

Walter Hill

Last Man Standing

Interview by Patrick McGilligan

Big picture: *The Man*.
Insert: *Last Man Standing*.

Walter Hill
b. 1942

1968 *The Thomas Crown Affair* (Norman Jewison). Second assistant director.
1969 *Bullitt* (Peter Yates). Second assistant director.
1969 *Take the Money and Run* (Woody Allen). Second assistant director.
1972 *Hickey & Boggs* (Robert Culp). Script.
1972 *The Getaway* (Sam Peckinpah). Script.
1973 *The Thief Who Came to Dinner* (Bud Yorkin). Script.
1973 *The Mackintosh Man* (John Huston). Script.
1975 *The Drowning Pool* (Stuart Rosenberg). Coscript.
Hard Times (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.
Dead People (Willard Huyck, Gloria Katz). Actor.
1978 *The Driver* (Walter Hill). Director, script.
1979 *The Warriors* (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.
Alien (Ridley Scott). Producer.
1980 *The Long Riders* (Walter Hill). Director.
1981 *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.
1982 *48 HRS.* (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.
1984 *Streets of Fire* (Walter Hill). Director, coscript.
1985 *Brewster's Millions* (Walter Hill). Director.
Rustler's Rhapsody (Hugh Wilson). Producer.
1986 *Blue City* (Michelle Manning). Producer, coscript.
Crossroads (Walter Hill). Director only.
Aliens (James Cameron). Executive producer, co-story.
1987 *Extreme Prejudice* (Walter Hill). Director.
1988 *Red Heat* (Walter Hill). Producer, director, coscript, story.
1989 *Johnny Handsome* (Walter Hill). Director.
1990 *Another 48 HRS.* (Walter Hill). Director, sequel based on his characters.
1992 *Alien³* (David Fincher). Producer, coscript.
Trespass (Walter Hill). Director only.
1993 *Geronimo: An American Legend* (Walter Hill). Producer, director.
1994 *The Getaway* (Roger Donaldson). Coscript, remake of 1972 film.
1995 *Wild Bill* (Walter Hill). Director, script.
Tales from the Crypt Presents Demon Knight (Gilbert Adler, Ernest Dickerson). Executive Producer.
1996 *Last Man Standing* (Walter Hill). Producer, director, script.
Tales from the Crypt Presents Bordello of Blood (Gilbert Adler). Executive producer.
1997 *Alien: Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet). Producer.
2000 *Supernova* (Walter Hill under pseudonym Thomas Lee). Director.
2001 *Tales from the Crypt Presents Ritual* (Avi Nesher). Producer.
2002 *The Prophecy* (Walter Hill). Director (straight to video).
Undisputed (Walter Hill). Producer, director, coscript.
Television writing (and directing-producing where noted) includes *Dog and Cat* (creator of the 1977 series), *Tales from the Crypt* (direction and scripts for the "Cutting Cards," "Deadline" and "The Man Who Was Death" episodes, as well as executive producer of the 1989 anthology series), *Two-Fisted Tales* (executive producer of the 1991 anthology series), *Perversions of Silence* (producer and director of episodes for the 1997 anthology series), *W.E.I.R.D. World* (executive producer of the 1995 series), *Deadwood* (director of episodes of the 2004 series).

WALTER HILL'S FIRST PRODUCED SCRIPT was in 1972, but his films are a throwback to the Golden Age and to storytelling traditions that seem increasingly endangered in today's Hollywood. He brings a modern swagger to old-fashioned genres. He relishes stories that center on male heroics, with cinematic action. But he is always reaching for intelligent themes. He prides himself on craft and literacy. He was lucky to have worked closely with Sam Peckinpah and John Huston, learning disparate lessons from the experiences. He is at once the consummate pro, and a personal, at times poetic filmmaker; it helps, as he explains in this interview, that he has taught himself to write in "one voice" (like Peckinpah), or "many voices" (like Huston).

Hill swiftly turned director, emerging as one of the best of the new crop of writer-directors in the 1970s. But after the stellar run of *Hard Times*, *The Driver*, *The Warriors*, *The Long Riders*, *Southern Comfort*, and *48 HRS.*, the industry became increasingly homogenized, and Hill found his niche shrinking. He branched out into producing, and directing other people's scripts. When I first contacted him about an interview, he said, half-jokingly, he was touched that anyone thought of him as a writer anymore. Hill has mastered the Hollywood game. He maintains an incredible output; he can boast several franchise hits (the *Aliens* series, *48 HRS.* and its sequels, the *Tales from the Crypt* series); and, though it is a constant struggle, he keeps making his more personal films.

Hill doesn't go in for extravagant publicity; he doesn't give many interviews. This one he approached conscientiously. Much of it was by email, with he himself polishing the final draft.

Early Years

Film International How does your film sensibility come out of your personal background and life story?

Walter Hill I have no idea. There are the mysteries of the head and heart. I admit to a somewhat juvenile sensibility, with an emphasis on physical heroics. I was asthmatic as a kid, several years of school interrupted. This left me with a lot of time alone – daydreaming, reading, listening to radio serials; I was devoted to comic books. I never liked kid fiction much, read adult novels at a very early age, never much liked kid movies either. I've always been a good reader. My father and his father were my great heroes, smart, physical men who worked with their heads and their hands. Both had great mechanical ability, I had none. Being a sick child means that you are fantastically spoiled – which of course I loved, and was excellent preparation for Hollywood.

Film International My *Ephraim Katz Film Encyclopedia* (admittedly not always perfectly reliable) mentions your involvement with cartooning, journalism (your degree in English), construction and oil drilling, and also educational documentaries. Which of these had the most useful application to your career as a writer?

Walter Hill If the encyclopedia says I have a degree in English, it is mistaken. I was a history major. If

it says I was a journalist, it's also mistaken about that. For a few weeks of my life while young and unemployed I contemplated journalism – never did anything about it. I did work in the oil fields on Signal Hill during summers of the latter part of my high school years, and several more years while in college. My job description was a roustabout. I was never part of a drilling rig (they are skilled workers, I was not), though I have been around drilling units a great deal; but mostly around crews that pulled the rods and casings on individual wells. My grandfather (on my father's side) was an oil man: a wild-cat driller who became an owner and operator.

As to construction, I ran an asbestos pipe-cutting machine for a summer; add to that, factory work – I was a spray painter in the John Bean factory in Lansing, Michigan. Horrible job. I can still smell the fumes.

All of this taught me one important thing that carried over to writing. If you are capable of making a living out of your talent and imagination, you are a privileged soul. As to the actual writing, you learn about writing by reading. And then you learn to make use of your own particular attitudes, gifts and skills by – writing, writing, writing.

Going professional

Film International You spent time, early on in the industry, as an assistant director. I suppose what that job teaches is obvious – but is it? Is what you learned on *Bullitt*, for example, vastly different from the lessons learned on *Take the Money and Run*?

Walter Hill As an assistant director, I saw how often the process of filmmaking was political as well as creative. Again, one shouldn't generalize, but this was true on *Bullitt*, not true on *Take the Money*, which was the first time that I worked with (around) a writer/director. I didn't do much but pass out the call sheets and fill out time cards.

The fact that the director is a writer, and has written the script being made, changes all attitudes. Executives, actors, crew – to them, the director becomes the personification of the script, and it therefore immediately becomes much less vulnerable to attack. I think I'm a particularly good witness to this; and as a writer (before I was a director), I was generally treated in the classical Hollywood tradition.

Film International What was the date and circumstances of your first professional sale of writing (i.e. you got paid money)? Can you date your first script sale in Hollywood? Produced or not.

Walter Hill Joe Wizan bought a script that I'd written, a Western, in 1969 (I think). He optioned it for a couple of years, picked up the option once – "Lloyd Williams and His Brother" was the title – later changed to "Drifters." Never got made. Got close a couple of times. Sam Peckinpah was going to do it after *The Getaway*, then he jumped over to MGM and *Pat Garrett [Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid]*, 1973). I used some material from "Lloyd Williams" when I did the script for *Hard Times*, so it probably worked out for the best. Except for Joe.

Film International I hate to join the long line of



The Getaway: Doc McCoy (Steve McQueen) and his wife in crime, Carol (Ali McGraw).
Below: Sam Peckinpah

people who have asked you about Peckinpah, but he's a hard subject to avoid. I love *The Getaway*; it seems the peak before the decline. What did Peckinpah bring to that collaboration as a writer? Or was he (my impression) partly frustrated and inarticulate as a writer?

Walter Hill I had been hired by Peter Bogdanovich to write *The Getaway* (actually to co-write it with him). He had read *Hickey & Boggs*, and got the producers (Foster and Brower)² to sign me up. I'm actually not sure that Peter ever read *Hickey & Boggs*, but Polly Platt did; they were separated, but she was still a very big player in his life.³ I didn't know Polly then; later we got to be friends.



Anyway, Peter and I began to write – I was in San Francisco with him while he was shooting *What's Up, Doc?* (1972). The way we worked was pretty simple: I was staying in The Huntington working on pages and then bringing them to him on the set; he would then give me notes. We had maybe twenty-five pages when we went back to L.A., and Steve McQueen fired him. Nothing to do with the pages (we hadn't turned anything in) – personality thing. So I started over. (Peter was

trying to make a Hitchcock-like picture out of the material, which I wasn't very comfortable with, but I was doing my job, man.)

I wrote a first draft in about six weeks, and then they hired Sam. He came in from England where he had been finishing up *Straw Dogs* (1971). I assumed he would do any rewrites himself, or bring in one of his cronies; but we talked, got on well, and he kept me around. While I was doing changes (mainly trims, dialogue polish, and probably most critically – going from period – 1949 – to contemporary) he gave me several of his old scripts to read. He had a motive. He suggested I lift a few pages out of one of them and adapt them to the story at hand. Which I did. This was the first time I ran into the idea of directors reworking old scenes and making them fit anew. I've done it myself a number of times. As they say, most of us only know one story.

One of the pleasant surprises of my life was how little Sam changed his *Getaway* script while they were shooting. And I thought it came out to be a pretty good film – certainly well directed, well shot, and for the most part, well acted.

In speaking about Sam, you need to be careful about which stage of his career you're talking about. I think the dividing line is around *Pat Garrett* (a film I'm not wild about, but I know others are). Obviously I'm talking about alcohol and, let's say,

various other forms of intoxicants. I'm in no position to throw stones, but Sam's habits were well-documented and in the end, very self-destructive. He was alcoholic, but functional and rational up to about this time – after that, he was in and out of coherence, especially artistic coherence. I'm trying to be dispassionate here – it's difficult. I was very fond of Peckinpah. We weren't terribly close, but he was a friend. He helped my career in many ways and many times encouraged me as a writer and a director. He could be a lot of fun – he had a wicked sense of humor – but he also had most of the traditional manifestations of an affluent alcoholic, and they aren't pretty. For instance, excessive reliance on toadies and flunkies, talking badly about people he actually liked, and that liked him, and the constant paranoid search for disloyalty was absolutely Nixonian.

Peckinpah was a good writer, but he only had one voice. He could just write his kind of thing: Westerns, hard guys, bitter-enders. But he wrote them quite well. He was good at structure, and good at finding the ironic moment. On dialogue, it's a little harder to be completely generous. He was good at finding short catchphrases for characters that described their inner-workings, but I always thought he was way too explicit in having characters baldly state thematic ideas.

The contrast with John Huston I think is interesting. Huston, like the more traditional screenwriters, could write in many voices. For instance, it's impossible to imagine Sam writing *Dr. Erlich's Magic Bullet* (1940), *Jezebel* (1938), or *Wuthering Heights* (1939).⁴ But one can certainly see him doing *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). This sounds like a criticism of Peckinpah, but isn't meant to be. I actually think you are much better off writing in as narrow a voice as possible (produces higher quality work, and a more personal statement), but the other side of that coin (and Sam is illustrative of this), you probably burn out faster.

Film International! Do you feel you write with one voice or more?

Walter Hill I'm old-fashioned. I can write in more than one voice, but I think all my best stuff is when I play to my strength. Unfortunately, in my case, those projects are much harder to get made.

Film International! I know there is some trick to writing for Paul Newman, who can be fussy, but it seems like an elusive, enigmatic job from the outside. You got away with it twice in the early 1970s. How? Serendipity?

Walter Hill I didn't know Newman at all. Still don't. I was around at the beginning of the shooting of *The Mackintosh Man* (1973) – “The Freedom Trap” in those days. We did have a couple of meetings to go over rewrites – he was quite pleasant, struck me as the kind of guy that wanted to live to be a hundred, and have everybody love him. He may make it.

That whole thing [*The Mackintosh Man*] was a real fiasco. The novel wasn't much, my script wasn't much, Huston was doing it for the money, and

Newman was doing it because Huston was doing it. I got into *Mackintosh* because it got me out of being sued. A couple of years before, I had been signed to write an original Western for Warner's (“The Big R.B.,” never got written) when a spirited fight broke out over their selling my script *Hickey & Boggs* to U.A. I had been paid \$15,000 (I think, hard to remember) and they sold it for a couple of hundred thousand. My agent (Jeff Berg) took the position that Warner's was meant to be making movies, not brokering scripts, and certainly not without cutting the writer in on the windfall. You can see where this is all going; anyway, a year goes by, Warner's is mad because they are not getting an original script by me as promised by signed contract, and they had paid me some startup money (thirty years later, I can see they had a point). So Berg settles the whole mess by jacking up my price on the old “R.B.” deal, and tells them I'll adapt something for them. They (literally) send me a box of novels they owned – I pick one out and crank out a draft – remember, I'm still furious about the *Hickey & Boggs* transaction. The book was a half-assed spy story, a genre that's never been one of my favorites.⁵ In truth, and pretty obviously, I should never have done the damn thing. I wrote (I think

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a workmanlike script – this is the dangerous gift of being able to write in more than one voice – but it wasn't anything more than workmanlike. Certainly nothing special. Anyway, vaguely embarrassed, I turned it in and left town. A couple of weeks later I called Berg from San Francisco, and he immediately says, “Where the shit have you been? Everybody's looking for you – great news, blah, blah...” I'd been driving all over the Gold Rush country and stayed a while over in Reno; he told me to get my ass back to L.A. because Newman and John Huston were doing my script. And it was true. But ...

They flew me to London, then to Ireland to work with Huston. We didn't get along very well with the work, but he was great at lunch and dinner. He kept wanting to stick to the book, and I kept suggesting we'd better change as much as possible. (I know all this sounds more than a bit self-serving, and have the accuracy of hindsight, but trust me, it's true.) Anyway, I felt a bit desperate, smelling disaster. And Huston refused to get too excited about it all. By then he'd survived many disasters, and he was a bit preoccupied; it was a bad time for him. He was getting sick (emphysema), having a lot of problems with his new wife (massive

understatement), and had a lot of money trouble. I got fired in the end. Huston ended up writing a lot of the final script (later, he was reluctant to admit this, as well he should have been), as did a couple of other writers – Gerald Hanley and someone else, I forget who. As to the finished film, I wrote about eighty percent of the first half (I'll let somebody else do the math), nothing after that. Somehow I ended up with sole credit on the thing – just my luck.

I had ambivalent feelings about Huston for years, and then we got tossed together again over *Revenge*. This was back in L.A. in the mid-eighties. He was lonely, broke, very sick, living in some crappy house up in Laurel Canyon. He had just written a script based on Jim Harrison's story with his son, Tony – coincidentally, I had co-written a script with David Giler several years before from the same material. And originally, Harrison had written a draft, I think for Jack Nicholson. Ray Stark tried to engineer a blending of the Hill/Giler and Huston/Huston scripts, which I was to direct; Huston, who really should have directed it, was too enfeebled at that point. Oddly enough, he seemed to like our script better than his own, save for the ending – the last thirty pages actually – I think he was right. I can still hear him, “You have completely fucked up everything that the story is trying to be about, torn the petals off the rose.”⁶ He loved to argue. I remember once I happened to make a passing complimentary reference to *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and Huston did thirty minutes on what crap the film was – wouldn't hear a word in favor of it.

At this time he was getting ready to direct the Joyce story (*The Dead*, 1987) in some warehouse out in the Valley. He was playing the last card and knew it. They were brave last days. Anyway, we made our peace.

The other Paul Newman project was yet one more mess. Larry Turman and David Foster (David had produced *The Getaway*) had a deal at Fox and asked me to do a script of Ross MacDonald's *The Drowning Pool*. Richard Mulligan was to direct. I did a draft and tried to toughen up the material, and put a little more muscle in Lew Archer's pants, which was probably a mistake. Certainly the studio and the producers ended up feeling that way; their main criticism was MacDonald's fans don't respond to physical action. They may have been right, but I thought going in the direction they wanted with that script was the highway to dullsville. So I more or less jumped ship to start writing *Hard Times* at Columbia for Larry Gordon.

What followed on *The Drowning Pool* was the usual Hollywood horseshit. Lorenzo Semple rewrote me. Tracy Keenan Wynn then rewrote him. And finally, I think Eric Roth did some work on it. In the finished picture, there are a couple of scenes that I can say I more or less wrote – beyond that, not much. Mulligan left the project when I did; he and I got along fine. Newman wasn't part of the deal at the time. I think he came in after Lorenzo's draft. As you may infer from my remarks, I wasn't too crazy about the movie.

On screenwriting

Film International How did you teach yourself screenwriting?

Walter Hill The usual story – read a lot of scripts, saw every possible movie. Wrote a lot at night. My big problem was finishing – I must've written twenty-five first acts – abandon and move on, abandon and move on. This went on about three years. Funny thing, once I was able to finish a script, I was able to make a living at it right away.

Film International I don't mean the format so much, I mean the essence of it, as well as the kind of style you preferred. Were you influenced by specific scripts?

Walter Hill Alex Jacobs' script of *Point Blank* (1967) was a revelation. He was a friend (wonderful guy, looked like a pirate, funny and crazy). This revelation came about despite a character flaw of mine. I have always had difficulty being complimentary to people whose work I admire, when face-to-face with them. This is not the norm in Hollywood, where effusiveness is generally a given. Anyway, a mutual friend told Alex how much I admired *Point Blank* and John Boorman. Alex then very graciously gave me a copy of the script. This was about the time he was doing *The Seven-Ups* (1973).

Anyway, by now I'd been making a living as a screenwriter for maybe two or three years, and had gotten to the point where I was dissatisfied with the standard form scripts were written in – they just all seemed to be a kind of sub-literary blueprint for shooting a picture, and generally had no personal voice. Mine were tighter and terser than the average, but I was still working within the industry template and not too happy about it. Alex's script just knocked me out (not easy to do); it was both playable and literary. Written in a whole different way than standard format (laconic, elliptical, suggestive rather than explicit, bold in the implied editorial style), I thought Alex's script was a perfect compliment to the material, hard, tough and smart – my absolute ideals then. So much of the writing that was generally praised inside the business seemed to me soft and vastly overstated – vastly over-sentimental. Then and now. I haven't changed my opinions about that. But I have changed them about the presentational style.

Anyway, I immediately resolved to try to go in that direction (that Alex had shown), and I worked out my own approach in the next few years. I tried to write in an extremely spare, almost Haiku style. Both stage directions and dialogue. Some of it was a bit pretentious – but at other times I thought it worked pretty well. I now realize a lot of this was being a young guy who wanted to throw rocks at windows.

Film International What scripts did you write in that particular style?

Walter Hill *Hard Times* was the first, and I think maybe the best. *Alien* (1979) – the first draft, then when David and I rewrote it, we left it in that style. *The Driver*, which I think was the purist script that I ever wrote, and *The Warriors*. The clean narrative drive of the material and the splash-panel approach



Hard Times

Poe (Strother Martin), Chaney (Charles Bronson), and Spencer "Speed" Weed (James Coburn) prepare for an illegal fight in the streets during the Depression.

Driver

The Detective (Bruce Dern) harasses The Driver (Ryan O'Neal).



to the characters perfectly fit the design I was trying to make work. Of course all this depends on the nature of the material; I don't think the style would've worked at all had I been writing romantic comedies.

Film International You appear to have a knowledge and appreciation of certain screen writers of the past. Are you conscious of the influence of particular old-time screen writers?

Walter Hill I did some homework. You owe it to the craft. Borden Chase, Lamar Trotti, Ben Hecht (probably the classic example of the multi-voice screenwriter), Preston Sturges, [Robert] Riskin, and of course Hawks – who was a writer/director, though he's usually not billed that way. I don't pretend to be a scholar about the history and evolution of screenwriting, and I think you have to approach

it as a craft rather than an art. But it's the old story; if the craft gets good enough it is an art.

Film International In general, how much do you need a co-writer, either for balance, feedback, or just company?

Walter Hill As they get older, writers tend to specialize given their particular comfort zones, but I'm still trying to be flexible. I'm happy to sit down and write an original, an original on spec or after a pitch (one of the first rules I learned but have broken many times – never write for free, and never use your own money to buy a project), or adapt from a source. I like co-writers for all the reasons you've mentioned, but I've discovered there're very few people I can work with. It's just such a delicate thing; you have to be on the same wavelength, not that you won't have some roaring discussions – you

should really like each other, otherwise the process is so intimate that you will probably end up trying to choke your partner. Co-writing is great for two basic reasons: you've got an equal to test your ideas against, and vice versa; the other reason being you have someone you can have some laughs with. I can't write with someone unless it's fun; as you know, writing alone can be very grim.

In the past, I've only written with (as opposed to have worked with) three guys – David Giler, Larry Gross, Lukas Heller. With David, we usually ended up working in hotels with plenty of time for TV, sports and long dinners where alcohol was served. Lately he and I have worked at his place up in the hills – that's where we did *Undisputed* (2002). Lu-

The Warriors: poster art



kas and I always worked out at my beach house. We also made arrangements for TV sports and dinner. Larry and I usually worked at whatever studio was paying us; then we'd each go off and write; then we'd hook up the next day. Obviously you work with people because they're giving you something that you think is going to make it better.

David's the best dialogue writer I've ever known. And he's got a marvelous capacity for coming up with the unexpected – a u-turn that's novel but at the same time underlines what you're trying to do with the material. A lot of the time he'll present it as a joke, and it'll turn out to be a great idea. Like in *Alien*, when the Ian Holm character was revealed to be a droid – that was David.

Lukas was also a great friend – I miss him very much – he was just really good at everything about screenwriting. Construction. Story. Dialogue. Theme. A terrific adaptor, he had to have source material. Other than that, he had all the bases covered. Three to five pages a day, then pass the bottle.

Larry is an unapologetic intellectual. Very rare in show business. Extremely well-read.

Extremely knowledgeable about the history of film. He's very good at keeping scenes on the thematic tract. We'll discuss something and he'll then cite a moment from Dostoevsky, Borges, Yeats, or some such to illustrate it; then we sit there and try to figure out how to steal it. (laughs)

Film International People always say that writing is a lonely profession, but directing, although you are surrounded by people, is also a solo act. I can figure out what might be professionally required – but what is psychologically necessary for a writer to make the leap to being a director?

Walter Hill Writing does not train you for the following essentials in directing – verbally transmitting your ideas to other people. Suffering fools. Practical problem-solving of a physical nature. Leadership that falls somewhere between being the first of equals, or a ruthless tyrant – depending on your character and the role you choose to play. Most of all, a sense of how to deal with the actors, to give them confidence they're in good hands and are in an environment to do their best work. However, most of the real work of both directing and writing is interior, private, personal, non-collective, idiosyncratic.



Writer-Director

Film International *Hard Times*: how much of a struggle was it to get your first directing job?

Walter Hill I met Larry Gordon in the spring of 1973 – he was running A.I.P. then, and he told me he'd give me a shot at directing if I'd write a script for him. We had to find a subject, obviously – something that appealed to both of us – then he moved over to Columbia. Larry was going to have his own unit that specialized in low-budget action films.

Larry is one of the great characters; from Mississippi, obstreperous, high-decibel, tough businessman, real smart, and can make you laugh for hours. The first thing he told me was that he didn't figure he was taking much of a chance on me as a director: I couldn't be any worse than the ones he'd been working with at A.I.P., and at least he'd have a shot at getting a good script. I was in that bullshit "hot-writer" phase coming off *The Getaway*, so we made a deal: write for scale, direct for scale, and they couldn't make the picture without me. So it was a good bargain for everybody; they got me cheap, and I got a shot at directing. The truth is, I would've paid them for the chance.

The Long Riders

Right: The botched robbery.

Below: Band of brothers. From the left: Cole Younger (David Carradine), Jim Younger (Keith Carradine), Bob Younger (Robert Carradine), Charlie Ford (Christopher Guest), Bob Ford (Nicholas Guest), Ed Miller (Dennis Quaid), Clell Miller (Randy Quaid), Frank James (Stacy Keach), Jesse James (James Keach).



Larry had a project set in San Pedro about street-fighting for money. He had developed a script from a newspaper article – it was contemporary and pretty rough stuff – very A.I.P. I thought maybe if you did it more like a Western with a kind of mythopoetic hero, it might take the edge off – give it a chance to come up-market. Larry went with that, so we made it period – set it in New Orleans. Larry had spent a lot of time there; he went to law school at Tulane. He knew a lot about the city, and I thought I knew a lot about everything. (laughs) Anyway, I guess I took a deep breath – a subject matter I loved, a producer I respected, a deal that said I could direct – here was my chance, no excuses allowed. I wrote a draft, then rewrote it four or five times before I finally got it. But I did get it, and I knew it. I knew it was going to get an actor, and get made.

Film International How much of a struggle was it to hold on to the job and do it properly?

Walter Hill I shot it in thirty-eight days. It seemed like about a year and a half. I got along pretty well with [Charles] Bronson, not so well with [James] Coburn, loved Strother Martin. I had written a rather exotic character; Strother asked me if he could just play it like Tennessee Williams. I said,

great, and that took care of it. Strother could be very washpish, but he was a gentle soul. He gave me a special edition of Whitman when we finished. I was sorry we never got to work together again. The cameraman, Phil Lathrop, helped me enormously.

Film International How much of a switch was it, going from writer to writer-director?

Walter Hill Not a lot. Some people have a knack for it – I think I fit that category. What I think is deplorable is the notion that directing is an extension of a writing career, and that those who don't make the jump are somehow the less for it.

Film International Is it possible to say which of your films was made with the greatest creative freedom?

Walter Hill I can't honestly say I've ever had a lot of producer interference. Larry and I used to have fights, but they were always couched in good humor and respect. And when he disagreed with me, he never went to the studio behind my back. To a lot of people, Larry's a bit of a rough character, but I always found him to be more than honorable. I haven't always done so well with the studios.

Film International Even in that period, in the 1970s?

Walter Hill The first two films went okay – when I turned my cut over to Columbia on *Hard Times*, they had two little notes: I said no, and they said fine. I had some real fights with Michael Eisner on *The Warriors*, and a few years later on *48 HRS*. But Larry always smoothed them out as best as possible.

Film International Do you like Eisner?

Walter Hill I like him about as well as he likes me. Let's let it go at that.

Film International You made two films for him; both made money and got good reviews.

Walter Hill To be honest, I never liked his general approach; he was the prototype of the executive that led us to the high-concept, market-driven studio. I realize that makes me sound like a Luddite, but fuck it. I have to admit had Eisner not taken the path, someone else would have.

My clearest impression is that Eisner wanted movies to be a kind of pleasantly flavored chewing gum, and was almost physically uncomfortable in dealing with anything about the dark side of the human heart. There's no taking away he's a hugely successful businessman, and he was obviously a great fit for Disney. I liked two things about Michael: he didn't give a damn about what you thought about him, and he had an unshakable belief in his own opinions; both are rare qualities in film executives. Unfortunately, the unshakable belief had a downside: he had great popular instincts, but he lacked anything approaching artistic taste. And to be really good, you need both.

The whole executive/writer thing is obviously tricky. I've liked a lot of them, but Eisner, I just found all his notes, ideas, and enthusiasms to be so shallow. I liked being around Alan Ladd, Gareth Wigan, John Calley – smart guys that had very high standards. I certainly don't believe that studio interference has ever made any project I've been around more commercial. Or better. The best defense is a good script. It all starts there.

Film International Was the script process on *48 HRS*. acrimonious?

Walter Hill *48 HRS*. started out as an idea by Larry Gordon. In the original story, the governor of Louisiana's daughter was kidnapped by a vicious criminal who strapped dynamite to her head and announced to the world there were forty-eight hours to pay the ransom or KABOOM. Solving this dilemma was obviously a job for the meanest cop in New Orleans, who goes to the worst prison in Louisiana and gets out the most vicious criminal in the history of the state, a Cajun, for his special knowledge about the devious ways of the kidnapper who, coincidentally, used to be his cellmate. The cop and the con don't get along very well, but finally hard justice is done to the miscreant. Very hard justice. As you can see, in some ways things changed a bit. And in some ways they didn't. I guess this is a good example of my juvenile sense of heroics, because even though I'm poking a little fun here, I loved the basic notion of the story. Right from the first.

Roger Spottiswoode wrote one of the early drafts, while he was living at my house up off Mulholland – right after we had finished *Hard Times*. Roger was the editor on the film; he wanted to direct, and Larry and I encouraged him to write his way into the job. Bill Kerby wrote a draft, as did a couple of other guys – the project moved from Columbia to Paramount. Then Tracy Keenan Wynn wrote a draft. I guess then it was my turn; I wrote a quick draft that took it in another direction.

This was meant to be for Eastwood. Larry got him interested in the story, but Clint wanted to be the convict. As I was leaving to do *The Long Riders*, I suggested to the studio that we flip the roles, and I'd rewrite it with the idea that Eastwood be teamed up with Richard Pryor. But Eastwood didn't want to play a cop – that would bump his *Dirty Harry* series over at Warner's. He was right about that. Then he decided to do a prisoner role in Alcatraz with Don Siegel [*Escape from Alcatraz*, 1979].

That pretty much put paid to the idea that he would play our convict part. Alcatraz turned out to be a good film, but it didn't help us any: The big fish had slipped through the net.

Another couple of years went by, nothing much seemed to happen; then out of the blue, Larry called me and asked if I'd do

Streets of Fire

Big picture: Raven Shaddock (Willem Dafoe).

Inserted: Walter Hill directing a scene.



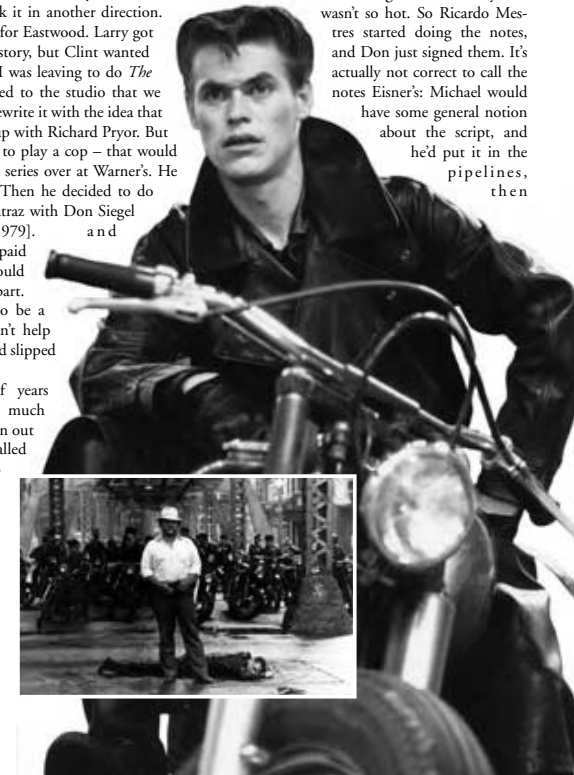
the picture with [Nick] Nolte. Suddenly everything had broken right, and Larry put the movie together; a good example of a persistent producer – Larry never quit on it. We shot the film seven years after Roger had written his draft.

Up to this point, there wasn't any acrimony that I knew about. But once we had a start date, and Larry Gross came in to help me tune the script up, then it got pretty rough and stayed that way until the movie came out in the first part of December. We started shooting in the middle of May, if I remember correctly, with about a seven-week prep. Larry Gordon was busy on a lot of his projects, so he had Joel Silver, who worked for him, produce the movie on a daily basis while he [Larry] oversaw what was going on.

Film International So Larry remained active on the project?

Walter Hill Yeah. Very much so. I think *48 HRS*. was our fourth movie together, and by now we were great friends. This was about the time Don Simpson was carrying water for Eisner; Don was President or Vice President in charge of the Western Universe, something like that – one of those phony titles they give each other. A few months later they fired Don and made him a producer – the way he lived made them nervous. Anyway, Don would get Eisner's notes and transmit them to me. They were usually incoherent, more or less depending upon the amount of drugs Don had ingested. At some point the studio figured out this system wasn't so hot. So Ricardo Mes-

tres started doing the notes, and Don just signed them. It's actually not correct to call the notes Eisner's: Michael would have some general notion about the script, and he'd put it in the pipelines, then





48 HRS.

Above: Convict Reggie Hammond (Eddie Murphy) and cop Jack Cates (Nick Nolte) trying to outstare each other.

Right: "I am your biggest nightmare: a nigger with a badge!" Reggie going wild in a redneck bar.



Another 48 HRS.

Above: Jack and Reggie at each others throats again.

Right: Walter Hill relaxing on set with his two leading men.



Those Who Also Serve would try to implement them with specific ideas. So the notes you were getting represented a committee trying to assuage their boss. Classic studio procedure.

Film International What did you do with the notes?

Walter Hill I usually read them and tossed them; then after a while, I didn't read them and tossed them – finally, I just started sending them over to Joel [Silver], unread, and told him to tell me if there was anything any good in them. He had his secretary read them, and she'd tell Joel what she thought.

Film International I assume she wasn't a trained story analyst.

Walter Hill Shit no, she wasn't. Anyway, Eisner was frantic that I wouldn't let the movie get funny enough – which was bullshit. But you know the drill; they only think 'funny' is what's on the page.

Jokes. Situational gags or sight gags are usually beyond them, unless you go up to their office and act it out. I've never been much for that. So Larry Gross and I just kept writing, specifically to the personalities of Nick and Eddie [Murphy] – and we got it where we thought certain scenes would play to their strengths. The big problem in a sense was Eddie – I know I should have such problems on all my movies – and turning him into a real film personality, not letting him simply be a comedy sketch character out of *Saturday Night Live*. Larry Gross and I were rewriting Eddie to the very last day of shooting. The more we learned, the better he got. Of course, it's obvious that he was a gold mine of talent. I guess we did something right – Eddie played basically the same character for the next ten years.

Film International How much of Eddie's dialogue was improvised?

Walter Hill Not a lot. Occasionally he came up with something really good, which I was smart enough to go with. I mean, he is a very funny guy when he wants to be. But let's not get into the idea that William Powell and Myrna Loy really talked that way. They had writers.

Film International In the redneck bar scene, who wrote the line – "I'm your worst nightmare – a nigger with a badge"?

Walter Hill I did. That scene was done out of sequence, pretty much at the end of shooting. Eddie started a few weeks after principal photography began (he was finishing up his commitment to *Saturday Night Live*), and I had arranged to do most of his heavy lifting as late as possible in the schedule, so we'd have more time to write to him and work with him. The atmosphere on the set was terrific. We had a lot of fun making the movie. But the atmosphere at the studio, as I've indicated, was

lousy. When I did the gunfight scene in the hotel, where Nick faces off with Jimmy Remar – I think it was the first or second week after we got back to L.A., they (the executives) went to dailies and said I'd never work at Paramount again.

Film International Why?

Walter Hill Too violent. They thought it would kill the humor.

Film International You did work at Paramount again.

Walter Hill Yeah. But they were all gone.

Film International Did they really want to fire Eddie Murphy?

Walter Hill Yes. But that wasn't Eisner. Several of the executives didn't think Eddie was funny. Or, to be precise, they didn't think he was like Richard Pryor, who was the definition of funny black man at that time. I showed Eisner some cut footage and he thought Eddie was fine, but that I was still not letting the movie be funny enough. He kept talking about "block comedy" scenes. That's a TV expression. I'm not exactly sure what it means. I told Michael I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about, but not to worry, the story was coming along fine. And that Eddie was very funny. As usual, Larry Gordon smoothed it all out, and I kept shooting. The person that really understood that Eddie was doing great was Joel. Remember, this was Eddie's first movie, and he was all over the place, but Joel understood we were only going to use the good stuff. And there was plenty of that.

Producer-writer: *Alien*

Film International You were working in a special niche of your own in the late 1970s and early 1980s with *Hard Times*, *The Driver*, *The Warriors*, *The Long Riders* and *Southern Comfort* – lean, elegiac films which, I'm guessing, benefited from modest budgets and expectations, as well as low producer interference.

Walter Hill Yes, that niche no longer exists. The middle ground has largely fallen out of the studio system.

Film International Is it possible to say, for you, which of them turned out the best? Or, in retrospect, your favorite?

Walter Hill I couldn't say. They're social as well as aesthetic experiences. If you point a gun at me, I'd probably say *Wild Bill* (1995) is as good as anything I've done. But that was years later.

Film International Are the mega-hits like *48 HRS.* a kind of mixed blessing?

Walter Hill The positive factors are obvious and on the whole outweigh everything else. A big hit allows you to go forward, keep working. But the financial people constantly want you to not simply repeat yourself (I'm not against this in principle, remember we only know one or two stories), but they usually want you to go out and make exactly the same movie right down to the shoelaces. I am against that. If I may digress, this old saw that I've just used again about only knowing a couple of sto-

ries, is actually quite accurate if one substitutes the word "theme" for "stories."

Film International Speaking of mega-hits, can you clarify your contribution to the *Alien* series?

Walter Hill I generally duck answering *Alien* questions in interviews – so much of it ended up acrimoniously, and when you give your side it usually comes out sounding totally self-serving.

Film International *Alien* was the first time you functioned as a producer.

Walter Hill Yes. This is complicated – mainly I'll try to talk not as a producer, but as a writer – however in this case it's difficult to separate ...

David and I had formed a production company with Gordon Carroll⁷ – this was about 1975. About six months after we started, I was given a script called *Alien* by a fellow I knew (Mark Haggard, interesting guy, a real John Ford expert) who was fronting the script for the two writers (Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett). I read it, didn't think much of it, but it did have this one sensation-

rights and kicked it around for a few weeks, trying to figure out what to do with it. Remember, neither of us was a real sci-fi writer or a horror writer, but we were arrogant enough to think we understood how the genres worked. First, we gave the original screenplay to the studio we had a deal with (Fox); they read it and passed (actually it had been previously submitted to them, so technically they passed twice), but we just didn't want to let it go. We believed that if you got rid of a lot of the junk – they had pyramids and hieroglyphics on the planetoid, a lot of von Däniken crap, and a lot of bad dialogue – that what you would have left might be a very good, very primal space survival story. Finally, I said I'd give the fucker a run-through (it was now around Christmas holidays). David was going off to Hong Kong with his girlfriend, but before he left we thrashed it out pretty good.

Film International How did the rewrite differ from the original script?

Walter Hill For starters, in the original material, it was an all-man crew, and the creature was some kind of outer space octopus – the main idea David and I had was to do a slicked-up, high-class 'B' movie that as best we could avoided the usual cheeseball characters and dialogue. This doesn't seem like much now, but the notion that you'd write up to a 'B' movie idea – make it to be played with the same intentions and style as high drama – that was out of the box, then. And, pretty obviously, we were thinking like producers before we began to deal with it as screen writers.

One other thing – I resist science fiction that suggests the universe is something other than dark, cold, harsh, dangerous. I said before how much I liked Hawk's *The Thing*, and one of the ideas in the finished script that I liked best was the way it dramatized and valorized instinctive wariness and practicality when dealing with the unknown, over the needs of science. Right from the first, I wanted very much to get a version of that into the script. And I think that quality is what made the movie so American, even though it was shot in England, had an English director, English technicians, and several English cast members.

David had suggested making the captain (Dallas) a woman. I tried that, but I thought the money was on making the ultimate survivor a woman – I named her Ripley (after *Believe It Or Not!*); later when she had to have a first name for I.D. cards, I added Ellen (my mother's middle name). I called the ship *Nostromo* (from Conrad; no particular metaphorical idea, I just thought it sounded good). Some of the characters are named after athletes: Brett was for George Brett, Parker was Dave Parker of *The Pirates*, and Lambert was Jack Lambert of *The Steelers*.

In a sense, what was different from the O'Bannon/Shusett script is difficult to answer. There were certainly a lot of finite things; the protagonist is a woman, mixed gender crew, the



Alien: Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) lost in space.

al scene – which later we always called "the chest burster." I should probably also say that *The Thing* (1951) was one of my favorite films from when I was a kid; and this script reminded me of it, but in an extremely crude form.

I gave it to David with one of those "I may be crazy, but a good version of this might work" speeches. The next night, I remember I was watching Jimmy Carter give his acceptance speech to the Democratic convention, and was quite happy to answer the phone when it rang. It was David – he told me I was crazy, but he had just got as far as the big scene (the chest burster) and it was really something. So basically, off the strength of that, we acquired the



“A perfect organism. Its structural perfection matched only by its hostility. I admire its purity. An organism unclouded with remorse, conscience, or delusions of morality ...”

ALIEN

RESURRECTION



Aliens: Ripley, Newt, (Carrie Henn), and Hudson (Bill Paxton).



Alien: The confrontation between Ripley and Ash (Ian Holm).



Alien*

Wayland-Yutani Company, the conspiracy theory undertones to the Wayland-Yutani Company, the possibility of using the Alien as a biological weapon, Ash as a droid, the idea of class lines based on job descriptions – what we called “truckers in space” (this became an instant cliché; you couldn’t make a sci-fi movie after this without baseball hats); but the most significant difference in the two scripts was setting the mood, the environment, and what became the stance of the film. That said, we then added a rough contemporary quality to the characters that broke it out of the usual genre mold – the “kiss my rosy red ass” and “kill the mother-fucker” kind of dialogue that historically you didn’t find in Science Fiction movies. Remember we were at the same studio that had made *Star Wars* (1977). The on-lot joke at the time was that we were the Rolling Stones to their Beatles.

Film International Did you like the joke?

Walter Hill Shoot me as the Antichrist, but I never much liked the Beatles.

Film International The film is sometimes criticized for having weakly defined characters.

Walter Hill That’s bullshit. You clearly know who each of them are, and what their attitudes reflect – and they have immediacy. And of course, our best character was the Alien.

Film International Can you elaborate?

Walter Hill David and I joked about calling him/her Nietzsche, you know, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Seriously, that was one of the things in making the thing fly – we articulated that notion in a way that got to the audience.

Film International I love the Ash death speech, “A perfect organism. Its structural perfection matched only by its hostility. I admire its purity. An organism unclouded with remorse, conscience, or delusions of morality ...”

Walter Hill Ian Holm. Wonderful actor. I remember I met with Tommy Lee Jones in New York; we were interested in him playing Dallas – he told me he had read the script twice, and the only character that really grabbed him was the monster, and that he’d sign up tomorrow if he could play it.

Film International It sounds like you and David Giler had a good time writing the script.

Walter Hill Too much probably. And to tell the truth, we were kind of left-handing the whole thing. I don’t mean we thought we were above the material; that’s the worst sin, and sends you straight to the inner circle of hell. But, we were busy on a lot of other projects and, again, neither of us felt sci-fi was our natural métier. Although I had been a big sci-fi reader when I was a kid, David not at all. Oddly enough, in the long run, I think that distance helped the script – the feeling we had of standing somewhere outside the genre helped get it off center and made it different in tone. And it gave us the courage to be irreverent. I mean when it’s two a.m. and you’re writing about a monster with acid for blood, some irreverence is called for; we were always taking an implausible situation and trying to make it sound real, and most of the time we pulled it off, I think. I guess what I’m trying to say is that we may have left-handed the script, but we did work very hard; the Ash death speech we

probably wrote twenty times before we got it right. Anyway, David went off to Hong Kong, and I sat down and did the spec rewrite of the O’ Bannon/ Shuset script. It took maybe a week. After the holidays, David got back, and then he and I rewrote it several times. We gave it to the studio, and they got on board. Gareth Wigan was the executive on the piece; he’s one of the very few executives I’ve ever worked with who’s actually very good with script. David and I then did what seemed like an endless series of polishes. The last couple we did in New York in my room at the Navarro (now the Ritz Carlton), while I was prepping *The Warriors*. Film International But in the end, you two weren’t credited.

Walter Hill Correct. The [Writers] Guild decided we didn’t deserve any writing credit for our efforts.

Film International It sounds like you’re still unhappy about this.

Walter Hill It’s a long time ago, and there are a lot more important things in the world; however, I certainly believe it was an injustice in the sense that it doesn’t reflect the truth. Partially as a result of all that, after the first *Alien*, I have to admit I never felt as involved or committed to those that followed, though obviously I was quite happy at their success.

Film International Is it true you’ve sued Fox over the profits?

Walter Hill Yes. Twice. Both times settled in our favor.

Film International Any backlash to this?

Walter Hill I am told that David and I are currently blackballed at Fox. So be it.

Film International Why was *Alien* so successful?

Walter Hill First, but not necessarily foremost, it was a good script – suggestive of deeper issues, deeper terrors, nightmares. It’s not quite a Sci-Fi movie, not quite an action movie, not quite a horror movie, but some kind of odd synthesis that came together via a good, solid, old-fashioned story move. The objective problem in the first half becomes subjective in the second half by getting into Ripley’s head and experiencing the terror through her. The final draft was very tight, only about eighty pages, lean and mean.

But whatever the quality of the script, films have to be realized. And in this case, it just all worked. [Director] Ridley Scott did a wonderful job, the best film he’s done, I think. Sigourney Weaver was iconographically perfect, and had the chops to pull it off. She was a very young woman then; inexperienced, but it made the movie so much better that she wasn’t a known actress. Needless to say, that was a tough one for the studio to swallow. I mean, we were insisting on a female lead in a Sci-Fi action film; and then on top of that, insisting on an unknown female lead. With a director whose previous film had a worldwide gross of, I think, less than half a million dollars. That’s why maybe the ultimate good guy was Laddie⁸ – he said yes.

The conventional wisdom in Hollywood is that warm films are commercial, and cold ones are not. As usual, the conventional wisdom isn’t true, and it isn’t true by the bagsful with *Alien*. It’s a very cold film. Hospital cold. I’m-here-to-die-in-this-sterile-

room-and-nobody-gives-a-shit-cold. But at the same time, that’s only a half-truth; it’s also fun – a good example of the old show biz rouser.

Film International What about *Aliens* (1986)?

Walter Hill This was a few years later. David and I sat down and had a discussion about what the sequel should be. We figured the next one should be a straight action thriller – the military takes over – a patrol movie. David wrote it down on a couple of pages. Jim Cameron wrote a treatment. David and I rewrote it a bit (this must be about fall of ’83); we gave it to the studio and they said, “Go to script.” Jim went off and directed *The Terminator* (1984), then came back and wrote the first draft. It never changed much.

Film International Did you like the film?

Walter Hill Obviously Jim has a great talent for connecting with big audiences. I thought he shot the shit out of it. Tremendous physicality. I wasn’t too crazy about the stuff with the kid.

Film International What about *Alien³*?

Walter Hill Another complete fucking mess. The studio wanted to crank another one out. There were a number of false starts. David and I were a bit sick of it, and wanted to end the whole thing. But we wanted to do it with some class and thematic cohesion. We thought that killing Ripley – or to be more precise, having her sacrifice herself while ridding the universe of the alien – would be a bold move and round out the trilogy. That was our only stipulation; beyond that we tried to stay out of it as writers. As usual, David and I were busy on other films. There were a number of writers and directors, then David Fincher was hired. There was a start date, the script was announced to be a mess (it was) – it had been run through about five writers up to then; sets were being built, actors being hired – the usual circus of expensive incompetence. The studio and Sigourney asked us to put on our firemen suits, so David and I went to London and started writing. Fifteen years later, and we’re still in hotel rooms rewriting *Alien*. We felt we were working in handcuffs – writing to sets that were already built, plot moves that had been committed to that we didn’t agree with. Then there were differences of opinion with Fincher, Sigourney, and the studio. We did our best and went home.

Film International On this one, you and David Giler got credit.

Walter Hill Or the blame. I think a lot of the ideas in the third one are actually the most interesting in the series, but the whole thing didn’t quite come off. And certainly some of that is our fault. Speaking for myself, I don’t think our script was nearly as good as the one we did for the first *Alien*.

Film International What about the fourth, *Alien: The Resurrection* (1997)?

Walter Hill We had nothing to do with that one – didn’t even think it was a good idea for starters – we thought we had ended the series. And our relationship with the studio had deteriorated even more, probably due to the lawsuits. People don’t usually love you when you sue them. Our only real function was telling the studio that the script they developed without our input wasn’t any good and wouldn’t work. We then suffered the traditional fate



Geronimo: An American Legend. Geronimo (Wes Studi), Lt. Charles B. Gatewood (Jason Patric).

of the messenger ... Personally, I think it's a lousy movie. And they just wasted Winona Ryder. That's inexcusable.

Purity in genre filmmaking

Film International Let's return to your masculine/physical heroics for a moment. Are there ways in which this strength has also become a straitjacket? I'm thinking of violence and car chases, for example – which, dating back to Peckinpah and *The Getaway* – were an evolutionary innovation in the American cinema, but nowadays, in other hands, these ideas too often become a simplistic cliché. I can see producers coming to you expressly for that, and urging more and more violence and smashups upon you, in terms of both script and filming. The stars too begin to fall into a mold and then demand such things. Yes, no?

Walter Hill Yes. But since you've asked a complicated question, allow me to be a bit circular. I love comedies, musicals, and thrillers like everybody else, but I confess to believing action pictures are what movies are most essentially all about. It's the work they do best and uniquely best. I don't mean action movies are better; in fact, most of them are actually a lot worse than the norm. But the few that really work are sublime. Films like *Colorado Territory* (1949), *White Heat* (1949), *Ride the High Country*, *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Scarface* (1932), *Heat* (1995), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Attack!* (1956), *The Good, the Bad, the Ugly* (1966), or a hundred others I can name ... The real power of movies lies in their connection to our unconscious or semiconscious dream life, and action movies are about heroism and death. Will he live or will he die is the ultimate drama, isn't it?

Purity is important. Because it's the essence of what the creative person is most trying to achieve – the ideal. This is where I think screenplays and movies cause terrible frustration; the dramatic form itself is so messy. So much of what we are trying to do is simply to put things in proper order. And this ordering of things is complicated; it's absolutely not simple. Now, if you're going to do action films, a

certain amount of repetition, which certainly is a kind of straitjacket, is inevitable. You are going to have to deal with gunfights and chases. And usually there are certain other limitations that are a given. If you're doing *Dirty Harry*, Eastwood is not going to be shot dead at the end, right? So it becomes a kind of game. The audience knows what the conclusion will be, but you still have to entertain them. So you are always walking on the edge of a precipice – trying to juggle the genre expectations, which can slip into clichés, and in many cases are clichés – and your personal need to dance with the idea of taking the familiar and getting a little off-center, getting it to play – putting your fingerprints on it. We have our areas of skill, and we want to continue to explore them, because we feel there's probably something left to say – the need to, maybe this time, get it right. Lukas Heller always told me that [Robert Aldrich used to say that the manipulation of idiots [the studio] was part of the job. But you manipulate them to get the opportunity to chase a kind of limited perfection.

The main thing is to use whatever means are at hand to tell stories that mean something to you on a personal level. And often, again especially in the action field, what is personally interesting to you may be invisible to others. In the end, of course, when reviewing the result, the person you have



outsmarted is very often yourself.

Film International It seems to me that when you have directed "only" and especially produced "only," that often you are doing so partly in order to step outside the mold, doing offbeat comedies or other stuff (horror, etc.) that otherwise might not come your way. Is that a fair generalization?

Walter Hill Yes. Absolutely. And with mixed results.

Film International You seem to have made a point of directing or producing without writing the scripts, for quite a few films after the mid-1980s. Is that partly happenstance? Or is it a decided career choice?

Walter Hill Neither. I think in every instance, for better or worse, I did a lot of work on the screenplays but decided to not put in for credit. In some cases I felt I didn't deserve it, in others I thought I would hurt the chances of the writers I was working with in getting credit. As discussed before, I'm not a great admirer of the arbitration process. I've never directed a script I didn't control, with the exceptions of the *Supernova* mess and the *Deadwood* pilot for H.B.O.

If you're willing to make films without really controlling the storytelling elements, then you can probably work a lot more. But unless you're broke, why bother?

Changes

Film International How does your script format differ, from when you started out? Do you write less dialogue, less description nowadays ... or what?

Walter Hill My scripts have always been a bit terse, both in stage directions and dialogue. I think I've loosened up in the dialogue department, but I still try to keep the descriptions fairly minimal, and in some cases, purposefully minimalist. I still punctuate to effect, rather than to the proper rules of grammar. I occasionally use onomatopoeias now, a luxury I would certainly never have allowed myself when I was younger. My favorite description of the dilemma of screenwriting comes from David Giler, "Your work is only read by the people who will destroy it."

Johnny Handsome

Film International What is the actual writing process, for you?

Walter Hill When I'm working alone, the old hard way. Longhand. Fountain pen. Legal pads. Thesaurus at my side. This last item, I'm not ashamed to say, is quite helpful – when you write screenplays you don't have a lot of room, and the stage directions can become onerously repetitive if you don't work at fresh descriptions. Try to show the reader a new way to see it. Unless, of course, you are using repetition as a rhythm device in creating mood – which I guess is a perfect illustration of one of the things I like best about screenwriting: whatever is true, the opposite can also be true. Both at the technical level and at a much larger one – I think it's best approached as an enigmatic way to make a living.

Film International When you look around the room at a Writers Guild function nowadays, how many people do you recognize, still working at the craft, from your own first days as a screenwriter? What has been the secret of longevity in the field? Luck, tenacity, talent?

Walter Hill I'm under the impression that very few people that started writing about the time I did (late 1960's) are still at it, but I could be wrong. One loses contact – that's the nature of the work. But it's foolish to think there aren't a lot of casualties along the way. As to what makes for career longevity – this is difficult; your categories of luck, talent and tenacity are certainly factors – to last at a significant level, relatively without compromise, seems to me to be the hardest trick to pull off. All

this begs for definitions, however; and my notions of who is compromised and who isn't probably differ radically from others.

Obviously sustaining a career is primarily due to being associated with either commercial success, or widely held notions of having done quality work. But quite often the first is a matter of luck, and the second a mistake in judgment that gets repeated often enough to have a life of its own.

Are the current producers, or studio executives, worse than ever, in terms of script standards?

Let's not kid ourselves; it's always been a whorehouse. But I think it was a more elegant one in the past, and certainly there was a much greater attempt to tell adult stories. I have confessed my juvenile sensibility, but now what's on demand isn't juvenile, it's more often childish. As you know, producers (studios) come in all shapes and sizes. In general I'd say that now they put much more emphasis on concept, much less emphasis, and have less confidence in the craft of storytelling.

I don't want to fall into the trap of the old fucker who complains that everything was better in the past. I don't believe that. But I do think something reasonably adult is more difficult to get through the studio system than before (not that it was ever easy). There are a lot of reasons for this, but the greatest of them go beyond Hollywood – essentially the changing nature of a mass audience, domestic and foreign. I should add I'm the kind of person that believes if you had a system built on altruism and great goodwill, with the sole aim of making a positive contribution to popular culture – even

then, ninety percent of what got made would be shit.

A lot of attempts at good work get done in the independents, but they generally lack scale. And scale is one of the glories of film. Currently what's most getting lost is the personality within films. We need *Red River* (1948). Hawks and Borden Chase. A wonderful old screenwriter told me this recently, "It's a paradoxical truth; Hollywood's worse than ever, but it was always bad."

But I can't quit on that note. It's only half true. In my case, the other half being that, for nearly forty years now, it's been a voyage where I've been lucky enough to work with an enormous amount of talented people. And got paid for it. No complaints.

Notes

- ¹ The hilltop fields dotted with oil derricks on Signal Hill, overlooking nearby Los Angeles.
- ² Producers Larry Turman and David Foster.
- ³ Best-known early in her career as a costume and production designer, the multi-talented Polly Platt closely collaborated with husband Peter Bogdanovich until their divorce. Nowadays Platt is as likely to turn up on film credits as a producer (*Battle Royale*, 1996) or screen writer (*A Map of the World*, 1999).
- ⁴ Huston made an uncredited contribution to *Wuthering Heights*.
- ⁵ *The Mackintosh Man* is based on Desmond Bagley's novel, *The Freedom Trap*, published in 1971.
- ⁶ *Revenge* was eventually produced in 1990, with Kevin Costner, Anthony Quinn, and Madeleine Stowe starring, Tony Scott directing, and the script credited to novelist Jim Harrison and Jeffrey Alan Fiskin.
- ⁷ The company was called Brandywine.
- ⁸ Alan Ladd Jr., then production head of 20th Century-Fox

Trespass: King James (Tracy Marrow aka Ice-T), Savon (O'Shea Jackson aka Ice Cube).

