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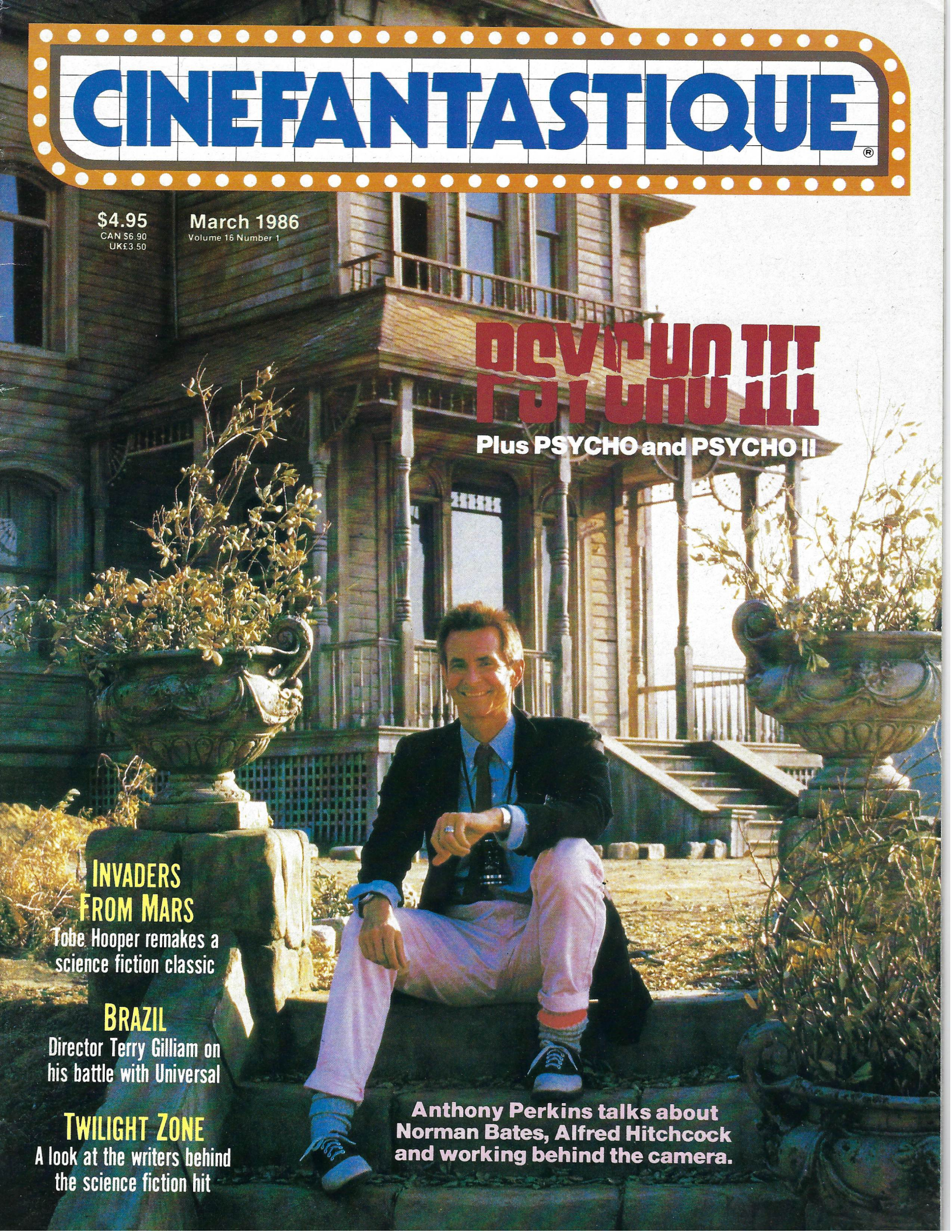

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Illustration by Lucy A. Synk

JACOB'S LADDER

The story of screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin and the thought-provoking script he wrote that no one dares film.

By Kyle Counts

"Suddenly a strange and terrifying spectacle unfolds before Jacob. The dancers undergo a shocking transformation . . . Horns and tails emerge and grow like exotic genitalia . . . new appendages appear, unfolding from their flesh. Dorsal fins protrude from their backs. Armoured scales run in scallops down their legs . . . Bones and flesh mold into new forms of life, creatures of another world."

—from JACOB'S LADDER by Bruce J. Rubin

Hypothetical situation: you're a young writer, virtually unknown to Hollywood, who has recently sold a screenplay which was made into a multi-million dollar genre film by a visionary special effects expert turned director. The film doesn't perform as well as expected at the boxoffice, but you at least have a solid screenwriting credit to your name, and can now go about pitching your next screenplay to the industry power people who always claim to be looking for intelligent, well-written movie material.

Your script is hailed by studio readers, development executives and production personnel alike as "brilliant" and "innovative." Copies are circulated among big-name actors and directors. You're certain that a deal will be struck any day. But the unthinkable happens: no one wants to make your movie.

Unhappily, this is no hypothetical situation, but the real life predicament encountered by writer Bruce Joel Rubin, author of THE GEORGE DUNLAP TAPE, on which Douglas Trumbull's BRAINSTORM was based (14:2:16). There is nearly unanimous agreement among industry insiders that his next script, JACOB'S LADDER, a fantasy/horror story about a war veteran who begins seeing demons who tell him he died in Vietnam, is one of the most original and powerful screenplays to be seen in Hollywood in years—and just as much agreement that it will probably never be made into a motion picture.

Born in Detroit in 1943, Bruce Rubin entered New York University film school in 1962, where he found himself in a phenomenally exciting class that included such aspiring filmmakers as Brian DePalma, Martin Scorsese, James McBride (BREATHLESS), Lewis Teague (CUJO), and Michael Wadleigh (WOLFEN). DePalma, in fact, directed Rubin's first script, a lyrical, narrative film called JENNIFER, about a boy who falls in love with a girl who may never have existed.

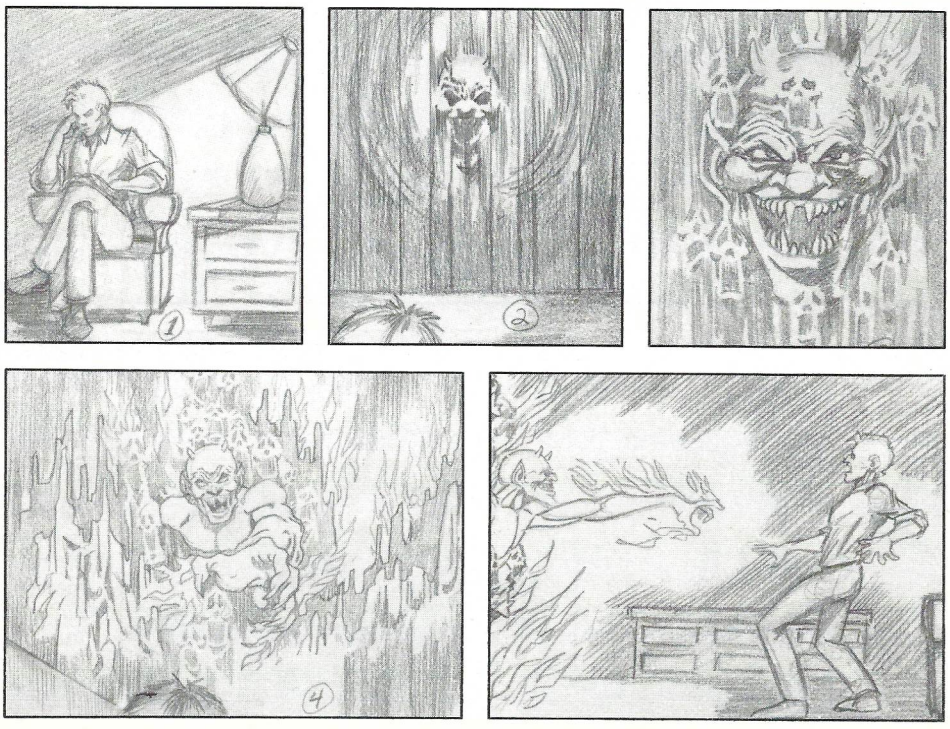
Rubin made two other films at NYU: FROG CROAKS AT MIDNIGHT, about a witch and a troll falling in love under the Brooklyn Bridge, and HEADS UP, FEETS DOWN, GRANNY'S SWINGING ALL AROUND, a story of a young couple whose grandmother dies while they are on a camping trip, and their attempts to retrieve her body when it is stolen from a police station where they have gone to report her death.

After leaving a position as assistant film editor at NBC in 1966, Rubin traveled the world in search of a broad view of religious experience. After a few years of this profoundly affecting "spiritual smorgasboard," as he referred to it, he returned to the States with a desire to become a full-time screenwriter. His mission, as he saw it, was to take his learning and express it in broad-based, commercial terms for the movie-going-masses—to give audiences a little consciousness-raising with their entertainment.

In 1969 he began a stint at the Whitney Museum, where he ultimately assumed the title of Associate Curator and Head of the Film Department. He became good friends with museum curator David Bienstock, who launched the museum's underground cinema program, and was a well-regarded independent filmmaker in his own right. Both were writers at heart, and decided to collaborate on a movie script.

Over a two-year period, Rubin and Bienstock wrote QUASAR, a 3-D science fiction film about a scientist who discovers what he thinks is a giant quasar in space, which over a period of observation

Screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin (left), surrounded by images from his script for JACOB'S LADDER. Right: A scene from the script.



CUT TO JACOB sitting in a comfortable chair in his LIVINGROOM. He is reading. The room is dark, lit only by a reading light. The walls are mostly in shadow. The light, however, falls on one section of the wall, a portion that has been lined in fake wood paneling.

JACOB'S eyes suddenly lift off the page and roam over the wood grain on the wall. All of a sudden he notices something strange, an image in the grain. He stares at it. The more he stares the more precise its definition. The image of a DEMON appears gradually.

JACOB sits up quickly and stares at the wall. It is impossible to get the DEMON'S image out of the grain. It seems etched, even imbedded, in the panel.

JACOB looks away and returns to his book. He is reading about archetypes and the primordial mind. But the book does not hold his attention. He is drawn to the wall. Its molecules seem suddenly active, the wood grain subtly animate. Layers begin to appear in the surface of the wall as the grain patterns slowly define a barren landscape.

The DEMON is growing solid. Cries and screams rise up in the distance. Flames and a red glow emanate from the space extending rapidly into the wall. The image of Hell erupts before Jacob's eyes.

JACOB stands up. He can see bodies suffering beyond the wall, masses of PEOPLE wailing and enduring the torments of a fiery world. The DEMON'S arm slowly extends from the plane of the wall and reaches into the room. He is huge, covered in flames and skulls, a living horror.

Storyboards by Aaron Lopresti

puts him through an evolutionary leap. Through Brian DePalma—with whom Rubin and Bob Fiore made the underground film DIONYSUS IN '69—they found agent Marvin Minoff, who lined up producer Ingo Preminger (fresh from his success with M*A*S*H), who submitted the script to Richard Zanuck and David Brown, then studio heads at Warner. "It was like magic time," said Rubin. "Everything was happening right on schedule, according to my fantasy dreams."

> *"JACOB'S LADDER is a fantasy/horror story about a war veteran who begins seeing demons who tell him he died in Vietnam. One of the most powerful and original screenplays to be seen in Hollywood in years, it will probably never be made into a motion picture."*

But the fantasy ended when Zanuck declared that he didn't understand the ending of the script. The studio heads passed on the project, a three-month option period expired, and the dream was over. QUASAR ended up on the shelf, where it sits to this day.

A resurgence of interest in Rubin's JACOB'S LADDER script, written in 1981, in part can be traced to a recent article in *American Film* by Stephen Rebello entitled "One in a Million," about some of the best unproduced screenplays in Hollywood—highly touted material that, for whatever reasons, failed to get the green light for production.

Based on his instincts, and the recommendations of respected peers, Rebello made a master list of some 125 scripts, which he amassed through industry connections. Ultimately, Rebello whittled the list down to 30—choices not only reflecting his tastes, but those of various "power people" in the industry. After re-reading all thirty, Rebello narrowed the list to ten titles. One screenplay that survived every round of elimination was JACOB'S LADDER.

Rubin's script opens in the jungles of Vietnam, circa 1967, where Jacob Singer and other members of his platoon are sharing a joint as they await another offensive. Suddenly, one by one, the soldiers erupt into a frenzy of violence, directed at one another. In the skirmish, Jacob is stabbed with a bayonet, and falls to the ground screaming. There is a sudden rush through a long, dark tunnel, to a brilliant light at its end: we are now in New York, some years later, where Jacob, now a mailman, is sitting in a subway car, dozing on the way home. The screech of the train wheels awakens him. He is dazed and confused, not certain where he is.

When Jacob gets his bearings, he rises to exit from the subway car. His eyes fix on an old man lying asleep on a fiberglass bench, who, in adjusting his position and tugging at his coat, exposes something from beneath the coat's hem: a red, fleshy protuberance that looks strangely like . . . a tail.

Rubin, who relocated to Los Angeles last year from DeKalb, Illinois, with his wife, Blanche, and his two sons, spent a year writing JACOB'S LADDER which he calls "high-class horror like THE EXORCIST— horror with a strong visceral hook." Like many of his script ideas, the story came from a dream. In the dream, Rubin found himself on a subway train that was pulling into a station. But when he climbed the stairs to the exit, he found that all the gates were locked. He was trapped.

"The horror overtook me," recalled Rubin. "I thought I was never going to get above ground again. The whole film began using the subway as a descent into the inferno, in a sense. I used it to write my first scene—that of Jacob experiencing a similar ordeal in the subway."

As Rubin considers himself a very intuitive writer, he did not proceed with JACOB'S LADDER from a preconceived story outline—a process he feels is inorganic. "To me, the process of writing is in the surprise," he explained. "I find it almost impossible to plot something upfront; I want to be as excited and as shocked or frightened as the reader. In writing JACOB'S LADDER, I was; I could not write with the door closed, and I had to keep all the lights on. I was that uncomfortable."

Rubin knew he had a spellbinding opening for his script, but he wasn't sure in what direction the script was heading. "I knew I wanted to write a film about a man who sees demons," he related. "I also knew they had to be real demons, not fictional ones. They had to have a Hieronymous Bosch sense of archetypal image." Then, growing reflective, he added: "I believe that people know demons, I really do. They're something very much in our unconscious."

As Rubin would eventually shape the story, Jacob is a former philosophy student who gave up his studies after a devastating stint in the Vietnam war. Brilliant but burned-out, he decides he doesn't want to be a man of the mind anymore, and opts for the simple life of a postal worker. He is passionately involved with a co-worker named Jezzie, and has two children from a dissolved marriage.

All of this information, Rubin hints, may or may not be true, for once the demons begin appearing, telling Jacob that he is not alive—that he, in fact, died in a jungle in Vietnam some fifteen years ago—past and present begin to overlap with increasing disorientation. Almost in mid-sentence, characters seem to flop over into the demonic and angelic, and back and forth. One is never sure if what they are reading is actually taking place, or is it part of Jacob's elaborate fantasy world. "My objective was to keep giving people a sense of what was real," said Rubin, "and then pull the carpet out from under them, to make them question the nature of reality."

JACOB'S LADDER is so complex with its various levels of alternative reality, that it is all but impossible to grasp in a single reading. Part of its strength is just this challenge; rather than giving us another pre-digested, predictable horror film, Rubin engages his audience's intellect. Even when the reader is confused or disturbed by Rubin's unsettling imagery, one feels he is in the hands of a benevolent and sophisticated storyteller.

"One of the script's great strengths was the way in which the fireworks of the piece were honed very closely to what I perceive to be a very detailed philosophy of the way the world works—birth, life, death," commented Rebello. "When the big, hallucinatory scenes unreel, it's not just a nifty little light show. You're learning something about the lead character and the way he views the world. Rubin writes with passion, from a place it appears he knows well from experience.

Indeed, Rubin is well-versed in the teachings of several spiritual philosophies, having studied them intensely while on his odyssey of personal exploration in the sixties. He has very strong ideas about the metaphysical implications of life and death, concepts he infused into the storyline of BRAINSTORM. He views death much like the Asian culture does—as a

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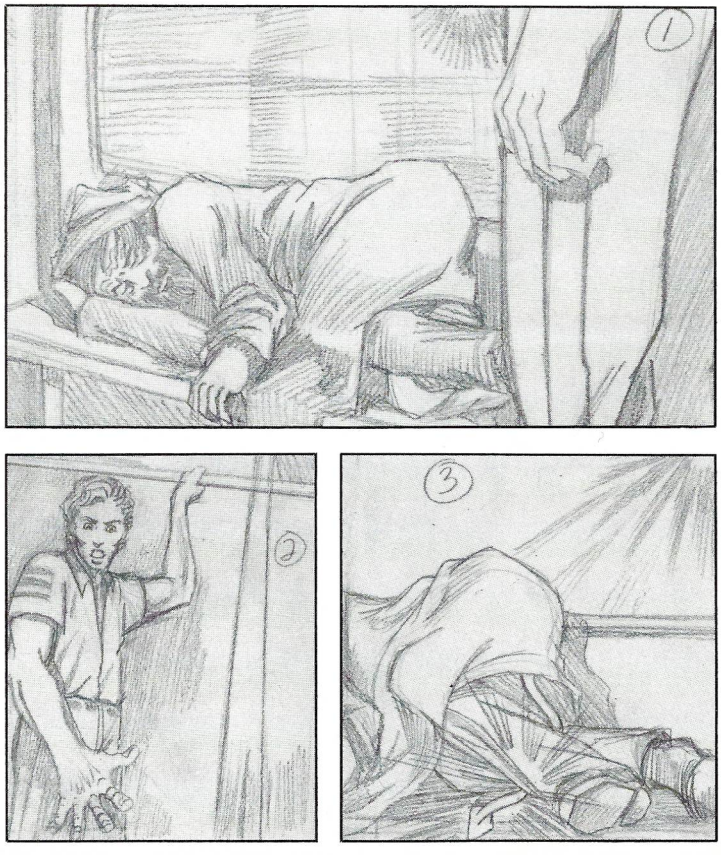
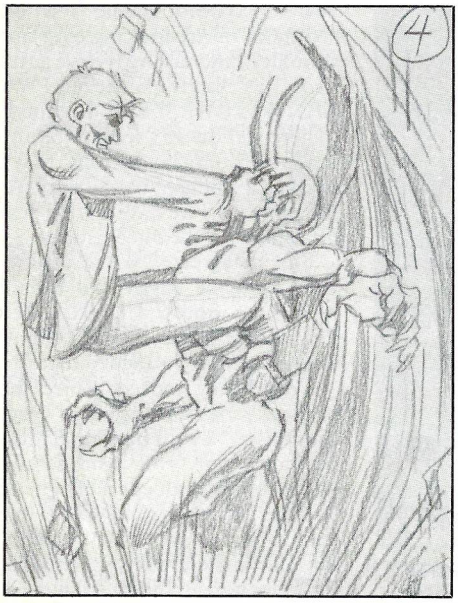
Jacob spies an old man lying on a fiberglass bench in the subway. As the old man stretches, Jacob catches a glimpse of something protruding from beneath the coat's hem. His eyes fix on the spot waiting for another look. He sees a long red, fleshy protuberance, strangely like a tail. The train stops, breaking Jacob's stare.

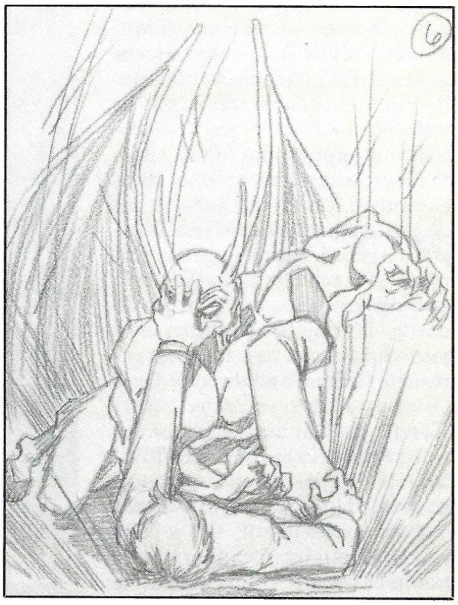


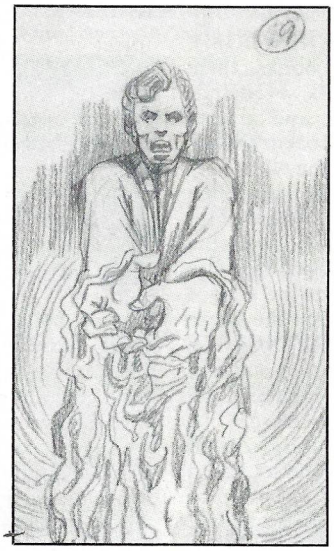
Storyboards by Aaron Lopresti

Jacob Battles Demon

Jacob fights the demon, battling for his very soul. Its giant wings flap furiously, lifting them both off the floor. The demon crashes through the last fragments of the ceiling of Jacob's crumbling apartment. Jacob does not let go. They burst into the fiery darkness. An abyss opens beneath them. The creature charges into a rocky slope, smashing Jacob into its cliffs. Jacob claws, bites and rips at the wings, shredding their delicate fabric. He grabs a rock and shatters the demon's teeth. The demon falls to the ground. Jacob holds on. The demon metamorphoses and turns into Jacob's son. Jacob does not let go. The demon dissolves into a jelly-like mass, forming an oily pool. Flames ignite and engulf him.







Storyboards by Aaron Lopresti

FILMOGRAPHY

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quality and aimed strictly at the juvenile market.

• 1971—GODZILLA AGAINST HEDORA (U.S. release GODZILLA VS. THE SMOG MONSTER by A.I.P. in 1972). Directed by Yoshimitu Banno; screenplay by K. Mabuchi and Banno.

• 1972—GODZILLA AGAINST GIGAN (U.S. release GODZILLA ON MONSTER ISLAND by Cinema Shares in 1978). Directed by Jun Fukuda; screenplay by S. Sekizawa.

• 1973—GODZILLA AGAINST MEGARO (U.S. release GODZILLA VS. MEGALON by Cinema Shares in 1976). Directed by J. Fukuda; screenplay by S. Sekizawa.

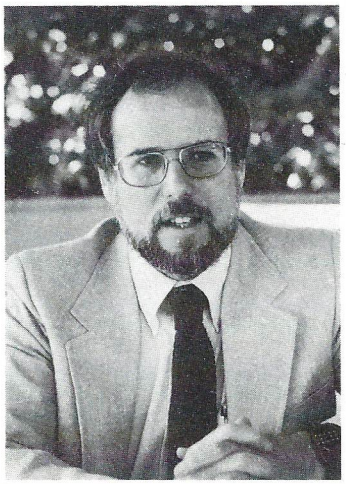
• 1974—GODZILLA AGAINST MEKA-GODZILLA (U.S. release GODZILLA VS. THE BIONIC MONSTER, later GODZILLA VS. THE COSMIC MONSTER by Cinema Shares in 1977). Directed by J. Fukuda; screenplay by S. Sekizawa.

• 1975—REVENGE OF MEKA-GODZILLA (U.S. release TERROR OF GODZILLA by Bob Conn in 1978, and as TERROR OF MEKA-GODZILLA to TV by U.P.A.). Directed by I. Honda; screenplay by S. Sekizawa. Series creator Honda takes one last stab, making this a cut above the previous four.

Japanese film production is quite different from the way Hollywood operates. Japanese budgets are a mere fraction of U. S. costs. Shooting schedules for all Godzilla films, from pre- through post-production never exceeded 3 months, which is brief for such extensive special effects work.

The Japanese consider their scripts as bible and very rarely deviate from them when shooting and editing. This method keeps costs low and predictable but sometimes yields a final product that works better on paper than on screen. For that reason, U. S. distributors often regard the Japanese Godzilla films merely as "rough cuts" to be re-edited. Toho also has no control over the English dubbing, which varies from adequate to abysmal. ☐

Screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin.



JACOB'S LADDER

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loss of ego, an "unweaving" of one's pattern of existence. "Such a process is liberating to someone who is willing to let go," Rubin remarked, "but those who remain attached to their lives and personalities experience death as being torn from themselves—literally being torn apart."

Jacob, as one who is deeply attached to his life with Jezzie, experiences just this literal dismemberment, and finds himself caught in a Lovecraftian void, coming face-to-face with hellish creatures who are intent on claiming him as one of their own. Guests at a party suddenly transform into heaving monsters; creatures emerge from the wallpaper in his room; even his beloved Jezzie takes on the shape of a rodent-like, winged serpent. And, he finds, he is not alone in his predicament: several of his war buddies report that they too are experiencing tormenting visions—and one of them, convinced he was being followed has already died under mysterious circumstances.

As beset with tension as Jacob's life is, he is not a hopeless figure. There is, unbeknownst to him, a guardian angel watching over him, and when Jacob discovers that he and his friends have been unwitting subjects in a military drug experiment, a chemist friend offers Jacob an antidote for his nightmarish visions. But antidotes and guardian angels don't spell the end to Jacob's Hell on Earth. Before he can solve the mystery of his true existence, Jacob must engage in a battle with a demon capable of instant metamorphosis, a special effects *tour de force* that comprises the script's dizzying final pages.

With so much going for it, why then is JACOB'S LADDER the "hot" property no studio wants to touch? Rebello thinks that, for starters, the script may be perceived as a cousin to THE NINTH CONFIGURATION and ALTERED STATES, "heady" films that produced lackluster financial returns. Expense might be another deterring factor. Rebello estimates the film would cost in the neighborhood of $20 million—but cites GORKY PARK as the kind of arid Hollywood product that is just as costly, yet far less ambitious. Most likely, Rebello reasons, it is the "darkness" of JACOB'S LADDER that is the major stumbling block.

"Dark is not flying with the studio power people these days," said Rebello. "In difficult economic times, that's not the kind of material they think people want to see, which I think sells the audience short. Yes, JACOB'S LADDER has an uncompromising view of life—at least until you get further into it—but it also has an extraordinary life-affirming vision. I think it's extremely rare for a writer to seem very much on the side of the angels, in a very fundamental way."

Commented Rubin on the "dark" theory, "My feeling is not only is it

Brainstorm Precursor

Bruce Joel Rubin was all set to direct "The George Dunlap Tape."

Rubin (seated fourth from left) and crew pose with props, including several brainwave helmets.

Bruce Joel Rubin wrote THE GEORGE DUNLAP TAPE, on which the film BRAINSTORM was based, in 1973. Over the next three years, Rubin made plans to direct it as a low-budget, 16mm feature in Indiana, where his wife was at work on her doctorate. He found an investor, and hired New York actors Laurinda Barrett (THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER), Woody Eney, Fred Holliday, and Jacqueline Brooks (Kate Nelligan's neighbor in WITHOUT A TRACE) for the leads that would later go to Natalie Wood, Christopher Walken, Joe Dorsey, and Louise Fletcher.

Through his museum experience, he lined up some of the country's leading experimental filmmakers, including Jordan Belson (who recently did effects work for THE RIGHT STUFF), John and Michael Whitney and Scott Bartlett to create the film's visual effects. Props were built (computers, helmets, telephone switching machinery) and sites located (private homes around the Bloomington, Indiana area, and on the campus of Indiana University) that would double for the realistic scientific world detailed in the script.

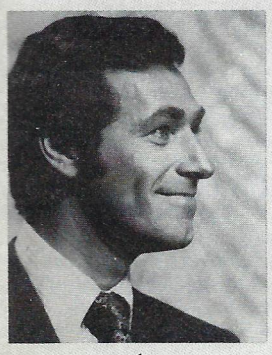
When Rubin decided to switch to 35mm, his backer upped the budget to $400,000. Film stock in hand, his assembled production crew was ready to leave for Indiana when the devastating word came: Rubin's investor had backed out. With no available alternative source of funding, the project collapsed. Rubin gave up the movie profession and went to work for a public service foundation.

When filmmaker Douglas Trumbull optioned the property (see 14:2:16), Rubin and Trumbull got together to discuss the script. Rubin made an impassioned plea to Trumbull that he not abort or compromise the essence of the script, a request Rubin felt would sit well with Trumbull, who had already been associated with mystical, spiritual films like 2001 and CLOSE ENCOUNTERS. "Doug looked at me with such understanding, and we both hugged like brothers," said Rubin. "We had, and still have, a very close feeling toward one another. But after the contracts were signed, he started to make radical changes."

Rubin was nonetheless pleased to see some of his heady concepts reach the screen, even though BRAINSTORM was not a boxoffice success. "What Trumbull pulled out of my script at least had some spiritual content," he said. "I'm thankful for that. I hope visionary cinema finds more pioneers like Trumbull, and takes its rightful place in the mainstream of American filmmaking."

For Rubin, the hardest part of dealing with BRAINSTORM's failure is that he no longer has legal access to the ideas and concepts found in the film's original source. "I could do an entire sequel to BRAINSTORM just from the script material that wasn't used," said a dismayed Rubin. "But, of course, it's unlikely I'll ever get that chance. There is a major flaw in our copyright system, that fertile ideas can be bought and sold, and left to decompose in studio vaults." **K.C.**

Rubin's cast: 1) Fred Holliday, 2) Laurinda Barrett, 3) Woody Eney, and 4) Jacqueline Brooks. 5) Facilities at Indiana University were to be used as laboratory sets.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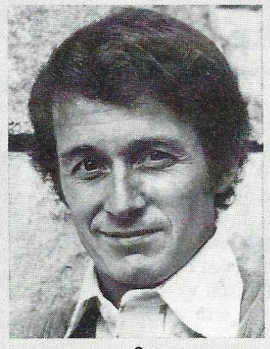
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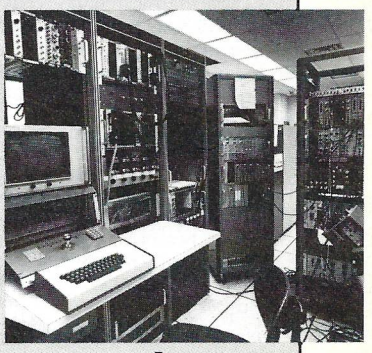
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not dark, but it's flooded with light. Perhaps the fact that not enough people who read it share that opinion is my fault as the writer. But one producer I know read it and cried; I was so grateful to know that someone had been touched by what I intended. Just as in BRAINSTORM, to touch on issues like life and death, even lightly, stirs enormous feelings in people, and I think for the better. RESURRECTION was one of the precious few films to deal with death and metaphysical questions, and I thought it was an extraordinary work."

Sidney Lumet has read JACOB'S LADDER, Rubin hears, as has Richard Gere. Brian DePalma, an old friend from New York University film school, loved the script, but said he didn't want to deal with the film's enormous pyrotechnics. "I don't know how one maintains control over his script in the age of the Xerox machine," joked Rubin, referring to the number of copies of JACOB'S LADDER that have found their way around Hollywood over the past two years.

"The person I most wanted to do the film, Ridley Scott, said yes," added Rubin. "I could not imagine a better director for JACOB'S LADDER. But then he had to back out because his next project had been delayed for a year, and it would take a good two years to get JACOB made. I met with his people again when I first came out to Los Angeles, and they said that after doing his new film, LEGEND, he wanted to do something completely different, something not effects-oriented. I have hopes he'll come back to the project at some point in the future."

Since moving to Los Angeles, Rubin has written two features that were never produced: a science fiction film for Embassy, and a TV-movie for ABC with a non-genre theme. But, thanks to the doors that have opened to him as a result of the interest generated by JACOB'S LADDER, Rubin has gone on to more notable accomplishments. He is currently at work on a feature film for producer Robert E. Sherman called FRIEND (formerly A. I.), based on a novel written by Diana Henstell. Wes Craven, hot on the heels of his success with NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, has been signed to direct for Warner Bros. Also, a screenplay Rubin penned last year, entitled SECRETS OF THE ASTRAL PLANE (which he calls a "psychic DIRTY DOZEN"), has just been optioned by the executive producer of BRAINSTORM, Joel Freedman. Rubin also has several other projects in development.

Rubin hasn't given up on JACOB'S LADDER yet, even though he figures every major studio in town has already said no to it at least once. "Even if it takes five to ten years, I think the film is going to happen," said Rubin. "I don't think it will become dated. I think it's mostly a matter of the climate in Hollywood. Light stuff seems to be what is selling in Hollywood these days, yet I do sense an atmosphere of reaching for something new. Studio people are beginning to look for projects that are different. If that remains true, then perhaps this script will have its day."

Material that is as special as JACOB'S LADDER requires a champion, someone with box office clout who falls so in love with the material that they dare to defy tradition and successfully guide it through the labyrinth of the movie-making machinery. "I have no question that when and if that happens," concluded Rebello, "all the bugaboos that have prevented its being made will suddenly evaporate, and we'll see what a wonderful, rich movie a script like JACOB'S LADDER can make." □