

# A Day at the Beach

**M**aking a movie can be a first-class blast most days. This is not one of those days. The only blast is coming from the Northeast at 30 miles an hour. It's midnight. I am freezing as I stand on the upper level of the Verrazano Bridge that connects Brooklyn and Staten Island. It is one o'clock in the morning in March 1977. I have a crew of 60 people standing around freezing in a 30 mile-an-hour wind at 10 degrees above zero. And *we are doing nothing*. We are not shooting. We are not talking. We are supposed to be making "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night" fortunately renamed *Saturday Night Fever*. A 22-year-old John Travolta is refusing to do the scene as staged by the director — me. He is shut in his trailer. We still have a big scene to shoot that night and the sun will explode on us at 6 am whether I like it or not. Of course, it must be all my fault. I have to get us shooting — and Travolta won't come out to play. What's a director to do?

Rewind to 1976. It's another non-blast day. I am shooting in Macon, Georgia on a baseball diamond in a 100-degree blazing sun with 90% humidity. I have a crew of 60 people standing around melting. And *we are doing nothing*. We are not shooting. We are not talking. My first feature film, *The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings*, is not traveling anywhere today. This movie, which stars Billy Dee Williams, James Earl Jones, and Richard Pryor, is a very affectionate look at the last days of the Negro Baseball Leagues.

In the hot sun I am looking at a very angry Richard Pryor planted 18 inches from my face, demanding an apology. I allegedly endangered his life the

previous day by asking him to drive by the camera. Who knew? Today I have again put him in harm's way by asking him to slide into second base. Pryor is so mad he has booked a flight back to Los Angeles unless I apologize to him right now. I am young, stubborn, and above all, stupid. I tell myself I've done nothing wrong, so of course I won't apologize. This is why directors don't live to be very old.

Thank God I'm not the only one who has bad days. Somewhere on location a movie is being made by two first-time directors working as a team on the HBO *Project Greenlight* series. The novice filmmakers have their first full crew, real cameraman, and professional actors, and everybody is rooting for them to succeed. Because it's all been recorded on video we get to watch the filmmakers struggle minute by minute through their shooting days. The series is a huge cinematic lesson for all of us on the perils of filmmaking. It might be easy to make fun of the way their shoot is going if everyone who has ever picked up a camera has not had similar problems. We've been there and have plenty of sympathy for their trial by fire. *Project Greenlight* shows us talented people trying their hardest to make the best film possible. At the same time the endless communication snafus threaten to cripple the whole film. Not the least of which is the directors communicating with the actors. We see the actors eager to please, eager to adjust in whatever way the directors want. We see the directors, desperate to make the scenes perfect, talking themselves blue.

The creative process often finds rookie directors failing to get the scene they want because of their inexperience talking to the actors. The creative process often finds experienced directors failing to get the scene they want because of their inexperience talking to the actors. Talking to actors always seems so easy until the director, no matter how experienced, attempts it. Then directors learn there is a whole language of actor Speak. Harder to learn than Hottentot clicks, it can sound very "New Age" or it can be downright brutal and manipulative. Try talking that way to your cinematographer or an assistant director, and you'll get a lot of weird looks. What is that way? What is that secret language? What is that actor Speak? Why can't they just do what we tell them? The difficulties on *Project Greenlight* are not helped by the fact that the set is awash in kibitzers. No matter how well meaning and well attuned to each other the creative team is, the suggestions from the crew are like the story of the blind men describing an elephant. We see the actors melt in confusion. No wonder that smart actors learn to defend themselves from incompetent directors.

**Jenna Elfman:** “I find the most important thing for me is to study acting with a great teacher because sometimes you don’t have a director that’s going to lead you the way you need to be led, and you have to be able to lead yourself. I love being directed. I always hope to have a great director because I like that dynamic of being directed. One of the greatest experiences I’ve had being directed was with Ron Howard on *EdTV*.”



The more headstrong actors dive into a mode of self-protection. They stop listening to the babble and go for what they think their character should be doing. With luck and talent they may stumble on a good scene, or parts of a good scene. Otherwise they can create a mess that even a talented editor will have trouble sorting out.

Any person who has directed anything in their life, even the Christmas pageant at church, has collided head on with situations like these. There are directors on the planet that stoutly maintains they have *never* had these sorts of problems. I am thrilled for them, I would envy them but... they are *lying*. Not just through their teeth, but through their eyes, ears, nose, and throat. If there is life on other planets, there are actors out there making directors miserable. It is part and parcel of the often-dubious joy of being a director.

On the flip side, and just as grimly, there are plenty of directors everywhere making life miserable for actors. Some directors seem to do everything they can to alienate, frighten, and intimidate the actor. They rule by fear and yelling. Otto Preminger, Henry Hathaway, and John Ford terrified everyone by their very presence. Some directors like to make life miserable for the crew and the actors in smaller parts. They can’t push the star around, so they kick the supporting cast instead.

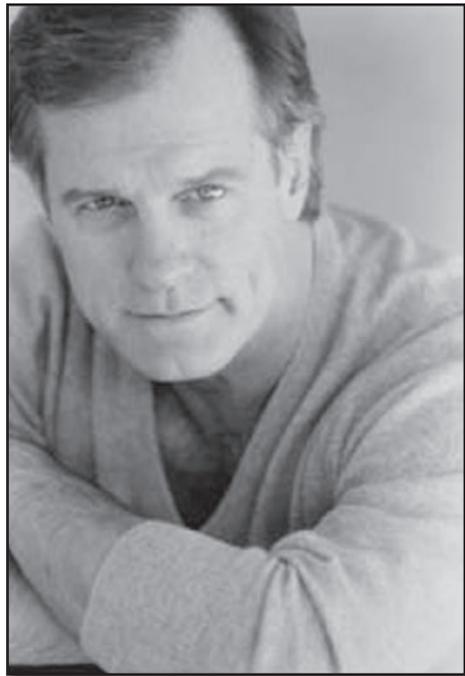
**Steven Soderbergh:** “There are some directors that don’t like actors, don’t understand them, don’t want to understand them, and think that they’re in the way and that they slow things down.”

There are passive-aggressive directors, often called “Stealth Directors.” They keep a distance from the actors, having little communication with them. The actor is left to creatively sink or swim on his own. You never see this kind of director portrayed in movies showing directors at work. Too dull. Hiding behind television monitors or inside a control booth, these directors leave the actor hung out to dry rather than risk confrontation. Surprisingly, the Stealth director may be more prevalent than those who would emulate John Ford, Roman Polanski, or James Cameron. These latter directors rule their sets with an iron fist, and have made excellent movies to show for it.

**Stephen Collins:** “Few directors know how to talk to actors or do. There seems to be more and more a kind of wall between them and the actors. Mike Nichols said that directors never get to watch each other work... You can count the number of directors who really, really help you on the fingers of maybe one hand... If the stories of Hitchcock and William Wyler are true, apparently they didn’t know what to say to actors either. But they knew how to do everything else so well.”

“Who was the director on that TV show you just did?” I once asked a young actress. (Long pause.) “I don’t know... I think he had a beard.” I could wallpaper my office with variations on this conversation. It’s a predictable one to hear from an actor at a party. They speak proudly of the latest job they’ve just finished. They tell me how much fun it was, how their agent got calls from the producer saying how good they were. But they don’t know the name of the director?! The first six thousand times I heard this I just thought the actors were twits. Then I realized that they might never have had a real conversation with the director. The director had made little if any impression on them.

**Betty Thomas:** “The first time I remember someone directing me on screen, who really “directed” me was Bob Butler — who directed the pilot of *Hill Street Blues*. I was supposed to be looking at Veronica Hamel’s character Joyce



— Bob wanted to make a specific moment for me. Bob said, ‘Your character doesn’t like her. Let’s show that.’ I didn’t have any lines, so I said, ‘Okay, how are we going to show that?’ And he said, ‘Well, just think to yourself what your character really thinks of her. Just think it through and I’ll do a close-up and we’ll have it. That’s all you have to do. Don’t do anything else.’ I said, ‘Really? That’s it.’ He said, ‘That’s it.’ And so he shot it and I did exactly what he said and afterwards he said, ‘OK, that was it — I got it.’ And he did.”

Not so surprisingly the directors that actors do remember like Mike Nichols or Sydney Pollock or Martha Coolidge are known for being good with actors. But do they remember less well-known directors? You bet. If the director makes an effort to connect with an actor, he or she knows they’re being looked out for. That’s a lifeline to a drowning man. Actors may have been doing this for years yet still be a bowl of Jell-O inside. When you save somebody’s life you have an ally forever. When you let them sink or swim on their own, the makeup artist means more to them than you do. At least they had meaningful contact with her. It’s not about the actor remembering your name at a party. You’ll make an ally that will do anything to help you make a good movie.

How can a director, young or old, beginning or experienced, talented or not, learn how to survive in these difficult arenas? Every bit of psychology, street smarts, anything that could pass for human relation skills will be called into play in a director’s career. The sooner the director learns to confidently cope with the knotty problems that persistently arise, that *will* not go away, the sooner that director will begin to radiate the kind of ease and sureness of direction that make them a leader people want to follow. When Sydney Pollock or Mark Rydell, Steven Soderbergh or Steven Spielberg talk on their sets, actors and crew listen. That’s not just because they are Big Star directors who intimidate. Far from it. *They are accessible, kind and supportive of their creative partners.*

In many years of talking to film students at USC, the Yale Drama School, the American Film Institute, Chapman University, or NYU, I am inevitably asked by students “*What do you do when the actor won’t do what you want?*” At that point in the lecture hall an amazing thing happens: Disinterested and bored students come to life. This is something they really, really, REALLY want to know. A cinematic Holy Grail for aspiring filmmakers?

Sorry, no secrets here. There is no one-sentence answer. To paraphrase the New Testament, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a tyro director to understand the inner workings of an actor. Many experienced directors confess they were very frustrated with themselves as directors when they first began trying to communicate with actors. They

couldn't find the words to express what they thought. All they remember is that using the words "more" or "less" or "faster" or "slower" is *not* directing.

## How to Hide

Here are some great ways to isolate yourself from the cast so that you will never understand them and they will never know who you are.

1. Video Assist
2. The Camera
3. Lenses
4. Film Stocks & HDTV
5. Lighting
6. Cranes and grip equipment
7. Any CGI or computer effect

It's lots of fun to learn the workings of the Panavision camera, CGI effects or the Avid editing tools. You can see them; hold them in your hand. You can hide behind them. And best of all: they do what you tell them!

The beginning director can flee behind these wonders of technology, never to be seen again. He says he needs to concentrate on the "visual look" of the film... and the cast... well, the cast will take care of itself. This is nothing more or less than fresh steaming horseshit. Directors always need actors to tell a story, so why would they hide from them?

**JB:** "Is there anything you wish that directors would do with actors when they are working with them?"

**Dennis Haysbert:** "Talk to them about their characters. Today what I see with directors is that they are more concerned with the shot, rather than the character that they are shooting. They don't think about who your character is and where you are at this particular moment. In a scene, I'm always looking at where I came from, where I am, and where I'm going. And it helps you get through the scene."

Many young directors are afraid of actors. Cameras do what you tell them, more or less. Not so the actor. But then actors are not machines, actors are creative human beings. Whether they are highly paid professionals or beginning amateurs they also have tremendous insecurities. *Just because you are a great actor with an Academy Award, doesn't mean you don't need, and don't really want, all the help and support that a director can give.*

A movie succeeds or fails on three things: the quality of the script, the quality of the actor's performance, and the quality of the director's realization. *If you don't start with a good script you will not finish with a good movie.* This is not a cliché; this is an eternal truth, inscribed on the Dead Sea Scrolls... or somewhere.

*If the director cannot inspire, lead, cajole, or even manipulate his actors to give their greatest talent to the script you will have a mediocre movie.* And believe it or not, even a good director can really screw up a good script. All elements of a film have to work together. Mediocrity always lurks under an apple box on the set or an executive's desk, poised to invade. It's our job to make the movie shine, not to let the endless parade of script readers, executives, and producers with their "Notes" turn us into a Stepford Director.

The incidents I mentioned earlier on the Verrazano Bridge and in Macon, Georgia are great object lessons about how *not* to work with actors. How *never* to work with actors. My tardy and sincere apology to all the actors I've misdirected or emotionally abused in my years of trying to understand their psyche.

In *Saturday Night Fever*, there is a scene towards the end where Tony's friend Bobby C is going to jump from the bridge onto the rocks below. Tony and his friends go out onto an exposed beam to try to grab Bobby C before he jumps.

When we arrived on the set, the temperature was below 30. The wind was 25 knots. The line producer, Mike Hausman and the stunt coordinator, Paul Nuckles were worried that the steel beams of the bridge were going to freeze up in the February night air. We needed to make shots with stunt doubles because Barry Miller, the actor playing Bobby C, would fall from the bridge; the freezing conditions would make the beams too slippery. Mike Hausman's wise recommendation was that we shoot the stunts first before the beams froze up. Then we could shoot close-ups with the actors in a safe location on the bridge.

While the actors were getting ready, I staged the stuntmen in the positions where I wanted the actors to be during the scene. The cameras and lights were prepped and we shot Bobby C's fall successfully.

Now the actors who had been staying warm in the one motor home that the film's \$2.5 million budget could afford were called to the set.

And that's where the trouble began.

John Travolta and the rest of the cast arrive and I show them where they physically have to be at the end of the scene, in order to match what the stuntmen have already done. All heads nodded... but one, John Travolta, known as "JT." I had had the stuntmen walk out on the beam a few feet, standing erect, and then because they were 300 feet over the water they would go on their knees to crawl the last few feet to Bobby C played by Barry Miller. It seemed like a sensible idea at the time. "JT" looked at me and said that his character wouldn't do it that way. His character would not be a pussy and go on his knees when it got too dangerous to stand. His character would be standing upright the whole way. YIKES!

I smiled and said, "But we've already shot it this way with the stuntmen." JT's response was, "Well, you can re-shoot it right?" "No, the stuntmen have gone home." The scene wouldn't cut together if we didn't match the stuntmen's work. My problem, not his, said he. With a disgusted look he turned and went back to his trailer.

I was now a leper. Everyone moved away from me. What's a leper director to do? Can't re-shoot the stunt because the stuntmen have gone home. The producers Robert Stigwood and Kevin McCormack won't let us come back tomorrow night. I'm screwed!

Doctors say that the first reaction of a patient who is told that they are dying is total denial. That's me.

So now I have the humiliating job of going to the motor home to see "JT" and tell him we would do it his way. He nodded grudgingly and we went back to work. We barely got our night's work done and still had to shoot some close-ups faked in a garage a few weeks later.

The mismatch never did go away and it suddenly became the editor's problem. Dave Rawlins had to figure out a way to cut around the mismatch and hide my mistake. If you freeze frame on the DVD you'll see he cuts from the medium shot of Bobby C falling to the extremely wide shot of the fall from below. The size and angle changes are so drastic that an audience's eyes go to the falling figure of Bobby C and not to the kneeling figure of Tony who is supposed to be standing upright. The fact that we got away with it is no excuse.

## The Moral of This Tale Is?

Never, never, never stage a scene without the actors' participation.

Guaranteed to backfire. I know this; I knew it when it happened. But I did it anyway, duh. If I had taken my competency pills that night I would have staged the scene with the actors *first* and then let the stuntmen match them. Not the other way around. *It was not John Travolta's fault, it was my fault.* Involve the actor when you start staging a scene and uncover simple problems before they become 'Nightmare Problems.'

**Jenna Elfman:** "I like rehearsing in the environment that I'm going to be filming in because I'm free to find choices that enhance the story, but if it has already been lit or the director says, 'You're going to sit here and do this and that,' and I say, 'What if I feel the need to walk away during this scene?' It's not allowed because it's already lit and we have no time. That tends to happen a lot. An actor can't necessarily make the choices he would want because it's lit a certain way and there's no time."



It's easy to make lots of mistakes making a movie. You are always under great pressure to "get it done." Any film, no matter how big or small is forced to be shot in less time than the director really needs. Whether it is *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, or an episode of *Frasier*, directors always need more time. The first thing in the shooting day, while the actor is in makeup and hair, is usually when directors under pressure screw up. The cameraman needs a camera set-up first thing in the morning. It's an easy scene you think, so why drag the actors out of makeup? The actor surely won't mind the staging because it's so obviously right. Right? Wrong. The actor arrives, shoots your ideas down, and you look like a fool. And you are a fool because you've lost valuable time.

**Richard Donner:** "Shooting *Wanted — Dead or Alive*, I get up and I see this hill and I said, 'Good, we'll be up here and McQueen drove up in his Jaguar and said, 'Okay, what am I doing?' I said, 'Here's where it is, Steve. The guy is down there and you're up here,' and he said, 'Nope.' I said, 'What do you mean



nope' He said, 'I wouldn't put my back to them. I said, 'Well where would you be? What would you do?' He said, 'You're the director. You figure it out.' And he walked away."

You are thinking, "You're the director, you're in charge. Just tell the actor he *has* to do it!" Ahh, if it were only that easy. You may tell an actor who is only there for one day, to do the scene your way, *but try that with the star and for the rest of the shoot you will have an angry person who believes you can't direct traffic.* Often they will stop listening to you and do what they please.

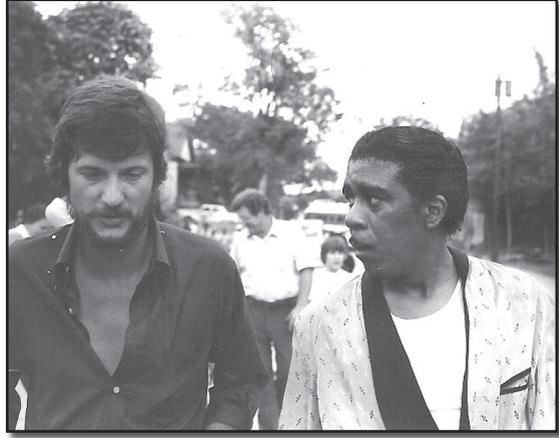
## Novice Director Meets Richard Pryor

The fact that *Bingo Long* was my first feature film is no excuse for what happened in the ill-fated Richard Pryor incident. . It appears in the dictionary under "stupid director arrogance." Richard was angry because he believed we had put him in danger the day before in a driving shot. The shot was of James Earl Jones on a motorcycle followed by Billy Dee Williams driving a convertible and Richard driving another convertible behind him.

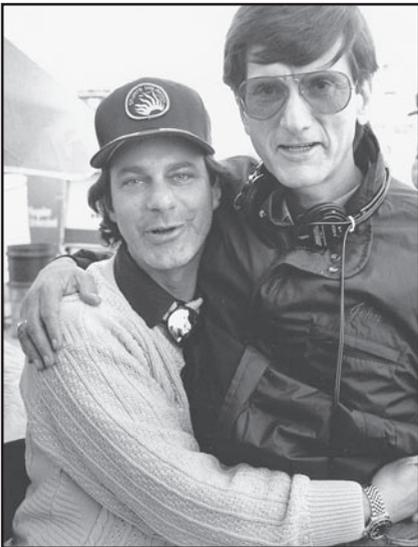
The shot was in progress when we nearly had a terrible collision. James Earl Jones on his motorcycle and the camera car almost ran into each other. Everybody swerved and screeched to a halt. James Earl was the one who was really in danger of being badly hurt and I ran to him to make sure he was all right. Thank God he was safe. He laughed it off. Richard was hundreds of feet away from the main part of the incident and was able to stop his car safely. No harm, no foul you think, right? Wrong. The next thing I see is Richard Pryor getting in a car and returning to the hotel. We did the shot again with our stunt coordinator Joffrey Brown doubling Richard. I should have done this in the first place. I thought that Richard would go home and calm down. It seemed like such a petty thing. See it through Richard's eyes however, and petty is the last word you'd choose.

At 6:30 am the next day, I walk out of the hotel to drive to the set. Leaning against my car was Richard Pryor. I said "Good morning." I somehow could tell "good morning" was not on his mind. Maybe it was the scowl on his

face? He looked me in the eye and said, "You owe me an apology." "For what?" I said disingenuously. "You nearly killed me yesterday," he said. "I nearly killed James Earl Jones, but thank God you were alright. I wouldn't endanger you or anyone knowingly." Now I'm patting myself on the back, I'm really standing up to this guy and not letting him push me around.



This is where it gets good (or bad). Richard said that obviously I didn't care about him so he was flying back to Los Angeles right now. Remember how in high school you learned from the bullies to never show weakness and always have a smart remark? So I looked at Richard and said, "Let me help you out with that. Don't fly out of the Macon Georgia airport, fly out of Atlanta, it's much easier." I got into my car and drove to the set leaving a flummoxed Richard Pryor. Smart move Badham? Not.



My producer and partner Rob Cohen (the wise one) got wind of this dustup and begged Richard to stay and go to work. Richard came to the set where I was trying to shoot the day's work. When it came time for me to show Richard what he should do in the next shot he said, "I'm not doing shit till I get my apology." At that point I was not giving in. I wondered if this would become a fistfight. The thought of me in a fistfight is totally ridiculous. One punch and I'm chipped beef and toast. At my heaviest, I look like I escaped from a concentration camp.

I looked at Richard and saw a sad look in Richard's eyes. Without thinking I said, "I'm sorry that you're so upset by

this." There was a long pause where I didn't know what was going to happen. Suddenly Richard nodded his head and went to take his place in the scene.

Billy Dee Williams came over a moment later and said "Good thing you apologized to him." I was shocked. Oh no! I did what? I stupidly had no intention of apologizing. I guess I would have let the whole movie and my career go to hell over a matter of pride.

## Career in the Dumper

*Never go to the mat with your cast. You can't win. If you do win they'll get you before it is over. A smarter, more mature would have found a way to see the situation from Richard Pryor's point of view. Instead of telling him that it was no big deal I should have said something like "It sounds like you're really upset about this. I'll really have to be a lot more careful in the future." That would have solved it right there. All I needed to do was acknowledge his feelings. Nobody wants to be told that his or her problem is meaningless. If your five-year-old falls and bumps her knee and you tell her that it was no big deal, she will just wail all the louder. It works the same way with adults. Just the fact of acknowledging that someone has a problem goes a long way toward being able to talk with each other again. You don't have to be a doormat; you just have to say that you realize that they feel bad. How hard is that?*

**Mark Rydell:** "I had a confrontation with John Wayne. There's a scene in *The Cowboys* where he's hired all of these kids to help herd cattle... and they're about to start the cattle drive. We had 1500 cattle. Duke (John Wayne) was about 25 yards away ... and I was up 30 feet in the air on a Chapman crane. We had 8 cameras working on this shot. Now you know, you can't say 'Action' to cattle. You're working with a bunch of cows that are pretty stupid. I don't mean to say all cows are stupid... just these cows. It takes three minutes at least to get them all moving. So the plan was to wait till the wranglers got the cattle moving. Then we would roll the cameras. If we rolled cameras and then started the cattle we would have run out of film before they got going.

"All of a sudden Wayne decided on his own that it was time to start. He starts riding and yelling 'Move 'em out!' stuff like that. I hadn't said Action. But everyone else started because he started. The wranglers start moving the cattle, the kids start herding them. And we're suddenly in the middle of this giant FUBAR. This was early in the picture, and I had not yet found my ground with him. I also was prejudiced against him. I had heard all of those horrible stories about his bigotry and I was waiting for him to make an anti-Semitic remark, and he's just the most charming guy that I've ever met. I'm up high on

the crane and I haven't started rolling the cameras yet. I get the ADs to stop everything, which is no little thing. You have to turn 1500 head of intellectually challenged cattle around and get them back to the start. They haven't read the script and could give a crap. The cattle, not the ADs.

"Wayne rides up... and I start screaming at him from the safety of the crane 'Wait a minute, you stupid jerk.' I'm enraged and I'm yelling at him 'I'll tell you when to go.' I couldn't stop. I was furious. All the pent-up feelings about his political position and everything I was waiting for, it all came out... I'm finished. Even though I'm producing and directing my career is over.

"It's the end of the day, and that crane comes down slowly. I get off the crane, and the crew lines up to shake my hand to say good-bye. It wasn't congratulations, it was goodbye. I'm thinking I'll get a call from Warner Brothers that Andy McLaughlin is taking over as director. What did I do? I was out of control. There was no excuse for it. It was just terrible. I should never have done it, and I'm sure I'm through. I went back to the production office and there're four calls from Wayne. I finally get up the courage to call him... and he invites me to dinner."

**JB:** "Fired and a meal, right?"

**MR:** "We went to a Santa Fe restaurant, Nirvana. Going to a restaurant with Wayne, whose six foot five, hands like ham hocks, there is no experience like it. He met people all over the restaurant. He never turned anybody away. He was the most gracious man. Please meet my mother, and he would get up and go over to say hello. He couldn't have been sweeter. We drank and we drank and we drank. Tequila. He said I reminded him of "Pappy" [John Ford].\* He called me Sir from that day on. It was the most amazing thing.

"He went to the john at some point and when he came back one whole side of his pants were soaking wet. He says, 'Would you believe it I'm taking a leak and this guy next to me looks at me and goes, JOHN WAYNE! He turns my way, sticks out his hand. But he never stopped peeing.' I think he probably wet his pants just for a joke, but that's just the kind of guy that he was. It was just an instinctive rage that I experienced that was completely unjustified."

## Summary

1. Communicating with actors about their work is a learned skill, difficult to grasp but not impossible.
2. What kind of director are you: the Absolute Dictator who scares people into compliance? The Passive-Aggressive who avoids conflict and remains anonymous? The Benevolent Dictator who is friendly and open to other's ideas?

3. A director who hides behind his equipment, cameras, videos, lighting, and is not communicating with the cast, deserves the mediocre movie that will result.

4. Never, never, never stage a scene without involving the actors at the beginning. No exceptions.

5. Never go to the mat with your cast. You *will* lose. Pride and machismo are stupid.

6. You don't have to be a doormat; you just have to recognize your actor's feelings as real, not imagined.