation you were able to build before coming to Hollywood, right?

Well, I didn't know that. When I arrived in Hollywood there had been a magazine article printed about the ten best unproduced screenplays in Hollywood. *Jacob's Ladder* had been among them, and somebody called me and told me that. I had written *Jacob's Ladder*, and sent it to my then-agent in New York who was not all that well connected in Hollywood, unfortunately. I didn't know who had seen the script, but it turned out that a lot of people had seen it. So when I came out to Hollywood people said, "Oh, you wrote *Jacob's Ladder*." It was a big deal. And they had read it. So in a certain sense I came out as a known entity without knowing I was a known entity. That was an amazing gift to me, because I was not completely invisible; I had a reputation. And it was a good reputation because people liked that script.

It's amazing how far a single script can make it around if people like it.
I had no idea; but they do kick around. I think a lot of people thought *Jacob's Ladder* would never get made, including me. But it had captured people's imagination. It was such an intense read that I think a lot of people couldn't get it out of their heads.

Do you think most people in Hollywood can tell a good script from a mediocre one?
Yeah. But I think most scripts probably are mediocre. It's hard to write a good script—having tried many times and failed on numerous occasions, I know it's hard. When I pick up a script, I know by page two, page one sometimes, whether this person knows what they're doing. You know good writing the minute you see it because it stands out. And good storytelling stands out. And so, yes, I think people know. The only problem I have with Hollywood readers is how fast they read. Some of these guys read a script in twenty minutes. I don't know how they do it. And yet, some of them I talk to really have singled out the good writers. Whether they get the depth and the nuance and the subtlety of the story, I don't know. But I think they know when something is a gem as opposed to a piece of coal.

For me the core of storytelling is how much do you want your character to get what they want? How much are you rooting for them to get what they say in the beginning of the movie they need to have? If you care desperately for them to get it, you've got a winning piece of material. If you couldn't care less, you've got a problem. A reader in Hollywood is no different from any other person in the world. I mean, they're human beings who read a tale and either they get caught up in it or they don't. When I was pitching *Ghost* around town it was the people who cried when I told them this story that I knew I wanted to work with.


GHOST

You pitched *Ghost* for three years, quite some time. Did your grasp of the story get better or was it better salesmanship that ultimately sold it?
I think the grasp of the story more than the salesmanship. Because what happened was as I told the story, I mean, as anybody tells a story, you watch the person you're telling it to. There's always this sort of glaze-over factor that starts to happen, and as soon as that happens you've lost them. So I kept reworking the story to push that glaze-over moment further and further back.

With a pitch you need to tell a story like a kindergarten teacher, only the executives are your students. You want them to be there with their mouths open. When I would tell them the part about Sam fighting to protect himself and Molly, and there's a gunshot, and he runs off after the bad guy, but can't catch him, and then he comes back to Molly and sees her sitting on the ground in a shadow, holding his body in her arms; that moment was crucial in locking the executives into the story. But I also described the gunshot. Whenever I described it, I would slap my hands together and wherever the executives were floating off to, they were back. And so, when they were back and I got them to experience that moment with Sam seeing his own body, I had a sale. That's when I really started to understand they were into the movie. That was crucial; it was three minutes of pitch, but that ultimately became the best pitch I've ever done. In the last week of pitching I had five sales, five people who wanted to do the movie.

Why did you decide to try to sell that story on a pitch rather than writing the script and selling it on spec?
I was hungry, that's how Hollywood works: you come out here, you have good ideas, your agent sends you around to meet all these people, and then you pitch them. I won't do that anymore. Now I can afford to write my movies on spec. And, in fact, I've decided to write novels rather than writing movies at this point, because I so covet and protect what I want to say that I don't want it to exist only in a form that's so easily changed by other people. It's got to have one version where it's mine, that's really crucial to me.

What pushed you into that transition?
Three very frustrating years of working for other people. One year of writing for Spielberg on *Deep Impact*. And two years of writing for Jerry Zucker, my dearest friend in Hollywood, on a film called *In Your Dreams*, which is now actually getting made [Rubin is co-producer]. But they were devastatingly difficult periods for me because I have a very strong voice and a very strong vision. Of course, if you think I have a strong voice and vision, you should see Spielberg and Zucker. They have stronger visions and stronger voices, and I couldn't get my voice to prevail. And that's painful. They have good ideas and they're fine, but they're not my ideas. I need to get what I want on paper. I'm getting older, I'm fifty-five years old. You know, a year of your life goes tick, tick, tick. When I turned fifty I looked at an actuarial table in *Esquire* magazine that said I had twenty-two years left. I said, "Twenty-two years? And I've just given one to Steven and two to Jerry." It's like, what am I doing?

I definitely want to talk to you about the whole process of writing *Deep Impact*, but I'm wondering, did your 4% [net profits] of *Ghost* ever pay off for you?
You're sitting in it. [Rubin has a beautiful home in the San Fernando Valley.] It paid off in a big way.

That's great. As both an artist and a person who is in business in Hollywood, how hard do you think writers should fight for their vision of material?
Well, you should fight with every ounce of energy that you have. On the other hand, you better fight in a collaborative way. You know, you have to understand the process. If you're sitting there being an obstructionist, if you're saying, "I've got to do it my way," that's not going to help anybody. If the director truly has a different vision of your material and the actors are going with that, you have to find a way to make it work. I don't think if you're just standing there against the flow that you're going to be of value to anyone.

Who first talked to you about writing *Deep Impact*?
Steven Spielberg called me and said he would like me to write a movie that was inspired by *When Worlds Collide*. I loved *When Worlds Collide*. I saw it when I was eleven years old. I came out of the theater with a friend named Billy Robinson, we stood on a street corner for four hours, I have never in

my life stood on a street corner for four hours, and just talked about the meaning of it all. It was the beginning of philosophy in my life. It was the beginning of speculation about the awareness of life. It changed me. Steven is such an enthusiast; as we sat and talked about it, I realized I had an opportunity to bring that moment to another generation of filmgoers. That's an incredible feeling—to be able to take a truly inspirational point in your life and pass it along in such a concrete way. So, I was very excited about that. Steven described his vision of the movie as seeing a bullet coming at the human race in slow motion, and watching the reaction. How do people react to the end of life? I hoped people would go into the movie with one world view and come out with another.

Steven and I spent time at his office and his home talking about what we wanted, about who these characters should be. But we knew we couldn't make a movie about two planets on a collision course with the earth, and people trying to build a rocket ship to go off to one of the planets, the one that wasn't going to hit, and build another civilization there [a la *When Worlds Collide*]. Even in the 1950s that felt kind of bogus. So we tried to figure out a more realistic scenario, and I became kind of an expert on what would happen. I started learning about the tsunami factor: that if the comet hit an ocean there would be a tsunami that could be as much as a mile high, and how it could move as fast as 500 miles an hour going inland. I mean unbelievable stuff. And I thought my God, this is great. And then Steven had this vision which I just loved... of all of these people standing on the beach who couldn't get out of the cities, just standing on the beaches and holding hands as this vast wave approached. It was very powerful.

To the extent that *Deep Impact* was somewhat a remake or adaptation, did you approach it any differently than you normally approach a new script?

Well, in the end it was not a remake. I would have approached it as a remake if I thought that there was enough structural relevance in the original material, but the only thing that finally came through to me from the original that I wanted to sustain was that sense of peril. What would happen, how would people react to a sense of communal extinction? It's one thing to think you're going to die, but it's another thing to realize that your family is going to die and your neighbor, that everybody is facing it together.

I wanted a broader array of story lines, and the movie to be more comprehensive, more representative of the larger society, but I was voted down. That was hard for me, because white middle class Americans are not the only people to be destroyed by this comet. I wanted to try to create a larger framework than that, but that was not the movie we were making. So I had some creative problems here. In the end I kept thinking, "Just go with the flow, make the movie that everybody seems to want to make and try to make that film still have the heart and soul that you are talking about." And I have to say, I think *Deep Impact* still conveys the kind of emotional thrust that I wanted it to have. I came away feeling like it held up more than I had ever anticipated, because I had been very concerned that this film would be hard for me to watch.

One thing I thought that was lost in the translation from what you initially had written to what appeared on film, was more of how people react to this death sentence... in a larger sense, in a societal sense. I mean whether they're building trenches, whether they're going out and causing havoc in the streets. I didn't get a sense of a lot of that.

Well, neither did I. Would I have liked to see more things, other things in the film, other areas of focus? Yes, I mean I wrote it with much more in it originally. But, you know, I wasn't directing the movie. So you look at the final product and you ask, "Does it work or doesn't it work." Do these two hours carry you somewhere worthy? There might be a part of the audience that wants to see the mayhem, there might be a part of the audience that wants to see the darker side of things. And having written those scenes, I would have liked them to have survived. On the other hand I'm grateful that so much actually made it to the screen.

Another thing I saw was almost a suicide subplot in the finished film. The mother commits suicide then the father goes off to meet the wave, and then the daughter meets him there, which is a really nice moment and I can see why Spielberg wanted that, but having all of that in there... I don't know, it pushed my buttons the wrong way.

DEEP IMPACT

That's interesting. There was nothing in my script having to do with suicide. I know exactly when it emerged in this movie. All I can say is that's not my vision, that's not my approach to these things. I agree with what you're saying, however. There is a certain kind of darker element here. In this situation there would be some people who commit suicide, but when that's the only response that survives in the movie, it certainly begins to look like an arrow pointing rather than an aspect of the larger whole.

In discussing your film *My Life* you said, "My idea was to bring people into a direct confrontation with mortality as a way of making them appreciate their lives." You could be talking about *Deep Impact* there too, couldn't you?

Yeah, and probably everything I've ever done. *Jacob's Ladder*, even *Ghost* has some of it. I think my primary goal as a writer is to wake people up, to

make them understand the fragility and the impermanence of this existence, to push their noses into the roses.

One of the things that really struck me about your script, and it's a little different in the film, are the three independent story lines. Why did you think that was the best way to tell the story?

I wanted it to be more than three story lines. I wanted it be a lot of story lines. In the draft before the one you read there were more, and in the treatment before that there were even more. I had a little sense of its being like *ER*. Like a lot of characters moving through this event and watching their lives. But I presented all of them to Steven and he said, "This one I like, this one I like, this one I like, this I don't, this I don't, this I don't," and that was that. I think there's so many responses to this situation that I wanted a larger world's response. The finished film is very narrow, but I think it is still universal enough that people get it. Walter Parkes and I had a discussion about it. Walter said that his vision of the movie was something like *Gone With the Wind* in which the Civil War is background, not foreground; he really wanted the comet in this movie to be background. But I found that hard to do.

That's the classic mode of filmmaking, the big back story but a tight focus on the characters.

Right, right. I wanted... My original vision was much bigger, a much more sprawling tapestry with worldwide impact rather than just America. But Steven very clearly wanted it to be an American film. And you know he has a certain wisdom in terms of the commerciality of a film and I'm not going to stand up and say, "You're wrong." On occasions I did say, "You're wrong," but I was not going to win those arguments. If I had pushed my point Steven would have hired another person to do it—which is kind of what happened, actually.

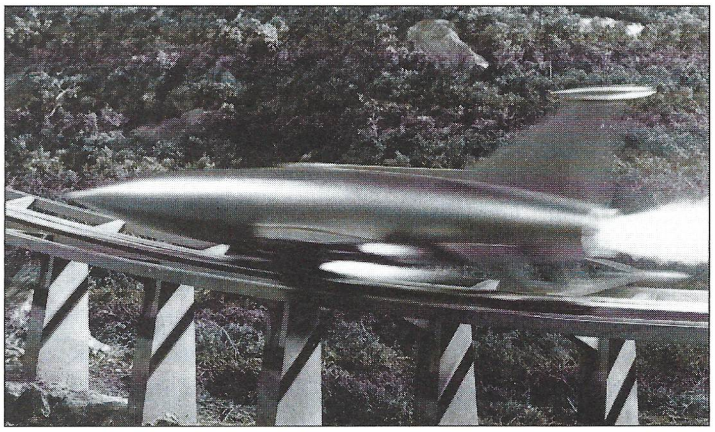
You told me it was Steven's idea to tell the story through the news. What did you think about that concept of trying to use the media?

I think it was a really interesting *idea*. I'm not the one who got it there. As you can tell from reading my draft, it was not completely focused on the news. I made the news reporter character more central. In the first draft the whole idea of E.L.E. hadn't emerged yet. That emerged in the second draft. I came up with the idea of an Extinction Level Event and Steven loved it. He just thought that it was terrific and I didn't even see how good it was. Steven is the one who grasped it. And so we decided to make the reporter pursue the E.L.E. story and that became the opening of the movie. But Steven wanted something more and I couldn't grasp quite what that was—which is why in the end he said he was going to try to write it himself. He couldn't explain to me quite what he wanted. I guess he wasn't satisfied with his own attempt at it, so they brought me back and asked me to try again and I said, "No." I didn't think I could afford another year of my life trying to guess what Steven wanted. Time is too precious to me.

Wasn't he able to articulate what he was looking for?

He could not articulate what he was looking for, and I think it frustrated him and it frustrated me. I don't think he wanted to see anything on the screen that wasn't media-generated. That is worthy as an idea and I don't in any way have a problem with that. I just didn't know how to tell this story in those terms.

I think if it was *totally* media that would be an interesting approach.



WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

I don't deny it's interesting as a possibility. I just don't think that I was the man to do that.

It wouldn't have been a Hollywood film, coming entirely from that approach.

Perhaps, you know it's hard to say. John Wells had a big hand in this final screenplay and its one that I admire a lot. I saw a lot of his *ER* sensibility... his ability to take very potent situations and condense them into these tiny little moments that actually work, that deliver emotional payoff. I was very impressed by what he did. I think John is a really great writer and I think if he had handled this completely himself, he might have pulled it off.

Did you ever consider creating a human antagonist to go along with the force of nature, the comet?

It would have been so *When World's Collide*, you know. The bad guy who builds the ark trying to survive... I hate it when you have to do that, when you have to create human antagonists. For me the comet is pretty antagonistic. You always know you're getting a false story whenever somebody in the government doesn't want to believe something is really happening.

What's a screenwriter's responsibility to their audience and world as a whole?

We as filmmakers have two hours to talk to the world. It's an amazing opportunity, to be able to hold people's attention to tell them what you want to say. It's okay to just try to entertain for two hours and that's fine and I don't have any objection to that, it's okay to just create mayhem and spectacle. But you can do more, you can say something. You can have a point of view. You can let the world see what it's like to really experience mayhem, to be the victim of mayhem. To experience the spectacular and the awesome in terms that affect and change you, that make you a different human being. If you talk to just about any *writer*, they understand there is a deeper reason for their movie existing other than just saying, "Look, I can write a movie." A lot of writers end up just creating a salable product and then have to make a career around that. And it's not enough. A career comes from having something to say. Ideally it emerges from who you are.

Writers are always trying to imitate everybody else instead of working on themselves. Working on yourself is the core, I think, of what writing is about. It's trying to find your own heart and your own mind and your own passion and fear and all of that stuff, and to bring it out on the page in a way that audiences can learn from your lessons and your experience. For me it all comes down to that two hours you have to talk to the world. What are *you* going to say?